THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO NARRATIVE THEORY

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Introduction[1]

Political debates in Europe have become increasingly toxic in recent years. The art of compromise, cultural diplomacy, and the appeal to shared values have been severely challenged by Brexit, growing nationalism, and the rise of right-wing populism in many member states. Migration is a particularly sensitive policy field, where pragmatic policy narratives of crisis management clash with aggressive discourses of xenophobia and racism, cosmopolitan counter-narratives and the humanitarian storytelling employed by NGOs. As Euroscepticism joins forces with the exclusionary rhetoric of the far right, narrative has become associated with anti-democratic ways of reasoning, anti-science worldviews, hostile opinion-building strategies, and the dismissal of "mainstream" journalism.

How can cross-disciplinary research help to counter "the global impact of the darker side of political communication" (Bradshaw and Howard 2018, 23), the harmful effects of storytelling (see Nünning and Nünning 2017, Presser 2018), and the "dangers of narrative" (Mäkelä et al. 2021)? How can narrative theory continue the work on "narrative transactions" (Brooks 2006), "narratives in contest" (Phelan 2008), and "cultural ways of worldmaking" (Nünning et al. 2010), which has furthered cross-disciplinary exchange? And how can cultural narratology contribute to the collaborative effort by linguists, literary scholars, social scientists, political theorists, and media experts to understand the forms and functions of narrative curation (Fernandes 2017) or the complex dynamics of narrative and counter-narrative in the public sphere (see Lueg and Lundholt 2021)?

This chapter proposes a new concept of narrative dynamics, one that generates both well-constrained descriptions of specific elements, features, or qualities of narratives, as well as programmatic claims concerning their potential uses and effects that require further investigation. Moving beyond narratological definitions that focus on narrative fiction (Richardson 2008 [2005]), narrative dynamics is here understood as an umbrella term for all kinds of relationships, hostile or symbiotic, competitive or complementary, local or global, between narrative phenomena. A narrative dynamics perspective views the public sphere as an environment, ecosystem, or market where ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, worldviews, and norms are circulated, modified, negotiated, and exchanged in complex transactions that can't be reduced to a binary logic of narrative and counter-narrative or to the simple antagonism of "story wars" (Sachs 2012).

Narrative dynamics research proceeds from the assumption that we need to increase, not reduce, complexity to account for the roles of narrative in a world in flux. It is equally interested in the

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pragmatics of strategic framing and the grand narratives of human rights, in mundane stories of everyday experience, and the intangible myths and masterplots that shape organizations, institutions, and cultures. Narrative dynamics acknowledges the distinction between fact and fiction but knows that the most pervasive stories play freely with conceptual boundaries. Studying narrative dynamics means investigating how storytellers, storysharers, storypeddlers, storymeddlers, and storyfakers, human or algorithmic, visible or invisible, trustworthy or unreliable, active or passive, vie for attention, trying to steer individual and collective behavior to gain narrative authority and to exert narrative control.

Most contributions to narrative studies begin with a definition of narrative, a ubiquitous term that means different things to different people, from phone calls to novels. Metaphorical expressions like "changing the narrative" refer to future activities, while prototypical narratives are based on retrospective storytelling. While for many approaches dealing with specific types of narrative concise definitions are needed, a dynamic perspective seeks to retain the fuzziness and semantic ambiguity of narrative as a "traveling concept" (Bal 2002). For present purposes, it seems therefore sufficient to say what narrative, in a pluralist, open society, is *not*: a phenomenon, construct, or thing existing in isolation. Narratives attract and reject each other, inviting co-narration and provoking responses; they may disappear for a while, but can always be summoned back; they take shape and lose it.

My argument proceeds in two steps. The next section addresses those formal characteristics and functional qualities of narrative that contribute to its dynamic nature, introducing several new concepts to capture salient features of narrative transactions, such as narrative aggregation and normalization, event modeling, and narrative chaff. The third section then focuses on the uses and effects of narrative communication in European migration discourses since 2015, using three examples: event modeling in the early days of the refugee "crisis," when its status as a crisis was still contested; the confrontation between Matteo Salvini, Italian interior minister, and Carola Rackete, captain of Sea Watch 3, a rescue mission ship, in 2019; and the viral photo showing a Spanish aid worker hugging a migrant in Ceuta in 2021.

Narrative Dynamics: Toward an Inventory of Relevant Phenomena

Narrative dynamics is best thought of as an umbrella term for the ways "push and pull" narratives,[2] i.e. "curated stories" (Fernandes 2017) and emergent, co-constructed stories (see Dawson and Mäkelä, 2020), interact with one another, or with the medial, political, cultural, or societal environments from which they emerge and in which they are embedded. More generally, narrative dynamics refers to an emerging field of research that focuses on the connections and interdependencies between different kinds of stories, as well as old and new forms and practices of storytelling and storysharing. In order to understand narrative impact, we need to focus on the functions, uses, and effects of narratives to describe the key characteristics and recurrent features of narrative communication. Such a framework allows us, among other things, to explain why some kinds of narrative framing are more successful than others, how the nature of narrative transactions is affected by social media, how narrative event modeling works in practice, and how post-truth storypeddling affects public discourse.

Narrative Event Modeling and Management

"Narratives do not simply recount happenings," Peter Brooks (2006, 13) reminds us, "they give them shape, give them a point, argue their import, proclaim their results." Event modeling plays a key role in this process, as events, or rather representations of the happenings or sequences of incidents we call events, are the most basic building blocks of narrative. From a narrative dynamics perspective, events are the sites of struggle and contest, as they can be framed in wildly different ways. Failure or success? Trump's inauguration attracted the largest crowd ever to attend such a ceremony, or only half of

Obama's, depending on whether you trust evidence provided by the National Park Service or prefer wishful thinking. Was the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11 one event or two? As Stephen Pinker (2008) points out in the introduction to his book, *The Stuff of Thought*, the difference was worth three and a half billion dollars: the leaseholder of the World Trade Center stood to receive a total of seven billion, if the terrorist attack comprised two events.[3]

As these examples show, the representation of events is a complex affair. Narrative event modeling has always involved processes of selection, evaluation, and interpretation. Event modelers, such as communication strategists, PR experts, or influencers, focus on those happenings that should be considered as meaningful by intended audiences and downplay incidents that might weaken the narrative they want to spin. Ansgar Nünning (2012, 39) rightly concludes that events should not be understood "as something given or natural, but rather as something that is made or constructed by an observer or storyteller." Leading proponents of structuralist narratology have therefore developed criteria for defining degrees of eventfulness to facilitate the study of event modeling (see Schmid 2003, Hühn 2013). Salient features include the relevance or significance of a change of state that constitutes the dynamics of an event, the degree of predictability, and the effects of the event, as well as its reversibility (or irreversibility) and repeatability (see Nünning 2010, 199).

In addition, the classification of events as crises or turning points has to be viewed with skepticism, as this is often intended to create a sense of urgency or to claim that there are no viable alternatives to reactive policies. In *Anti-Crisis*, Janet Roitman (2014, 41) observes that "when crisis is posited as the very condition of contemporary situations, certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed." Labeling an event as a crisis and framing new policies in terms of crisis management, a response to a serious threat, thus changes what mathematicians call possibility space, i.e. the sum of possible solutions to a problem. Drastic measures, previously unimaginable, may appear necessary and justified.

The EU–Turkey Statement and Action Plan, announced on March 18, 2016, is a case in point. This deal, designed to "end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU" (i.e. the perceived crisis), marks a radical change in European migration policy. The action plan promised to "break the business model of the smugglers" and "to offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk."[4] Among these "alternatives" were the newly established refugee detention facilities on the Greek islands, including the infamous camp at Moria. Gerald Knaus, a key figure among German Chancellor Angela Merkel's political advisors and the driving force behind the deal with Turkey, later called the camp, which burnt down in September 2020, "a Guantanamo for refugees."[5]

After the fire, the European Commission announced that a taskforce would be established to improve the situation on the island. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a press release that "Moria is a stark reminder of the need to find sustainable solutions on migration. … Together we have to show that Europe manages migration in a humane and effective way."[6] The rhetoric of event management fails to conceal that one of these goals, effectiveness, has been achieved. In the same press release, Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs, openly admitted that Europe had failed to keep its promises: "Conditions in Moria, both before and after the fire, were unacceptable." Her statement continues with a thinly veiled reference to another crisis, that of European disintegration:

> The taskforce brings together the central tenets of the Pact – fairness and efficiency for applicants and greater responsibility for Member States. It is not good enough to say never again, we need action and all Member States must play their part.

From a humanitarian point of view, Moria is an outrage. In 2021, Amnesty International released a sobering assessment; Eve Geddie, Director of the NGO's EU office, called the EU–Turkey deal an "abject failure" and a "shameful policy."[7] From a narrative dynamics perspective, Moria lends substance to the claim that framing migration as a security threat rather than a humanitarian crisis may fuel anti-EU sentiment. If we allow the end (the fight against irregular migration) to justify

the means, systematic violations of human rights and the inhumane treatment of vulnerable people are normalized, increasing the potential for acts of desperation that are exploited by right-wing populists: after four young migrants from Moria had been found guilty of arson, the German far-right party AfD cynically claimed that matches were the new visa.[8]

This example shows that event modeling and event management are closely related; policymakers try to create those events they wish to manage, or think they can handle. As Barry Glassner (2004) demonstrates in his analysis of narrative techniques of fear mongering in news media, three strategies are particularly relevant in this process. First, repetition, frequency, and volume are instrumental in capturing attention. Frequent references to an incident make the public perceive it as relevant, even if it is a rare type of event. The second technique is the depiction of isolated incidents as trends, a strategy that is particularly effective on social media. An example is the abuse of social services by migrants; it happens, but it's not the rule. The third technique is misdirection, a term "from the world of stage magic" (822) that refers to meddling with causality. Instead of calling for tighter gun control following mass shooting, lobbyists steer attention to video games. Similarly, despite the fact that NGOs or the UN criticize intolerable conditions, limited access to basic services, and overcrowding, the EU considers detention camps for migrants in Libya as an effective crisis management measure.[9] Although Glassner's analysis is restricted to "legacy" media (TV news and print newsmagazines), these techniques are still commonly used today to influence public opinion.

To sum up, the features and criteria sketched above stake out the possibility space for event construction in a pluralist, open society with a well-functioning media system, where critical incidents can't be ignored and attempts to create something out of nothing will be revealed quickly. But what is a well-functioning media system? What if event modeling turns into event invention? The inauguration example also points to the rise of chaff and purposeful storyfaking as key elements of a new post-truth political rhetoric. This is the realm of "alternative" facts and conspiracy theories, a new narrative dynamic in the public sphere that has to be taken seriously.

Narrative Purpose and Chaff

Every story, rhetorical narratology reminds us (see Phelan 2008), is told for a reason. This holds equally true for fairy tales, policy narratives, spin, or the masterplots and myths that delineate what a culture considers to be normal, desirable, or inappropriate. The storyteller's purpose or goal may not be immediately obvious, however, and in the case of literary fiction it rarely is, hence the need for interpretation. By default, we can therefore assume that it takes some effort to understand the full meaning, intended or implied, of any narrative. In some cases, narrative purpose becomes clear only if we contrast story and action, as the gap between both can only be explained through the untrustworthiness of teller and tale. Sometimes the public has to rely on chance or courage to learn the truth, as narrative purpose is revealed by accident, through whistleblowers or journalistic sources.

Narrative calls for interpretation, a methodology that seeks to maintain rather than to reduce complexity, as befits a humanities approach. But what if closer scrutiny reveals that a story is fabricated, based on false evidence, or used as a vehicle to promote dubious claims? What if the analysis of narrative form and content allows us to conclude that spreading disinformation, misrepresentations, and falsehood is a narrative's true purpose? That it is deliberately designed to tap into its audiences' fears and anxieties, or prejudices and stereotypes, in order to reinforce mistrust, tribal mentalities, and xenophobic attitudes?

Glen Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly (2020), the fact checking team of the *Washington Post*, painstakingly uncovered a whole catalogue of narrative strategies that characterized Trump's "assault on truth," among them repetition, inconsistency, invented pseudo-facts, statements disconnected from policies, false claims, derision for political opponents and hyperbolic rhetoric. The unprecedented scope and volume of such anti-truth rhetoric means that fact-checkers face a dilemma, having to counter unlimited distraction with limited resources. "In fact-checking Trump," they write, "we did

not want to have our core function – writing about policy – sidelined by chasing down the president's latest tweet or ignorant assertion" (xvi).

Divisive rhetoric outrages rationalists but delights the populist's target audience. Fact-checking takes time, lying doesn't; and if there are no immediate consequences for the liar, people may simply get used to it. The novelty wears off, the newsworthiness disappears when lying becomes a habit. In such a scenario, narrative ceases to be a communicative tool and becomes a strategy for distraction. Like the aluminum stripes dispersed by war planes to distract enemy radar, narrative chaff is intended to blot out meaningful conversation based on arguments and facts.

Narrative chaff is characterized, first, by brevity. Twitter is a favorite platform, as it allows the dissemination of an endless stream of messages without the need for substantial resources and planning. Second, brevity encourages paratactic syntax that abandons key features of argumentative rhetoric, like causality or explanation. Third, as one-directional forms of push-communication, tweets circumvent feedback loops, reducing the risk of critical questions that are the point of press conferences. Finally, narrative chaff exploits the "spreadability" (Jenkins et al. 2013) of social media, allowing large numbers of unrelated tweets to converge into a powerful narrative – that of a president who can bend the truth as he sees fit, without any consequence.[10] Such a "fog of disinformation" (261) used to be the hallmark of authoritarian regimes; since Trump, it haunts democracy, too.

Like military applications of chaff, the distractive rhetoric producing narrative chaff is not an end in itself but a tactical device. The analogy to dropping bombs in the public sphere is the announcement of decisions that mark a break with established policies. Examples are Trump's visit to North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un or his decision to relocate the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. In Brexit Europe, *Guardian* columnist Carole Cadwalladr accused Dominic Cummings, Boris Johnson's controversial aide, of using very similar tactics: "The 'noise', the anecdotes and the tall Westminster tales are flares he sends up before he drops his bombs somewhere else entirely."[11]

To sum up, narrative chaff, often dismissed as an idiosyncratic rhetorical style of controversial politicians, is in fact the opposite of traditional framing for serious public debate. Storyfaking, a key element of narrative chaff, is a strategy designed to delay debate and avoid public scrutiny until facts have been changed on the ground. Populist narratives of a deep state, or the Brexiteers' rhetoric of the "meaningful vote" in the UK, help to create a sense of urgency in which the end (far-reaching policy changes without due consultation of Parliament and public debate) justifies the means (chaff or noise designed to distract observers and commentator). These precedents are cause for concern because they have often turned out to be successful. Spreading narrative chaff in order to cause confusion and to increase uncertainty, a divisive strategy fostering political tribalism, should be considered undemocratic on principle.

Narrative Aggregation and Normalization

Most approaches studying narratives in contest, like legal narratology (see Brooks 2006) or the study of counter-narratives (see Lueg and Lundholt 2021), focus on the antagonistic nature of narrative, i.e. the capacity of stories to redirect, and even hijack, an existing narrative. While the various forms of opposition, including friendly or even hostile take-over, have received considerable critical attention, it is important to realize that narratives can be aligned in various ways. The narrative dynamics perspective accentuates the fact that storytelling and storysharing are aggregate processes: narratives tend to aggregate into clusters. There are many parallels between what literary theory calls intertextuality, i.e. implicit and explicit references between texts, styles, and genres, and the phenomena involved in narrative aggregation – of narrative elements into a full story, of small stories into one big story, of individual accounts into a group narrative or generational biography, of similar stories into a powerful masterplot. Various forms and practices, like co-narration and re-telling, support the alignment of slightly different stories; the process of aggregation evens out differences and reduces variation to a degree that seems acceptable.

Narrative aggregation thus facilitates or supports what sociologists call normalization, i.e. the process of defining and redefining what is culturally acceptable (see Link, 2004). The outcomes of normalization can be defined negatively, in terms of taboos (i.e. what is not normal or permissible), or positively, in terms of socially acceptable behavior. The role of narrative aggregation in this process is still under-researched. It confirms foundational myths of groups, organizations, or nations (examples of the latter include the rhetoric of a "special relationship" between the UK and the USA, or the notion of "European values"). A second function of narrative aggregation is to negotiate the shifting boundaries of tellability, which are continuously challenged through strategic framing and narrative realignment. Third, aggregation is a key part of what one might call rhetorical nudging, i.e. the attempt to spin new narratives that close the gap between existing ones, creating a new momentum for the revision of existing policies.

Narrative (Re)alignment and Redirection

As narratives aggregate into clusters, their relationships become symbiotic. Dynamic host–parasite relationships are often beneficial for all narratives involved. In this respect narrative symbiosis, i.e. obligatory or facultative interactions between narratives, can be explored by analogy with the various forms of biological symbiosis in ecosystems. The appeal of biological metaphors lies in the fact that they illustrate the need for more complex models of narrative interaction, the kind of "beehive narratology" (Sommer 2020) for which recent work on narrative complexity has prepared the ground (see Grishakova and Poulaki, 2019).

Like narrative dynamics, the study of narrative complexity is still in its infancy, however, and only a few working hypotheses can be proposed here. Parasitic narratives help to strengthen and proliferate the narrative "kernel" of the host, i.e. the nucleus of a narrative that is often little more than a powerful "metaphor" or "mini-narration" (see Nünning and Sicks 2012). This virtual kernel becomes more tangible through alignment and interaction with one or several parasitic counter-narratives. What is more, through narrative alignment, new "nodes" are established within a storied network of myths, masterplots, and cultural models. If we move beyond the purely text-internal definition of nodes proposed by Bode and Dietrich (2013), such contact points or crossings can be understood as the space where ideas are amplified and begin to resonate. It is easy to see, then, why and how narrative parasites can become instrumental in co-constructing and spreading "future narratives." For instance, the narrative of technological progress, often dismissed as a cause of global warming, can easily be realigned with that of climate justice, if green technologies are foregrounded: innovation can kill the planet, or heal it. Processes of narrative alignment and redirection may furthermore steer a narrative into a different direction, altering its original message and, in some cases, distorting it beyond recognition.

Multiple and Competing Narratives

Given the degree of interpretation involved in creating a media event out of a series of incidents and framing it as a crisis, turning point, tipping point, or point of no return as a way of justifying either political action or inactivity, it is not surprising that coherence and closure are often difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. In *Narratives Online* (2018), a book on shared stories in social media, Ruth Page theorizes a key element of narrative dynamics. The appeal of a story, as an interpretation of an incident or series of incidents, increases if it taps into cultural myths or master narratives (51). Complex events produce a clash between irreconcilable models, or versions, of events. Courtroom narratives like those analyzed by Brooks (2006) provide excellent examples: contested on principle, they evince multiple, contrasting narratives vying for narrative authority.

The most obvious strategies for regaining control over the narrative in a digital environment are volume and trending, i.e. the number of posts supporting a talking point and the number of co-tellers sharing a certain stance on the issue in question. Large-scale pro-Kremlin disinformation on a wide range of topics has become a major issue recently and is regularly monitored by EU vs. Disinfo, a fact-checking initiative.[12] Quantity beats quality on any social media whose business model, and thus the way communication is organized and promoted, relies on the amount of data generated by a platform's users. Hashtags, once indexing tools for librarians, have become vital tools for achieving a high degree of visibility and (perceived) relevance. By "drawing together tweets about a particular topic" (Page 2018, 129), they enhance a feeling of community among the users making contributions, a feature linguists and media theorists call "ambient affiliation." The unifying potential of the hashtag, however, should not be overestimated: Although hashtags appear to mainly emphasize referential content, "they can," as Page (135) points out, "also emphasize stance, and that stance need not be shared."

The Narrative Dynamics of Migration: Three Scenarios

Long before Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram redefined the boundaries between the public and the private sphere, Boswell et al. (2011) pointed out that "the dynamics of migration are incredibly complex, creating immense problems for governments attempting to steer immigration." One could also add that similar problems exist for NGOs, and even the UN, in trying to change migration policies that don't even guarantee a minimum of living standards for migrants caught in detention facilities. Applying the concepts introduced above, the following three scenarios explore some of the directions such research might take.

Pinball Effects? Centrifugal vs. Centripetal (Counter)-Narratives

My first example concerns event modeling in German politics during the so-called European refugee crisis, which will keep historians busy for years to come.[13] The narrative dynamics of its early days, in September 2015, unfolded in several stages whose analysis is facilitated by the ethnographic concept of social drama. This divides crises into four "acts": a "breach" interrupts the status quo, to be followed by a "crisis," "redress," and a form of closure, which can either be "reintegration" (i.e. a return to the status quo ante) or the recognition of "schism" (Turner 1980, 149).[14] Turner's dramaturgical concept can be complemented with a more scalable model to account for complex developments involving multiple agents or interests on national and transnational levels. The distinction between centripetal and centrifugal forces, which has found its way from physics into many fields of research, including political science and migration studies, is particularly helpful in this context. These metaphors are often used in a programmatic manner to indicate opposing forces that move towards a center, or away from it.[15] Here, they signify unification (on a national level) or disintegration (on national and European levels).

From a narrative dynamics perspective, then, a centripetal narrative manages to contain the initial crisis following the breach; a centrifugal narrative, in contrast, fails to contain the crisis. Brexit is an example of social drama ending in schism (see Sommer 2019); in other scenarios centrifugal narratives may end in escalation, as in the Y-model introduced below. Centrifugal narratives also have the power to trigger another, potentially more systemic crisis that is even more difficult to contain: national drama may turn into European drama. As such dynamics are difficult, maybe even impossible, to predict, this scenario is reminiscent of a pinball machine (though experts may argue that gaming involves more skills than chance).

In most cases, event modeling can only be observed after the event; it is a historian's job to reconstruct the full picture, with all narratives and counter-narratives involved, from a variety of sources. Although quality journalism strives to present developing stories while they are still unfolding, outside observers have limited access to private data (which may also be impossible for historians to obtain)

or classified information. Investigative journalism, published shortly after the event, may offer the best of both worlds, as it can look behind the scenes, drawing on insider accounts and anonymous sources. The author will be held accountable for misrepresentations, which introduces a certain degree of fact-checking and quality control: if there are no allegations, controversies, or lawsuits following publication, the chances are that the information will be, by and large, correct.

Such a source is the book *Die Getriebenen* (2017) by Robin Alexander, a well-known German journalist. My brief analysis relies heavily on his detailed account of the formation and transformation of German welcome culture in 2015, although his interpretation of the incidents he recounts contradicts, at times, my own. Without doubt, Alexander's work deserves a more thorough narrative analysis, as he plays masterfully with the conventions of the genre in order to subtly manipulate the reader into accepting his main talking points, a narrative of loss of control and, implicitly, a lack of sensitivity with respect to European neighbors, especially Hungary and Austria. The book's German title manages to capture the dialectic relationship between center and periphery, as postcolonial theory would have it; or between a German government, driven by happenings that called for an urgent response, and the refugees urged forward by the hope of arrival. The past participle, which literally translates as "the driven," normally characterizes ambitious high potentials. In Alexander's narrative, it takes on two new meanings. On the one hand, it implies the lack of control and authority (Alexander openly criticizes Merkel for not taking the lead sooner). On the other hand, it conjures up the uncertainty felt by refugees, after days of uncoordinated camping in Budapest's train station. Would they be allowed to move on?

Alexander's step-by-step reconstruction of what happened behind the scenes (meetings, phone calls and conference calls, text messages and emails, private conversations and classified memos) and on stage, as it were (news coverage, interviews, photos), allows one to observe event modeling as a process, an ongoing activity. The interesting thing here is, that like the concept of the developing story in news media, the event is still being defined: a crisis only becomes a crisis when it is called a crisis – and Merkel long refused to do this (whether her hesitation is interpreted as a sign of weakness or well justified, given the circumstances, depends on the observer's political stance). What is more, Alexander claims that against the advice of the interior ministers of Germany's 16 federal states, Merkel initially refused to acknowledge that a breach had occurred: while an audience of bureaucrats, high-ranking police officials, state secretaries, and policymakers was watching the second act of the refugee drama unfold, she simply refused to enter the theater.

Alexander's well-researched narrative, which draws on the dramaturgical arsenal of political storytelling, from the use of the present tense to cliffhangers, focuses on what he calls six decisive moments over a period of 180 days, from the opening of the border to the closing of the Balkan route. The German term "Schicksalsmomente," moments of fate, casts Merkel in the role of Fortuna, towering over human affairs; his focus is on those waiting for her to make up her mind (which may also be due to the fact that she didn't grant him an interview). Event modeling is thus framed as a question of a certain kind of leadership, which calls for a strong stance, efficient decision-making, and, above all, speed. What Alexander's protagonists miss most is a fast response. Hungary's authoritarian prime minister, in contrast, not only decided very early to let the Syrian refugees move on, in violation of the Dublin treaty, but encouraged them by providing means of transport to the Austrian border, from where they traveled to Germany. Referring to the number of buses waiting to take migrants to the Austrian border, Alexander suggests that this must have been premeditated and well prepared.

This detailed account of a developing story also shows framing contests and nudging in action. Narrative frames appear to be volatile constructs, semiotic moments rather than rhetorical strategies. More often than not, they lack tangible substance, providing grounds for speculation and interpretation: a word ("Willkommenskultur"), a phrase ("Wir schaffen das"), a picture (selfies with migrants), or a gesture (allowing a migrant to lay an arm around the Chancellor). Such accidental signs quickly transformed Angela Merkel from a cold Snow Queen into Mother Teresa, as Robin

Alexander ironically notes. An unforeseen confrontation with an angry right-wing mob elicits a spontaneous reaction: in a brief statement, Merkel announces zero tolerance against racism, which becomes her new policy. The breach, finally acknowledged, is not constituted by irregular immigration, but by a racist mob (cf. 41).

Initially hesitant to take the lead in the response to political pressure, German Chancellor Angela Merkel thus became, on the spur of the moment, the European voice of human rights. Give the wheel of fortune another spin, equally unforeseen, and she may appear as a bully, forcing European partners to accept the unacceptable. While Hungary openly challenges German hegemony in Europe (48), using refugees as leverage, a surge of empathy in Germany creates the welcome culture that will for a long time define Merkel's policy, with respect to both immigration and right-wing populism. Merkel's pro-migrant narrative produces strong centripetal effects: opinion polls show high approval rates for her policy. For the time being, empathy is stronger than fear-mongering. It takes weeks for public opinion to swing; when Merkel succumbs to the pressure and reframes immigration as a crisis, however, her narrative has been realigned and redirected by the AfD, the German right-wing party now turning its attention from anti-Euro to anti-immigration policies.

It is tempting, with Alexander (43), to read the AfD's success at subsequent elections as a centrifugal effect of Merkel's policy. When she finally began framing immigration as a crisis, thus modeling a new type of event out of ongoing developments, the focus was on a fair distribution of refugees among EU member states. At this juncture, the centrifugal force of narrative aggregation and redirection became visible: governments in Budapest and Warsaw now rejected Berlin's calls for European solidarity and refused to accept even symbolic numbers of refugees. The narrative dynamics perspective thus shows how counter-narrative realignment and redirection make narrative event management difficult and even impossible. In the end, the dispute with Hungary and Poland had to be settled in court. The social drama of 2015–16 may have ended in schism; yet, Europe is not a one-act play but a long-running series. The performance continues after the break.

Antagonistic Normalization: Salvini vs. Sea Watch

Migration discourses offer countless examples of narrative normalization through processes of realignment and redirection. How does this form of rhetorical nudging work in practice? One example is the rise of bridging narratives that close the gap between progressive and conservative attitudes toward migration. The "We are helping the wrong ones" narrative, for instance, claims that mostly young men, the strong members of their communities, manage to reach Europe's borders, while those who really need our help, vulnerable women, children, and elderly people, are left behind. This narrative appeals to those who support women's rights and gender diversity as well as to those who wish to reduce immigration on principle, paving the way for more restrictive migration policies.

While most strategic efforts at narrative normalization employ soft methods of rhetorical nudging and realignment, the far-right uses more radical rhetorical strategies that may be called antagonistic normalization. This form of reframing is not content with nudging toward more restrictive positions but seeks to bring about a full reversal of migration policies. The narrative environment, in which such anti-stories thrive, is the "Fortress Europe" rhetoric. The story of self-defense in the face of the so-called great population exchange in Europe is a favorite right-wing conspiracy theory that generates narrative chaff, i.e. trial balloons to test the viability of new talking points. An example of a lobbyist using this strategy to test opportunities for antagonistic reframing is Beatrix von Storch, a high-ranking member of the German anti-immigrant party AfD, who proposed in 2016 that shooting refugees, including children, is a legitimate form of self-defense.[16] Two years later, AfD leader Alexander Gauland wrote a controversial opinion piece that was widely seen as an attempt to reframe German history by diminishing the Holocaust. In the German election campaign of 2021, the AfD used the slogan "Deutschland. Aber normal" ("Germany. But normal") to consolidate their efforts at "normalizing" anti-immigration and anti-EU policies.

This kind of strategic antagonism is a transnational characteristic of far-right populism. Matteo Salvini, in his role as interior minister of Italy, sought to criminalize private sea rescue missions in the Mediterranean. This policy is based on another cynical right-wing narrative, one that treats NGOs as a driving force behind migrant smuggling. "These gentlemen know that Italy no longer wants to be complicit in the business of illegal immigration, and therefore will have to look for other ports [not Italian] where to go," Salvini wrote on Facebook,[17] before closing Italian ports to migrant rescue vessels. Although banned from doing so, Carola Rackete, German captain of Sea Watch 3, entered the port of Lampedusa on June 29, 2019. Her decision to disembark 40 shipwrecked migrants without official permission led to further escalation of the "story war" declared by Salvini.

Although Rackete was initially detained and put under house arrest, Italy's highest court, the Supreme Court of Cassation, ruled on February 20, 2020, that she had followed her duty, stating: "The obligation to rescue is not complete with the act of subtracting victims of a shipwreck from the danger of getting lost at sea, but implies the supplementary and consequent obligation to disembark them in a safe place."[18] In October 2020, the Italian cabinet rewrote Salvini's security decrees by approving a new decree on migration and security that is intended to return to a system of reception and integration.[19] Although Salvini himself was later taken to court by Sea Watch over his decisions as a government minister, it seems highly unlikely today that he will personally be held responsible for his policies.

This example of a failed attempt at antagonistic normalization should be considered a wake-up call; it shows that basic human rights and international law are at stake when right-wing storymeddling, associating rescue missions with migrant smuggling, is not challenged by proponents of a pluralist, open, diverse, and democratic Europe. One of the problems is the nexus of migration control and crisis management, which interprets policymaking as a reactive rather than proactive process and sidesteps humanitarian issues and arguments. Why should this be cause for concern? A neglect of humanitarian aspects, human rights, and the wider perspective of development grounded in freedom, as proposed by Amartya Sen and others, not only affects refugees and migrants; it also has two serious consequences for the European Union itself. On the one hand, a bureaucratic approach to policy-making, which condones dubious deals with authoritarian rulers and failed states, renders all talk of European values obsolete. On the other hand, the official narrative of crisis plays into the hands of those who wish to see Europe fail; it fosters the centrifugal forces of anti-EU sentiment. Crisis breeds crisis: only a value-based approach to migration can save the project of European integration.[20]

Narrative Escalation: The Y-Model of Divisive Communication on Social Media

My final example turns from curated event modeling and top-down realignment of policy narratives with the right-wing rhetoric of sovereignty and self-defense to emergent storytelling (see Dawson, 2020). On social media, the tensions between curated content and emergent stories often escalate very quickly. "Curated stories" (Fernandes 2017) are wide-ranging narratives proliferated in a top-down dynamic, from a central source with high narrative authority such as governments, media outlets or celebrities. Emergent stories are the bottom-up narratives arising from user responses to such narratives. It is important to stress that this kind of narrative can be productive, if we look at successful grassroots activism promoting the new narrative of climate change. It can also, however, be divisive. Representations of refugees and migration produce predictable feedback on social media: empathy and humanitarian concerns characterize the contributions of pro-refugee commentators, while a vocal minority responds by questioning the facts or motivations behind specific posts. Such skepticism quickly leads to verbal abuse and hate speech.

The resulting scenario can be called the Y-model of escalation: the capital letter aptly visualizes the unfolding of the divisive effect, with an initial phase of uniformly positive feedback (the capital letter's

base) being followed, sooner or later, by a severe backlash. This has a divisive effect; from the moment the first critical posts appear, commentators are divided into two groups, symbolized by the bifurcation. The pro-migrant narrative and the anti-migrant narrative are incommensurable; they constitute an unhappy end to the "schism" of Turner's (1980, 149) social drama. The only way to stop the escalation is to close the channel or account. This is exactly what happened when Spanish television channel RTVE aired video footage showing Luna Reyes, a Red Cross volunteer, hugging a crying Senegalese migrant in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Before long, supporters of Spain's far-right Vox party and other right-wing commentators began abusing Reyes online, forcing her to lock her social media accounts.[21] Soon afterwards, the hashtag #GraciasLuna was trending in Spain.

Sadly, this escalation was predictable. Given that hate mail and even death threats seem to be a common reaction to people doing advocacy work for migrants, the right-wing backlash had to be expected. There is, however, another aspect to consider, one that concerns the story logic of social media. In his book *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Silicon Valley pioneer Jaron Lanier describes the unhealthy dynamics of blogging, reading the comments, and commenting on the comments that he himself experienced during a short stint at the *Huffington Post*:

> Comment authors were mostly seeking attention for themselves. We were all in the same stew, manipulating each other, inflating ourselves. After a short while, I noticed that I'd write things I didn't even believe in order to get a rise out of readers, I wrote stuff that I knew people wanted to hear, or the opposite, because I knew it would be inflammatory.
>
> *Lanier 2018, 43*

Thus, from a narrative dynamics perspective, it seems likely that the medium itself attracts and amplifies a certain kind of storyteller and a kind of response that resorts to name-calling, verbal abuse, and, more generally, "accusations as narrative rhetoric."[22] "Decorum in modern societies," Stefan Iversen (2017, 381) has recently argued, "is highly dynamic." The challenge to lawmakers, especially on a European level, is to control excessive dynamics without sacrificing freedom of speech.

Conclusion: Changing the Narrative?

In discourses on migration, many actors and stakeholders set out to change the narrative, from right-wing politicians determined to curb immigration to NGOs calling for a human rights approach to migrants and refugees (the latter are, lest we forget, entitled to claim asylum and a fair and transparent processing of their applications). But what does "changing the narrative" really mean? The narrative dynamics approach outlined here suggests that the options for new narratives in the public sphere are rather limited: Salvini's decrees are no longer in effect, Merkel's initial stance, an optimistic pragmatism, dissolved under pressure and was succeeded by a bureaucratic "out of sight, out of mind" policy that has turned a blind eye to blatant violations of human rights in both Libya and Turkey, and at the EU's borders in Italy, Hungary, and Poland.

Injustice committed in our name, however far out of sight, still affects us profoundly. In other words: if the European Union can only sustain its values, such as freedom of movement between member states, by betraying much more fundamental values elsewhere, i.e. basic human rights and the right to claim political asylum, its founding myths become untenable. How can this dangerous dynamic be controlled, if changing the narrative is a rhetorical promise without substance? Given that past attempts at creating a "new narrative for Europe," an initiative by José Barroso, proved completely unsuccessful, how can policymakers use the power of narrative to make a change?

The initial findings concerning the dynamics of centripetal and centrifugal narratives on migration suggest a few directions for further research. First, there may be a link between the trend towards pragmatic policymaking and event management, which is no longer grounded in a discourse on

shared values, and the growing Euroscepticism that can be observed in many EU member states. Second, the narrative alignment of anti-EU views and xenophobic narratives, typical of right-wing parties in Germany and elsewhere, is still under-researched. Third, the distinction between narratives and frames in political discourse has not yet been fully understood. Also, the distinction between narrative chaff and strategic framing needs to be explored further. Finally, changing the narrative means changing the conditions under which incidents are framed as crises or opportunities. The trend toward narrative confrontation and conflict escalation in the public sphere can only be stopped by a new discourse on fair play. A commitment to multiperspectivity, an ethics of listening, and a new debate on public decorum seem to be the way forward.

Notes

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2 I adopt this distinction from Jenkins (2018, 331) who distinguishes between pull media ("in which consumers must seek out information such as the Internet") and push media ("in which content comes to the consumer, such as broadcasting").

3 "In the trials, the attorneys disputed the applicable meaning of the term *event*. The lawyers for the leaseholder defined it in physical terms (two collapses); those for the insurance companies defined it in mental terms (one plot)" (Pinker 2007, 2).

4 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan

5 https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/europe-s-shame-the-moria-catastrophe-and-the-eu-s-hypocritical-refugee-policy-a-7a86c0dd-98b1-46fb-aa3b-1401d7d9ab13

6 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1728

7 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/03/eu-anniversary-of-turkey-deal-offers-warning-against-further-dangerous-migration-deals/

8 https://www.welt.de/regionales/hamburg/article215880094/So-reagieren-Abgeordnete-auf-Aeusserungen-der-AfD-zu-Moria.html

9 https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jun/24/violence-towards-refugees-at-libyan-detention-centres-forces-msf-to-pull-out

10 "Spreadability," as Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013, 3) define it, "refers to the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes"; it "emphasizes producing content in easy-to-share formats" (6).

11 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/07/smash-and-grab-dominic-cummings-democracy

12 https://euvsdisinfo.eu/storytelling-the-disinformation-2/

13 About 1.3 million refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq came to Europe, most of them heading for Germany.

14 The concept of social drama, which draws on the classical form of the four-act drama, was originally introduced in *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1974). Turner holds that theories of society and community should beware static concepts and consider instead "the dynamic quality of social relations" (24). For an in-depth explication of Turner's concept of social drama, and its application to the analysis of Brexit, see Sommer (2019).

15 Thomas Nail (2016), in his monograph *Theory of the Border*, holds that "the fence is a border regime that produces a centripetal social motion: the movement of flows from the periphery toward the center" (47). Huub van Baar (2014, 87–88), in contrast, defines the centripetal dimension of the EU's border regime as "the effect that this regime has on 'intra-EU' processes of bordering Europe and its populations."

16 https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/beatrix-von-storch-afd-vizechefin-will-polizei-sogar-auf-kinder-schiessen-lassen-14044186.html

17 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/16/italy-bars-two-more-refugee-ships-from-ports

18 https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/22951/rackete-upheld-rescue-duty-italys-top-court

19 https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/27783/italian-cabinet-approves-new-security-decree-removing-salvini-rules

20 In addition, narratives of crises and emergencies conjure up old imperialist notions of Europeans as saviors and heroes and Africans as needy and passive (see Musarò 2013, 11); this "normalization of the emergencies reflects a wider shift from the development optimism (intended as a global moral engagement) to humanitarianism as a need for intervention to solve emergencies and restore linearity" (11).

21 For the whole story, see https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-21/spanish-red-cross-volunteer-online-backlash-migrant-ceuta/100155152.

22 This is the title of an online talk, part of a lecture series on the Covid pandemic at RWTH Aachen, by Stefan Iversen and Hanna Meretoja: https://www.accels.rwth-aachen.de/cms/ACCELS/Veranstaltungen/~kjdjz/Event-Series-Pandemic-Storytelling/.

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