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THE BATTLE OF NARRATIVES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Issues, methods and limitations of narratological approaches

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ABSTRACT

The ‘battle of narratives’ has emerged as a particularly fruitful way of describing digital influence. It invites us to interpret the fragmented streams of platforms as architectures of plausibility: sets of narrative, symbolic, technical and affective frameworks that make certain content immediately recognisable, credible or emotionally coherent to specific audiences. Narratology, semiotics and platform analysis enable us to reconstruct these continuities, track their reactivations and identify the forms that shape collective perception. This paper explores this approach in greater depth by clarifying its objects of study, its methods and its relationship with computational approaches. It then examines the conditions necessary for linking the analysis of narrative architectures to that of reception and behaviour.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Digital influence is often understood through easily isolated elements: an account, a coordinated campaign, a viral video, a strategic framing or a volume of engagement. This approach captures the actors and the flows but does not fully capture the continuity of the symbolic forms that organise reception. In digital environments, content circulates in the form of fragments, screenshots, excerpts, comments, *hashtags*, montages or memetic objects, without this material fragmentation necessarily leading to a fragmentation of meaning. Heterogeneous objects can reactivate the same moral opposition, the same implicit causality or the same affective tone. The relevant unit is therefore no longer merely the message, but the interpretative architecture within which it becomes legible.

This shift explains the renewed interest in the concepts of narrative, framing, seriality, architext and interpretative community. They shed light on several properties that circulation metrics alone fail to capture adequately: the persistence of motifs, the immediate recognition of a structure, the reactivation of past content, the affective coherence of statements that are nonetheless contradictory, or the stabilisation of certain regimes of plausibility. Digital spaces appear less as mere distribution infrastructures than as semiotic environments. They select, prioritise and reactivate available forms for audiences that are already socially and culturally situated.

This perspective opens up a broader research programme. A narrative architecture can be described in terms of its stability, visibility, coherence and capacity for reactivation. It then remains to be understood how these properties interact with reception: the recognition of a form, the appropriation of a frame, adherence, mobilisation or transformation of behaviour. The value of the concept of plausibility architecture lies precisely in enabling this articulation without reducing influence to the mere circulation of a message.

The challenge, therefore, lies in realising the full potential of narratological approaches. These reconstruct the symbolic, technical and affective architectures that render certain content plausible and reactivatable. Combined with computational methods and research on reception, they can contribute to an integrated analysis of digital influence, understood as a socio-technical process linking symbolic circulation, interpretative frameworks and situated behaviours.

I. FROM CONTENT TO ARCHITECTURES OF PLAUSIBILITY

A. RECOGNITION, SERIALITY AND ARCHITEXT

Media objects never function[1] merely as vehicles for information. Roland Barthes's work[2] on contemporary mythologies had already shown that they produce cultural assumptions by normalising value systems. Erving Goffman's work[3] on the frames of experience established that individuals interpret situations on the basis of pre-existing structures. Stuart Hall, for his part[4], showed that reception is not passive: messages are decoded within cultural and social systems that give rise to dominant, negotiated or oppositional interpretations. The plausibility of a piece of content therefore never lies entirely within that content itself.

Seriality helps to clarify this mechanism. Serial cultural forms rely less on the absolute originality of each episode than on the pleasure and effectiveness of recognition. The partial recurrence of the familiar, familiar roles, stable oppositions, expected causalities, recognisable tones, enables the audience to understand a new episode even before they have examined all its elements. Umberto Eco has shown[5] that repetition and innovation are not opposed: serial innovation becomes intelligible because it varies an already familiar matrix.

Digital environments intensify this property. A short video, a photograph taken out of context, an ironic comment and an alarmist message may share no specific vocabulary whilst still reactivating the same pattern: hidden truth versus the official version, the people versus the elites, threat versus

1 Jean-Marie Floch, Semiotics, Marketing and Communication, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1990.
2 Roland Barthes, Mythologies, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957.
3 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience*, New York, Harper & Row, 1974.
4 Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, London, Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 128–138.
5 Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*, Paris, Grasset, 1985; *From Superman to the Übermensch*, Paris, Grasset, 1993.

protection, dispossession versus resistance. The individual piece of content then functions as a local trigger. It need not provide a complete demonstration; a few clues are enough to summon a readily available interpretative framework.

The concept of the 'architext'[6] , drawn from the narratological tradition, refers to this matrix of conventions that allows a particular type of narrative to be recognised immediately. It shifts the focus of analysis: a message does not become plausible merely because it is factually credible, but because it fits into a form whose roles, expectations and possible outcomes are already familiar to the audience[7]. This recognition reduces the cognitive cost of interpretation. It also helps to bridge certain gaps: the recipient fills in the blanks using pre-existing knowledge, suspicions or emotions.

This property requires us to move beyond a conception of influence as the one-off transmission of a message. A piece of content may constitute an episode, but its significance often depends on the structure that precedes it and survives it. The disappearance or refutation of an episode therefore does not negate the architecture that gave it its meaning. However, observing this persistence does not in itself allow us to assert that the architecture exerts a behavioural influence. At this stage, the narrative approach establishes a condition of legibility and plausibility, not an effect.

B. PLATFORMS, DISTRIBUTED MEMORY AND REGIMES OF VISIBILITY

Digital narratives do not circulate in a neutral space. Platforms organise the conditions for the visibility, repetition and reactivation of content. Recommendation mechanisms, short formats, engagement metrics and attention-grabbing strategies favour certain forms: easily recognisable, highly polarising, readily shareable content that is compatible with pre-existing expectations. Technology therefore does not merely transport[8] narratives; it contributes to their form and temporality.

6 Gérard Genette, *Introduction to the Architext*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1979.
7 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991.
8 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

This dimension aligns with the media-theoretical insight[9] that no symbolic circulation can be dissociated from the material devices that make it possible. Platforms constitute systems of distributed memory. Older content remains available; it is extracted from its context, recombined and reintroduced into new sequences. It may lie dormant and then resurface when an event restores its relevance. Narrative continuity no longer depends on a stable text or a single source: it emerges from a multitude of fragments, actors and repetitions.

The temporality of these environments is therefore discontinuous at the level of individual items, but potentially continuous at the level of structures. Content is rapidly renewed, whilst oppositions, figures of threat, causalities and tones remain. This dissociation explains the resilience of certain interpretations. The architecture can persist despite the refutation of several of its episodes, precisely because it is not conflated with any of them.

Platforms also contribute to the differential visibility of these architectures. They prioritise content that elicits an observable reaction, but this reaction may be positive, negative, ironic or simply curious. An engagement metric aggregates heterogeneous behaviours and transforms them into a signal of r recommendation. The resulting exposure may increase familiarity with a motif without generating endorsement of its content. Visibility is therefore simultaneously a real technical property and an ambiguous indicator of influence.

Contemporary narrative architectures must thus be understood as socio-technical objects. They are neither mechanically imposed by platforms nor produced exclusively by audiences. They result from an interaction between mechanisms of visibility, cultural repertoires, actors' strategies and reception practices. This conception avoids two oversimplifications: treating narratives as mere discursive facades or attributing autonomous causal power to algorithms.

9 Régis Debray, *Cours de médiologie générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991.

C. AFFECTS AND THE REDUCTION OF COMPLEXITY

Narrative plausibility is also affective. Research on affective audiences[10] and emotional economies[11] shows that emotions are not merely individual reactions[12]. They circulate, attach themselves to objects, distinguish between groups and help to stabilise communities of reception. Fear, indignation, humiliation, nostalgia, suspicion or a sense of revelation become interpretative reference points.

A narrative often seems plausible because it 'resonates' with a given audience. This resonance does not imply factual truth. It refers to the alignment between a proposition and a pre-existing configuration of experiences, expectations and emotions. A local contradiction can then be absorbed without undermining the whole, provided that the emotional structure remains stable. Emotional coherence can compensate for a lack of logical coherence.

This property is reinforced by information overload[13]. In environments characterised by speed, competition for attention and an abundance of signals, narrative architectures fulfil an function of reducing complexity[14]. They assign roles, organise causal relationships and prioritise events. They enable interpretative continuity to be maintained without re-examining every piece of information. This cognitive economy explains their persistence, but it should not be automatically equated with persuasion.

Emotional intensity can promote memorisation, engagement or sharing. However, it does not provide a direct measure of endorsement. Content that provokes anger may reinforce a conviction, elicit rejection or serve as a basis for denunciation. The same digital traces may correspond to opposing mental states. Affective analysis therefore reveals areas of emotional concentration; it does not resolve the question of their behavioural significance.

10 Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.
11 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
12 Frédéric Lordon, *La société des affects*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013.
13 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London, Verso, 2013.
14 Yves Citton, Towards an Ecology of Attention, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2014; Bernard Stiegler, The Automatic Society, vol. 1, Paris, Fayard, 2014.

II. MAKING NARRATIVE CONTINUITIES OBSERVABLE

A. SHIFTING THE UNIT OF ANALYSIS

If the object of study is a distributed interpretative continuity, the corpus can no longer be constituted as a mere collection of messages linked by keywords. Two pieces of content that are lexically similar may belong to different architectures; two pieces of content with no shared vocabulary may fulfil the same narrative function. The constitution of the corpus therefore necessarily involves a theoretical decision regarding what constitutes continuity.

Qualitative methods drawn from narratology and semiotics enable us to identify recurring motifs, actantial structures, interpretative frameworks, isotopies and regimes of enunciation. Greimas's actantial model[15] helps, for example, to identify relatively stable positions: the threatened subject, the hidden adversary, the suspect authority, the revealer, the collective victim or the mediator. The analysis looks not only at what is said, but also at the function performed by each fragment within a broader structure.

The concept of isotopy enables the reconstruction of semantic and affective continuities across heterogeneous objects. The same opposition can manifest itself through different terms, images, rhythms, framing or implicit meanings. The corpus thus becomes an interpretative cross-section of a distributed narrative environment, rather than a supposedly exhaustive inventory of the narrative.

This shift is essential, but it carries a risk of circularity. If the researcher first defines an architecture and then selects the fragments that confirm it, they may transform their hypothesis into a result. It is therefore necessary to spell out the coding criteria, seek out counter-examples and distinguish between the presence of a motif and its actual centrality. Narrative reconstruction remains an interpretative operation that must be made refutable.

15 Algirdas Julien Greimas, Structural Semantics: In Search of a Method, Paris, Larousse, 1966.

B. COMBINING CLOSE READING WITH COMPUTATIONAL METHODS

The sheer volume of digital traces[16] makes it necessary to combine close reading with computational observation. Co-occurrence analyses, time series, relational mappings[17] and measures of emotional valence can identify patterns that are invisible at the level of individual pieces of content. They reveal peaks in reactivation, lexical neighbourhoods, relational positions or concentrations of affect.

However, "distant reading" does not[18] only replace interpretation. It provides clues that enable us to return to the texts, test a hypothesis or identify areas of significance. A co-occurrence map does not automatically constitute a narrative structure; statistical proximity establishes neither an actantial role nor causality. Similarly, a sentiment analysis tool [19] can identify a dominant tone without determining the object of the emotion, its reception by the audience or its effect.

A robust method can therefore follow an iterative process. A qualitative analysis formulates a hypothesis regarding patterns of recognition. Computational tools then investigate their distribution, temporality and variations within an extensive corpus. Returning to the content verifies the meaning of the detected patterns and identifies contradictory uses. The aim is not to produce a comprehensive measurement of the narrative, but a controlled reconstruction of partial continuities.

This framework allows us to distinguish several levels: the presence of a motif, frequency, visibility, circulation between communities, temporal stability and affective intensity. Each corresponds to an observable property. None should be used in isolation as a synonym for influence. The analysis gains in precision when it moves away from a single indicator and describes the specific combination of the observed properties.

16 Richard Rogers, *Digital Methods*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2013.
17 Tommaso Venturini, 'Diving in Magma: How to Explore Controversies with Actor-Network Theory', *Public Understanding of Science*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2010, pp. 258–273.
18 Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London, Verso, 2013.
19 C. J. Hutto and Eric Gilbert, 'VADER: A Parsimonious Rule-Based Model for Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Text', Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, vol. 8, no. 1, 2014, pp. 216–225.

C. WHAT THE TRACES ACTUALLY ENABLE US TO ESTABLISH

Platform metrics primarily provide information on exposure, engagement and local circulation. They show that a piece of content has been viewed, shared, commented on or linked to other items. They do not provide direct insight into understanding, belief, a shift in preference or the taking of action. Even sharing is ambiguous: it may signal agreement, criticism, irony or simply the preservation of content.

A narrative architecture can thus be defined as highly visible when its motifs appear frequently and occupy central positions within the networks under observation. It can be described as stable when these motifs persist or are reactivated over time. It can be characterised as coherent when functions, oppositions and tones correspond with one another. These properties are important, but they remain descriptive.

The narrative approach is therefore less a tool for comprehensively measuring influence than a means of reconstructing the symbolic conditions within which such influence might be exerted. It helps us understand why certain content is immediately recognisable, why an isolated refutation leaves a structure intact, or why disparate fragments form part of the same universe. Without additional data, it does not allow us to attribute a change in behaviour to this universe.

III. FROM ARCHITECTURES OF PLAUSIBILITY TO EFFECTS OF INFLUENCE

A. LINKING RECOGNITION, ACCEPTANCE AND BEHAVIOUR

The analysis of narrative architectures naturally calls for a study of how they are received. An architecture may organise the perception of an event,

provide a shared vocabulary or make interpretation immediately available. Audiences may nevertheless share certain symbolic frameworks whilst retaining diverse judgements and behaviours. Discursive participation is generally less costly than practical mobilisation.

We must therefore distinguish between at least six stages: exposure to content, recognition of its structure, understanding, appropriation, endorsement and behaviour. The transition from one to the next is neither automatic nor linear. It depends on prior dispositions, group norms, trust in the source, the costs of action, concrete opportunities and interactions with other information. The same framework may produce declared endorsement without corresponding behaviour, circumstantial behaviour without lasting endorsement, or mere familiarity.

Research into media effects[20] has long demonstrated this dependence on the social contexts of reception. Narratives interact with broader environments; they do not constitute isolatable causes in the same way as a simple experimental treatment. Their role may be that of a framing device, a resource for justification, a mechanism for reducing complexity, or a structure for emotional coordination. These functions are not equivalent and do not imply the same causality.

This distinction prevents us from concluding that a widely disseminated framework would necessarily be effective. Conversely, a significant behavioural shift may result from mechanisms that are not readily apparent: local normative pressure, material interest, organisational constraints or a triggering event. Narrative visibility and practical effectiveness may vary independently.

B. FROM STRATEGIC POWER TO ANALYTICAL PRECISION

The concept of the ‘battle of narratives’ possesses intuitive power and genuine strategic utility. It serves as a reminder that statements never circulate in isolation, that actors seek to impose frameworks of perception, and that control over meaning can be just as important as control over channels. It thus provides a common language for practitioners, analysts and

20 Teun A. van Dijk, *News as Discourse*, Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988.

researchers who previously observed related phenomena without always being able to link them. This richness rightly explains its success.

Taken seriously, this metaphor even encourages us to move beyond the study of isolated messages. A battle cannot be reduced to the sum of the projectiles exchanged; similarly, a narrative space cannot be reduced to the sum of its contents. It possesses historical depth, positions already occupied, repertoires that can be mobilised, and audiences capable of recognising forms before examining their details. The concept therefore leads naturally to the analysis of 'architectures of plausibility' discussed in this note.

Its limitation only becomes apparent when the strategic image becomes, almost without transition, a causal explanation. Speaking of a 'battle' suggests relatively coherent entities, identifiable positions and an attributable outcome. Digital environments are often more unruly: contradictory fragments may serve the same architecture, continuities may emerge without a single direction, and audiences may rework, reposition or treat the content presented to them with irony. This observation does not refute the metaphor; it simply indicates the point at which it must be supplemented.

Furthermore, two competing architectures do not share the same resources, the same historical depth, or the same relationship to lived experience. Their comparison cannot, therefore, be purely formal. An institutional narrative does not become credible solely through the quality of its presentation; it also depends on accumulated trust, the consistency of observed practices, and the possibility for audiences to compare the statements with their own experience. Narrativity can underpin authority; it does not create it on its own.

It is therefore useful to distinguish between several possible meanings of 'victory'. Gaining visibility does not necessarily mean gaining credibility; gaining credibility does not necessarily lead to action. The same content can strengthen a community, mobilise its opponents and have no effect whatsoever on the majority of those exposed to it. The 'battle of the narratives' retains its full value provided that the target audience, the timeframe under consideration and the type of effect sought are specified. Without these details, it risks not so much being false as being overly broad: it explains circulation, recognition and action all at once, whereas these three outcomes cannot be deduced from one another.

The issue is therefore not to pit a 'good narrative' against a 'bad narrative' as if their effectiveness depended primarily on their narrative quality. Such an approach would merely reproduce the problem it purports to solve: it would attribute autonomous power to symbolic forms. Narratives operate within configurations that combine technical mechanisms, emotions, social authorities, interests, constraints and opportunities for action.

C. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCE

A more rigorous analysis must articulate three levels without conflating them. The first concerns symbolic architectures: motifs, roles, oppositions, temporalities and affects. The second focuses on the socio-technical conditions of circulation: platforms, recommendations, networks, formats and regimes of visibility. The third examines reception and behaviours: understanding, belief, appropriation, mobilisation and behaviour.

Narratology and semiotics primarily shed light on the first level. Computational methods allow us to partially observe the second level and certain traces of the first. The study of the third level requires other methods: surveys, interviews, experiments, longitudinal panels, ethnographic observation or contextualised behavioural data. No single level can serve as a substitute for the others.

This distinction also provides a criterion for falsifiability. A hypothesis regarding influence is strengthened by specifying what should change, among which audiences, over what timeframe, and in relation to which counterfactual situation. Without this minimum, high visibility may be interpreted as a conquest of the information space, whilst low uptake may be redefined as slow permeation or an invisible transformation of categories of thought. Conversely, the narrative approach becomes stronger when it acknowledges what it has not yet established: it then ceases to be an all-encompassing metaphor and becomes a precise component of a theory of influence.

This analytical framework enables the formulation of more precise causal hypotheses. We can investigate under what conditions a structure of plausibility increases the likelihood of acceptance, how repetition alters

familiarity, or how a shared emotion facilitates coordination. But these relationships must be tested and cannot be deduced from the mere presence of a narrative.

Digital influence thus appears not as a simple transmission of messages, nor as an autonomous war between narrative universes, but as a set of processes organising collective plausibility within socio-technical environments. Narratives constitute infrastructures of intelligibility within these environments. They direct attention and make certain interpretations available; they never mechanically determine what audiences think or do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Stop describing mere circulation as 'influence'**

Institutions should stop using the volume of views, shares, comments or mentions as direct evidence of influence. These data measure exposure, circulation or reaction. On their own, they do not establish a change in beliefs, attitudes or behaviours.

This distinction ties in directly with the findings of the RAND study, *Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia*, funded by the US State Department's Global Engagement Centre. RAND notes that the evaluation of online campaigns still relies primarily on reach and engagement, likes, shares and comments, even though these indicators do not measure effects on attitudes or behaviour. The researchers therefore recommend the use of panels, before-and-after measurements and, where possible, comparisons between exposed and unexposed groups.

The Army Science Board adopts a similar approach when, in *Human Interaction and Behavioural Enhancement*, it recommends evaluating information operations on the basis of changes in online behaviour, the adversary's reactions and observed effects on the ground, rather than solely on the basis of message dissemination.

A simple rule should therefore be applied: when a study has only platform data at its disposal, it should refer to visibility, circulation or responsiveness.

The term 'influence' should be reserved for situations in which a cognitive, social or behavioural transformation has actually been documented.

2. Replacing message monitoring with the analysis of plausibility architectures

Monitoring systems are generally organised around messages, accounts, keywords or identifiable campaigns. They accurately describe the content circulating, but do far less to capture the structures that make this content recognisable and plausible to certain audiences.

In *Understanding and Addressing Misinformation About Science*, the US *National Academies* emphasise that the consequences of a piece of information depend not only on its dissemination, but also on the audiences it reaches and its interaction with pre-existing individual and structural factors: values, beliefs, identities, preferences, trust and social position. They further distinguish between four levels of intervention: production, demand, distribution and appropriation. They conclude that none of these can be considered in isolation as the primary point of action.

This approach leads to a shift in the unit of analysis. Institutions should map not only the content, but also the oppositions, roles, implicit causalities and affects that persist despite the renewal of messages: hidden truth versus the official line, the dispossessed people versus the elites, threat versus protection, revelation versus concealment.

A piece of content may be removed or refuted whilst the framework that lent it plausibility remains in place. Monitoring should therefore become longitudinal: it would track periods of dormancy, reactivations, changes in medium and contradictory appropriations of the same structure. The relevant object would no longer be merely the visible campaign, but the interpretative infrastructure capable of accommodating several successive campaigns.

3. Do not respond publicly to a narrative without assessing the risk of amplifying it

The institutional response must not be automatic. Publicly labelling a narrative as hostile, exposing its origin or immediately issuing a denial may increase its visibility, confer on it a significance that it did not previously

possess, and reinforce the sense of persecution felt by the community disseminating it.

In *Countering Russian Social Media Influence*, RAND notes that publicly identifying a foreign source does not necessarily lead to a reduction in consumption, dissemination or belief. In some cases, exposing an operation may even amplify its message and give its author the strategic advantage of appearing particularly powerful.

In *Health Misinformation*, the US *Surgeon General* also recommends that information professionals learn to correct misleading information without contributing to its amplification, to respond first to the public's genuine questions, and to prioritise credible local sources.

Before reacting, decision-makers should therefore weigh up at least four options: a public response, a targeted response, indirect action on the information environment, and no response at all. The decision should depend on the actual size of the affected audience, the extent to which they have internalised the narrative, the possibility of unintended amplification, and the existence of a documented strategic effect. An event that is highly visible but confined to a marginalised community does not necessarily justify a national intervention.

4. Stop funding counter-narratives without addressing what makes the opposing narrative plausible

Producing a 'better narrative' is not a sufficient policy. When a hostile narrative is rooted in lived experience, an institutional contradiction or accumulated mistrust, the formal quality of the counter-narrative will not rectify the conditions that lend it credibility.

American research on the information ecosystem specifically shifts the focus towards relationships of trust, communities and institutions. In *Rebalancing the Information Ecosystem*, RAND emphasises that resilience is not merely a matter of disseminating accurate information: it requires restoring the social and institutional ties that enable such information to be received.

The US Army's doctrine,[21] articulates the same requirement in more operational terms: a narrative must be reinforced by consistent actions, and the organisation's behaviour must remain aligned with the message it conveys. Any narrative strategy should therefore begin with a plausibility assessment: what experiences, practices or contradictions lend credibility to the opposing narrative? The response might then include communication, but also a change in practices, verifiable evidence and the use of intermediaries who are genuinely credible with the target audience. An institution cannot, in the long term, use its narrative to counteract what its day-to-day behaviour helps to confirm.

5. Subject every narrative campaign to a counter-narrative test

No campaign should be rolled out across the board simply because its designers consider it persuasive or because it achieves good engagement results. It should be tested on several audience groups and compared with a baseline scenario.

The experiment should measure separately message recognition, comprehension, recall, internalisation, changes in attitudes and observable behaviours. It should also investigate any undesirable effects: amplification of the opposing narrative, increased polarisation, reactivation of a long-standing issue, loss of trust or mobilisation of an audience that was initially indifferent.

RAND specifically employed a controlled protocol to distinguish exposure to a campaign from its actual effects. Its researchers divided participants into a group exposed to the content under study and a control group, then measured the resulting differences. Whilst this method does not resolve all issues of ecological validity, it is far more robust than an extrapolation based on platform performance data. The US *Department of Defence* frames operations in the information environment more broadly within an architecture combining personnel, programmes, governance and

[21] Aguilastratt, A., Updike, M., & White, M. (2022). The Information Domain and Social Media: Part 2. NCO Journal. https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2022/January/Social-Media-Part-2/

partnerships, confirming that they cannot be reduced solely to the production of messages[22] .

Finally, institutions should require a critical analysis prior to deployment. A separate team would seek out counter-examples, unreceptive audiences, ironic interpretations and alternative causalities. This procedure would prevent analysts from selecting evidence that confirms the framework they themselves have constructed.

[22] Department of Defence. (2023). DOD Announces Release of 2023 Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment. https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3592788/dod-announces-release-of-2023-strategy-for-operations-in-the-information-enviro/

CONCLUSION

Narratological approaches have enabled a decisive shift: from isolated content to interpretative continuities that render this content recognisable, plausible and reactivatable. The concepts of seriality, architext, isotopy and actantial structure shed light on the persistence of symbolic forms amidst the fragmentation of digital flows. Analysis of platforms and affects shows that these forms are inseparable from technical devices, temporalities of memory and communities of reception.

This descriptive power must, however, be precisely circumscribed. A visible, stable and coherent narrative architecture does not demonstrate a transformation in behaviour. Digital traces primarily measure circulation and reactivity. They leave open the question of understanding, acceptance and action. The recognition of a form is not its victory.

The limitation of the 'battle of narratives' therefore lies less in the attention it pays to narratives than in the blurring it permits between three distinct concepts: the symbolic organisation of plausibility, cognitive reception and behavioural causality. By conflating them, it risks transforming a strategic metaphor into a general theory of influence. By separating them, it regains its true utility: describing the conditions under which certain interpretations become available and resilient.
Narrative approaches are not inadequate because they are inherently weak. They become so when they are asked to produce something other than what they are capable of establishing. They reconstruct the symbolic and affective infrastructures of plausibility; computational methods reveal certain distributions within them; the study of reception and behaviour must still establish the effects. It is within this framework—and not in the notion of an autonomous clash between narratives—that a rigorous analysis of digital influence can be constructed.

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