



Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power

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Abstract

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

Keywords

Communication power, influence, narratives, power, soft power, strategic narratives

Introduction: How Nye’s idea was hijacked

Joseph Nye put on the table of international affairs in 1990s a crucial question: How do we understand changing forms of influence in a changing international environment (Nye Jr, 1990)? During the Cold War, the overwhelming fixation within policy and academic circles was with nuclear arsenals and mass conventional militaries within a bipolar structure of conventional authority. Nye alerted us to the fact that the new international environment required the US to turn to new (or rediscover old) ways to influence the

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emerging new world order. Nye wanted to highlight new methods of American influence for the new environment. The Cold War focus on military had resulted in the USA downplaying non-coercive instruments (Cull, 2008, 2012).¹ Nye contended that if there was a peace dividend, the US needed to think about winning the peace and what comes next. The question Nye asked was: What tools or capabilities are needed to apply methods for the purposes of persuasion and continued US influence in the post-Cold War environment?

Rather than focusing on the effects of such capabilities, soft power analysis has largely resulted in sophisticated counting of tools or resources. Soft power analyses suggested governments must develop and maintain soft power capabilities. They paid less attention to how such capabilities could have influence or impact. Nye Jr (2013) laments: 'we're mesmerized by concreteness ... we're totaling up resources, not [explaining] what behavior they generate.' The same capabilities-centric mindset soon took hold even in the midst of the communication revolution ushered in by the emergence of the internet: counting of nuclear arsenals and conventional weapons has been replaced with counting Twitter or Facebook followers and State Department language streams. The question of how those resources have effects was lost. Critically, the question of how relationships are changing, and can be managed, was often disregarded because such work is conceptually and methodologically difficult (Miskimmon et al., 2014; Pamment, 2012).

Strategic narrative *is* soft power in the 21st century. Strategic narrative sets off from a similar starting point that Nye faced in 1990 – understanding fundamental change in the international system and asking: What are the best methods to influence international affairs? Strategic narrative brings us back to core questions in International Relations (IR), back to asking what means and methods of persuasion and influence are likely to work under what conditions, and to a focus on those conditions of communication and interaction, which have changed so fundamentally since Nye's seminal 1990 article.

Indeed, Nye himself now argues that international affairs has become a matter of 'whose story wins' (Nye Jr, 2013; cf. Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999). He often refers to the role of narratives in international relations (Nye, 2008b, 2011). However, he does not explore the nature of narratives or attempt to explain how a narrative becomes persuasive to target audiences (see Miskimmon et al., 2013; Steele, 2012).² The analysis of the formation, projection and – critically – the reception of strategic narratives and the interactions that follow does the work soft power analysis promised but has not delivered.

The turn to soft power

In the past decade, a major state without a soft power strategy, in practice if not in name, has become the exception (Hall, 2012; Hall and Smith, 2013; Kurlantzick, 2007; Tharoor, 2012; Tsygankov, 2005). The expansion of international broadcasting, competition to host global sporting events and proliferation of cultural institutes, partnerships and exchanges all point to attempts to put soft power into practice. Yet, realisation that it is impossible to analyse or understand soft power without its interaction with hard power led Nye to write of their mix as 'smart power' (Nye Jr, 2009b). In the UK in 2013 the British Council and House of Lords each sought a new understanding of soft power. Nye

stood as a witness to the Lords committee, re-stating that the challenge is 'getting others to do what you want them to do' (Nye Jr, 2013). The urge to understand how to explain and practice non-coercive engagement in international affairs has never been more acute.

Nye's conceptualization of soft power recognizes the importance of ideas and culture in international relations and foreign policy. Rather than focusing on hard power as the ability to coerce or induce another to do something, scholars and politicians often say that soft power is the ability to influence others through the attraction of culture, values, and policies – which are viewed as soft power resources (Nye Jr, 2006).³ A different way to think about soft power is the ability to create consensus around shared meaning. If people believe, for example, that the promotion and protection of human rights is important, desirable, and right or proper, it is more difficult to legitimize actions perceived to be in conflict with that consensus. Creating a shared consensus to force another to do something can be much more difficult than using hard power, but there is reason to believe that the results can be more lasting. Soft power resources may set the stage for shared understandings and this enhances other types of interactions, including opportunities in enterprise, and coordination of shared human goals such as the alleviation of human suffering. Nye calls this using soft power to create an amenable 'milieu' (Nye Jr, 2011: 97). It is no surprise, then, that policymakers and commentators point to soft power as one way to reduce tensions, mitigate conflict and find common ground in international affairs.⁴

If one looks more carefully at 'attraction', however, questions arise about the mechanism through which soft power works to produce a desired outcome. Nye says, for example, that attraction is more than persuasion through rational argument (Nye Jr, 2009a: 6). He suggests that soft power goes beyond that – touching on affect or feelings as well. Certainly the recent work on the role of reason and emotion in human cognition points to the salience of both logic and affect in the way audiences engage with international affairs. Bially Mattern (2005a, 2005b) argues, however, that this mechanism is not clearly articulated and that attraction can be, and often is, coercive – a concept she calls representational force. This is the exercise of power by using language to rhetorically trap others, and she highlights this in the case of the US pointing to contradictions in UK statements during the 1956 Suez crisis that undermined UK leaders' sense of identity, ultimately restricting their action. There is evidence that soft power can, under certain circumstances, be coercive; in the UK's case it was forced into a course of action in order to remain consistent with its values. However, there is another possibility as well. The attraction associated with the term soft power may also relate to the fulfillment of needs. Attractiveness may be based on both or either rational and affective components of culture, values, and/or policies. For example, values such as democracy, freedom, the alleviation of poverty, and human rights may attract others because they address individual and collective desires and needs. Others may not be coerced into an attraction to these values, but it is interesting to note – along the lines argued by Bially Mattern – that these values once articulated and claimed as one's own may constrain future behavior and be used in the context of representational force. If a state claims to value Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine because of its commitment to human rights, for example, this dictates certain policy positions should human rights violations be occurring in another state.

The distinction and relationship between hard power and soft power raises important conceptual considerations. Drawing a distinction between hard and soft power has always been difficult. Hard power resources include military and economic resources. Soft power resources, as currently understood, include culture, values, and policies. However, there is a different utilization of hard and soft power resources. Hard power resources are most often kept in reserve, and are used at specific moments, or within certain theatres and timeframes, with specific strategic and tactical objectives in mind. Initial soft power analysis lacked a fully developed sense of agency, or strategy, with soft power in particular being more about attraction than deliberate foreign policy intent. A state need not deploy hard power resources, but may threaten the use of these resources, and still exert power. In contrast, many soft power resources are not kept in reserve, but *must* be shared. It makes no sense, for example, to fund a cultural program that is not implemented, or to produce a BBC documentary that is not aired. Soft power assets are always on display. That said, there may be times when communication *about* soft power assets and narratives may be used strategically. Soft power assets can be promoted and publicized to target audiences for instrumental purposes – as in representational force or strategic narratives – just as hard power resources can be used instrumentally to influence a target actor's behavior. Consequently, in his later writings, Nye addresses 'the skills of the agent in converting the resources into behavioral outcomes' (Nye Jr, 2011: 22). 'Power conversion strategies turn out to be the critical variable that does not receive enough attention', he adds (p. 10), and hence he wrote an entire book about the leadership and strategic skills needed to achieve this conversion (Nye Jr, 2008b).

In addition, hard power resources are held, at least in the case of military resources, as a state monopoly. Soft power resources are found both inside and outside of the public sector. Any plan for utilization of soft power resources must recognize that among a country's most important soft power assets are the values associated with, say, an open, complex, and diverse society. Soft power may be a property of a country's universities, businesses, religious organizations, sports teams and its citizens. These all become potential elements of soft power strategies but these must be cajoled into working towards national objectives, at least in non-authoritarian states.

Especially interesting are soft power considerations in the use of military force. We have argued that hard power and soft power are conceptually distinct in a number of ways. Today, however, there is an important trend associated with the use of soft power by traditional bastions of hard power. This can be seen in the case of Afghanistan, for example, where military forces have taken on a large role in stabilization and development (Williams, 2011). This means that the military employs soft power resources as well as hard power resources. This goes well beyond Nye's idea that 'A well-run military can be a source of soft power' (Nye Jr, 2006).

Diplomacy is discussed as another soft power tool, both in its traditional government-to-government form, and in the public diplomacy form associated with government-to-publics interactions. Much has been written on soft power and public diplomacy (Hayden, 2012; Melissen, 2007; Nye Jr, 2008a; Seib, 2009). One important point is that soft power resources can be 'channeled through public diplomacy' (Seib, 2013). For example, Seib, in discussing the security of the Baltic states, argues that:

Soft power ... could better establish the political and cultural identities of these states in ways that would help them build international constituencies. If other countries' publics feel that they 'know' the Baltic nations, they might pay more attention to them and be inclined to support them in disputes with Russia.

Public diplomacy can, under certain circumstances, serve to amplify soft power resources, strengthening the 'attraction' of a country.

A weakness in the study of soft power is IR's inability thus far to effectively trace or measure its impact. Some scholars have attempted to identify when soft power matters, but they still largely focus on which capabilities to use and how to use them, and not on tracing the effects that soft power may have (Kroenig et al., 2010). Finnemore (2009: 59–60) argues that: 'Creating desired social outcomes, even with great material power, is not simple, as the U.S. is discovering.' Nye argues that we need to identify not just the effect of a country's soft power attractiveness on public opinion overseas, but identify behavioral changes that result from this. However, this is a task for 'journalists and historians' not international relations scholars, he argues (Nye Jr, 2011: 86). Carrying out such analysis in the present would be 'expensive and cumbersome' (Nye Jr, 2013).

Strategic narratives as power resources

It is evident that soft power is central to an understanding of international relations today. While many accept this general statement, it is still difficult to (1) identify soft power resources, (2) identify the processes through which soft power operates, and (3) understand under what conditions soft power resources can be used to support foreign policy. We argue that the concept of strategic narrative helps solve many of the fundamental questions associated with our understanding and analysis of soft power.

And while narratives have always shaped the way humans understand the world around them, we argue that the concept of strategic narrative is particularly relevant in international relations today. Rational theories are for well-ordered worlds and for leaders set within that world. Today, however, we have a chaotic world, with leaders who are ill-prepared for its complexities. Narratives are even more important for ordering the chaos.⁵

Certainly narratives are important to the structure of the communication process – and many scientists suggest that this is, in part, hardwired into humans (Salmon, 2010). First, a compelling narrative can be a power resource, as people may be drawn to certain actors, events, and explanations that describe the history of a country, or the specifics of a policy, for example. Second, narrative communication as a process is one way through which power resources can be understood to work more broadly (see, for example, Maus, 1991). Soft power resources – culture, values, or policies, for example – may be attractive because they fit within a preexisting or developing personal narrative. Strategic narrative, then, directly addresses the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system. Finally, when we see how different states try to use narratives *strategically* to sway target audiences, we begin to see how contestation works, especially in a more complex media ecology. It is vital that those seeking to use narrative strategically pay as much attention to the reception and interpretation of

narratives as to their formation and projection since it is here that meaning is made and any attractiveness, engagement and scope for persuasion are located and experienced (Skuse et al., 2011). Nye himself says as much: 'What the target thinks is particularly important, and the targets matter as much as the agents' (Nye Jr, 2011: 84). As we have seen, however, soft power analysis offers no framework to capture these processes.

Our work on strategic narratives involves identifying and understanding communication in international relations. We recognize that communication involves both verbal and other forms of communication. This is important because a focus on strategic narrative then bridges the gap between hard and soft power concepts. The use of military force, for example, can be understood to be part of the narrative projection of a state.

We draw from Burke's (1969) discussion of narratives to set out the following component parts of narratives. Associated with each component we give examples that are related to international relations:

- Character or actors. Actors are those who have agency and are depicted as important to the narrative. States, non-state actors, great powers, normal powers, rogue states, terrorists, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), and MNCs (multinational corporations) are all actors associated with the international system today. Within a domestic context political parties, interest groups, economic classes, and individuals – among others – are often included in the narrative about the domestic politics and the state. These designations tell us something about who is considered important, certainly. In addition, however, actors within narratives are associated with characteristics, interests, and behaviors. There is scholarly work, for example, that shows that 'great power' identity has shaped, and at times trapped, certain states into particular behaviors that 'normal' powers do not exhibit (Oates, 2006; Roselle, 2011). That is, great powers are actors within a narrative about the international system.
- Setting/environment/space. What constitutes the stage? Where is action taking place? In terms of international relations and foreign policy, setting refers to how the international system is depicted and how it works. Is the world understood as one of growing interdependence and globalization with prospects for cooperation in pursuit of common goals, or is it depicted as a world of friends and enemies, those who believe as you do or those who do not? As with actors, the setting or environment is packed full with assumptions, assertions, and underlying principles and rationales. These shape the range of the possible in terms of identifying issues that need resolution, and goals that might be achieved. Who creates or reshapes this space or milieu? (Wolfers, 1962).
- Conflict or action. Who does what to who or what, and what reactions and interactions follow from that? This highlights the importance of temporality – as narratives are quite often structured to address past, present, and future. This may also point to the identification of perceived dangers, and by whom and how this danger should be confronted. For example, we have seen that as the world is characterized as one in which terrorists challenge the security of all, more states identify more groups as 'terrorist', and the implied response involves the use of the military and significant surveillance.

- Resolution or suggested resolution. Narratives are appealing to human beings in part due to the presentation of action to resolve a conflict or disruption to the status quo. The suggested resolution in a narrative in many ways bounds the possible – both in thought and action. For example, a narrative about the international system that stresses the importance of international cooperation to confront those who break norms about chemical weapons, highlights ‘acceptable’ behavior in the international system. In this case, it makes it more difficult to use military force unilaterally.

Narratives – with the structure outlined above – explain the world and set constraints on the imaginable and actionable, and shape perceived interests. States – with particular characteristics or identities – are actors within the international system as we understand it today. Narratives can be a power resource setting out what characterizes any state in the world, or how the world works.

It may be worthwhile to highlight or understand narratives at three different levels (Miskimmon et al., 2013) and to give some examples. These levels and narratives at them are inextricably linked. First are International System Narratives that describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works. Examples would include narratives such as the Cold War, the War on Terror, and the rise of China. The War on Terror narrative, for example, sets out states as protecting individuals from non-state actors known as terrorists in a battle for security. A War on Terror narrative may constrain policymaking if, for example, a political actor is defined as a terrorist by others in the world.

At a second level are National Narratives that set out what the story of the state or nation is, what values and goals it has (Holsti, 1970; Thies, 2012a, 2012b; Walker, 1987). Examples of national narratives include the US as peace-loving and historically committed to freedom and democracy (in the US), and the US as world bully (in other parts of the world). Berenskoetter (2013: 3) identifies a biographical narrative of the state that delineates ‘an experienced space (giving meaning to the past) intertwined with an envisioned space (giving meaning to the future) and delineated through horizons of experience and of possibility, respectively’.

Finally, there are Issue Narratives that set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished. Issue Narratives set governmental actions in a context, with an explanation of who the important actors are, what the conflict or issue is, and how a particular course of action will resolve the underlying issue. This is related to Alexander George’s work on policy legitimacy in which he argues that policies must be explained to political elites and the public, at home and abroad, and that this explanation should communicate that the policy is right or good, and can be achieved (George, 1989).

Narratives at each level may be power resources, and like culture or values, these narratives are found within the public sector and outside as well. Add to this that this democratic structure that champions freedom and voice is itself a narrative that has significant soft power. There simply is no way to strictly control every narrative at every level, and frankly it is counterproductive. Yet, as noted above, Bially Mattern argues that narratives can be used strategically as representational force.

We are not arguing that all narratives in the international system are strategically deployed by political actors. Yet, we do argue that strategic narratives employed at one level may affect narratives at other levels, and thus constrain future policy choices and behavior. The beginning of the Cold War narrative is an excellent illustrative example, as political scientists and historians have clearly shown that strategic narratives about the support for specific US policies – monetary support for Greece and Turkey in 1947 (leading to the Truman Doctrine) and the drafting of NSC 69 in 1950, for example – contributed to the development of the international level Cold War narrative that structured the world as a bi-polar and highly confrontational world (Gaddis, 1974; Miskimmon et al., 2013).

The point of analyzing the role of narrative at these three levels is that this provides a more precise grasp of how communication, persuasion and influence operate in international affairs. One can trace how political actors strategically shape and are shaped by narratives. This allows for more compelling explanations of power and influence than can be provided by soft power analysis.

A new communication ecology and communication strategies

We have noted that the post-Cold War international system opens space for significant contestation over narratives. In addition, a new communication ecology opens this space as well. Elected officials and policymakers in international affairs believe foreign relations that are not coercive and are not simply government-to-government have a new and pressing relevance in a vastly changed, and rapidly changing, world. Connectivity creates new distributions of power. Investment in media channels and online platforms by the BRICS, Turkey, Iran and others has created a more pluralist world marketplace of perspectives and reporting. Diplomats ask: Should we try to gain a presence in all these media spaces – appearing on Al-Jazeera, tweeting to citizens? Should a country invest more in its regional or global media players, if it has any? Can old media stalwarts like the BBC, CNN or Deutsche Welle retain or even extend their historical status, reach and influence? As more and more people become connected through social media and engage in what Castells (2007, 2009) calls ‘mass self-communication’ should states entrust ‘citizen diplomats’ to project soft power on the country’s behalf through their routine engagements on social media?

At issue is power and control as contestation over narratives has increased. We argue that this also highlights the importance of the concept of strategic narrative as foreign policy and diplomacy face a new vulnerability from increased transparency. As more of the global population become familiar with more media, so they become more literate about how communication works. Consequently, it is not simply that more government action is visible, recorded, archived and available for scrutiny, today or in the future. Importantly, *how* governments manage their transparency is also scrutinised; too controlling gives an authoritarian appearance, too open and it becomes hard to make decisions. Striking the right balance, and being seen to strike the right balance in the eyes of multiple audiences, is a major challenge. Elites sense they have lost relative power over information and time, and audiences as political actors, including individuals, non-state

actors, NGOs, terrorist cells, and international organizations, have access to communication technologies that will reach a vast audience (Brown, 2005; Chadwick, 2013; Price, 2002).

As we have written elsewhere:

Today the ‘global battle of ideas’ creates both the perception and actuality of a more competitive and contested marketplace for governments who must learn how to compete with or harness a plethora of voices. States no longer have the option to conduct relations with the world in grand diplomatic set pieces, controlling who is in and who is not in the room. Monroe Price argues that although leaders can choose not to engage in shaping hearts and minds of citizens, the incentives to do so and the contestation of ideas that shape the world require activism on the part of states. As Richard Holbrooke once commented to Michael Ignatieff in an interview, ‘Diplomacy is not like chess ... It’s more like jazz – a constant improvisation on a theme.’ The ability to devise and implement a coherent strategic narrative rests on the vagaries of events and the views of others, (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 69).

Of course there are challenges associated with the strategic use of narrative. Transparency and increased media literacy may generate as much cynicism as engagement, especially if preexisting narratives are not understood. This is related to contestation and credibility. In fact, there is some evidence that new media – including social media communication – can lead to a more critical or cynical audience (Pearce and Kendzior, 2012).⁶ Look at the memes that were generated after the Russian President Vladimir Putin’s op-ed on Syria in the *New York Times* in September 2013, for example.⁷ Second, actions, policies, and real world events matter. Narratives cannot be made up out of nothing, and power can be challenged by action, policy, and events. Events that people experience or know happened can counter the most sophisticated strategic narrative. Finally, above all, what we know is that to reap advantages associated with strategic narratives, a state must accept a lack of control over aspects of this process.

Methods for studying strategic narratives

This brings us to a brief overview of methods that can help scholars and policymakers identify narratives (and their component parts) at various levels, and understand their formation, projection (including contestation), and reception. First, the communication space and content are mutually constituted, and we acknowledge the difficulty of studying this space. It may be helpful to think about the study of strategic narratives as dips into a fluid environment. Elsewhere we argue that analytical choices depend on what strategic narrative processes the researcher wishes to explain along a spectrum of persuasion (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 14–16). Here we simplify in order to highlight some examples of methods that may inform formation, projection, and reception.

If one chooses to focus on political actors’ formation of strategic narratives, careful process tracing, textual analysis, and interviews may allow one to understand the domestic political pressures evident when studying policy narratives, or how national or international narratives constrain how political actors conceive the realm of the possible. Studies that choose to focus first at projection involve tracing the flow of narratives through the media ecology. Network analyses, content studies, textual analyses, and big

data analyses drawing out narrative components in all forms of media are helpful in understanding contestation and processes associated with projection of narratives. Finally, to study reception involves a whole methodological toolkit built on years of political communication literature. Interesting methodologies that are particularly well suited for understanding how people make sense of narratives include Q-methodology and focus groups. Soft power analysis seeks to identify whether audiences find one's country attractive, appealing, welcoming or worth emulating. The analysis of the narratives through which policy or public audiences make sense of the world gives a more penetrating analysis. We have argued that a narrative will present a set of characters or actors, a space or environment, a conflict or action, and resolution. We can identify whether audiences come to understand international affairs in those terms or in what ways they differ.

The challenge – and the promise – of studying strategic narratives lies in the conceptual underpinning that invites the use of multiple methodologies to inform our understanding of influence in the world today.

Conclusions: Implications for media, war and conflict

Understanding power and influence in international affairs could not be more relevant to the field of media, war and conflict. The texture and character of relationships between states, and between states and non-state actors, can play a role in the creation of tensions and hostilities or in their mitigation; in the formation or deterioration of alliances and institutions; in the legitimization of military intervention or insurgency and resistance. If the texture and character of international engagement are changing because they are occurring within a changing media landscape then we can see a direct, fundamental relationship between international relations and global communication on the one hand and war, conflict and their mediation on the other. This is not to say that every study of media, war and conflict must address this broader context. However, we urge scholars in the field to at least be prepared to situate the specificities of any case or instance within this changing landscape, given how it shapes leaders' expectations about how they should be communicating and what they believe constitutes effective communication.

More specific applications of strategic narrative for this field can be identified. First, the study of strategic narrative is central to understanding how all aspects of a conflict are defined, constructed and understood. The combatants and their grievances, claims and aspirations are all subject to characterization, the attribution of motives, and attention to any reputation earned. Different episodes are narrativized, put into cause–effect sequences, and given meaning with regard to an overall narrative given to the conflict. Both characterization and narrativization are subject to dispute and contestation, and used for the legitimization of claims and actions.

Second, the interplay of narrative types can help explain how actors are characterizing and narrativizing the immediate protagonists and the situation. An issue narrative of a specific conflict can be connected to a national narrative that characterizes a certain nation involved as traditionally intransigent or cooperative. Alternatively, it could be connected to a system narrative concerning broad power struggles and rivalry between great powers, regions or alliances. In this way, expectations of likely behavior and

outcomes can be generated, expectations that may feed into decision-making and the expression of support for certain courses of action.

Third, war and conflict will be affected by the more extensive and intensive connectivity that is a feature of the new media ecology; more extensive as more people around the world are able to upload, communicate, dissent across distances and in virtual spaces; more intensive because connections become more instantaneous, with a greater number of potential participants and audiences, producing an acceleration of the conduct of war and deliberations around it.

Fourth, digitization disrupts the sequential structure of narratives of conflict. We witness not just temporal acceleration, but temporal fragility: the apparently settled meaning of past events can be disrupted by the emergence of new data or images that force a reconsideration of what happened. Those waging wars in the present are aware of the potential of footage for their actions to be captured and used in ways they cannot foresee or that cannot be controlled. While most news of war and conflict holds to relatively familiar narrative formats – relying on official sources, propelled by longstanding news values ('if it bleeds, it leads'), and the incorporation of amateur-cum-citizen journalism footage into professional coverage – it is the new narrative fragility that creates vulnerability for militaries.

Fifth and finally, political and military leaders charged with creating and projecting strategic narratives to legitimize war, conflict or peacebuilding must become more reflexive about the first four points. They must find ways to research and know others' narratives. They must find narratives that appeal to multiple audiences with differing interests and learn what it is that makes those narratives convincing. They must be able to find coherence between their system, national and issue narrative and publicly expose the inconsistencies across their opponents' narrative levels. They must have scenarios in place for when digital disruptions undermine their preferred narrative so as to restore narrative order. They must be able to maintain consistency between their public narrative and events as they unfold on screens around the world. Events that people experience or know happened can counter the most sophisticated strategic narrative. This challenge is even more pressing as new powers are emerging to challenge The United States' primacy. With greater diffusion of power and authority in the system, more consensual solutions to problems in the international arena will need to be found and studied. Being able to influence international responses to crises through effective strategic narratives will be increasingly challenging, but necessary as unilateral action becomes more constrained.

Readers may have noticed an important parallel by now. In 1990, Joseph Nye saw the end of the Cold War order, saw the changing nature of media, and developed a concept that would explain how states could engage and influence each other in non-coercive ways – soft power. Around the same time, in the field of media, war and conflict, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 1991–1992 Gulf War, and series of Western military and humanitarian interventions triggered a series of studies of the CNN effect, asking what difference global television coverage made to decision-making and public support for these interventions. We close by asserting that something similar is happening today. A change in the IR landscape has triggered a change in the focus and explanation of media and war. The 'emergence' of new global powers like China and India and the continuation of major changes to media ecologies demand the development of a concept to explain

power and influence that is fit for purpose – strategic narrative. Change is already giving rise to patterns of media, war and conflict that have triggered new research questions and approaches that seek to grasp the sheer, diffused connectivity and overlap between audiences and producers, new forms and relations of power and influence, the changing nature of attention, authority and news, and the myriad ways that actors are adapting media devices for purposes of war-waging and peace-making – and for making sense of each.

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Notes

1. Downplayed in terms of budget, though persuasion through communication was still part of US strategy.
2. We take a broad view of persuasion here, assuming there is a spectrum of persuasion based on Brent Steele's approaches to discourse: rationalist, communicative, reflexive, and poststructural.
3. Nye sets out culture, values, and policies as important resources of soft power (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/02/22/think_again_soft_power). Of course, these are not distinct – as all are mutually constructed. We argue that the concept of strategic narrative is a means to update the study of power and influence which Nye sparked in 1990. Conceptually, narratives focus attention on communicative processes currently associated with soft power, but which have not been fully developed.
4. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) has launched several recent soft power, media-focused, network-led campaigns to mitigate conflict. Its diplomatic efforts in Mogadishu led to the 2012 and 2013 International Somalia Conferences in London that aimed to increase international political and financial support for the Federal Government of Somalia in its new post-conflict phase. In May 2012, its Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict campaign enrolled a range of NGOs and Angelina Jolie to seek to reduce levels of rape and sexual violence in conflict, leading to the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict endorsed on 24 September 2013 in New York by 119 countries. See the FCO's Storify page: <http://storify.com/foreignoffice/this-week-at-the-foreign-office-16/elements/f8fd39d6b6ca0f5d87c1f75e>
5. Thanks to Timothy McKeown for this point. We also thank the IR working group of graduate students and faculty at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill for their insightful comments on a draft of this paper.
6. There is some research that does not find increased cynicism: e.g. Hanson et al. (2010).
7. Responses can be found at <http://www.vocativ.com/09-2013/on-the-world-stage-putin-may-be-stiff-but-hes-a-laugh-riot-on-the-internet/> (see also Putin, 2013).

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