Chapter 9

The Impact of the Information Ecosystem on Public Opinion during Nuclear Crises:

Lifting the Lid on the Role of Identity Narratives

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Public Opinion Is Embedded in Identity Narratives

How do strategic narratives function in an information ecosystem to influence constituencies during international crises? And how does an information ecosystem marked by increasing use of social media affect public opinion during such crises? In this chapter I argue, first, that nuclear crises allow the public articulation of narratives about how international order works and that narratives about the identities of the key protagonists often remain central to the reaction of public opinion. Second, I argue that we cannot expect social media to greatly affect how public opinion works in crises. Decades of scholarship on political communication have shown that news, entertainment, and other media formats have influenced what issues and events publics think about but not what positions they hold toward issues or events. Instead of simply asking what impact social media have, it is more useful to ask first *whether* social media, via the relationships they enable and the content they convey, play a significantly new or different role on public opinion during international crises.

As this chapter outlines, changes to the information ecosystem will not make substantial changes to public opinion during international crises such as nuclear standoffs. Many decades of research in political communication have shown that public opinion is very difficult to change. This is confirmed by recent research exploring the narratives

citizens hold about international affairs and global media events. Certainly, social media intensify the speed and potential public participation in global media events, but there is no evidence to suggest they change opinions. Instead, it is more useful to examine the longer-term narratives that citizens and publics hold about international affairs, how those enduring narratives shape expectations about how global crises are likely to unfold, and how they should be managed.

Social Media, Identity, and Strategic Narratives

Social media have been viewed across scholarly and policy debates as a potential source of chaotic, participatory exuberance. This is deemed to mark a moment of transformation in how public opinion functions. And yet, a more realistic view is possible. Digital technologies that allow anyone a public voice have simply lifted the carpet on the range of already existing and diverse viewpoints for all to see.[1] And many are horrified! It is not that social media have led to greater polarization about, or emotional reactions to, international affairs. US public feeling about nuclear conflict, for instance, was intense and divergent in the early days of the Cold War.[2] Rather, those divisions and responses were offline, face to face, and not immediately turned into data that are archived, cherry-picked, and sensationalized. A sanitized "mainstream" idea of public opinion could be constructed in the post–World War II era, a period characterized by relatively few national news media outlets covering international affairs, polling geared around the issues covered by those outlets, and, in the West, a democratic politics geared toward compromise and stability after the upheavals of the early twentieth century.[3]

We now see much more clearly the role of identity in the long-term narratives held by ordinary people about their own country and its role in international affairs. This is to some degree a function of the methodologies that let us research public opinion. In marketing, digital traces of ordinary people's conversations provide firms with new ways to segment populations by sentiment and interest, renewing

attention to identity groups—what consultancy firm KPMG labeled digital "tribes."[4] Communication becomes tribal, too, in the sense that social media enable instantaneous conversation or "chat" such that many scholars argue we are witnessing a return to an oral public culture. After a "Gutenberg parenthesis" in the twentieth century, when periodic written texts were central to public life, digital media enable a return to a pre-twentieth-century orality based around storytelling.[5] This encourages easy expression and contestation of identities. But how can we understand this in a systematic and rigorous way?

I define strategic narratives as a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.[6] Critically, I argue that three types of narrative are pivotal to explaining how the meaning of international affairs is generated, including the meaning of nuclear politics:

- *System narratives* describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works. For example: Is there a global bipolar international order led by a G2 consisting of the United States and China, or is there a multipolar system in which the European Union, India, and Russia join the United States and China as great powers? Is the system governed by states or by some mix of states, firms, and international organizations?
- *Identity narratives* set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, what its character and reputation are, and what goals it has.[7] One's system narrative determines what constitutes an appropriate role or function that a state with certain characteristics can play. Thus, system narratives play an important and often primary role in shaping what identity narratives these states project.[8] For instance, if we inhabit a G2 system, this would entail China and the United States taking equal responsibility as leaders tackling global problems.
- *Issue narratives* set out a problem and why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished. For example, depending on how we narrate the origins and causes of climate change as an issue, this will then shape the

> design of solutions (for example, whether to focus on adaptation or mitigation) and the distribution of responsibility for implementing them (whether the major polluters should bear the greatest costs or all should contribute to addressing them).

The study of narrative in international affairs has become a recurring theme in international relations recently, particularly to explain how communities of consensus on an issue can be built such that actors feel they are moving toward a shared problem diagnosis and solution. Political scientist Jack Snyder has argued that, through analyzing strategic narratives, we can see how political actors attempt to persuade others of their political vision.[9] He argues that narratives make possible the "conceptual integration of facts and values (of 'is' and 'ought') in strategic persuasion and the political integration of diverse perspectives among partners in a strategic coalition."[10] The use of narrative is a tool to organize the identities of political communities and international organizations.[11] Narratives are also seen as having force to coerce others to do the will of the powerful in international affairs, since confident great or emerging powers can point to and exacerbate the contradictions or hypocrisies in another actor's proclaimed identity and empirical actions.[12] Hence, we find in nuclear politics efforts to shame or embarrass parties to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) who do not meet commitments on disarmament and nonproliferation, and to stigmatize and securitize non-NPT states who seek nuclear technologies. Nuclear politics is mediated by narrative characterizations of key actors. Those characterizations determine expectations about how those actors are likely to act and thus how they should be engaged. In other words, through identity narratives, communication is used to shape behavior.

Nuclear Crises Are Standoffs That Must Be Narrated

We can further understand the role of narrative in nuclear crises if we treat them as instances of a standoff. A standoff involves two antag-

onistic parties at deadlock in a conflict. Following sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici, I treat standoffs as "action in the subjunctive mood": witnesses hypothesize about likely outcomes and their speculation is tinged with emotion—doubt, hope, fear.[13] A spectator may think, "I dread that my country will be bombed and we will suffer" or, "I fear our leaders will launch an unjustified attack." Standoffs let us identify how regularities and norms of behavior are invoked and thus what opinions publics hold about international affairs. What is the appropriate way for the international community to manage such crises and dilemmas? And what is the most effective and useful way for journalists to report on such events? There is a duration to these moments of crisis, when fate hangs in the balance, and in that duration we can focus on how actors respond to the contingency of that moment.[14]

The centrality of expectations and projections of possible outcomes necessitates the analysis of public opinion in the forms of narratives rather than simply public attitudes or sentiments toward ongoing events. I would expect to see cultural variations in how different nations and their leaders respond to nuclear standoffs. Wagner-Pacifici writes, "In the action-oriented culture of the United States, there is an exaggerated *horror vacui*—the horror of nothingness, of doing nothing—that exerts pressure on the standoff. Nobody wants to do nothing."[15] A country like Germany will approach the standoff differently, given that past instances of acting—of doing something—led to the crimes of the Nazi period. India and Pakistan could bring different approaches again to a nuclear standoff within the context of their rivalry and entangled history.[16] Digital media will enable citizens from such different countries to debate the relative merits of action or inaction during a crisis, but this conversation is unlikely to alter opinions on either side. Let us now examine why.

The Problem of "Impact"

There is a tendency among pundits and policy makers alike to believe that communication influences publics. This is the concept of the

"third-person effect"—that while *our* minds are made up, the minds of *others* are influenced and their behavior changed by exposure to media. The validity of the third-person effect has been a subject of recurring debate. Based on years of ethnographic fieldwork, Professor Sarah Maltby has documented how military communications teams have a mindset of "imagined influence": if they project content (videos, leaflets, sweets for children), those on the receiving end must "get the message," surely? This leads to efforts to communicate more and "smarter" but rarely to any research with those target audiences to see if they actually welcome these communications.[17] (The same could be said for science communication on vaccines, climate change, and so on.) As political scientist Joanna Szostek is showing in her ongoing research in Ukraine, the presumption that enemy media are influencing "your" public spurs state efforts to control the information battlefield—which is also the public sphere and the space of democracy.[18] But *are* people influenced by propaganda? *Does* the enemy "implant" conspiracies in "our" population—and *how*? The longevity of presumed media influence is embedded in more long-standing assumptions about the malleability of human hearts and minds and, normatively, what the *right* and *normal* responses of individuals *should* be.

Yet, scholars of political communication continue to argue that exposure to a narrative is not the same as being persuaded by a narrative, let alone altering one's behavior based on being persuaded by a narrative. Hence, we face a paradox. On the one hand, we have never had more efforts to influence others in political campaigns, at home and abroad. A study of the presence of disinformation campaigns by political parties in forty-eight countries found that parties in *every one* of these countries are now using these techniques.[19] On the other hand, there is no evidence these techniques have made any difference in voter behavior. A recent metastudy of the effects of voters' exposure to political campaigns across forty-nine field experiments showed an average of *zero* effect on voters' candidate choices.[20] This does not rule out voters at opposite poles becoming more polarized, even if the net effect is zero. But comparative research demonstrates that this polarization is

by far the most evident in the United States, such that the debate about the persuasiveness of disinformation campaigns is being driven by an outlier.[21] Even within the United States there is uncertainty about media effects. Internal testing of the persuasive effects of political ads on American citizens by one firm discovered that "not only did the group find zero correlation between engagement and persuasion; in some cases, the most engaging videos persuaded people in the wrong direction."[22] The consensus view in scholarship on political communication is that shaping citizens' opinions is extremely difficult and that a citizen's position on an issue is explained more by feelings of identity than by any "rational" processing of information.[23]

Robin Brown, a historian of international communication, contends that strategic narratives projected through public diplomacy programs only succeed to the extent that these communications become interwoven within existing social networks and communities.[24] Previous public diplomacy programs have failed because they have neither penetrated existing social networks nor generated new networks. He argues that doing so today is potentially feasible, methodologically, to the degree that social networks are constituted through digital media. But not all communication is online. Many of the networks public diplomats would target are face-to-face or proceed through nondigital media. Nevertheless, the spread of mobile telephony, the internet, and thus social media in the developing world will afford opportunities to trace how states' strategic narratives about nuclear weaponry and norms of countries' behavior during standoffs or crises are received, negotiated, and sustained or challenged in local contexts. But because narratives are embedded in long-term social networks and tied to perspectives on the identities of one's own state and others, it is unlikely that a narrative about a nuclear crisis arriving from outside a community will shift that community's view of the matter. If the effects of communication depend on how narratives enter into and circulate in communities, we would need to employ offline methods to trace how such narratives and norms are present in those communities and how online and offline communications work. The temptation to study online communities is

high because social media data are relatively freely available and much cheaper than the costs of fieldwork in offline communities. Ultimately, however, such effort and collaboration across locations are needed if we are to understand how narratives about nuclear crises are received and interpreted and how any influence may operate.

A key finding of much research of audience engagement with global crises in past decades is that ordinary people feel a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity about how issues like cyberattacks, nuclear proliferation, or radicalization actually work.[25] This is often in part because journalists have difficulty explaining them.[26] Hence there is the tendency to fall back upon long-established identity narratives that hold in one's community and that precede digital communication. Are changes to the information ecosystem likely to alleviate such uncertainty? Will the diffusion of information allow citizens to enjoy more meaningful engagement with matters of international security?

Changes to the Information Ecosystem

Too much footage and information from contemporary wars and conflicts leave us unsure what we are being shown or what we are hearing.[27] Since 2015 the post-truth debate has stirred invocations of a crisis of journalism and of democracy precisely because of uncertainty about communication. Communication poses a problem because it is simultaneously ubiquitous and black-boxed; it constitutes all relations and yet is beyond our grasp, our "literacy." From Syria we have unprecedented digital content yet maddening opacity.[28] Russia's interventions in US elections and Ukraine are said to show the brittleness and fragility of mass communication and the institutions supposed to uphold it. Content from open-source outlets and citizen journalists may allow verification when a crisis unfolds, but it is often slow and may not receive wide publicity in mainstream media that would allow publics to reconsider the event. Even when we see, we cannot discern the motivation of those who publish content. Trust collapses. Events in international

affairs seem important and could possibly affect us, but they reach audiences in ways that offer a picture that is unclear, contested, and ambiguous—indeed, often deliberately so in the case of a news organization like Russia's RT.

By 2018, a recurring claim about the information ecosystem was that it intensifies and polarizes emotional positions of publics. Professor of journalism Silvio Waisbord writes:

> Recent political events . . . have magnified social and communicative rifts driving post-truth politics. Truth becomes a matter of personal and group convictions rather than something that resembles the scientific orthodoxy of shared procedures and verifiable statements about reality.[29]

Now, we can question whether public processing and interpretation of information about international affairs ever resembled a scientific process. As I argued above, social media have rather lifted the lid on the range of epistemologies and orientations to truth that people hold. There is no evidence that social media created or increased that range of orientations. But, in a context of uncertainty about complex international affairs issues like nuclear standoffs, it is easy to see why publics would fall back upon long-standing identity narratives about the protagonists. Through characterization of familiar actors in international affairs, identity narratives offer a degree of certainty about those protagonists' likely motives based on interpretations of their past behavior.

Several insider accounts now indicate that the business model of social media rests upon cultivating a degree of emotional charge, and such emotionally charged engagements *may* work to exacerbate a focus on identity. Platforms offering campaign services to political parties in the US 2016 presidential election led to efforts "to make politics more sensational," argued one former Facebook employee.[30] A Facebook investor compared the "if it bleeds, it leads" logic of traditional news media to how Facebook uses outrage through its "2.1 billion individualized channels. . . . They're basically trying to trigger fear and anger to get the outrage cycle going, because outrage is what makes you be more

deeply engaged. . . . Therefore, you're going to be exposed to more ads and that makes you more valuable."[31] This outrage cycle is structurally built into how social media generate revenue, because attention generates interactions, which can be analyzed to offer insights about user behavior, data, and insights that in turn can be sold to advertisers. Consequently, those structures must be altered if we are to expect different outcomes.

This is not the place to list recommendations to reconstruct information ecosystems so that they are more resilient for a functioning democratic culture or to ensure citizens are protected from disinformation on matters of international affairs such as nuclear crises. That debate is unfolding, and it varies in each national media and political system. Instead, we must acknowledge that, to the extent that information ecosystems are increasingly driven by commercial and platform logics that prioritize emotional engagement, this has the potential to further intensify the importance of identity narratives in the way ordinary citizens interpret international affairs.

Conclusion

Changes to the information ecosystem such as the proliferation of social media will not make substantial changes to how public opinion operates during international crises such as nuclear standoffs. Research in political communication and current work on the stickiness of narrative in communities demonstrates why this is the case. Social media do affect how debate works, speeding up the connectivity and circulation of content and enabling a greater degree of participation by members of publics around the world. However, there is no evidence to suggest they change opinions. They can focus attention upon social division that could be used to intensify opinion and feeling, but the effects of this are not yet understood. I have argued instead that social media simply lift the lid on a greater range of diverse and long-standing narratives held by publics. For this reason, it is more useful

to examine the longer-term narratives citizens and publics hold about international affairs and how those enduring narratives shape expectations about how global crises are likely to unfold and how they should be managed.

If we treat crises as standoffs, Wagner-Pacifici's analysis indicates that for a standoff to be resolved there must be a restructuring of the situation so there is some overlap of meaning and time horizons.[32] At least a degree of convergence of perspectives must occur for debate to be intelligible. Participants must agree on the sequence of events being disputed, the nature of the problem, and a likely timescale for it to be resolved. Social media enable publics in different countries to be exposed to each other's perspectives and narratives as they exchange views through social media. However, this does not imply that this exposure alters those perspectives and narratives, because, as Brown argues, those are embedded in communities and it is difficult to alter the form and substance of a community's narratives.[33]

What is needed is collaborative, mixed-method, and sustained research that integrates online and offline analyses of how publics engage with nuclear issues. Exploring the rituals and practices of news engagement in moments of crisis *and* in moments *between* crises will give a far greater understanding of how social media or any other media are influencing public opinion.

Notes

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14. Ibid., 5.

15. Ibid., 80.

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32. Wagner-Pacifici, *Theorizing the Standoff*.

33. Brown, "Public Diplomacy."