DOMINOES
digital resilience to disinformation

4.3

Planning, design, and implementation of counter-narratives and positive content

Digital cOMpetences INformatiOn EcoSystem

What is a narrative?

**1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6**

What is narrative

Narratives have been generally studied within the field of literary studies. For obvious reasons, they have been linked to art and literary works and associated with the cultural heritage of a society. A shift occurred in this perspective with the poststructuralists that, for the first time, highlighted the universal character of narratives which are articulated in a multitude of vehicles such as: spoken or written discourse, pictures, movies, gestures, graffiti, art and street performance etc. In this larger context, Roland Barthes insisted on narratives' "infinite variety of forms...present at all times, in all places and all societies" and on their universal character, as international, trans-historical and transcultural, started "with the very history of mankind" (Barthes and Duisit, 1975).

Their universal character and fundamental function of articulating reality makes narratives in this broader social and cultural sense the main vehicle of identity formation and dissemination. Whether we refer to individual or collective identities, their sense making is inseparably linked to narratives. Hence, narratives' main function is that of representation and they are generally perceived as accurate reflections and expressions of what we see, how we are and what we cherish as individuals and communities. However, with postmodernism and poststructuralism, and especially in the works of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, narratives were also revealed as inextricably linked to power formation and projection, hence acquiring social and political value. In the words of Somers, "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (Somers n.d., 606).

Where to find narratives?
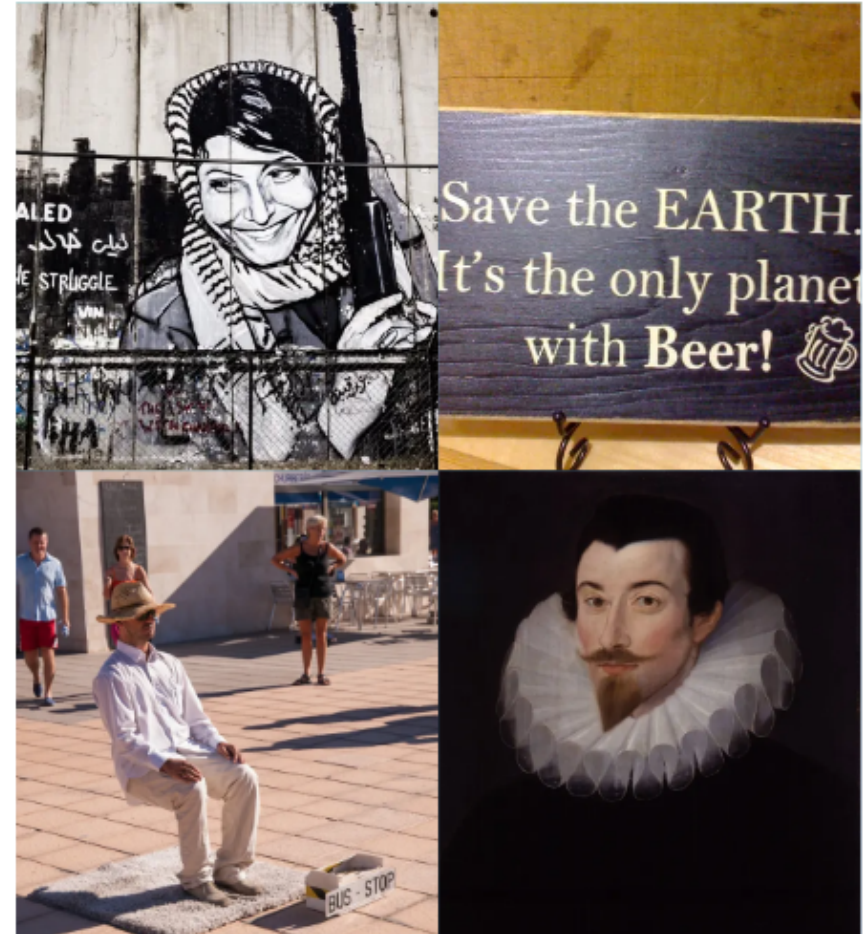
Where to find narratives?

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Graffiti

Art (street) performance

Written statements

Narratives

Gestures

Movies

Testimonials

Erasmus+
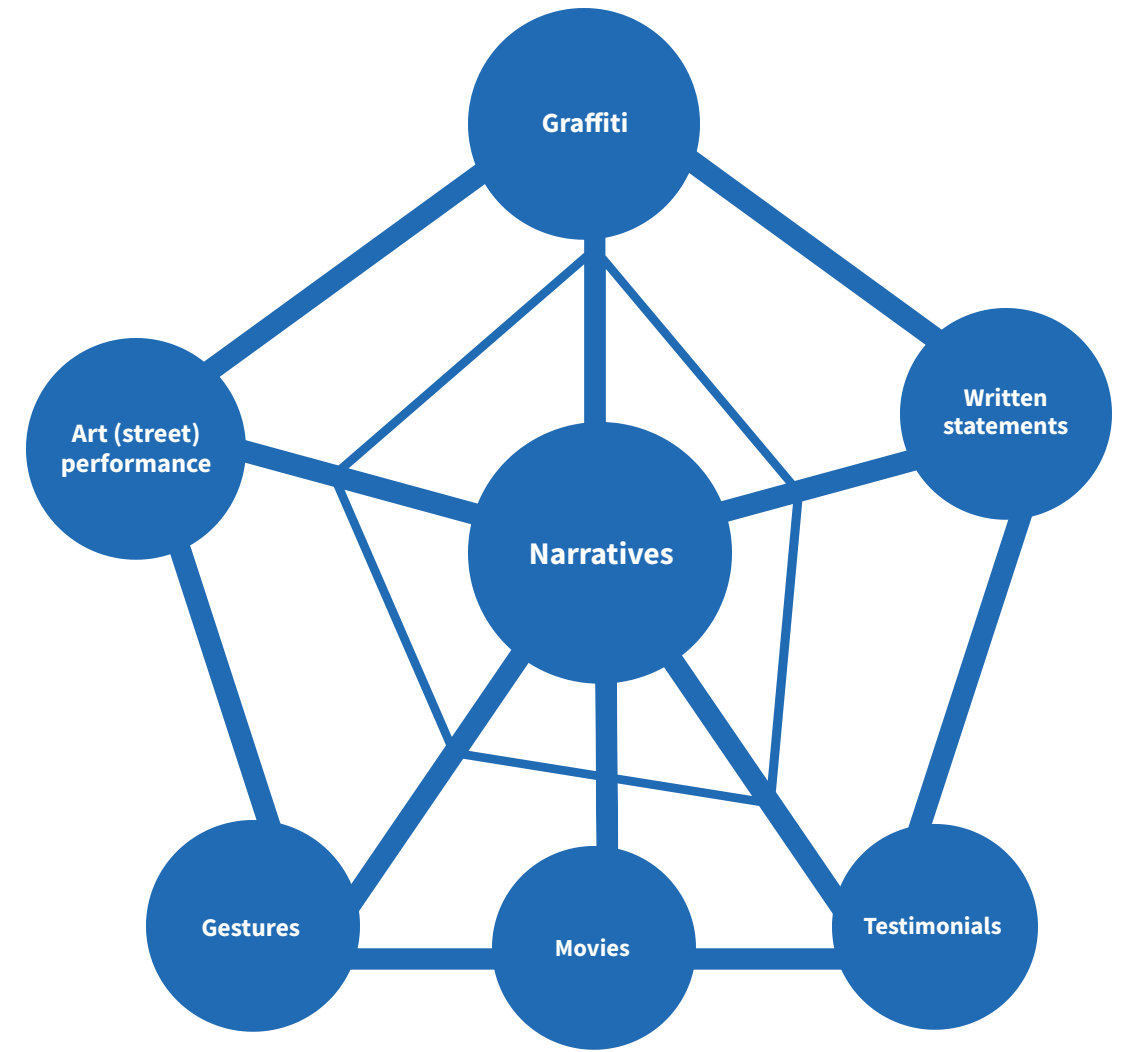
Audience & content creators
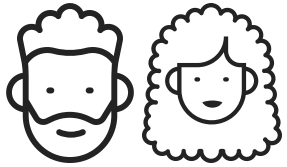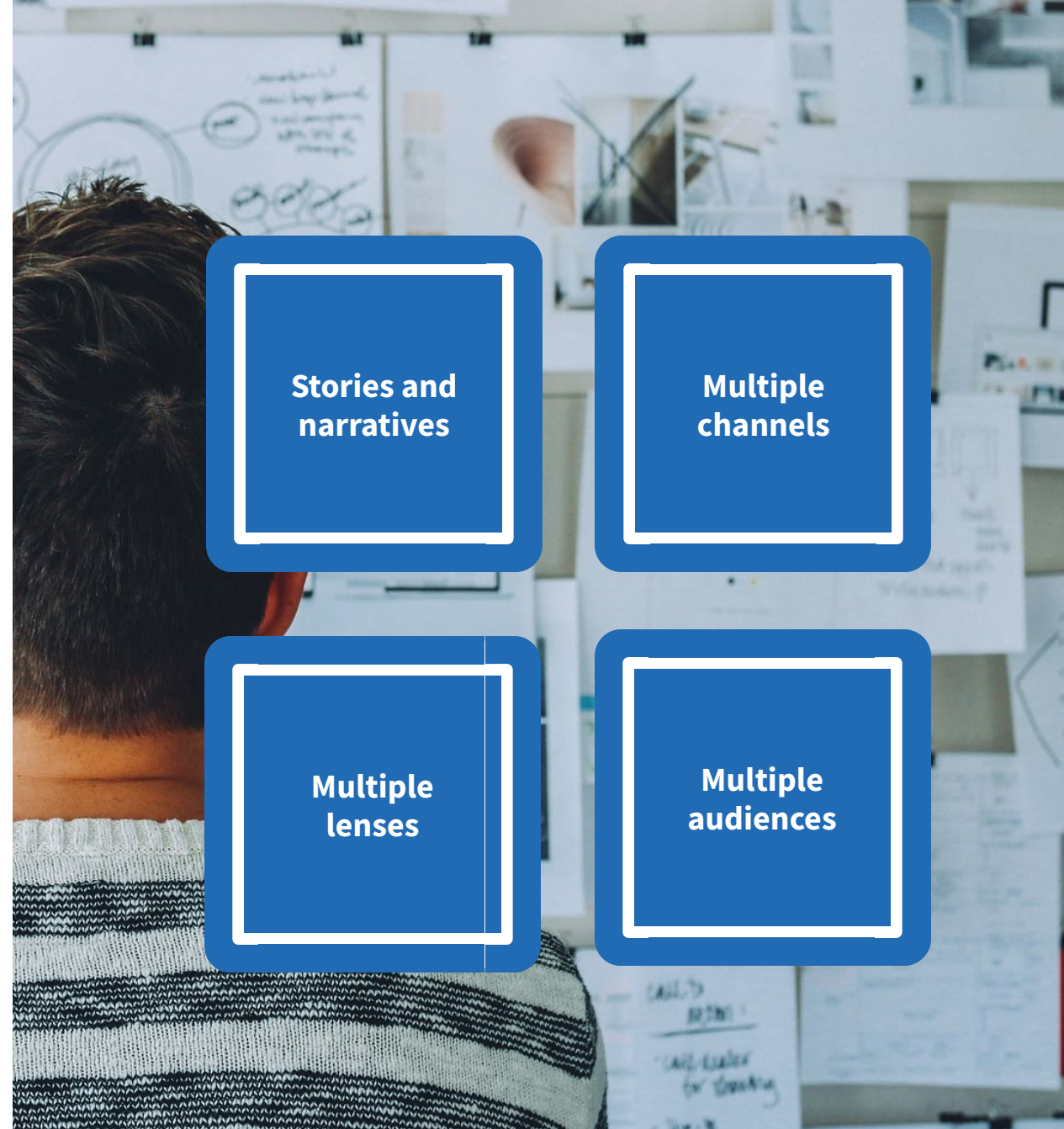
General public   Experts   Teenagers   Granpharents

everyone

Stories and narratives

Multiple channels

Multiple lenses

Multiple audiences

Can narratives manipulate perceptions and convictions?

"to counteract propaganda of two kinds related to the United States. First, that this country has no real culture, (or) native artists of creative vitality. Second, that the colored people have no opportunity to develop their abilities beyond a slave status."

Porgy and Bess 1 🔗

Porgy and Bess 2 🔗

Cultural productions:

while the majority of cultural productions do not serve as propaganda tools, their significance can mainstream politically loaded statements and can attach a particular meaning to an entire epoch
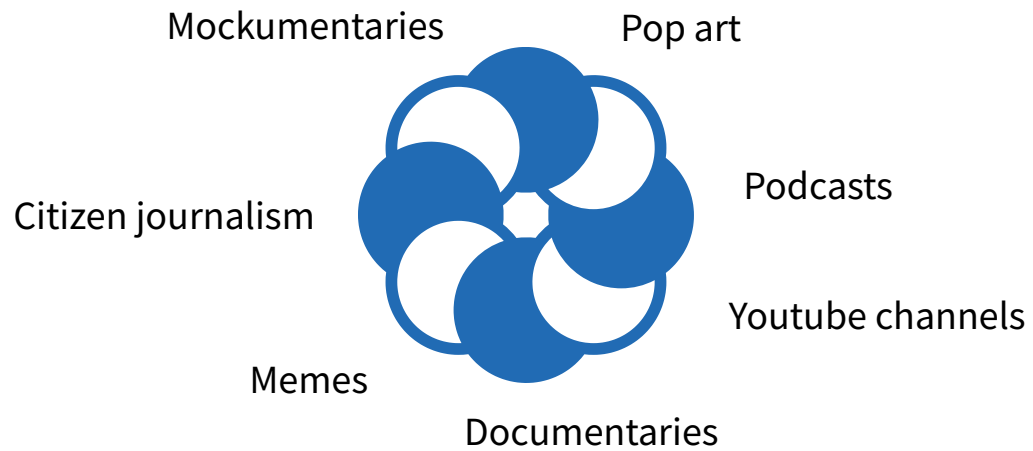
Narratives

As we have already discussed, narratives are sometimes used to influence and manipulate. All state propaganda, for instance, is linked to conveying stories of legitimate power. All state propaganda, for instance, is linked to conveying stories of legitimate power. Therefore, from government sites to media state outlets, both strategic communication and propaganda channels will tend to build stories of legitimacy, efficiency and purpose. Some of the most successful examples in history come from culture. David Monod, for instance, discusses the case of the Porgy and Bess musical under the interpretation of the Gershwin Opera, that was used by the American State Department as a tool of propaganda in Europe in the 1950's.

As Monod observes, the declared objective of the State Department announced 3 months in advance of the tour was "to counteract propaganda of two kinds related to the United States. First, that this country has no real culture, (or) native artists of creative vitality. Second, that the colored people have no opportunity to develop their abilities beyond a slave status." What this historical example hints at is that narratives circulated via fine artistic productions, beyond their esthetic value, can be instrumentalized in the propagandistic exchange of adversary states and in ways that appeal to the minds of the target country's citizens.

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Mockumentaries

Pop art

Citizen journalism

Podcasts

Youtube channels

Memes

Documentaries

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Additional info:

Yet as cultural historians often argue, cultural products will always bear a potential for subversion, their complexity making them ambivalent, unexpected interpretations assigned by different readers occurring at any time. A special part in creating powerful narratives has to be acknowledged especially in the case of performative arts, those that in the framing imposed by the director, can channel understanding of narratives in less ambivalent terms and in favor of a preferred interpretation - that being the case with music videos, theater plays, and especially movies.

The "war on terror" master narrative created post 9/11 is another globally known example of how understanding of major historical events can be shaped not only by political discourse and strategic communication, but also in cultural productions reflecting the events - books, movies, TV series, documentaries, all in a diverse plethora of explanations that go beyond the event and into the making of history. And while the majority of cultural productions do not serve as propaganda tools, their significance can mainstream politically loaded statements and can attach a particular meaning to an entire epoch.

Case Study

A compared analysis of Monica Ali's novel Brick Lane, published in 2003 and the British drama film directed by Sarah Gavron launched in 2007, reflects the tension created between different viewers of the New York Twin Tower fall as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attack. Both underline the interplay of love and death, hope and revenge, whom are given precedent distinctively by the different characters and lead readers and viewers into searching for a more deep insight of jihadism and the underlying social and psychological grievances that trigger it. They will serve as an ambivalent narrative of terrorism as an extreme and violent response to social injustice and discrimination, while both works of art turn the spotlight on human agency and love as providing alternative personal pathways.

Dozens of other film productions, from Zero Dark Thirty (2012) directed by Katryn Bigelow to 9/11: One Day in America (2021) individualize the story while taking a narrative that could easily shape perceptions of viewers worldwide. While the most visible and easily recognizable, state media outlets and cultural productions are not the most powerful channels instrumentalized to create preferred significances to events. Narratives have in history been used also quite extensively in gray and black propaganda operations. And if high art can play a significant part in the soft power apparatus, one should not overlook the role played by popular art, by memes, podcasts, YouTube video channels, documentaries and mockumentaries, citizen journalism and any other form of collective, grass root formation of narratives as stories we tell each other about ourselves as individuals and communities.

Implementing counternarratives

David Attenborough(style) narrates about Russian Tank.
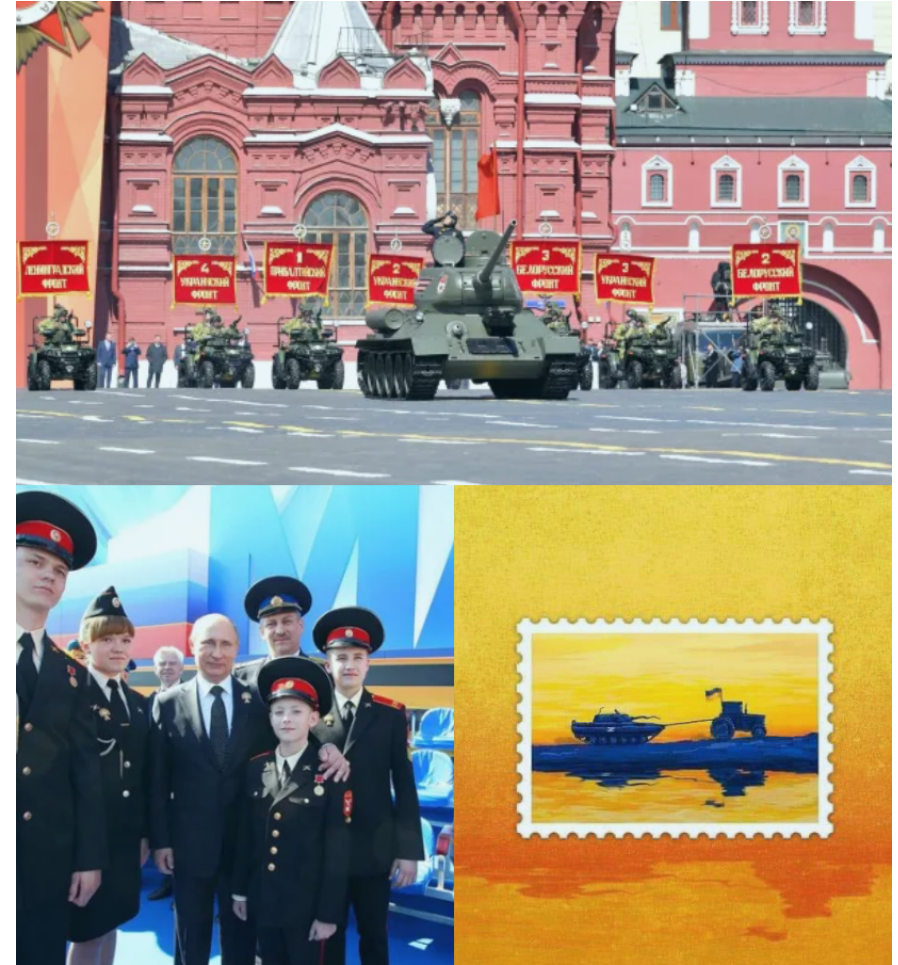
Please have a look at these iconic images of the Russian war propaganda with parade tanks marching in all their glory in front of Kremlin and think of the functions such images have in creating a narrative of indomitable power projection.

Think of their effect on the Ukrainian target audience about to be invaded or during the initial days of the invasion, in which Russian tanks marched at full speed towards Kiev. And then, think of effective ways to create counter-narratives, build community cohesion and trust in own state capacity, building trust and sympathy with the invaded population at EU level etc.

The stamp collection image of a tractor towing a tank presented in the right hand side bottom of the slide illustrates the powerful effect of such a counternarrative, started from a real incident recorded on a Youtube film, of a farmer towing with a tractor an apparently left behind Russian tank. As you will see in the exercises to come, this has sprung an entire series of pop art performances and images, culminating with the mockumentary accessible on the link: https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=333665958904295

Remember

- Cultural productions that emerge out of the participatory digital culture are some of the most powerful ways in which counter-narratives and positive content can be transmitted

◉ WHY
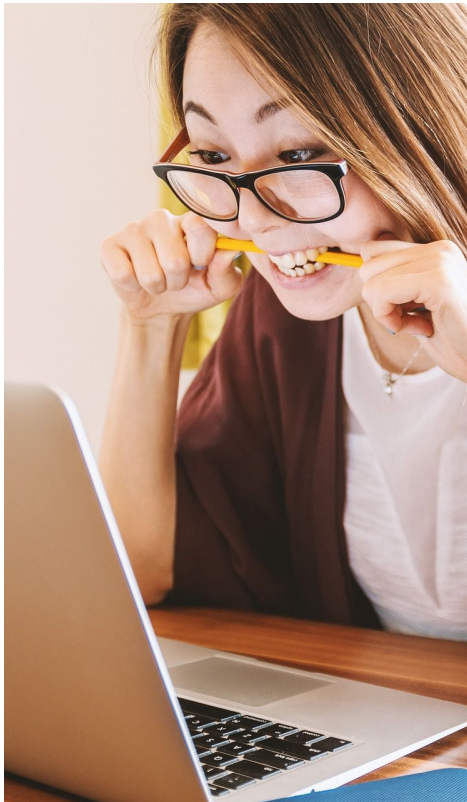
When planning counter narratives, please REMEMBER:

Cultural productions that emerge out of the participatory digital culture are some of the most powerful ways in which counter-narratives and positive content can be transmitted.

Here, creation is often anonymized, while co-production and non-attribution are widely shared behaviors. At the same time transgressive and empowering, these cultural productions often make meaning as part of counter-narratives emerged through public participation. Positive co-created content gains force from the amount of user interaction generated and the real time meaning making process they foster and encourage with digital users. Most rely on a media account of real life events only to then transgress into the symbolic regime and start generate meaning(s) by the engagement of the audience.

💡 **Exercise**

Planning, design, and implementation of counter-narratives and positive content

Exersice: What do we want to counter?

Russian propaganda machine.

Click on the image to zoom in.

Graphics description: Russian propaganda machine

Narratives denying facts

A sequence of narratives attempted to persuade the audience by denying facts and blaming the opponent for their own deeds: Russia did not attack and does not wage war, the Ukrainian population is decimated by its own government forces, attacks are inflicted by third parties and imagined enemies aspire to conquer Ukrainian territories. Denying their own crimes and justifying war through the existence of imaginary enemies

was a preferred narrative used to confuse, detour attention or simply create as much as possible plausible deniability.
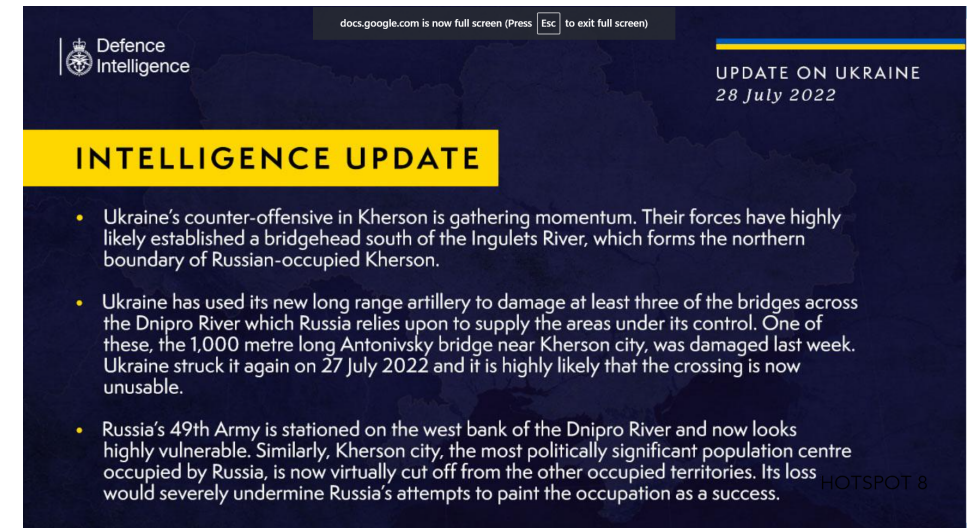
Pattern of fake narratives

A timeline of the first 100 days of the Russian war against Ukraine shows a telling pattern of fake narratives. At the beginning, mid-February 2022, the Russian propaganda machine advanced the idea that there is a Ukrainian crisis caused by the disregard of the West towards the "neo-Nazi crimes" of the Ukrainian government associated forces.

Counter narratives to Russian propaganda machine

- Public intelligence briefings

- INTELL.gov - The public's daily brief

- The Cipher Brief

- Alerts to the press

Twitter - (1/5) Ukraine's counter-offensive in Kherson is gathering momentum. Their forces have highly likely established a bridgehead south of the Ingulets River, which forms the northern boundary of Russian-occupied Kherson.

docs.google.com is now full screen (Press Esc to exit full screen)

Defence Intelligence

UPDATE ON UKRAINE
28 July 2022

INTELLIGENCE UPDATE

- Ukraine's counter-offensive in Kherson is gathering momentum. Their forces have highly likely established a bridgehead south of the Ingulets River, which forms the northern boundary of Russian-occupied Kherson.

- Ukraine has used its new long range artillery to damage at least three of the bridges across the Dnipro River which Russia relies upon to supply the areas under its control. One of these, the 1,000 metre long Antonivsky bridge near Kherson city, was damaged last week. Ukraine struck it again on 27 July 2022 and it is highly likely that the crossing is now unusable.

- Russia's 49th Army is stationed on the west bank of the Dnipro River and now looks highly vulnerable. Similarly, Kherson city, the most politically significant population centre occupied by Russia, is now virtually cut off from the other occupied territories. Its loss would severely undermine Russia's attempts to paint the occupation as a success.

HOTSPOT 8

Click on the image to zoom in.

Counternarratives to russian propaganda machine

Public intelligence briefings

Public intelligence briefings were used to reveal the invasion before it actually occurred and allowed for the narrative to be clear, casting Putin and Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as a victim. This helped form unified support for Ukraine.

Alerts to the press

Alerts were constantly released to the press, like the ones that followed the attack of the Moskva ship and its subsequent sinking: "The 510-crew missile cruiser was a symbol of Russia's military power, leading its naval assault on Ukraine. Kyiv says its missiles hit the warship. The United States says it also believes it was hit by Ukrainian missiles." Source: BBC

DOMINOES
digital resilience to disinformation

Encouraging the audience to take ownership and engage in co-creation of collective narratives

1   **2**   **3**

Co-create humor, artistic representations, memes

As a result of public engagement, people started to co-create humor, artistic representations, memes etc. For example the one described by **Euractiv** 🔗 as a collage that illustrates what is perceived as a victory of David against Goliath" or this tweeted by **SPRAVDI-Stratcom Centre** 🔗 showing a picture of a Russian ship showing the text Operation Z and picture of an ocean showing the text Operation Ctrl + Z.

Facilitate dissemination of collective cultural productions through the state sponsored dissemination of meaningful art: the Ukrainian postage stamp collection

The Ukrainian state also issued a series of postage stamps reflecting powerful popular narratives, such as **the blue tractor narrative** 🔗 illustrated in the previous section of the MOOC. The stamp design evokes milestones in defending the country as an alternative powerful way to advance counter-narratives at global scale.

Video game creation, street art performances, graffiti etc - for example the Bansky series on Ukraine

Other collective narrative expressions included fans of the blue tractor symbol creating video games on the topic, mockumentaries, street art performances and art exhibitions in central European capitals, graffiti, such as **the famous Banksy series in Ukraine** etc.

💡 **Exercise**

Planning, design, and implementation of counter-narratives and positive content

Exersice: What to do?

Match the following propaganda narratives with suggested ideas of counternarratives that you believe would be effective in correcting perceptions.
(Drag an Drop the titles to allocate them with their respectives paragraphs)

Clear the fog by fact checking invoked person's identity

Get out of the biolabs conspiracy area by making the audience aware

Fact check the original source, give voice to real experts

Story frequently referred to by pro-Kremlin sources as "proof" of Ukrainian involvement:
On 19 July 2014, two days after the MH17 disaster, a Twitter account belonging to a certain "Carlos, a Spanish dispatcher" working for air traffic control at Kyiv Airport, claimed that two Ukrainian fighter jets had downed the aircraft. Then, RT Spanish carried out an interview with an individual claiming to be Carlos.

US biolabs in Ukraine are aimed at reducing Russia's gene pool. It has long been known what these Pentagon biolabs in Ukraine were doing. They grew pathogenic microbes to infect humans, everything was done with the Russian gene pool in mind. We know that about 30 Pentagon biolaboratories were dispersed in different cities on Ukrainian territory with different specializations, but with one goal: to cheaply and angrily destroy the central enemy and its allies.

Studies have shown that China is more democratic than the United States.
This is evidenced by the results of a study by the Alliance of Democracies and Dalia Research, which was conducted in 53 countries from April to June 2020 among 124,000 people, reports News-Front.
(…) It should also be noted that in China, 73% of respondents called their country democratic, while in the United States only 49% got it. The democratic deficit in China was 11%, down from 20% last year. In the United States, the deficit rate was set at 24%, just 2% below the 2019 level.
In Russia, according to Western analysts, the deficit was 27%, down 5 points from last year. Thus, the difference between the Russian Federation and the United States is only 3%. It should be noted that Freedom House nevertheless classifies Russia as "not free", unlike the United States.

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and useful resources

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