

Narrative Dynamics and Migration

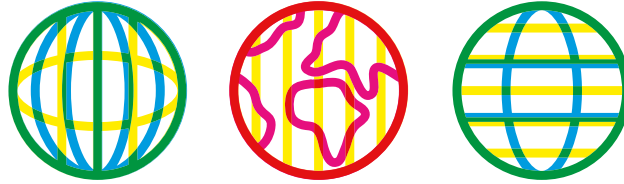
Centrifugal vs. Centripetal Forces

Roy Sommer (University of Wuppertal)



opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration



opportunities

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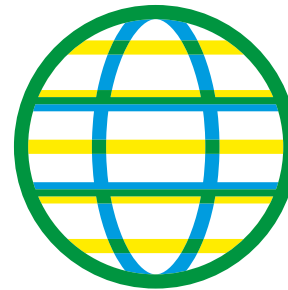
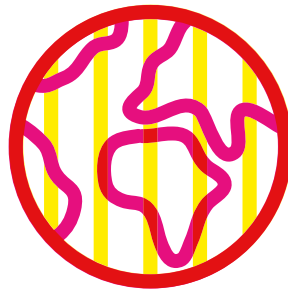
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Centrifugal vs. Centripetal Forces

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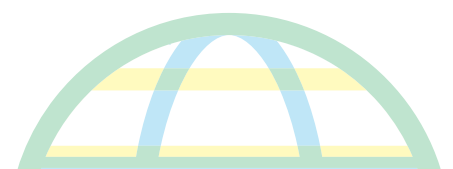
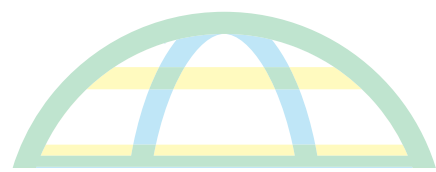
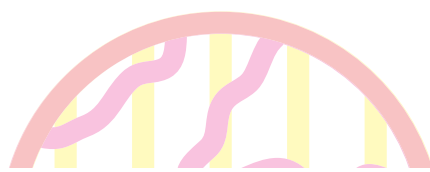
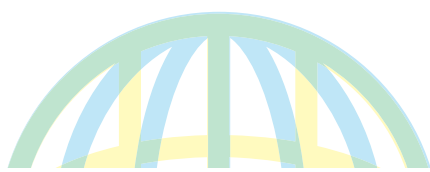


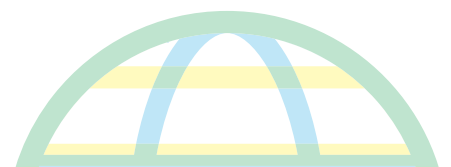
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Abstract

Narratives influence the public perception of migration and attitudes towards migrants and refugees, often with unintended and unanticipated consequences. In order to further our understanding of the construction, emergence of, and interaction between different kinds of narratives, this paper proposes a programmatic concept of narrative dynamics. Narrative dynamics research is equally interested in the pragmatics of narrative framing and the grand narratives of human rights, in fake news, propaganda and disinformation, in mundane stories of everyday experience and the intangible myths and masterplots which shape organizations, institutions, and cultures. The paper concentrates on wide-spread phenomena, revealing key features of narratives: event modeling and event management, purpose and chaff, aggregation and normalization, as well as (re)alignment and redirection. In addition to this, the paper focuses on scenarios involving multiple and competing narratives, and it introduces a distinction between centrifugal and centripetal effects. Three examples – German welcome culture in 2015, Matteo Salvini's confrontation with Sea Watch in 2019, and online hate speech against a Red Cross volunteer in Ceuta in 2021 – demonstrate how these concepts help us to analyse political framings of migration and responses to representations of migration.



1. Introduction

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 EU member states, while the effects of post-truth discourse connected with the Trump presidency are still felt today on both sides of the Atlantic. Migration is a particularly sensitive policy field, where pragmatic policy narratives of crisis management compete with aggressive discourses of xenophobia and racism, cosmopolitan, liberal and progressive counter-narratives, and with 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.

The divisive effects of the European refugee "crisis" in 2015 and 2016 emphasizes the need for a better understanding of the impact of narratives on public opinion. How can narrative theory 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)? How can narrative research, in the humanities and the social sciences, work together to counter "story wars" (Sachs 2012), "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)?

This paper proposes a programmatic concept of narrative dynamics, one that paves the way for systematic descriptions of specific elements, features, or qualities of "narratives in contest" (Phelan 2008) and investigates the potential uses and effects of narrative in migration discourses. Moving beyond narratological definitions which 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 narratives. 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 which can't be reduced to a binary logic of narrative and counter-narrative.

Narrative dynamics research is equally interested in the pragmatics of political framing and the grand narratives of human rights, in mundane stories of everyday experience and the intangible myths and masterplots which 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, 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. The narrative dynamics approach further distinguishes between two potential effects of narrative "worldmaking" (Nünning et al. 2010) in the public sphere, i.e. centripetal forces fostering unity and stability in a political system and destabilizing, centrifugal forces promoting disunity and division.

Most contributions to narrative studies begin with a definition of narrative, a ubiquitous term which 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 as the present renaissance of Cold War rhetoric in Europe demonstrates.

My argument proceeds in three steps. Section two 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, or narrative chaff, i.e. fake news, disinformation or propaganda designed to increase confusion and produce uncertainty. Section three 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. Section four makes the case for methodological multiperspectivity and cross-disciplinary collaboration among scientists and scholars interested in narratives, showing how theoretical work can benefit from the findings of quantitative studies.



2. Narrative Dynamics: Toward an Inventory of Relevant Phenomena

Narrative dynamics refers to an emerging field of research which 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 story-based communication. More specifically, narrative dynamic research

- investigates the balance between narratives *of* migration, e.g. life stories, fictionalized accounts or memoirs telling us what it's like to be a migrant, and narratives *on* migration, e.g. policy narratives, news stories or research papers;
- explores the ways “push and pull” narratives,¹ i.e. “curated stories” (Fernandes 2017) and emergent, co-constructed stories (see Dawson and Mäkelä, 2020), interact with one another;
- focuses on the relationships between narratives and the medial, political, cultural or societal environments from which they emerge, and in which they are embedded;
- is interested in various forms of strategic storytelling, from steering narratives to deliberate disinformation and narrative propaganda; and
- seeks to explain how narratives contribute to political framing, how the nature of narrative transactions is affected by social media, how narrative event modeling works in practice, and how post-truth story-meddling affects public discourse.

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From a methodological angle, narrative dynamics as an umbrella concept helps researchers from the social sciences and the humanities to integrate different scientific and scholarly perspectives on the nexus of narrative and migration more systematically, making more efficient connections between quantitative, qualitative and theoretical work.

2.1 Narrative Event Modeling

“Narratives do not simply recount happenings,” Peter Brooks (2006, 13) holds, “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 sites of struggle and contest. 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.²

Event modeling involves processes of selection, evaluation, and interpretation. In extreme cases, incident selection may generate diverging representations of happenings, i.e. events that add up to very different stories. Ansgar Nünning (2012b, 39) therefore holds 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 which constitutes the dynamics of an event, the degree of predictability, 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 security threat, is often the key to justifying drastic measures. The EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan, announced on 18 March 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”.³ 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”.⁴ 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 which may be exploited by right-wing populists: after four young migrants from Moria had been found guilty of arson under questionable circumstances, the German far-right party AfD cynically claimed that matches were the new visa.⁵

2.2 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 which delineate what a culture considers to be either 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 always calls for interpretation. 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 which 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.

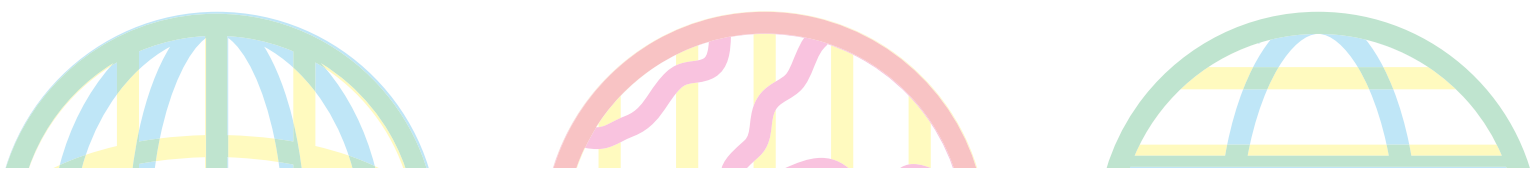
Narrative chaff is characterized, first, by brevity. Twitter is a favorite platform, as it allows the dissemination of an endless stream of messages without the need for substantial resources and planning. Second, brevity encourages paratactic syntax which abandons key features of argumentative rhetoric, like causality or explanation. Third, as one-directional forms of push-communication tweets circumvent feedback loops, reducing the risk of critical questions which 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.⁶ 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 which 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."⁷

To sum up, narrative chaff, often dismissed as an idiosyncratic rhetorical style of controversial politicians, is in fact the opposite of narrative framing for serious public debate. Story-faking, 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 or increase uncertainty, a strategy routinely used by authoritarian rulers, should be considered undemocratic on principle.

2.3 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 which seems acceptable.

Narrative aggregation may involve practices of re-telling and streamlining, or the addition of similar stories to give substance to a narrative. In her memoir *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Dina Nayeri (2019) describes how “those first refugee steps – the annihilation of the self, then an ascent from the grave” (14) are often followed by years of retelling the same story of the miracle of escape over and over again; for many refugees these defining moments “become their entire identity” (ibid.). Asylum procedures involve a strategic search for discrepancies – the individual story needs to fit the template. If your story doesn’t “add up”, you’re in trouble. If many individual stories or testimonials represent incidents in a similar way, supporting (or supported by) forensic evidence, they lend plausibility to an emergent narrative, like the recent accounts of Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

Narrative aggregation also 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 or legally acceptable behavior. Illegal pushbacks denying migrants access to asylum procedures are one example: can the use of force be justified by the right of the sovereign state to protect its borders? Where do we draw a line between illegal pushbacks and robust border regimes? The role of narrative aggregation in this process (investigative journalism documenting incidents vs. policy narratives justifying dubious practices) is still under-researched. Another function of narrative aggregation is to negotiate the shifting boundaries of “tellability” (Norrick 2005), which are continuously challenged through strategic framing and narrative realignment. Finally, narrative aggregation supports rhetorical nudging, i.e. the attempt to spin new narratives which close the gap between existing ones, creating a new momentum for the revision of existing policies (see 4.1).

2.4 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 which 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, narratives of technological progress and economic growth can be realigned with the narrative 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.

2.5 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.

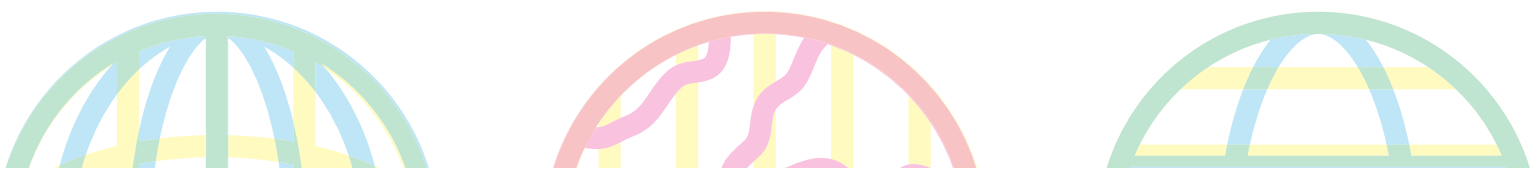
Strategies for regaining control over the narrative in a digital environment include volume and trending, i.e. the number of posts supporting a talking point and the number of co-tellers sharing a certain stance on the issue in question. Large-scale pro-Kremlin disinformation on a wide range of topics has become a major issue recently, and is regularly monitored by EU vs. Disinfo, a fact-checking initiative.⁸ The business model of social media, 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."

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2.6 Social Drama: Centrifugal vs. Centripetal Dynamics

Boswell et al. (2011) point out that "the dynamics of migration are incredibly complex, creating immense problems for governments attempting to steer immigration." The fate of German welcome culture in 2015 and 2016 is a case in point. The opening of the borders will keep historians busy for years to come; section three offers a brief reminder of key players and events. But one thing seems certain: German Chancellor Angela Merkel could not have anticipated that her humanitarian stance, best expressed in her famous slogan "Wir schaffen das!" ("We will manage!") which demonstrated confidence both in institutions and civic society in Germany, would eventually lead to a European crisis.

How are the dynamics of migration affected by narrative dynamics? A good starting point is the ethnographic concept of social drama proposed by anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner suggests dividing crises into four "acts" or stages: 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).⁹ Turner's chronological differentiation of four subsequent phases or stages needs to be complemented with a dynamic model to account for complex developments involving multiple agents or interests on national and transnational levels. The metaphorical distinction between centripetal and centrifugal forces or effects is such an instrument; it has found its way from physics into many fields of research, including political science and migration studies. Both terms describe opposing forces which move towards a center (centripetal), like gravity in



Newtonian mechanics, or away from it (centrifugal).¹⁰ With respect to the European Union, centripetal narratives can be said to promote shared responsibilities, transnational cooperation, and integration; centrifugal narratives amplify xenophobia, nationalism and Euroscepticism in an attempt to further political disintegration.

Narrative dynamics in complex media ecologies can't be predicted easily; political attempts at narrative steering through narrative framing often produce unintended and unanticipated effects. This is not only a problem for governments trying to win broad support for new migration policies, as the example of German welcome culture in 2015 shows. It also affects NGOs advocating for a humanitarian approach to refugees and migrants, as the examples of the criminalization of Sea Watch and the hate speech experienced by Luna Reyes, a Red Cross volunteer in Ceuta, demonstrate.



3. The Narrative Dynamics of Migration: Three Examples

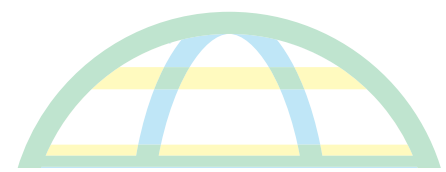
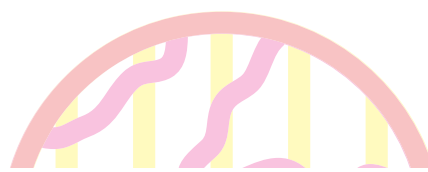
3.1 Event Modeling: the Refugee “Crisis”

My first example concerns the so-called European refugee crisis: about 1.3 million refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq came to Europe in 2015 and 2016, most of them heading for Germany. Analysing narrative event modeling – the attempt by various stakeholders to frame and steer the narrative and influence public opinion – in an ongoing crisis poses serious methodological challenges: reconstructing the full picture, with all narratives and counter-narratives involved, from a variety of sources is a historian’s job. Narrative dynamics research will often have to rely on investigative journalism which strives to present developing stories while they are still unfolding. Published shortly after the event, journalists may offer a 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 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, which literally translates as “the driven,” manages to capture the dialectic relationship 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 “driven” is often used to characterize 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 e-mails, private conversations and classified memos) and on stage, as it were (news coverage, interviews, photos), allows one to observe event modeling as a process. Like the concept of the developing story in news media, the event appears as work in progress, a race between competing frames. 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, in Turner’s sense, had indeed occurred.

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). Active event modeling is thus equated with strong leadership, which calls for efficient decision-making and, above all, speed. What Alexander’s protagonists miss most is a fast response. Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s controversial 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 (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. While Hungary openly challenged German migration policy in Europe (48), using refugees as leverage, a surge of empathy in Germany supported the welcome culture which will for a long time define Merkel’s policy, with respect to both immigration and right-wing populism. Merkel’s pro-migrant narrative initially produced strong centripetal effects: opinion polls showed high approval rates for her policy. For weeks, empathy appeared stronger than fear-mongering. When Merkel succumbed to the pressure and reframed immigration as a crisis, however, her narrative had already been realigned and redirected by the AfD, the German right-wing party using its hostile immigration policy to foster anti-European sentiments.

3.2 Antagonistic Normalization: Salvini vs. Sea Watch

Migration discourses offer countless examples of normalization through processes of framing, which employs strategies of narrative 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 which 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 which 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 implied in 2016 that shooting refugees, including children, should be considered a legitimate form of self-defense.¹¹ Two years later, AfD leader Alexander Gauland wrote a controversial opinion piece which 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.

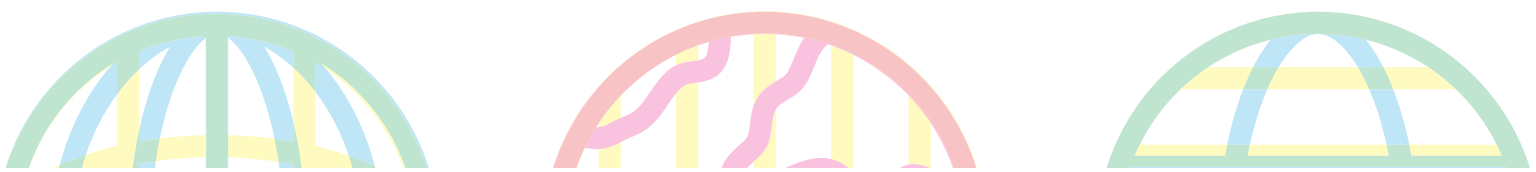
This kind of strategic antagonism is a transnational characteristic of far-right populism. Matteo Salvini, in his role as interior minister of Italy, sought to criminalize private sea rescue missions in the Mediterranean. This policy is based on another cynical right-wing narrative, one that treats NGOs 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,¹² 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.”¹³ In October 2020, the Italian cabinet rewrote Salvini’s security decrees by approving a new decree on migration and security which is intended to return to a system of reception and integration.¹⁴ 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 with the aim of criminalizing sea rescue missions should be considered a wake-up call; it shows that basic human rights and international law are at stake when right-wing story-meddling, 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 policymaking, 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.¹⁵

3.3 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 proliferating? 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 new narratives of climate justice or diversity. 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.¹⁶ Soon afterwards, the hashtag #GraciasLuna was trending in Spain.

Sadly, such right-wing backlash is in line with 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 which 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 which resorts to name-calling, verbal abuse and, more generally, "accusations as narrative rhetoric."¹⁷ "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.

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 which is even more difficult to contain: national drama may turn into European drama. As such dynamics are difficult, maybe even impossible, to predict.



4. From Narrative Dynamics to Attitudes on Migration: A Cross-Disciplinary Research Agenda

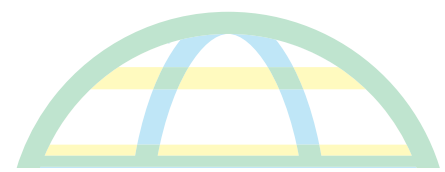
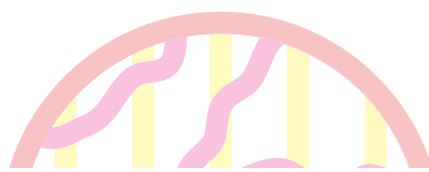
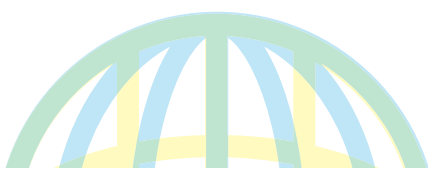
The concepts proposed in this paper allow us to theorize narrative “ecologies” in contemporary media societies as narrative dynamics in action. This theoretical framework provides a foundation for analytical work on the ways in which narratives influence public opinion in general as well as specific stakeholders’ attitudes toward migrants and refugees. The purpose of the model proposed here is twofold.

On the one hand, the inventory highlights the fact that “narrative” is a necessary, but imprecise umbrella term for a wide range of narrative phenomena which researchers need to study both in isolation, to develop even more precise concepts and terminologies, and in interaction, in order to answer questions of the kind raised in the introduction to this paper. By developing conceptual frameworks such as narrative dynamics, narrative theory (or narratology), i.e. the systematic study of the forms, functions, uses and effects of narrative conducted in the humanities, serves to reduce complexity without fostering the kind of misleading simplicity which results from using the term narrative as shorthand for various related concepts including story, storytelling, communication, and framing. Reducing the complexity of story-based communication in the public sphere also helps us to understand why policy narratives often fail to reach their intended goals: in a dynamic media society, bottom-up storysharing on social media platforms may produce counter-narratives whose effectiveness is easily underestimated.

On the other hand, this paper also acknowledges the limits of theoretical work. Models and metaphors such as narrative dynamics and narrative ecologies help to generate hypotheses and to focus more precisely on specific issues; yet the narratological study of recurrent features of narrative communication in the public sphere needs to be accompanied by analytical work in order to yield robust results. The OPPORTUNITIES project uses both qualitative studies employing discourse analysis and applied narratology, and quantitative approaches such as corpus-based linguistic analysis and online surveys.

First results of survey research and quantitative linguistic analyses confirm that the cross-disciplinary approach championed by OPPORTUNITIES is vital for creating new and more specific knowledge on the nexus of narrative dynamics and migration. Investigating attitude formation, De Coninck, Mertens and d’Haenens (2021a) analyse how media consumption informs attitudes towards what sociologists call outgroups (here, refugees, migrants, and Muslims) in Austria, Germany, Italy and Hungary. With respect to television news, the survey finds that “consumption of public service and local news is associated with positive sentiments towards these outgroups, while commercial news consumption is associated with negative sentiments” (16). From a theoretical perspective, it is particularly interesting to see that media selection plays a vital role in attitude formation and thus needs to be considered more prominently in future work on narrative dynamics.

A corpus-based linguistic analysis (Mertens, De Coninck and d’Haenens 2021b) investigates collocations of the term “migration” in Twitter tweets by politicians in the same European countries. The study provides empirical evidence for the assumption that right-wing parties such as Germany’s AfD frame migration as a threat – collocations of migration include Islamism, extremism, and totalitarianism (13). The study of collocations on Matteo Salvini’s Twitter account reveals close links between



immigration, business and human traffickers – shedding light on Salvini’s role as “the key ‘frame sponsor’ of this xenophobic discourse” (8). What is more, the kind of linguistic profile generated through the analysis of collocations allows one to see how conditions for narrative aggregation and realignment are prepared through social media discourses. Juxtaposing right-wing and conservative tweets from the German AfD and CDU Mertens, De Coninck and d’Haenens allow us to see how the latter foreground safety (Sicherheit) and, to a lesser extent, order (Ordnung) and cohesion (Zusammenhalt) in tweets on migration. The AfD rhetoric emphasizing threats directly responds to such conservative concerns. As the data provide snapshots of political positions rather than developments, they are not sufficient to observe actual changes in public opinion (and, of course, right-wing populists don’t only thrive on scared conservatives). Yet these observations show how quantitative work integrates with theoretical modeling and discourse analyses in the OPPORTUNITIES project, allowing for methodological multiperspectivity in a truly cross-disciplinary research agenda.

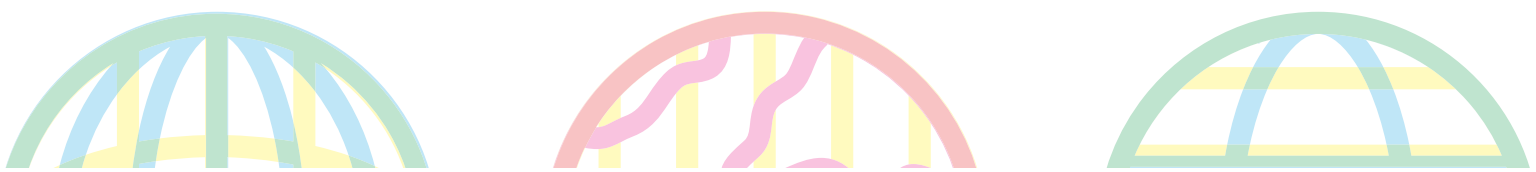


5. Conclusion

This paper has proposed a programmatic concept of narrative dynamics which is designed to achieve three related goals. On the one hand, it helps narrative researchers identify discursive phenomena and processes (event modeling, chaff, aggregation, normalization, realignment and redirection) which go beyond conventional binary juxtapositions of narrative vs. counter-narrative, helping us to account for the complexity of narrative ecologies. On the other hand, by focusing on the centripetal and centrifugal effects of narratives, this dynamic approach offers an innovative instrument for modeling and analysing narrative interactions in print media, on social media platforms, and between national and European publics. These concepts, the paper argues, can play a key role in a cross-disciplinary research agenda grounded in perspective changes, facilitating conceptual transfer across disciplines. Finally, these concepts seek to do justice to the complexity of migration discourses.

The war against Ukraine, accompanied by a new narrative dynamics fueled by propaganda, misinformation, false allegations, censorship and a renaissance of Cold War rhetoric, puts the theory to the test. The narrative perspective emphasizes that events don't just "happen" or "unfold" in a passive manner; they are planned, produced, (mis)managed and modeled by various stakeholders for national and international audiences. As millions of refugees from Ukraine seek temporary protection in neighboring countries, following the attack by the Russian army on February 24, 2022, we are witnessing a paradigm change in European migration policy. Whereas the arrival of refugees from Syria in 2015 was framed in terms of crisis and a security threat by governments in Hungary and Poland and right-wing parties in other member states, refugees from Ukraine currently experience a new welcome culture grounded in solidarity with a neighbor under attack. The centrifugal crisis of 2015 and 2016 divided European member states. This time, in the face of Russian aggression, there is unprecedented unity among European member states offering temporary protection to refugees from Ukraine.

Is this the beginning of a new European narrative on migration? When Ylva Johansson, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, announced on Twitter that the EU would offer temporary support to all Ukrainian refugees ("I'm proud of how the EU and Member States are giving immediate support to those coming from the horrific threats of war"), first responses were positive but also criticised the lack of solidarity with non-White, non-Christian refugees. Initial reports about racist discrimination of African and Indian refugees by Ukrainian border guards and growing concerns over human trafficking and sexual exploitation of vulnerable refugee show that a fair migration policy grounded in humanitarian principles is still on the horizon.

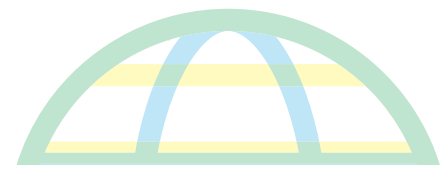
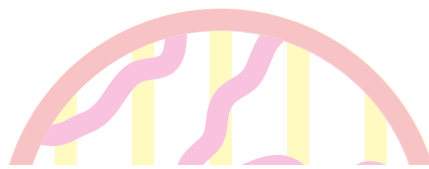


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Endnotes

¹ 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”).

² “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)

³ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

⁴ <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>

⁵ <https://www.welt.de/regionales/hamburg/article215880094/So-reagieren-Abgeordnete-auf-Aeusserungen-der-AfD-zu-Moria.html>

⁶ “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).

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/07/smash-and-grab-dominic-cummings-democracy>

⁸ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/storytelling-the-disinformation-2/>

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.”

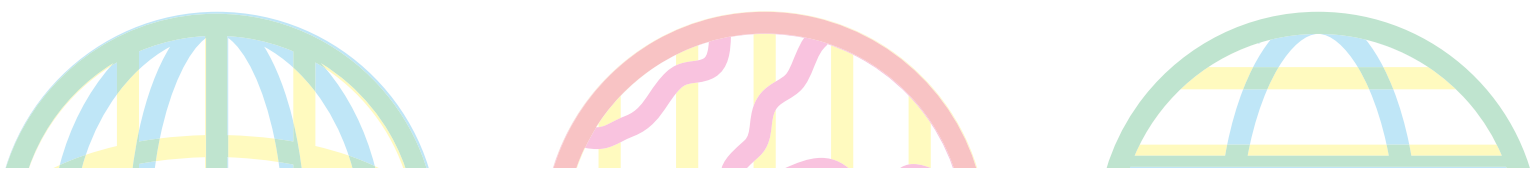
¹¹ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/beatrix-von-storch-afd-vizechefin-will-polizei-sogar-auf-kinder-schiessen-lassen-14044186.html>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/16/italy-bars-two-more-refugee-ships-from-ports>

¹³ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/22951/rackete-upheld-rescue-duty-italys-top-court>

¹⁴ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/27783/italian-cabinet-approves-new-security-decree-removing-salvini-rules>

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ For the whole story, see <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-21/spanish-red-cross-volunteer-online-backlash-migrant-ceuta/100155152>.

¹⁷ 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.accel.s.rwth-aachen.de/cms/ACCELS/Veranstaltungen/Event-Series-Pandemic-Storytelling/~kttrg/Interdisciplinary-Lecture-Stefan-Iverse/>.





opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration