

SUMMARIES



Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power

Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin

Soft power in its current, widely understood form has become a straitjacket for those trying to understand power and communication in international affairs. Analyses of soft power overwhelmingly focus on soft power 'assets' or capabilities and on ways to wield them, not the ways how influence does or does not take place. It has become a catch-all term that has lost explanatory power, just as hard power once did. The authors argue that the concept of strategic narrative gives us intellectual purchase on the complexities of international politics today, especially with regard to how influence works in a new media environment. They believe that media and war studies would benefit if more attention was being paid to strategic narratives.

Global Knowledge Warfare, Strategic Imagination, Uncertainty, and Fear

Holger Mölder, Eric Shiraev

The modern security environment has been constantly changing in the recent years. The wars of tomorrow will no longer necessarily be a conventional confrontation between two armies on restricted battlefields to which we are historically accustomed, but rather a battle between competing narratives, supported by a limited number of special military operations. Instead of human lives, the target of modern information warfare will be knowledge, and strategic imagination will be the method for creatively and critically assessing possible scenarios of new security threats. This new situation could be called Global War of Knowledge; its strategic goal would be to affect the emotions of an opponent, create cultures of fear and insecurity around them, and make them behave irrationally. We are increasingly confronted with psychological

warfare, but also with ideological warfare that has been successfully applied by revisionist powers whose strategic goals are related with the changing status quo (Russia, China, Iran, etc.). Information warfare conducted by revisionist powers is aimed at weakening the foundations of the Western liberal democratic society. The Internet and social media networks are turning into a promising battleground in the Global War of Knowledge. Digitalised communication tools are skilfully used, especially for manipulating national and international public opinions. Using examples of apparent troll activities on the web, the authors discuss prospective methods in the Global Knowledge Warfare, among others, targeting democratic elections, targeting public opinion, attacking the reputation of public figures, creating chaos, building historical myths, promoting own leaders' images, insulting Western liberal values, scorning key government policies, and exaggerating difficulties.

What Happens to Public Diplomacy During Information War? Critical Reflections on the Conceptual Framing of International Communication

Joanna Szostek

Discussions about state-sponsored communication with foreign publics are increasingly framed in the language of “information war” rather than “public diplomacy,” particularly in Eastern Europe. For example, media projects supported by Western governments to engage Ukrainian audiences, and the efforts of the Ukrainian government to engage international audiences via the media are considered necessary responses in information war with Russia. This article highlights several potentially problematic assumptions about communicative influence that are embedded in the language of information war. First is the assumption that communication can be targeted like a weapon to achieve a predictable impact. Second is the assumption that audiences relate to the communication of an adversary because they are “vulnerable.” Third is the assumption that “winning” in information war means getting citizens to believe particular facts. Although these assumptions may hold to some degree, this article argues that adopting them uncritically may have detrimental consequences in policymaking.

Antithetical Identity Formation in the Strategic Narratives of the Russian Federation

Daniel Tamm

This article serves three main goals. The first goal is largely theoretical as the article seeks to develop an original framework of analysis, connecting collective identity formation with strategic narratives.

According to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe from the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, political identities always entail a form of antagonism, a type of exclusion. Connecting this notion with the framework of the Tartu–Moscow Semiotic School allows me to delineate how the nature of such an exclusion can be used to interpret the goals of these narratives. In the present case, I will focus my efforts on antithetical identity: the idea of a collective “self” being first and foremost perceived in relation with its polar opposite. As a strategic narrative, antithetical identity formation entails a specific form of projection: the image of an enemy is first created internally and then used to consolidate the power of a given hegemon.

The second goal of the article is to demonstrate the ways in which an antithetical identity formation can become dangerous to others and how this threat can be dealt with. First, I will outline the ways in which the discursive strategies of 1) semiotic disarming, 2) discursive mimicry, 3) preventive projection, 4) moral victimisation, and 5) justified aggression are used to legitimate attacks against alleged adversaries and as a means to avoid blame. Then, I will illustrate how an antithetical identity can lead to a security dilemma and how this can be alleviated by applying an inverted reading model of the narrative.

The third goal of the article is to argue that the forces guiding Russian foreign policy towards the West can be better understood through the lens of an antithetical identity formation. Relying on numerous secondary sources, I will investigate the strategic narratives of 1) “the Russophobic West”, 2) Russia as a “besieged fortress”, and 3) Russia as the ruler of the “Russian world”. Drawing from these, I will interpret the narratives of 4) “Ukraine as a fascist state”, and 5) “the European Union in decay” that have been used to justify Russian aggression towards the two.

A Projection of Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories About COVID-19 in Strategic Narratives: A Semiotic Analysis of the Content of RT and Sputnik

Mari-Liis Madisson, Andreas Ventsel

In spring of 2020, a study was published on conspiracies/conspiracy theories regarding the projection of the coronavirus in Russian state-financed Anglophone media outlets RT and Sputnik. In our analysis, we outlined five major motifs regarding the narration of conspiracies and conspiracy theories in RT and Sputnik. Russian outlets generally express explicitly negative attitudes towards conspiracy theories. However, we detected two peculiarities of strategic narration in such representations: (a) criticism towards conspiracy theories and (b) conspiracy-based explanation of the circulation of conspiracy theories.

We identified three motifs regarding the criticism on conspiracy theories. First, the viral dissemination of conspiracy theories that blame 5G for the rapid spreading of COVID-19 was fiercely condemned in RT and Sputnik for being an expression of irrational fear and weakness of the Western people. The growing popularity of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories was denounced in a similar, sometimes even ridiculing manner. Conspiracy theories that refer to the coronavirus as a bioweapon were treated as a particularly dangerous form of COVID-19 infodemic and the USA leaders were severely condemned for spreading them. These three motifs enabled RT and Sputnik to position themselves as media-literate and critical channels.

In relation with these three motifs, we distinguished two dominant ways in which RT and Sputnik are using a strategic depiction of conspiracy theories. Firstly, an anti-conspiracy discourse was used to support the strategic narrative of the Russian Federation in their general resentfulness towards the West, i.e. a story about a morally corrupt elite and frightened, easily manipulative people. Such a narrative enables to strengthen the anti-Western attitudes and present the Russian Federation and the people who consume Russian media as insightful and moral agents. Secondly, the Russian Anglophone media outlets presented selective criticism on conspiracy theories. The USA, EU, and the Western mainstream media were blamed for voicing and circulating COVID-19 plots.

Regarding the conspiracy-based explanation of the circulation of conspiracy theories, we identified two recurring motifs. First, several articles

spoke about the covert malicious manipulation of the Western public opinion that harms a great number of people. This conspiracy narrative matches the aforementioned strategic narrative of a decadent West. Second, the alleged false accusations of Russia spreading the COVID-19 conspiracy theories were themselves presented as a part of a conspiracy, plotted by the USA and EU and the Western mainstream media. Such supposedly groundless accusations were depicted as part of a vast hostile information influence campaign against Russia. It appears that RT and Sputnik have internalised the criticism of several researchers and media experts who have accused them of conspiracy theorising. Now, the Russian Anglophone media channels blame their opponents for the same sin. Evidently, the explicit condemnation of conspiracy theories enables RT and Sputnik to mask their own representations of the alleged Western conspiracies. Conspiracy theories have become the new “fake news” because they function as a universal accusation that can be used to undermine the reputation of an opponent.

5G-Related Blame Narratives in Russian Strategic Communication: A Comparative Analysis of Media Coverages by RT, Sputnik, Pervij Kanal, NTV, and ITAR-TASS

Andreas Ventsel, Mari-Liis Madisson, Sten Hansson

In this paper, we analysed the ways in which Russian state-funded news portals have used certain articulations of blame regarding the adoption of the 5G cellular technology for strategic purposes. In the Kremlin-backed Russophone and Anglophone media, the coverage of 5G technology has revealed a multi-layered blame discourse. In this discourse, the US is depicted as a distributor of false information on the 5G technology, groundlessly slandering China and forcefully pressuring its allies; China has also accused the US for its pressuring politics. Both the Russophone and Anglophone coverages were characterised by the following: even though the US accusations against China originated mainly from American politicians, the stories and their tone were framed by comments (both by experts and journalists), highlighting the groundless nature of these accusations.

The main differences between Russophone and Anglophone media are the following. Firstly, the Russophone media over-emphasised the pressure that the US put on its allies. Secondly, at the end of the analysed period, the

Russophone media explicitly presented, for the first time, Russian position in the global confrontation between the US and China. Evidently, Russia supports the technological alliance with China because they “trust them more than the USA”.

Strategic narratives can be interpreted on three levels: on a policy, identity, and system level. On the level of a strategic policy narrative, the blaming devices used in both Russophone and Anglophone media outlets concerned two aspects. Firstly, it was stressed that the US government has not presented any clear evidence to the public about the security risks accompanying the use of Chinese 5G technologies; thus, the US accusations against China are, in fact, slander. The other aspect concerns a depiction of the confrontation between the US and China in terms of a trade war policy narrative: by smearing China, the US is, in fact, covering up its actual concern about coming off as the second-best from the economic and technological progress race with China.

On the level of identity narratives, these articulations of blame frame the roles and relations of international actors in the following ways: the US is depicted as an ill-willed and aggressive blame-maker and an undemocratic spying hypocrite; the Western countries – the US and its allies – are portrayed as being at odds or in conflict with each other, as supposedly evidenced by mutual attributions of blame; China is framed as a ‘victim’ of groundless accusations by the US, but also as a technologically advanced superpower that can put the US to shame. These three strands of blame combined in an identity narrative are used to damage the reputation of an antagonist. The purpose of damaging the reputation of an antagonist is to subvert the international position of the US and NATO.

On a more general level of system narratives, the blame structure on a global political playfield is referred to in the following three ways: the stories convey the idea of an erosion of the US (Western) global hegemony, paralleled by the rise of China (Asia); relatedly, the stories allude to the erosion of Western democracy as the dominant (or exemplary) political system (including the erosion of civil rights and rational debates as political values); the media has created an alliance between Russia and China.

A Construction of Narratives on Estonian and NATO Cyber Defence Capabilities in Estonian Journalism

Maia Klaassen

The objective of this article is to outline the ways in which the media constructs the ability of Estonia and NATO to resist e-threats from international actors and the changed information environment. I wanted to describe the thematic narratives, the manner in which the characters and activities are portrayed, and determine which narratives featured signs of securitisation. For this purpose, I searched for articles published in the Estonian media before, during, and after the cyber security incidents of 1 November 2020 and 31 March 2021, using predetermined keywords with the Station. ee media monitoring tool. After constructing the sample, I analysed 109 thematic articles from various publications and encoded them with MaxQda software. From these publications, I identified 11 narratives and divided them into four thematic clusters: hybrid threats from Russia (1. “Information war is particularly dangerous in Russia’s case, as it is a precursor for military aggression,” 2. “The West is overly paranoid about Russia’s propaganda machine,” and 3. “Russian information operations have convinced many that Sputnik is the only safe vaccine.”), an expansion of Chinese resources and influence (4. “China applies spying, manipulation, and economic power to avoid criticism on human rights’ violations,” 5. “Technological advancements make China a dangerous superpower,” and 6. “China aims to export and realise the party’s authoritarian values internationally.”), the weakened international status of Estonia as an e-state (7. “Estonia has failed as an e-state because not enough e-solutions were used during the pandemic,” and 8. “Estonia lacks a political will to adequately coordinate information security.”), and modern information environment as a global security threat (9. “Radicals prepare themselves in the cyberspace and go on to wreak havoc in the physical world,” 10. “Information environment has made spying and attacking national systems easy and catching criminals hard,” and 11. “NATO has not been able to adequately adapt with the new strategic environment.”).

Since narratives can be fragmented and intertwined in media texts, a narrative analysis is often subjective and open to interpretation by a researcher. In order to mitigate this risk, I asked some experts in the defence field to evaluate the narratives: whether these are new or developed from earlier narratives, which party could benefit from their spreading, and whether the narratives

are efficient. For this purpose, I also carried out a focus group interview with six experts from the Chancellery of the State, the Estonian Internal Security Service, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the Information System Authority, Propastop, and the Estonian Military Academy.

Although several narratives appeared to be developed from previous hostile narratives, they are not necessarily spread by a hostile force, but could just stem from constructive criticism. Narratives that criticise e-Estonia can have a huge impact as the image of Estonia as the digital state has been tarnished from within: even though allies and foreign partners consider us a success story, Estonians can be the world champions in self-criticism. Criticism, if adequately received and responded to by consecutive advancements, can be useful. However, if it makes people feel powerless and weak, then not so much. At the same time, experts from the focus group interview said that making e-risks seem more dangerous than they actually are is not always a negative thing as it encourages people to be more cautious.

The results of the analysis raised the question of how to de-securitise the field. It is dangerous to construct e-threats as something inevitable to using technology on a daily basis but too complicated for anyone outside of the ICT field; perhaps even more dangerous than the e-threats themselves, as it can lead to idleness and surrendering. In future studies, researchers could analyse the ways in which to teach media and information literacy in an empowering manner and increase the resilience of society without intimidating the inhabitants.

Between History and Propaganda: Estonia and Latvia in Russian Historical Narratives

Vladimir Sazonov, Sergii Pakhomenko, Igor Kopõtin

This article analyses the main historical narratives and events of Latvia and Estonia concerning the Second World War, fascism, and the Soviet period more generally, and their representation in the pro-Kremlin ideological discourse.

Moscow is using several narratives and messages to try to influence different target audiences in Russia, but also in Estonia and Latvia (especially the Russophone audience) with its own interpretation of the historical events and narratives concerning Estonia, Latvia, the Soviet Union, and the Second World War.

Several different channels are used to promote the pro-Kremlin ideological agenda: not only profound historical studies (monographs, collective volumes, and articles), popular-scientific overviews, conferences, workshops and seminars, but also TV series, social media platforms, documentaries, and so on. Even more materials are available to the narrow audience that has a strong interest in contemporary history, especially the Soviet period and the Second World War. The main topics of these narratives are the Second World War and the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (1939), the occupation of Estonia and Latvia by the USSR, both in 1940 and in 1944, and the consequential post-war Soviet era. The main actors that design the pro-Kremlin understandings of Estonian and Latvian history are undoubtedly state officials, i.e. the president and his entourage. Major subjects such as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (1939), the annexation of Latvia and Estonia in 1940, and the activities of the Latvian Legion and Estonians in the Second World War in 1941–1944 are presented in a manner that is characteristic to the Soviet propaganda and historical science. According to the pro-Kremlin discourse, the Soviet–German pact on non-aggression and the delimitation of the spheres of influence were forced into existence by the inactiveness of the Western allies and the unwillingness of the USSR to enter into the war. Moreover, according to the official Kremlin narrative, Latvians and Estonians should think of the USSR (and its legal successor the Russian Federation) as the force that saved them from being in the same position as the countries that were defeated in the war that had collaborated with the Nazis.

The goal of the Russian political elite is to disavow the concept of ‘occupation’ and paint a picture of the Baltic people as collaborators. We argue that from around 2010 and the anniversaries of the Great Victory, the Russian academic science has developed several clichés that have been transferred from the official narrative to scientific research in order to politicise the historical projects designed to support the only true theses as promoted by the state leader. The same propaganda is then spread by the Moscow-controlled media outlets and TV channels that actively saturate the media space with the same approved content in an intelligible and simplified form to make it understandable for everyman.

Responding to the Russian Information Campaign in the Baltic States: A Comparison of Approaches Adopted by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

Johannes Voltri

In the recent years, numerous studies have been published on information influence activities such as mis- and disinformation or inauthentic behaviour on social media, mainly concerning their prevalence, characteristics, and causes. Yet, comprehensive research on the manner in which governments manage this “information disorder” has remained largely on the sidelines, contributing to a lack of knowledge when it comes to adequate responses to information influence activities. This study seeks to contribute to relevant literature by focusing on the responses of the Baltic States to Russian information influence.

The main objective of this article is to examine and compare Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian governmental responses to Russian information influence activities. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding on the ways in which the Baltic States have dealt with information influence in general and which countermeasures the three countries have undertaken, focusing on the setup of strategic communication, media literacy in formal education, and media policy, the author of this article analysed the main strategic documents and interviewed state officials. In order to make sense of various strategies that different democracies might opt for, the author used the analytical framework proposed by Hellman and Wagnsson (2017). The research focuses on governmental action, excluding the activities of the media and the third sector, such as independent fact-checking or educational projects.

The author argues that although the approach adopted by the Baltic States to counter the Russian information influence is generally quite similar, the three countries have different understandings about the extent to which the state should regulate the media to achieve its goals. Latvia and Lithuania seek to actively shape the media environment, either through supporting the media to encourage media literacy and raise awareness, or by restricting access to Russian television channels to respond to the incitements of hatred. Estonia, on the other hand, decided to develop its own Russian-language public media as an alternative to the Russian information space that is still influential.