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*CORRESPONDENCE

Artem Zakharchenko
✉ artem.zakh@gmail.com

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Advantages of the connective strategic narrative during the Russian–Ukrainian war

Artem Zakharchenko^{1,2*}

¹Institute of Journalism, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine, ²NGO Communication Analysis Team – Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine

In this article, we expand the methodological approach to strategic narrative analysis based on the case of the contemporary Russian–Ukrainian war. Namely, we introduce the concept of a “connective strategic narrative.” Such a narrative is not intentionally constructed by elites but created by the “affective public” on social media—emotionally tied social media users, according to Papacharissi’s definition. We argue that the patriotic Ukrainian narrative about the war evolved in social media can be considered a connective strategic narrative that is more comprehensive than the “normal” strategic narrative shaped by authorities, while the pro-Russian social media war narrative is merely a reflection of the official strategic narrative. Based on social media data, we conducted a structural narrative analysis of both strategic narratives used in the ongoing war in Ukraine and deployed in the Ukrainian information space: the offensive pro-Russian narrative and the defensive Ukrainian narrative. The pattern for such analysis is based on Korostelina’s framework for national narrative analysis. Our analysis emphasizes the key differences between these narratives and shows that the Russian one has crucial disadvantages that prevent it from successfully engaging the Ukrainian people. Instead, as it was developed with the significant participation of ordinary citizens, the Ukrainian strategic narrative had the total advantage in the struggle for the attention of Ukrainians at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

KEYWORDS

strategic narrative, war communication, social media, affective public, Russian-Ukrainian war, propaganda

1 Introduction

Russia started full-scale aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, after an eight-year “local” war in the East and South of Ukraine. The Kremlin had not achieved its goal of taking Kyiv by storm in three days; as of December 2024, this goal has not been achieved. One of the reasons for this is the significant resilience and will to fight demonstrated by the Ukrainian military and civilians, as noted by the media (Burns, 2022). This results from informational warfare as a part of the hybrid military confrontation, as described by military researchers (Caliskan, 2019). Therefore, the course of the invasion has shattered both the myth of Russian military might and the effectiveness of Russian propaganda and propagandists. This is possible when the offensive Russian strategic narrative spread in the Ukrainian information space was less effective than the defensive Ukrainian strategic narrative. However, the reason for this difference has not yet been clarified. At least, at the beginning of the conflict, both narratives had to establish their positions in the information space. The study period will be from 24 February to 4 April 2022. The final date was chosen as it was just after the substantial turning point in the attitude to the war, following the exposure of Russia’s military crimes in Bucha.

Western military experts typically emphasize the high proactivity of Ukrainian soldiers and military units. They note (Hall, 2022) that the decision-making in the Ukrainian army is largely decentralized, which provides a crucial advantage on the battleground compared to the highly centralized Russian army. The same situation applies to the support of the army by Ukrainian volunteers. Communication in Ukrainian and social media is also decentralized and pluralistic, with many grassroots movements (Zakharchenko et al., 2019). In view of the above, we can hypothesize that the reason for the Ukrainian strategic narrative advantage can also be rooted in decentralization.

But how can it be decentralized? As an instrument of soft power, strategic narrative allows states to win the war. It is usually considered a story intentionally constructed by the authorities and told for their citizens and the enemy forces (Szostek, 2017a, p. 5). Therefore, it is created in a centralized manner.

To resolve this inconsistency, we apply the “affective public” concept introduced by Papacharissi (2015). We provide the concept of “connective strategic narrative” to show that in a time of social media communication, the actors of the strategic narrative are not limited to the authorities. Here, we consider strategic narrative as a story that motivates people to struggle.

This approach allows us to make a connection between the strategic narrative and the more ordinary social media narrative, which has been studied for many years as a comprehensive story about the world created on social media by different countries, generations, and more (Carmen et al., 2023). Therefore, we can hypothesize that the segment of this narrative that was formed in Ukraine at the beginning of the full-scale invasion plays the role of a strategic narrative. In the example of the Ukrainian war, we will answer whether the narrative created on social media can serve as strategic.

RQ1. Is the social media narrative about the war in Ukraine appeared in the patriotic, pro-Ukrainian segment of social media and served as the strategic narrative of the Ukrainian side of this war during the first months of this war?

Pro-Russian social media content is also present in the Ukrainian media space and used by Russia to influence the Ukrainian audience (Katerynychuk, 2017). It is also expected to be a source for the Russian strategic narrative study, considering the strong centralization of the Russian propaganda machine and its control over communication in social media (Horbyk et al., 2023)—namely, Russia banned social media platforms that were not controlled by the state on its own territory as well as on the occupied territories. Therefore, the Russian social media narrative about the war cannot be anything other than just a mirror of the official narrative. But we have to check this before move forward.

RQ2. Is the pro-Russian social media narrative in the Ukrainian information space about the war in Ukraine just a mirror of the official Russian strategic narrative presented by official Russian speakers?

Positive answer on RQ1 and RQ2 will enable us to compare the Ukrainian and Russian strategic narratives based on social media data.

RQ3. What are the differences between the offensive Russian and defensive Ukrainian social media narratives about the war in its initial stage?

Determining why the Russian strategic narrative was unsuccessful in Ukraine is also important. This can be achieved by examining the requirements articulated by previous researchers who have worked on this topic:

RQ4. Are there any significant problems in the Russian strategic narrative in Ukraine according to the requirements of the “good strategic narratives” articulated by scholars?

To answer all these questions, we develop a structural approach for strategic narrative analysis. It is common to think that this narrative is a kind of “artwork” that must meet a list of requirements—so there is less information about its construction. But, our approach allows us to show how to construct these narratives rather than create them. Within the context of social media, we consider narrative as a dynamic structure rather than a completed artwork, so it may differ significantly at various stages of the war.

2 Literature review

2.1 Identity and action narratives

Lyotard’s «grand narratives» despite postmodern criticisms (Lyotard, 1984), still have a significant role as stories that bring people together and motivate them to take common action. In an age of mediated reality, these narratives are often shaped in a media communication space (Kaun and Fast, 2013).

There are two basic types of these narratives. The first is the identity narrative, which describes different peoples’ identities, origins, rules, and goals. The most well-studied is the national narrative (Snyder, 2004). However, there are also other identity narratives, such as religious narratives, which are among the most widespread in human culture (Pihlaja, 2011), and political ideology narratives (Kaye, 2016). Gender, professional, subculture, and other narratives can also be suggested.

The structure of the national narrative is well-described by Korostelina (2014, p. 23–51). This narrative creates a national identity and legitimizes power in the country. Typically, such a narrative consists of three parts:

- Binary opposition: This kind of opposition separates ingroups from outgroups by providing the edge and describing the features of both categories. This distinction could be based not only on opposing social groups—ethnic, religious, cultural—but also on ideology groups and social development levels.
- Mythic narratives: stories about the foundation and development of the nation. The structures of these myths could be reduced to several patterns: impediment by outgroups, condemning imposition, positive ingroup predisposition, validation of rights, enlightening, opposite interpretations of the same subject, and the same interpretation of opposite subjects.
- Normative order: judgments about the desirable state system and relations between the ingroups. Different binaries and myth structures are based on cultural rights, acceptance by advantaged and disadvantaged groups, legitimizing ingroups and delegitimizing outgroups, validation of social order, and consensus among groups.

This detailed structure is sharpened for the national narrative, but we can assume that other identity narratives (political, religious, gender, professional) have a similar structure.

In addition to identity narratives, there is also a more applied type of action narrative. We operate from the notion that there are pairs of interconnected narratives of identity and action. For example, the strategic narrative is a kind of action narrative that subordinates to the national narrative during a war (Jilani, 2020). Similarly, the electoral narrative (also action narrative) subordinates the political ideology narrative during a campaign (Zakharchenko and Zakharchenko, 2021). We can assume that every identity narrative can be paired with an action narrative during some special, challenging periods. These action narratives necessarily contain calls to action, for example, in the case of an election narrative, to vote for the candidate, campaign for him, persuade the opponents, and so on.

This idea of pairs of identity/action narratives allows us to elaborate on the approach for the structural analysis of the strategic narrative based on such patterns for the national narrative. We will describe it in Chapter 2.

2.2 Strategic narratives and their features

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, we first need to find out what approaches exist to studying strategic narratives. Its concept developed on the edge of centuries. In the context of the war, it is defined as a «form of communication, through which political actors attempt to give meaning to the past, present and future to achieve political objectives» (Szostek, 2017a, p. 5). National and strategic narratives are considered second-order narratives in the classification (Roselle et al., 2014), while the researchers placed the narratives of international organizations on the first level of the world's system of narratives.

There are several approaches to defining the goals of strategic narratives. J. Szostek distinguishes promotional measures of the strategic narrative, such as “nation-branding,” aimed at attracting citizens and protecting the state's identity, and defensive measures directed against opponent states (Szostek, 2017a, p. 18). L. Freedman considers narratives that serve strategies aimed at hostile out-groups to persuade them to deceive or confuse and narratives about strategies aimed at in-groups and their mobilization (Freedman, 2015, p. 22). It is also believed that strategic narratives could be used not only for winning and domination but also for the establishment of cooperation (Miskimmon et al., 2016).

War in Afghanistan became the broadest polygon for strategic narrative studies (De Graaf, 2015). Scholars realize that communications with opponents, the local population, and home actors should be analyzed (Dimitriu, 2012). Nevertheless, researchers in this war have focused most on studying the strategic narrative within the United States, not in Afghanistan.

A different situation is the study of the Russian strategic narrative and its impact on the European Union and Ukraine. It was studied as offensive; for example, the narrative analysis of political papers showed the danger from Russia to Western democracies in 2017 (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017). The Ukrainian polygon brought to the fore the limitations of this “weapon” (Szostek, 2017b).

The Chinese strategic narrative has recently been considered an offensive weapon (Ichihara, 2020; Gustafsson and Hagström, 2021).

To answer RQ2, we should also examine the “recipes” of a good strategic narrative. First, it must meet the requirements of storytelling: to have a character or actors, setting and environment, conflict or action, and resolution (Roselle et al., 2014). It should be “a compelling storyline that can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn” (Freedman, 2006). Emotions and metaphors are very important, along with evidence or experience.

Despite the internal narrative features, external ones are also important. A good offensive strategic narrative has to resonate with local political myths. For example, it is argued that the Russian narrative was so influential in France because of its resonance with some French myths like the “Golden Age,” “American danger,” “European civilization,” and so on (Schmitt, 2018). Another external requirement is that the narrative must not be disproven by further events and new information that could appear (Freedman, 2006, p. 23). Moreover, a narrative will be more convincing if it has an internal imperative and will be more salient if it catches attention (Freedman, 2015, p. 24).

At last, Dimitriu and De Graaf (2016) summarize the “strong narrative” features based on previous studies, particularly (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011). The narrative should be:

1. Clear, realistic, and with a compelling mission purpose.
2. Legitimate, in both objective (judicial, procedural) and subjective (political, public, ethical) senses.
3. Promising wartime success.
4. Presented consistently, and preferably without strong counternarratives.
5. Fitting within an overall strategic communication plan.

We can expand on the last point: this narrative must fit into an overall strategic plan that includes both information and conventional military operations.

As we can see, all these requirements tell more about the final features of strategic narratives and do not help to construct them. This is not surprising because scholars usually consider strategic narrative as an art rather than a construct: “The art of crafting strategic narratives is much more than a PR trick to “sell a war” or a mere tool for communication specialists,” write De Graaf (2015).

This study will attempt to show what this structure might look like.

2.3 Affective strategic narrative

There is a strong belief that authorities can only develop strategic narratives. “Strategic narratives do not appear out of the blue, however. They are deliberately designed and nurtured by political elites,” De Graaf says (De Graaf, 2015, p. 8; Freedman, 2006), strategic narratives are “deliberately constructed or reinforced out of ideas and thoughts that are already current.” Only after the creation of the narrative do elites utilize different channels for its promotion, like celebrities (Wright, 2021), media, or opinion leaders. That is why most strategic narrative studies analyze official documents, leaders' speeches, or at least the rhetoric of propagandist media. Social media was studied as a source of counternarratives produced by informal leaders (Hellman and Wagnsson, 2015) or for less legitimate structures like ISIS (Siegel and Tucker, 2018).

The same belief was common among the scholars who studied protest activity: according to classical approaches, each large-scale and long-term protest should have a core organization. However, in the last decade, “social media protests” have undermined this belief, like the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine or the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East. In this type of protest, source mobilization occurs due to the “weak ties” established by social media instead of the “strong ties” inside the organization (Metzger and Tucker, 2017). Under such circumstances, a completely new type of communication takes place. Z. Papacharissi calls it the “affective public” (Papacharissi, 2015). People who participate in affective social media movements provide their own “connective gatekeeping” of the news, as well as “connective framing” and even “connective storytelling,” in which the same people can be its narrators and its heroes as they participate in the events that describe them in social media.

A very similar situation occurred during the first months of the full-scale war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. As Zakharchenko (2022b) proved, Ukrainian social media users’ behavior during the recent war was similar to the connective public. These users created connective messages and stories about the war and elaborated on the goals of the war. It is shown that neither Ukrainian nor Russian authorities had a strong impact on the social media content about the war, and often, the mode of this content was completely different from the official messages. Therefore, the social media narrative about the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian war is created in the mode of affective public.

RQ1 was derived from the notion that this affective war narrative has features of the strategic narrative because the online community that produces it aims to win the war. This narrative was successfully used for this purpose. This phenomenon can be named “connective strategic narrative.”

This type of strategic narrative challenges its researchers (Roselle et al., 2014). proposed a three-step research of strategic narratives, including a study of their formation, projection, and reception. However, in the case of a connective strategic narrative, these three stages converge as their creators, distributors, and recipients are generally the same people.

It is important to know that the Russian strategic narrative proliferates oppositely and more commonly. Its dissemination is highly centralized, which is typical for authoritarian regimes. There are two core parts of the Russian propaganda machine: the first is Russian television, especially Channel One (Khaldarova and Panti, 2016), and the second is the “troll factory”—an organization called the Internet Research Agency (Tucker et al., 2018) that spreads social media content on sensitive topics in different countries (Broniatowski et al., 2018; Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, 2018), particularly Ukraine (Golovchenko et al., 2018).

2.4 Ukrainian social media environment and the war

In studying Ukrainian strategic narratives, it is also important to understand the environment in which it emerges.

According to the classification of Hallin and Mancini (2004), Ukraine has a polarized pluralist model of the media system that is typical for hybrid political regimes. Before the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, TV channels were controlled by oligarchs who competed with

each other, creating a comparatively free media environment. Besides the oligarch control, there were a lot of issues that hampered the development of the completely democratic model (Orlova, 2016, p. 457), including a small advertising market, unfinished public broadcasting reform, the problem of personal security of journalists in a time of the Ukrainian–Russian war, the hidden advertising practices, and, at last, Russian propaganda pressure (Peisakhin and Rozenas, 2018). This pressure was the reason for banning three pro-Russian TV channels in 2021.

After the full-scale war with Russia began, Ukrainian authorities mobilized information sources for the struggle: six of the most popular TV channels launched the so-called «United News» marathon, which provided unified coverage of the war. The audience of some oppositional channels was artificially limited.

Under such circumstances, social media is a very important environment for information exchange. Ukraine became a known polygon for social media and people’s activity studies due to its deep traditions of activism. Due to this, Papacharissi’s affective public has been formed on Ukrainian social media over the past decade. The first case was the Revolution of Dignity 2013–2014, which appeared due to online people activity (MacDuffee and Tucker, 2017). Then, during the subsequent Ukrainian–Russian war in Donbas and Crimea (the so-called limited war that started in 2014 and finished in 2022 with the full-scale invasion), a powerful online movement of volunteers and activists appeared (Ronzhyn, 2016). Particularly, it was a counter-propaganda movement that was carried out not by government agencies but by commercial and activist organizations (Bolin et al., 2016). Even ordinary citizens joined the information resistance by creating numerous memes (Makhortykh and Sydorova, 2017). The experience of the Ukrainian women’s movement in social media was also unique: the hashtag about the violence against women #янебоюсьсказати (#iamnotafraidtosayit) took place in Ukraine a year before the #metoo movement (Lokot, 2018). At last, the 2019 presidential election also had the format of affective discussion (Zakharchenko et al., 2019). Hostility between the supporters of former president Poroshenko and incumbent Zelensky, on the one hand, weakened the whole patriotic movement, but on the other, engaged new people in this movement that became helpful during the ongoing war (Zakharchenko and Zakharchenko, 2021). This is the communication landscape for the deployment of the Ukrainian–Russian information war.

3 Approach and methods

3.1 Data source

As a semi-processed source of the content for the detection of the narratives, we used two lists of key messages, which were used by the patriotic Ukrainian accounts and pro-Russian accounts in the war communication on social media.

These lists were created by the volunteering group CAT-UA (Communication Analysis Team - Ukraine, 2024). This dataset is not publicly available, as the group mainly provides services to the Ukrainian government, but we have obtained access to it. Since 24 February 2022, CAT-UA analyzed social media content about the war in Ukraine and provided the results for Ukraine’s military and civil authorities. Every day, this group manually coded posts collected by one of the commercial media monitoring systems.

These are posts from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, V Kontakte, and TikTok, found on a query containing Ukrainian and Russian words describing military actions. CAT-UA took into account posts (not comments or reposts) with the geolocation “Ukraine” or “Not defined.” There were, on average, 320,000 such posts daily. A total of 1,050 daily messages were randomly selected for coding, or 42,000 in total, during the 24 February—4 April.

This organization used several coding categories, but for the purposes of this study, important three of them: attitude to the war (patriotic Ukrainian or pro-Russian attitude), link to the official source, and key message of the post. The first category was determined by coders based not only on the content of the post but also on the content of the author’s account. They took into consideration explicitly expressed attitudes to the war in the profile or in the recent posts, the visual design of the profile, lexical features, and so on. Direct or indirect links to statements of the central or local, civil or military authorities of Ukraine were the criteria for the second category in the case of patriotic authors, or, in the case of pro-Russian accounts, to Russian officials, “officials” of occupation administrations, and official Russian propagandist media. Regarding the third category, CAT-UA coders used the methodology of PR message analysis (Zakharchenko, 2022a). This method was developed for PR campaign analysis but was successfully used for war communication and propaganda analysis. Therefore, the coder determines a logical statement that is substantial for communication and in which the subject or the predicate is related to the war. To avoid confusion with social media posts, which are also often referred to as “messages,” we will refer to such judgments in this article as “communication messages.”

Formulations of such communication messages are unified to emphasize the general meaning of each post. Examples of messages used by patriotic Ukrainian users are: «Ukrainian army repulses Russian attacks. Russians have heavy losses», «Ukrainian cities are sheltering», «Life is going on despite the war», «Ukraine captures or destroys Russian military equipment», «There is an opportunity to support financially Ukrainian army», «Russian military loses ground», «Ukrainians help each other during the war». And here are examples of messages used by pro-Russian users: «Ukraine is shelling civilians in the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republic», «Armies of Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republic advancing on Ukrainians», «Nazis & extremists operate in Ukraine», «Ukraine spreads fakes», «Russia takes control of cities and strategic objects», «Western sanctions will threaten world economics». As none of the posts was linked to its author, and all the aggregated data is in the anonymized form, there is no ethical violation.

This list of communication messages, without regard to their quantitative distribution, became the basis for our qualitative analysis of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian narratives about the war.

In total, 681 pro-Ukrainian communication messages were detected by CAT-UA coders in the dataset, and 172 were pro-Russian communication messages. Among them, 389 pro-Ukrainian communication messages were used only in unofficial communication, so these statements were made only by bloggers, journalists, independent experts, or, mostly, by ordinary social media users. In the pro-Russian dataset, there were only 16 completely unofficial communication messages.

3.2 Structural analysis of the strategic narrative

We used the dataset described above as the basis for our own coding based on the matrix of the strategic narrative structure, which we will develop based on the following.

Analytical framing of our research questions requires a shift from the classical approach to the strategic narrative as a masterpiece and, instead, an elaboration of a clear model for structural analysis of the strategic narrative.

As demonstrated in section 1.1, the national narrative is closely linked to the strategic narrative, forming a pair of identity and action narratives. Therefore, we can use Korostelina’s structural model to develop one. When tailoring this model, we must consider the purposive nature of the strategic narrative.

Under the conditions of war, binary opposition turns into disposition, which describes not just ingroup and outgroup but at least four categories: “we,” “enemies,” “allies,” and “others.” We will refer to this part of the narrative as “disposition.”

As an explanatory part of the narrative, the normative order also undergoes modifications in the strategic narrative. It defines the goals of participation in the war for the military, civilians, and the whole country, as well as for the enemy, allies, and others.

Mythic narratives are also important as they describe how the war is conducted, combining individual facts into stories about the war that differ depending on which side is telling them.

A fourth part of the strategic narrative, which is not present in the national narrative, is a call to action.

These four components of the strategic narrative, which are further subdivided into subcomponents, form the basis of our strategic narrative analysis matrix, shown in Figure 1.

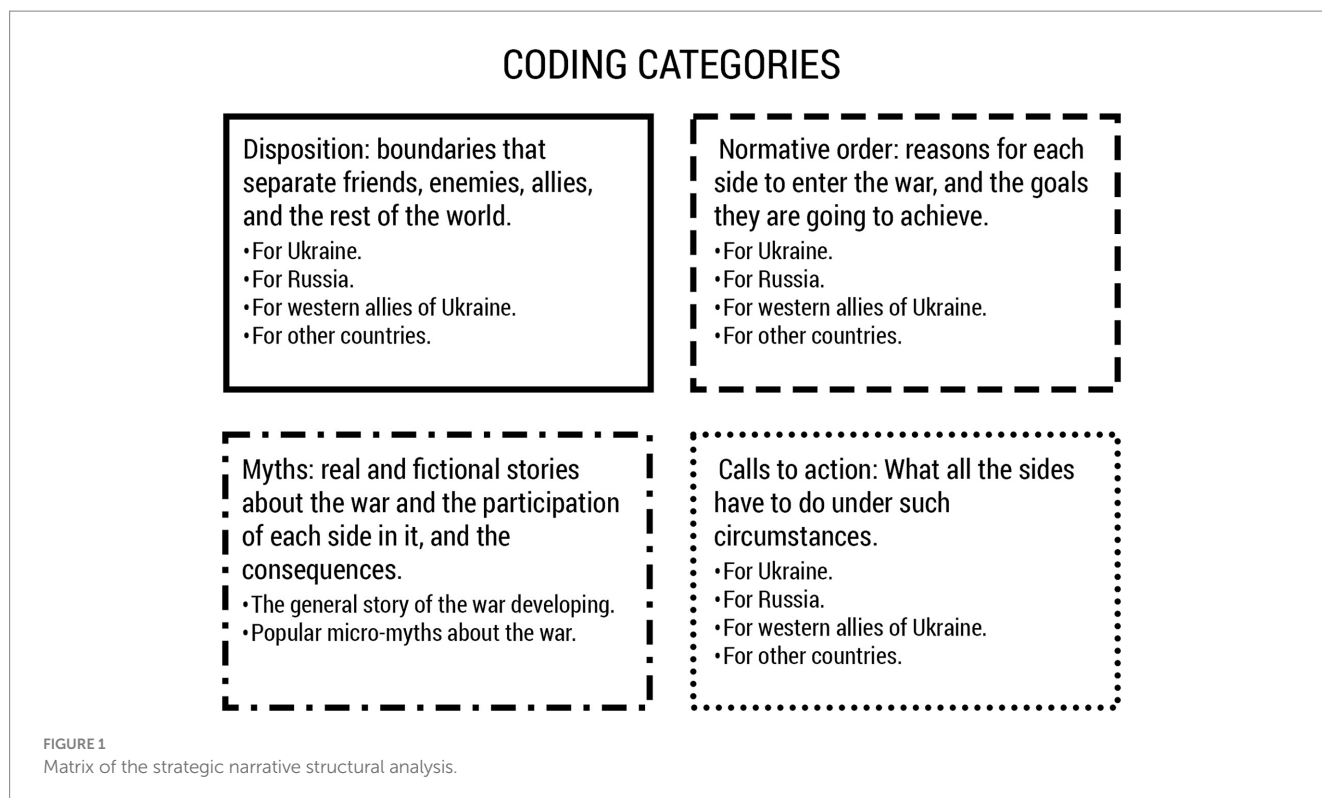
Based on this scheme, the author provided topical coding of the communication messages in two lists used by pro-Russian and patriotic Ukrainian users on social media, assigning them to one of the hierarchical categories shown in Figure 1. Consequently, communication messages used in social media were assigned to the matrix of the strategic narrative.

To accomplish this, sets of communication messages representing each category were obtained. These sets were then qualitatively processed and reformulated to obtain a descriptive narrative structure for each category. At this stage, completed narratives used by both sides of the war were stated without considering oppositional and other side narratives. For instance, some users in Crimea or Donetsk shared a small number of posts from Russian users convicting Putin of the war. However, these communication messages were not part of the completed pro-Russian narrative used by Russians to bring victory closer, nor were they part of the Ukrainian narrative because they were not created by the Ukrainian side for defense. Therefore, such posts were not considered.

4 Results and discussion

The result of our coding and further transformation of the received data into the narrative form is presented in the qualitative dataset associated with this article.¹

¹ <https://figshare.com/s/435ce9089fd9cf219a3>



Below, we present a short, illustrated description of these narratives along with their comparison, and then, we will provide a more detailed discussion about the aim of the study.

4.1 Comparison of patriotic Ukrainian and pro-Russian social media narratives in Ukraine

4.1.1 Disposition

A brief description of the dispositions presented in the two social media narratives studied is shown in [Figure 2](#) (Ukrainian narrative) and [Figure 3](#) (Russian narrative). These texts are abbreviated versions of the dispositions presented in the qualitative dataset mentioned at the beginning of section 4.

From this, we can see that both Ukrainians and Russians depict the disposition in a similar way: their own army is shown as powerful and supported by people, and the enemy as weak. Both describe the Ukrainian army as a unity of people rather than a leadership structure, unlike the Russian army, which looks like Putin's instrument. Western countries in both narratives are depicted controversially but with different accents. The Ukrainian narrative focuses more on other countries, while the Russian one does not pay enough attention to it ([Figure 3](#)).

4.1.2 Normative order

A brief summary of the regulatory procedure is also presented in [Figure 4](#) (Ukrainian narrative) and [Figure 5](#) (Russian narrative).

Both sides of the narrative (see [Figures 4, 5](#)) speak about their own goals on a global scale (to protect the world against totalitarianism vs. to destroy NATO), along with ascribing to the enemy more local goals. Ukrainians suspect that Russia aims to eliminate all Ukrainians,

whereas Russia provides contradictory versions of Ukrainian and Western goals. Ukrainians are depicted as both active and passive actors in this story.

4.1.3 Mythic part

In this sub-section, we will examine the characters of large and small war stories, as well as the general plot structure of these stories. The plots are presented in more detail in the datasheet.

The sides of the war focus on different facts; namely, Ukrainians speak more about the grassroots movement and heroism of ordinary people, while Russians speak more about the people of Donbas and their suffering in the past years. Additionally, at the fact level, Russian and Ukrainian stories of war have different structures. Similar to Korostelina's typology of mythical parts of national narratives (see section 1.2.), it is possible to compare strategic narratives with some classical plots. After the beginning of April 2022, the Ukrainian strategic narrative took the form of the "Middle-earth war" of absolute good and absolute evil, as told by Tolkien. Ukrainians even widely use the word "orcs" to name Russian soldiers. The Russians themselves use the aesthetics of the "Great Patriotic War," but the shape of their narrative is not similar to those used by the Soviet Union in the II World War because now Moscow is an aggressor, not a victim. Therefore, its strategic narrative is the missionary "Crusade," with the aim of liberating the "holy city" of Kyiv from "infidels."

4.1.4 Calls to actions

Finally, calls to action from both narratives are summarized in [Figure 6](#) (Ukrainian narrative) and [Figure 7](#) (Russian narrative).

As we can see, the Ukrainian narrative includes clear calls to three categories of people, the most pronounced for Ukrainians, in contrast to the pro-Russian narrative with only one call for Ukrainians and Western countries—to look down—and a poor set of calls to Russians.

DISPOSITION IN UKRAINIAN NARRATIVE



FIGURE 2
Disposition in Ukrainian narrative.

DISPOSITION IN RUSSIAN NARRATIVE



FIGURE 3
Disposition in Russian narrative.

NORMATIVE ORDER IN UKRAINIAN NARRATIVE



FIGURE 4 Normative order in Ukrainian narrative.

NORMATIVE ORDER IN RUSSIAN NARRATIVE



FIGURE 5 Normative order in Russian narrative.

CALLS TO ACTION IN UKRAINIAN NARRATIVE



FIGURE 6
 Calls to action in Ukrainian narrative.

CALLS TO ACTION IN RUSSIAN NARRATIVE



FIGURE 7
 Calls to action in Russian narrative.

4.2 Social media narrative as a strategic narrative

As we can see from the previous subsection, the Ukrainian narrative in social media fills almost all cells of our strategic narrative matrix. Additionally, as noted in section 2.1, around 57% of the messages used in the social media narrative were not expressed by official sources. Let us examine how important these messages were.

Grassroots communication significantly influenced three of the four aforementioned sections of the war narrative. Only the normative order section was primarily composed of official communication.

Unofficial communication had the most significant impact on the mythical part of the narrative. Firstly, folklore stories about voluntary resistance to the occupiers make a significant contribution. True stories include the one about the tractor pulling the Russian tank, fictional stories about the old woman who brought down the drone with a jar of pickles, or another old woman who poisoned the occupants with pies. Secondly, ordinary people enriched this narrative with stories about life, self-organization, and resistance under occupation, siege, or shelling. For example, numerous stories about performances or concerts in bomb shelters, about volunteers who helped the besieged Chernihiv, and about peoples' protests in the occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

Another section of the narrative heavily influenced by grassroots communication is a disposition, primarily focusing on judgments about Ukrainians and Russians. Messages about Western countries were under the control of authorities. Ordinary people began to talk about the changes in Ukrainians since the beginning of the war, notably the uprise of proactivity, mutual support, and self-awareness. This is where the image of the internal enemy emerged, including people who make money from the war, and, on the other hand, excluded the Russian-speaking population and even formerly pro-Russian people who are thought to have changed their views after being shelled. Additionally, within the unofficial segment, the statement that Russia is a terrorist state emerged, which was then repeated by the authorities in international communication, but after the period of this research. The image of Russia as an ever-present historical danger was also articulated. Finally, the image of "good Russians" who speak about their suffering from the war instead of helping Ukrainians emerged in the unofficial segment.

The latter and probably the most important narrative segment shaped by unofficial communication, is the call-to-action part. Mostly, the calls to help the army with buying military equipment appeared here because the authorities were not inclined to acknowledge the problems with ammunition. The same goes for the calls to boycott the companies that still work in Russia and to avoid internal struggles for some time. The calls to authorities to make no concessions and not to believe Putin were essential, and after the revelation of the war crimes in Bucha, even calls to withdraw from negotiations with Russia. At the same time, in the connective narrative, the official calls to Russian people to protest against the war or to avoid mobilization disappeared. These calls were substituted by emotional pleas for Russians to die, which determined further attitudes toward the negotiations.

This description does not include messages that appeared in the grassroots segment but were then repeated by authorities within the 40-day study period.

The narrative created by the Ukrainian affective public in social media serves as a true defensive strategic narrative. This public involves not only authorities but also top bloggers, media, ordinary military

personnel, and civilians in the process of narration. Therefore, authorities appear to be just one of the communicators, albeit a very powerful one. For example, this communicator is responsible in this system for messages about relations with Western countries and goal setting. Moreover, the use of this affective narrative allows the Ukrainian side of the war to include people who do not trust official authorities.

Official communication does not completely provide the narrative that motivates Ukrainians to struggle. Conversely, the social media narrative includes both "official" and "unofficial" parts of such a strategic narrative. This affective public does not only quote the "official" and "unofficial" thoughts about the war but also comprehends these thoughts, produces new messages in passing, and attaches new framing. Sometimes, authorities have to co-opt the messages from the unofficial part into their formal communication.

Lastly, let us recall J. Szostek's definition of strategic narrative as "a form of communication through which political actors attempt to give meaning to the past, present, and future to achieve political objectives" (Szostek, 2017a, p. 5). Considering the affective public and civil society as political actors, we should regard the social media narrative about the war during the research period as strategic. This is the answer to RQ1.

The situation differs from that of the pro-Russian social media narrative in the Ukrainian information space. While it also covers almost all cells of the strategic narrative matrix, only about 9% of the messages used in this narrative were not expressed by official sources. These mostly include complicated statements by cultural figures, such as "This is the war between Western totalitarianism and Eastern traditionalism," or local observations about war episodes told by pro-war bloggers, such as "Ukrainian armed forces are trying to evacuate the defenders of Mariupol" or "Russia diverts troops from separate locations." Therefore, even in the occupied territories, the pro-Russian population in Ukraine mostly repeats official messages and does not produce its own messages.

This is why the pro-Russian social media narrative is simply a mirror of the official Russian strategic narrative. Russia conducts offensive information operations in the foreign information space and uses social media as the main source of disseminating such narratives, as other media channels are closed to them. Hence, this narrative in social media is precisely the narrative that Russia employs for information offensives. Therefore, it can also be used for this study, albeit for reasons different from the Ukrainian narrative. This is the answer to RQ2.

Positive answers to both RQ1 and RQ2 give us the right to consider section 4.1. as a response to RQ3.

4.3 Compliance with the requirements for narratives

Let us discuss the obvious problems for the Russian offensive narrative regarding the requirements listed in subsection 1.1, which will be the answer to RQ4.

4.3.1 Set of characters

The Russian set of characters is poor; it includes a collective enemy—"nationalist battalions"—with no prominent protagonists except Putin and his spokespeople. The Russian army was faceless in the first stage of the war, especially in comparison to the Ukrainian narrative, which has a rich set of protagonists that includes not only President Zelenskyi but also a lot of heroes from the people: old women or half-criminal actors who combat occupants, legendary combatants like the "ghost of Kyiv," and so on.

4.3.2 Presence of internal imperative

Presence of internal imperative: The pro-Russian narrative has no clear call for Ukrainian citizens and Western countries besides giving up and allowing Russians to do everything they want. The Ukrainian narrative has clear calls (see Figures 6, 7).

4.3.3 Readiness to further events and new information

The first version of the pro-Russian narrative, which included the concept of a “brother nation” that waits for Russian liberators, was disproved by reality. The Ukrainian narrative also underwent substantial changes caused by new events like the information about the Bucha tragedy, but these events did not change it crucially; they just made it more radical.

4.3.4 Presented consistently

The pro-Russian narrative has fundamental inconsistencies, for example, uncertainty about who was the initiator of the war—Ukraine or the West.

4.3.5 Inclusion of the narrative

The pro-Russian narrative is exclusive not only to patriotic Ukrainians but also to the ‘fifth column’ inside Russia that had been tempted by the Western lifestyle as well. The Ukrainian narrative has different “friend-foe” criteria: Ukraine does not condemn its citizens who have or had a pro-Russian outlook as long as they did not commit a crime like fire adjustment. More convicted is a category of unconscious people who make money from the war. Moreover, the Ukrainian narrative includes the internal political opposition, including supporters of former President Poroshenko, who do not support Zelenskyi but strongly support the Ukrainian army. This confrontation undermined the unity of society during the war but, conversely, makes military goals independent of the person of a political leader: potential delegitimization or even elimination of the president will not stop the resistance. In the pro-Russian case, much more is tied personally to Putin.

As a result, we can see that at the beginning of the war, when the disposition was set for further use, as well as the goals of the war, Russia did not have a solid strategic narrative.

4.4 Possible reasons for the low quality of the Russian narrative compared to the Ukrainian one

All of the problems with the Russian offensive narrative do not necessarily mean that nobody will believe in it. For example, some people may have strong emotional bonds with the traditional Russian national narrative and thus be receptive to strategic narratives created on its basis. However, it makes engaging new recipients and persuading them almost impossible. If Ukrainians had not believed in the Russian neo-imperial messages before, especially if they had contact with a coherent and compelling Ukrainian narrative, they would have been unlikely to become Russian supporters.

The reasons for this situation appear similar to those in conventional war: miscalculations based on problems with feedback within the Russian elites. Jeremy Fleming, the head of the British agency GCHQ, said that Putin misjudged the strength of Ukrainian

resistance, the Western response, and the ability of his forces to deliver a rapid victory because his advisers were afraid to tell him the truth.

Another reason is the differences in the strategic narrative creation process. The affective public can be more adaptive to reality because it has rapid feedback from actual events. For example, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, good news from the battleground became an important part of the Ukrainian strategic narrative as proof of Kyiv’s ability to confront Russia. In the case of a highly centralized Russian bureaucratic structure, information flows, including feedback, are much slower than in a decentralized one, and there are other artificial obstacles in the way.

There may also be another reason for the inconsistency of the Russian narrative, as highlighted by T. Snyder (Boborykin, 2022): the Russian government believes in the postmodern relativity of facts and uses this approach for its propaganda for different audiences. Snyder believes that, in this case, a meaningful story told by Ukrainians is much more powerful than “literary criticism” of Russian propaganda.

4.5 Challenges for the connective strategic narrative

The situation when state structures have lost their monopoly on the strategic narrative has both advantages and disadvantages for the country’s information sustainability. The advantages were illustrated in the previous sections of this article: firstly, public creativity allows it to be more diverse and adaptive to the challenges of reality, and secondly, its grassroots nature allows it to better respond to the moods of citizens and their expectations.

As for the challenges, they are inherent in the very nature of connectivity.

- Sensitivity to democracy. The grassroots activity of citizens in creating content about the war is stimulated by the feeling that citizens can influence the approach to victory. This feeling is directly opposite to the paternalism that prevails in totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies. Therefore, in such circumstances, the government cannot contradict the most widespread public beliefs but rather needs to successfully complement and guide them. This is hindered by the challenges faced by democracy during the war, including military censorship, restriction of the rights to protest, to travel abroad for men, and so on. In such circumstances, it is important to introduce only those restrictions that the majority of citizens are willing to accept and to explain in detail the need for such restrictions. Otherwise, distrust of the authorities naturally begins to form, and hence, the feeling that the goals of citizens are not in line with those of the authorities. In such circumstances, there is a discrepancy between the strategic narrative created by the authorities and the one shaped by society.
- War fatigue is also naturally linked to trust in the authorities. Given that the state of affect is exhausting and leads to natural fatigue, its duration is limited in time. All the cases of social movements described by Z. Papacharissi, during which the affective public existed, lasted for several months. Therefore, when a war lasts long enough, there inevitably comes a time when the affective public ceases to exist. At this point, the

authorities should be prepared for the fact that a powerful generator of new ideas that fuels the strategic narrative will disappear in society. This means that they will have to continue shaping this narrative on their own. In addition, Papacharissi emphasizes that it is impossible to create a state of affective public artificially, so we cannot hope to restore the unity of the people that was observed at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

- One of the signs of societal fatigue can be the manifestation of dividing lines that citizens may ignore for a while. At a certain point, however, unsolved social contradictions become impossible to ignore, and citizens begin to accuse each other of misbehavior during the war. This threatens the coherence of the strategic narrative, and “conflict copies” (NGO “CAT-UA,” 2023) appear in it.
- Against this background, totalitarian systems with a centralized information environment, if well organized, can be more stable as they suppress the activities of critics of the authorities and unify messages between different speakers. However, this can only happen if all the challenges of totalitarian systems described in the previous section of this article are overcome.
- Propaganda can use modern technological solutions to influence information. In addition to creating and spreading fake news, for which artificial intelligence systems are often used (Huntsman et al., 2024), it is also possible to use AI to formulate and promote a strategic narrative. Such systems can formulate fictional stories about war heroes or help to present real stories in more attractive and diverse forms. They can also help formulate the goals of the war, prepare, and “package” appeals to different segments of society. One of the potential tasks for AI could be to reconcile the stories that already exist in the environment of influence and those that propaganda wants to spread. If used correctly, AI can challenge the affective public in creativity and thus in its potential to influence the motivation of citizens.

5 Conclusion

We have presented a novel approach to analyzing modern strategic narratives. Our findings suggest that strategic narratives can emerge not only from intentional construction by elites but also from the “affective public” on social media—emotionally tied users. This phenomenon can be named “connective strategic narrative.” We have also developed a structural pattern for strategic narrative analysis that enables comparison and identification of strengths and weaknesses.

We proved that the Ukrainian defensive strategic narrative at the beginning of the full-scale invasion was formed in this way, unlike the Russian offensive narrative, which was formed centrally by the authorities and only spread on social media.

The patriotic Ukrainian narrative developed by the affective public is strategic because it is more detailed than the official Ukrainian narrative from authorities and more inclusive, incorporating both official information and additional mythic elements, disposition messages, and calls to action.

Our analysis reveals significant weaknesses in the Russian strategic narrative, including incoherence, a lack of compelling characters and imperatives, a lack of inclusiveness, and disconfirmation by new events. These shortcomings may explain the narrative’s inefficiency during the war.

We have also shown that the “connective strategic narrative” has both advantages and disadvantages, including its short duration and, thus, additional challenges for the authorities or other social institutions that have to replace the affective public in time to update such a narrative.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article/[Supplementary material](#).

Author contributions

AZ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1434240/full#supplementary-material>

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