

Empirical Research Paper

Battle of narratives: Interaction between narratives and counter-narratives in megaprojects

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ABSTRACT

Megaprojects along with creating value to the economy, create environmental, social and political disruptions in its local environment. Narratives guide social action and hence both the promoters and the protesters of a project mobilize narratives to advance their interest. In this process, narratives and counter-narratives are (re)created and their interaction often establishes the dominant narrative. Using the case of the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in England, we highlight that it is through a continuous process of interaction between the promoter narratives and protester narratives that the narrative of the project vision evolves in practice. The strategies employed to resist the counter-narrative such as rejecting the counter-narrative, delaying it, and accepting part of it is discussed. We propose a model of how narratives of the project evolve through multiple narratives and counter-narratives. Thus, megaprojects are an arena where multiple battles are fought with narratives, to win one's vested interest in the project.

1. Introduction

Megaprojects are projects which cost more than USD 1 Billion or projects of a significant cost that attract a high level of public attention or political interest because of substantial direct and indirect impacts on the community, environment, and state budgets (Capka, 2004; Pitsis et al., 2018; Ninan et al., 2022). They aim not only at practical objectives such as the delivery of the infrastructure asset and services but also involve lofty ideas, high ambitions and economic development targets (Miller et al., 2017). These projects use colossal resources, budgets, and time while creating environmental, social and political disruptions in its local environment (Sturup, 2009).

Megaprojects can be considered as causing change to an existing environment. They can be considered as 'displacements' (Gellert and Lynch, 2003) in physical, social, and political realms. Megaprojects involve large amount of land acquisitions, displacing people, plants, and animals and thereby rapidly transforming the physical landscapes in very visible ways. These projects change the livelihood of people living near the project and changes economic activity in the area thereby causing social disruptions. Megaprojects also cause political changes as governments sanction and create megaprojects for getting political mileage, and thereby getting re-elected through the project. They can

also be seen as 'media magnets' which appeal to politicians as they enjoy the visibility gained from starting the project (Flyvbjerg, 2014). With changes, there is also resistance to change. The stakeholders in the local environment in an attempt to reduce these disruptions conflict on many of the specifics of the planned megaproject (Olander and Landin, 2008). For example, the community raises issues on the megaproject's basic design, function and alignment, the users for whom it caters, its impact on communities, the effect of megaproject operations on land use, amenity and values, the utilities that the megaproject will disrupt, and the construction methods adopted. Adding to this, negative emotions towards the project can cause these stakeholders to oppose the construction of the project, boycott the services and even cause a democratic government to withdraw support for the project considering their vote bank (Ninan et al., 2022; Van den Ende and Van Marrewijk, 2019). Thus, the project management team and the local communities can have competing views about how the megaproject will contribute to the economy, the environment, and society (Awakul and Ogunlana, 2002).

Organizational change literature considers the often-adversarial confrontation between actors with different interests and values around change. It is difficult to achieve change in pluralistic organizations, such as megaprojects, due to conflicting interests and dispersed power among the actors (Denis et al., 2001). As noted by Orr and Scott

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(2008), it is the institutional differences such as divergent perceptions regarding the legitimate means and ends of the project which are a source of project complexity rather than the mere number of stakeholders. The different stakeholders in a project seek to shape dominant or widely accepted narrative around the project according to their vested interests. After all, megaprojects can only survive with high levels of inter-organizational cooperation spanning across geographical, cultural, institutional, and political boundaries (Scott et al., 2011). It is in this context that a project narrative, which portrays different parameters of the project including the mission and vision of the project, is crucial for the outcome of the project.

Narratives, as defined by Vaara et al. (2016), are “unique discursive constructions that provide essential means for maintaining or reproducing stability and/or promoting or resisting change in and around organizations.” Narratives guide social action and are hence performative (Czarniawska, 2016). Rather than a linguistic device, narratives can be considered as being central to the ‘social construction of reality’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Because of the performative implications of narratives, narratives in the context of megaprojects can guide support for the project or protests in the project. Narratives are interpreted, shared, and challenged by various organizational actors in the process of managing the meaning (Granlund, 2002). In the case of megaprojects, different stakeholders because of their conflicting interests (Biesenthal et al., 2018; Ninan et al., 2022) strive to create narratives that advance their vested interests in the project. Often when the promoters of the project (such as government, project team, investors and other supporters of the project) create and share a narrative in favor of the project, the protesters of the project (such as affected community, opposition, interest groups and other resistances of the project) create and share a counter-narrative against the project. The dominant narrative, which is a top-down imposition of narratives (Hughes et al., 2017), can shape the organizations’ worldviews but still can be challenged and negotiated (Frandsen et al., 2017) through dynamically interacting ante-narratives (Boje et al., 2016). Both promoters and protesters can have a legitimate right to further their interests and therefore it is vital to understand the processes through which they advance their interest through narratives.

Promoters and protesters of megaprojects fight multiple battles of narratives for delivering or destabilizing the project. For example, the promoters and protesters of the Dakota access pipeline in USA fought multiple narrative battles on the project’s impact on lands occupied by the Native American tribes and project’s impact on drinking water. The war was won by the promoters as they completed the project in 2017. However, in the case of the Melbourne East-west link road in Australia, which fought multiple narrative battles on cost to tax payers and a need for public transport, the war was won by the protesters as they managed to cancel the project in 2015 with cancellation costs of \$1.1 billion, in the form of penalties and compensations. There is a need to explore the dynamics of these battles, i.e., the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives in megaprojects. Esposito et al. (2022) note that megaproject outcomes results from a battle by stakeholders with divergent interests and logics of action over competing narratives. However, the dynamics of the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives of the promoters and protesters are still underexplored. We argue that understanding the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives in megaprojects can help us understand resistance and thereby create more value through these projects. After all, complex, dynamic, and often illusive, features of organizing can be understood through the study of discourses such as narratives (Fairclough, 1995). Thus, the objective of this research is to propose a model of how narratives of the project evolve through narratives, counter-narratives, and contesting these counter-narratives. Hence, this research seeks to answer two research questions, (1) How do narratives and counter-narratives interact in the context of megaprojects? and (2) How do promoters and protesters of projects resist the counter-narrative?

The paper is structured as follows. In the literature review, the

current knowledge of narratives and counter-narratives is summarized before arriving at the research gap. Then the methodology used to collect data from a megaproject in England is summarized. Following this, we describe the findings and discuss them anchored in the existing literature. The conclusion section then consolidates the findings and outlines the future direction for research in this area.

2. Insights into narratives and counter-narratives

Narrations are a means for meaning-making (Zilber, 2007), and the ‘narrative way of knowing’ has primacy over the scientific and paradigmatic modes of thinking in everyday processes of sense-making and communication (Polkinghorne, 1988). Sergeeva (2019) notes that narratives help in sensemaking as actors use narratives to shape their own individual understanding. She notes that narratives also help in sense-giving as it crafts others’ understanding and thereby an outcome of the collective construction of meaning. Together sensemaking and sense-giving iteratively develop a set of shared meanings and actions (Weick et al., 2010). Framing theory notes that sensemaking and sensegiving are not restricted to senior managers engaging with lower levels of the organization, nor about issue selling up the chain of command (Dutton and Ashford, 1993). Rather, all actors are potential producers and consumers of frames and framing practices such as with narratives can bring stakeholders together for new coalitions and collective action (Kaplan, 2008).

Narratives, however, are unstable and shifts from one equilibrium to another (Todorov, 1971). The equilibrium is a dominant narrative that is generally accepted as a universal truth (Harper, 2009). The stories people say that offer resistance to, either implicitly or explicitly to the dominant narrative are called counter-narratives (Andrews, 2004). In suggesting how else it could be told, counter-narratives expose the construction of the dominant story (Harris et al., 2001). Boje (2001) calls the alternative stories that were not part of the shared vision as ‘rebel voices.’ These counter-narratives help to document, and perhaps even validate, a ‘counter-reality’ (Delgado, 1995). Counter-narratives undermine the shared and explicit narrative (Zilber, 2007) and strive to create a new dominant narrative. Exploring counter-narratives enables us to understand the struggles over meanings, values and identities that take place in organizing (Frandsen et al., 2017). It helps us to capture some of the political, social and cultural complexities and tensions in organizing (Sergeeva, 2019). McQuillan (2000) claims that the contest between the narrative and counter-narrative structures the narrative matrix and records counter-narrative as a necessary condition for narrativity. The boundary between dominant and counter-narratives is not fixed, and they are always less stable and unified than they appear (Squire, 2002). With time and effort, counter-narratives can potentially change the dominant narrative (McLean and Syed, 2015). In the process of creating the counter-narrative, individuals reference the dominant narrative and position themselves against, or in contrast to it (McLean, 2015; Andrews, 2002). However, how organizations resist counter-narrative is still not explored.

A megaproject setting offers an avenue to explore the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives due to the shorter time span in contrast to social and cultural changes. Within project settings, Veenswijk and Berendse (2008) argue that narratives are important vehicles through which meanings are negotiated, shared, and contested. They highlight that an analysis of project narratives helps understand organizational change processes. Counter and competing narratives inevitably arise in projects, such as megaprojects, which involve uncertainty, integration, and urgency (Boddy and Paton, 2004) from a stakeholder management perspective because along with creating value to the economy, megaprojects create environmental, social and political disruptions in its local environment (Sturup, 2009). Drevin and Dalcher (2011) record the presence of multiple counter-narratives before the coherent post-project narrative of success or failure emerges. As noted by Boddy and Paton (2004), the sources of counter-narratives lie in

people's subjectivity while they interpret the distinguishing features of a project and its context. Discussing leaders' narratives, [Havermans et al. \(2015\)](#) highlight how leaders frame the project dictate whether the project is routine or groundbreaking. They note that when the goals and methods of a project are unclear, the narrative proposed by the leader is likely to be more fluid and negotiable than when project goals and methods are clear. In the context of megaprojects, the promoters and protesters strive to create a narrative of the project either to stabilize or to destabilize the project. Taking the instance of policy measures in megaprojects, [Esposito and Terlizzi \(2019\)](#) record the process through which promoters and protesters of a given policy measure engage in battles over competing narratives. The stakeholders advocate arguments either in favor or against a particular policy in order to influence its final outcome. Adding to the gap in organization studies, i.e., an exploration on how organizations resist counter-narratives, from a project management perspective understanding the dynamic between narratives and counter-narratives can help projects manage community resistances.

3. Research methodology

To address our research objective, we choose to conduct a single in-depth case study. Single case studies are meant to study phenomena in depth within a single context to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events ([Yin, 2015](#)). Single case studies are multiple in most research efforts as they involve multiple vignettes or mini cases giving sufficient insights to theorize ([Ragin, 1992](#); [Stake, 2010](#)). This constitutes an embedded single case study ([Yin, 2015](#)) where systematic data from multiple elements within a case study are studied. Thus, within the single context of the a project, we analyze narratives of the need for project, narratives of the stakeholder consultation process, and narratives of environmental sustainability. The aim of an embedded single case study is to optimize understanding of some concepts, such as the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives, in this instance, within the case rather than to generalize instances beyond it ([Stake, 2005](#)). The research follows the 'theory generation' mode of case study research ([Ketokivi & Choi, 2014](#)), where we generate theory inductively from the empirical context while also connect them to the general theory on narratives and stakeholder management.

We chose to study the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the UK. The megaproject is delivered in multi-phases and plans to connect the city centers of London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds by 345 miles of new high-speed railway track project. It aims to bring the UK's cities closer to each other by effectively shrinking the distance and time taken to travel between them. The first phase of the megaproject intends to connect London and Birmingham with a 140-mile-high speed rail line to reduce the travel time between the two cities to 45 min at a cost of 30 billion pounds. The project was proposed in 2009 and is scheduled to be operational in 2026. We study the early stages of the HS2 project from 2009 to 2012 to analyze how the project evolves longitudinally through the interaction between narratives and counternarratives. We chose to study the megaproject due to multiple theoretical reasons. First, the project had very active resistance during the early stages from the external stakeholders along the route of the high-speed rail because they saw only the demerits of noise and vibrations with no visible benefits as the project passed through their lands with no nearby stoppages. To counter this massive opposition, the megaproject was very active in trying to create a favorable narrative for the project. Thus, the project is similar to other megaprojects which experience opposition from external stakeholders and can be considered as a common case ([Yin, 2015](#)). Secondly, the HS2 megaproject drew plenty of media attention and therefore had a good archive of the different narratives mobilized, which can be collected and analyzed retrospectively. News media play a large role in perpetuating public perceptions through images, hyperbolic reportage, and reporting comments from public officials ([Morehouse](#)

and [Sonnnett, 2010](#)). From a narrative perspective, [Dalpiaz and Di Stefano \(2018\)](#) recommends a study of the reportage to identify coherent and competing narratives that consciously perform and project the future, particularly during the early phases of project shaping. The media attention received by the project and the availability of news articles covering different narratives make the project a revelatory case ([Yin, 2015](#)), as we were able to analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible. Finally, the study of news articles discussing narratives of promoters and protesters over a period of time provides a longitudinal case ([Yin, 2015](#)), which enables and exploration of how certain conditions and their underlying processes change over time. Hence, the megaproject was selected for theoretical reasons such as the presence of project narratives, the presence of counter-narratives, and the accessibility of retrospective data in the form of news media articles, making it a common, revelatory and longitudinal case ([Yin, 2015](#)).

Thus, the data that informs this research is captured from naturally occurring news media articles. Naturally occurring data or naturalistic data arise without a researcher intervening directly or providing some stimuli to a group of respondents ([Silverman, 2001](#)) and hence do not have researcher's biases during the data collection stage as with interviews or questionnaires. The early stages of the megaproject are where narratives of the project are shaped in the process, drawing multiple narrative instruments and processes. Narratives in the news articles during the early stages of the HS2 megaproject in the UK were studied by [Ninan and Sergeeva \(2021, 2022\)](#). While [Ninan and Sergeeva \(2021\)](#) studies the different labels used in the project, [Ninan and Sergeeva \(2022\)](#) explores the various instruments and processes involved in mobilizing narratives. We used the same dataset to explore the interaction between narratives and counternarratives through a longitudinal research methodology. [Ninan and Sergeeva \(2022\)](#) highlights that 855 news articles regarding the project published between 2009 and 2012 were collected through a keyword search in the Google news repository, which were reduced to 164 after screening the titles and to 113 after reading the full text of the articles. Thus, in this research we consider the 113 news articles regarding the HS2 megaproject from different newspaper agencies such as the Telegraph (32 news articles), British Broadcasting Company (29 news articles), Daily Mail (7 news articles), Bucks Herald (5 news articles). Other newspaper agencies such as Independent, Financial times, etc. that had less than 4 articles each were also considered for the study. It should be noted that the news articles were not evenly spread across the study period, rather were dependent on a particular event and the criticality of it. For example, when the project was announced on January 10, 2012, the whole month had more than 30 news articles debating the need for the project.

We analyze how the project evolves longitudinally through the interaction between narratives and counternarratives using a grounded theory approach ([Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)). The analysis aims to go beyond simple examinations of verbal and written interaction and consider who uses the language, how, why, and when ([van Dijk, 1997](#)). For analysis, this research used open coding and axial coding of the data collected from news articles to arrive at theoretical constructs and thereby build theory as shown in [Fig. 1](#). There were multiple narratives in the project such as narrative of the need for the project, narrative of the stakeholder consultation process, narrative of environmental sustainability, narrative of benefits of the project, narratives of alternatives of the project, narratives of noise, etc. From these, we discuss three narratives that provide realism to our theories and/or portrayed dramatic moments to make the story more interesting following the guidance of [Golden-Biddle and Locke \(1997\)](#). Thus, we discuss the narrative of the need for the project, narrative of the stakeholder consultation process, and narrative of environmental sustainability. Across these different narrative themes, we employed axial coding and looked for patterns through which the narrative evolved. For example, within the narrative of the need for project, when the promoters dismissed the project benefit study conducted by the protesters, we assigned a category of 'rejecting.' Thus, strategies for resisting the counter-narratives

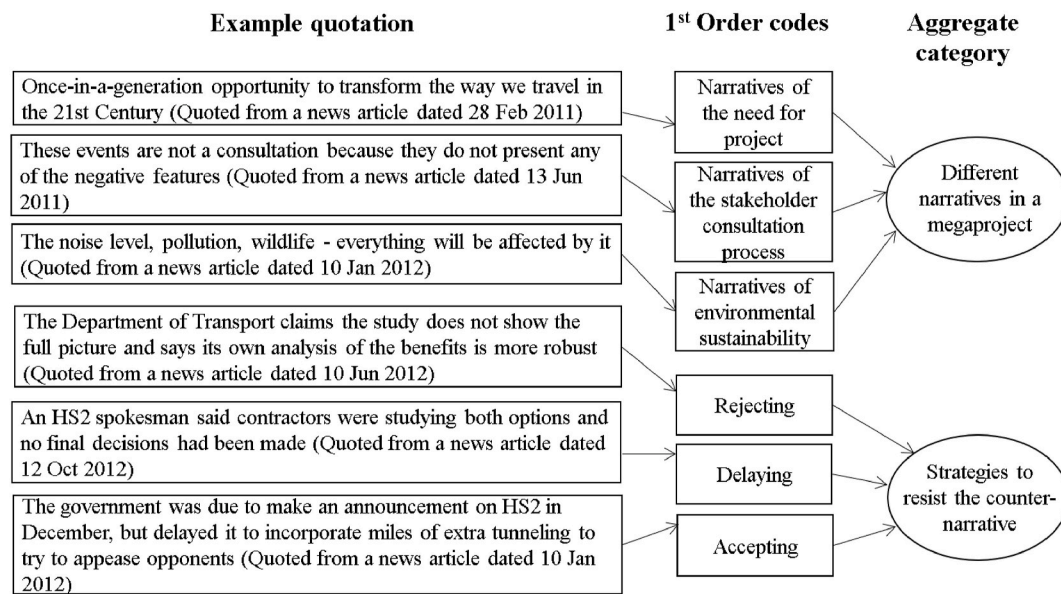


Fig. 1. Sample data analysis.

such as rejecting, delaying and accepting were seen from the axial coding. The data analysis was done in parallel with data collection, and with each new data point, the existing codes were revised. Careful and repeated readings were carried out because some constructs often are not obvious until the second or third reading (Steger, 2007). The categories or codes emerged from the data and were not predetermined. Multiple revisions were carried out such that the categories extracted remain exclusive and collectively exhaustive (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1997). The constructs generated are anchored in existing literature (Eisenhardt, 1989) for external validity.

4. Findings

We discuss the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives by studying the narrative of the need for the megaproject, narrative of the stakeholder consultation process, and narrative of environmental sustainability. Each of these is discussed below.

4.1. narrative of the need for the megaproject

The need for the megaproject is one of the most critical narratives resulting in whether the megaproject is built or not. While the promoters of the megaproject aim to create a narrative that the megaproject is needed, the protesters of the megaproject strive to propel a narrative that the megaproject is not needed. During the early stages of the project, the transport secretary claimed:

"I am excited about the possibilities that HSR [High Speed Rail 2] has to transform transport in this country for the better - providing environmental benefits, encouraging investment and boosting business and jobs" (Quoted from a news article dated 30 December 2009)

Stressing the benefits that the megaprojects would achieve to society is one of the ways to create a favorable narrative. These benefits can be economical, social or environmental as highlighted in the above quotation. The protesters of the megaproject bring forward the counter-narrative by highlighting that the megaproject does not fare well on these benefits. For instance, in one case a community member protested against the megaproject as quoted below:

*"As a businessman, I spent a couple of days going through the business case and I was shocked at what I found. There's a lot of wool being pulled over our eyes and the case does not stack up. If ***[name of transport*

secretary] took this to Dragon's Den [a TV program where budding entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to multimillionaires willing to invest], he would be eaten alive" (Quoted from a news article dated 19 February 2011)

Here, the protesters attacked the economic feasibility of the project and claimed that the business case of the project does not stack up. Such counter-narratives destabilize the dominant narrative, i.e., the project is needed, to a new narrative that the project is not needed. The promoters of the project destabilize the opposition narrative by highlighting that irrespective of the counter-narrative, the project is still needed. They highlight that the business case and early return on investments were not the criteria for the need for project, for which they compared the project with the Victorian railways. One news article reported as below:

"Supporters of HS2 point out that the original Victorian rail pioneers saw no great early returns on their investments. And yet the evolution of Britain's modern industrial economy would have looked very different without them" (Quoted from a news article dated 24 July 2012)

The promoters of the megaproject backed the need for the megaproject by creating a narrative that the project is along the most efficient route connecting London and Birmingham. However, when the protesters saw that the project is still going ahead even with the counter-narrative that the project is not needed, they claimed that there is no need for the project to follow the proposed route. They highlighted that the proposed line would go through a graveyard and an estimated 50,000 bodies would need to be exhumed to make way for the project. Hence they argued for a change in alignment. A news article reported a statement by the spokesperson of the HS2 megaproject highlighting that the project will develop a strategy to deal with the grave at the appropriate time, as below:

"On Thursday night, an HS2 spokesman said it was "really too early" to say how the project would deal with the graves" (Quoted from a news article dated 6 April 2012)

In another instance, the protesters claimed that the project need not follow the proposed route by highlighting that Britain's oldest and largest wild pear tree, which is 200–250 years old, stands right in the center of the route of HS2. The protesters thus tried to create a narrative that the project is not needed in the current form and called for a change in alignment. Against this, the promoter of the project claimed that they are investigating the issue and adequate actions will be taken

subsequently as highlighted by the quote by the official spokesperson below:

"We are investigating whether the tree is affected by the proposed route. If it is, we are at an early stage of design, and in the future, we would look at whether or not it could be avoided or accommodated within the scheme" (Quoted from a news article dated 23 February 2011)

Thus, there are multiple, often conflicting narratives of the need for the megaproject, and they develop in a longitudinal way countering the existing dominant narrative.

4.2. narrative of the stakeholder consultation process

Narratives can even be initiated by the protesters of the project as well, and a narrative of the stakeholder consultation process is a prime example of this. The protesters campaigned that an effective stakeholder consultation process was not done, and that the government is not hearing the community's concern regarding the project. A news article reporting the concerns of a protester group claimed:

****[name of person], from the Campaign to Protect Rural England, described the consultation process as "a complete train wreck." He said the consultation amounted to "a single route option, which the government has already made up its mind to favor" and the country needed a "fair, open and informed debate about HSR [High Speed Rail 2]"* (Quoted from a news article dated 28 February 2011)

The protesters also claimed that the megaproject affects people from whom land is taken and people living near the project. While people who are affected by land acquisition are paid compensation, those who are near to the project are not paid any. The protesters strived to create a narrative that the project will cause noise pollution resulting in decreasing property values for people living near the project. The project offered to buy and lease back homes affected by the route as highlighted below:

"The Department for Transport has also agreed to buy and lease back homes which are affected by the route" (Quoted from a news article dated 10 January 2012)

The protesters of the project continued to emphasize that the consultation process was not a fair and open debate about the project. Such discourses aimed to create a narrative that the stakeholder consultation was not adequately done. To counter this narrative, the spokesperson of the Department of Transport highlighted that:

"This was one of the largest consultations ever undertaken by a government with over 30 events along the line of route attended by tens of thousands of people" (Quoted from a news article dated 13 November 2011)

By highlighting the consultation process as one of the largest consultations ever undertaken by a government, the promoters of the megaproject claimed that they have had a fair debate with tens of thousands of people and that the consultation process was carried out properly. By conducting 30 consultation events, the promoters of the megaproject aimed to destabilize the narrative of improper stakeholder consultation to create a counter-narrative of effective consultation. However, the protesters strived to stop this counter-narrative from building by claiming that:

"The government has already held a consultation into HS2, and it was a farce. People were excluded from meetings. People were tightly controlled so they could not speak freely about this terrible plan" (Quoted from a news article dated 7th April 2012)

The protesters highlighted that even though 30 events may have been conducted, the consultation process was not clear and transparent as people were excluded from meetings and not allowed to speak freely. Thus, the narrative of stakeholder consultation as part of the

megaproject narrative was shaped by narratives and counter-narratives by the promoters and protesters of the megaproject.

4.3. narrative of environmental sustainability

Another area of evolving narratives in the megaproject was environmental sustainability. One of the benefits of going for the high-speed rail network was it being an environment friendly alternative of travel. The promoters emphasized that the HS2 megaproject was a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable transport solution. The Chief Executive of Network Rail highlighted that,

"It [the HS2 project] is the low-carbon, sustainable transport of the future" (Quoted from a news article dated 11 March 2010)

Some sections raised concerns of the environmental sustainability narrative. The protesters of the project argued that environmental sustainability includes the construction phase too and the HS2 megaproject is not the most sustainable option. They highlighted how trees have to be cut down along the Chilterns, an area designated for conservation due to its significant landscape value, to enable the construction of the megaproject. The Director of the National Trust's Thames and Solent region claimed,

"The proposed route could cause serious and significant impacts on the landscape of the Chilterns ... Like many people, we're yet to be convinced that the overall business case for HS2 - the high-speed line - stacks up environmentally, financially and socially" (Quoted from a news article dated 11 March 2010)

The project team accepted the concerns of the protesters of the damage to the Chilterns and made amendments to the route. A news media article quoted as below,

"The government was due to make an announcement on HS2 in December but delayed it to incorporate miles of extra tunnelling to try to appease opponents. It has added 7.5 miles of tunnelling and 3.5 miles of deep cuttings along the 13 miles of proposed line through the Chilterns" (Quoted from a news article dated 10 January 2012)

However, when the protesters claimed that the megaproject would damage the Great Missenden, an area of outstanding natural beauty, the promoters of the megaproject remarked:

"Have you looked at the route? It runs along the A413. Great Missenden is beautiful, but it doesn't go through Great Missenden. "Between Great Missenden and the HS2 route are the A413, the Chiltern Railways and a line of pylons" (Quoted from a news article dated 11 December 2010)

The promoters of the megaproject claimed that the people opposing the environmental sustainability of the megaproject have vested interests against it. One rail enthusiast highlighted that people living near the megaproject want to stop the megaproject coming up in their backyard, i.e., not in my backyard (NIMBY) are focusing on environmental sustainability for their cause, as reported below,

"He said he felt campaigners were being very clever about side-stepping the "not in my backyard argument". "They're doing everything to not make that sort of statement," he said. "They're going on about economics (and) the environment but really, with railways you can make as much a game for it as against it" (Quoted from a news article dated 19 February 2011)

The promoters of the project called the protesters as NIMBYs, who have vested interests to stop the project from happening to save their backyard, in the process drawing on wider arguments against the project, as claimed below:

"It always happens when you have infrastructure projects, that those who live near where they're being proposed object vigorously and, of course,

what they do is to try and draw in wider arguments." (Quoted from a news article dated 19th February 2011)

Thus, the practice of creating and sustaining a narrative can go through multiple rounds of narratives and counter-narratives. For example, in another iteration of the environmental sustainability narrative, the protesters contested the NIMBY argument raised against them. The commons transport committee comprising of MPs from different political parties recorded the environmental impacts associated with the construction of the HS2 megaproject and recommended the project to address them. The chief executive of the Countryside Alliance used this recommendation to counter the NIMBY argument by claiming that their arguments are legitimate, and they only wish to preserve the environment, as below,

"We hope that this recommendation extinguishes, once and for all, any charges of nimbyism directed at people who wish to see our most-cherished landscape preserved for future generations" (Quoted from a news article dated 8 November 2011)

The evolution of narratives of the need for the megaproject, stakeholder consultation process, and environmental sustainability are consolidated in Table 1.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the news articles from the HS2 megaproject during the study period helped us understand the interactions between narratives and counter-narratives in shaping the megaproject narrative. Subsequently, the micro dynamics of how megaprojects resist the counter-narrative is discussed.

5.1. interaction between narratives and counter-narratives

As seen in the findings section, the interaction between the narratives and the counter-narratives occurs through multiple iterations. These can be categorized into setting up a narrative, setting up a counter-narrative, and countering the counter-narrative.

1. *Setting up a narrative:* Narratives can be set up by promoters or protesters of a megaproject. In the case of the HS2 megaproject, the

Table 1
Evolution of different narratives in the HS2 megaproject.

	Setting up a narrative	Setting up a counter-narrative	Contesting the counter-narrative
Need for the megaproject	HS2 will transform transport and economy in this country (Promoter)	The economic business case of HS2 does not stack up (Protester)	Victorian rail did not have proper business case nor early returns on investment but helped Britain's economy (Promoter)
Stakeholder consultation process	Only single route option was given and hence consultation was inadequate (Protester)	Largest consultation done with 30 events attended by tens of thousands of people so consultation was successful (Promoter)	People were excluded from the consultation meetings and were not allowed to speak freely (Protester)
Environmental sustainability	HS2 can provide better environmental benefits (Promoter)	HS2 causes serious impact on Chilterns during its construction (Protester)	The protesters are arguing because they will lose their land; railways are always environmentally friendly (Promoter)

promoters set up the narrative of the need for the megaproject and the narrative of environmental sustainability, while the protesters set up the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process. Setting up a narrative can be for endorsing the vested interest of the stakeholder group. The promoters wanted to create a favorable image of the megaproject and created a narrative in support of the megaproject such as in the case of the narrative of the need for the megaproject and the narrative of environment sustainability. The protesters in contrast wanted to topple the megaproject and hence created a narrative against the project such as with the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process. People of reputation play a key role in setting up narrative through trust transference (Lim et al., 2006) such as seen with the transport secretary setting up the narrative of the need for the megaproject, the representative of Campaign to Protect Rural England setting up the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process, and the Chief Executive of Network Rail setting up the narrative of environmental sustainability. Narratives that are set up by people of reputation are covered by the media and gain traction (Hung, 2014). These narratives are subsequently built upon or countered.

2. *Setting up a counter-narrative:* A counter-narrative contests the narrative which are set up by the promoters or protesters of the megaproject. The narrative of the need for the megaproject set up by the promoters of the megaproject were countered by the protesters of the megaproject. Similarly, the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process set up by the protesters of the megaproject were countered by the promoters of the megaproject. Again, people of reputation play an important role in setting up the counter-narrative as only narratives backed with referent power (Ninan et al., 2019) is taken up by the media and reported. For instance, the spokesperson of the Department of Transport set up the counter-narrative against the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process and the Director of the National Trust's Thames and Solent region set up the counter-narrative against the narrative of environmental sustainability. As evident from the discussion, counter-narratives are dependent on the dominant narrative as they are referenced and positioned against the dominant narrative (McLean, 2015). As noted by Frandsen et al. (2017), counternarratives challenge dominant narratives yet also can be challenged and changed by other counternarratives. In project settings, even the narrative over the Amsterdam metro project as a major technological innovation was challenged by the counter narratives of citizens emphasizing the damage done to the old city (Van den Ende and Van Marrewijk, 2019). Hence, there is an ongoing process of multiple negotiations and contestations of meanings, values, identities, and images, fought through multiple battles of narratives in megaproject settings.
3. *Countering the counter-narrative:* The counter-narrative is also subject to contesting by the promoters and protesters of the project. While we were able to trace three rounds of the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives in the case of narrative of the need for the megaproject and the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process, we were able to trace four rounds in the case of the environmental sustainability as described in the findings section. As highlighted above and depicted in Fig. 2, the project narrative of the need for the megaproject is dynamic and travels through multiple rounds of narratives and counter-narratives. Thus, the project narrative is a result of the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives as shown in Fig. 2.

It is worth noting that the narrative of the need for project, as shown in Fig. 2 is a simplified version and the practice of creating a narrative can go through multiple rounds of narratives and counter-narratives. Still, the megaproject narrative progressed through multiple stakeholder discourses and interactions between narratives and counter-narratives as depicted in Fig. 2 with the case of the narrative of the need for the megaproject. Sometimes the narrative iteratively went back

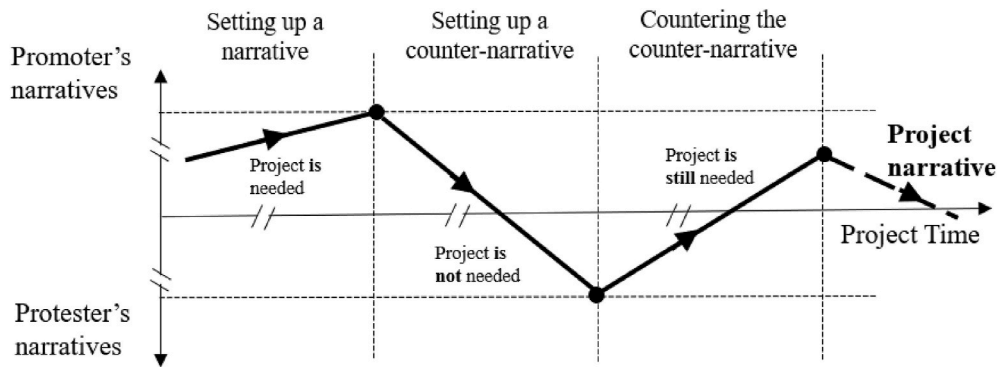


Fig. 2. Interaction between narratives and counter-narratives of need for the project.

and forth between the two competing narratives and the progression of the narrative was not linear. The figure shows that narratives are unstable and can shift from one equilibrium to another as seen in the work of [Todorov \(1971\)](#). It is noted by [Sorsa and Vaara \(2020\)](#) that as different stakeholders advance their arguments based on the stance of the other, they appropriate elements from each other's arguments, and thereby arrive at a convergence of arguments. Thus, as noted by [Van Marrewijk \(2017\)](#), megaprojects embedded in the society are multivocal, can change over time, and can be strategic in power struggles. Similar to [Fig. 2](#), [Sergeeva and Winch \(2020\)](#) has explored how the narrative of innovation at the government level and project-based firm level evolves. We extend the body of work by highlighting how narratives evolve through the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives.

5.2. contesting the counter-narrative

Resisting the counter-narrative involves the processes followed in handling the pull to create a counter-narrative. The organization that seeks to stabilize the narrative when a counter-narrative emerges resort to different strategies. The strategies to resist the counter-narrative observed in the case of the HS2 megaproject were rejecting, delaying, and accepting part of the narrative. Each of these is discussed below.

1. **Rejecting:** The organization seeking to stabilize the narrative can reject the counter-narrative and argue that the counter-narrative does not hold. They give evidence for rejecting the counter-narrative and even highlight why the counter-narrative emerged. One of the narratives stressed by the promoters of the megaproject was the megaproject being environmentally friendly. In one instance, the protesters, in an attempt to create a counter-narrative claimed that the megaproject would damage the Great Missenden, an area of outstanding natural beauty. The counter-narrative highlights that the megaproject is not good for the environmental landscape of the country. To resist this counter-narrative, the promoters of the megaproject highlighted how the project does not go through the Great Missenden and between the Great Missenden and the HS2 route are the highways, the Chiltern Railways and power lines. Thus, the promoters of the project rejected the counter-narrative of the project being not environmentally sustainable. Along with rejecting the counter-narrative, the promoters seek to destabilize the credibility of the protesters by claiming that the protesters are people living near the project are NIMBYs and they always oppose the project by drawing on wider arguments against the project. Rejecting the counter-narrative giving proper reasons helps the narrative to continue and not be affected by the pull of the counter-narrative. [Fig. 3](#) shows the promoter narrative continuing after rejecting the pull to create a counter-narrative by the protesters.
2. **Delaying:** Another strategy to handle the pull to create a counter-narrative was to delay the counter-narrative. As described earlier, in an attempt to create a counter-narrative that there are problems

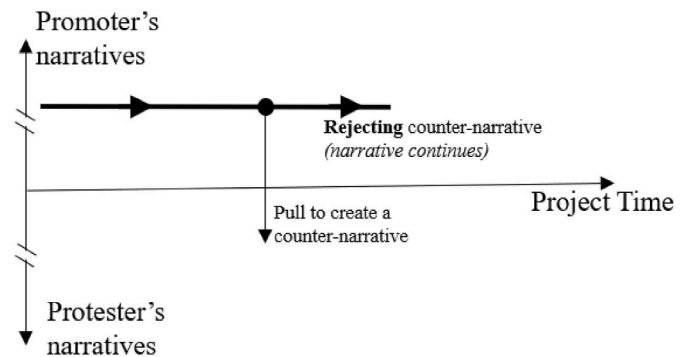


Fig. 3. Narrative continues with rejecting counter-narrative.

with the current route, the protesters claimed that an estimated 50,000 bodies would need to be exhumed to make way for the project. The official's quote was to delay the counter-narrative from being dominant by saying that the project will look into the concern. In the process, the project team destabilizes further discussion on the topic by acknowledging the concerns of the protesters, even though a final decision is delayed. Similarly, in the case of the wild pear tree, the promoter of the project resisted the counter-narrative by claiming that they are investigating the issue and adequate actions will be taken subsequently. The strategy adopted here is to delay the counter-narrative and thereby prevent it from destabilizing the narrative of the project. This strategy is similar to 'political long grass' ([Hood et al., 2007](#)) employed to put tricky issues into a long inquiry normally till the issue loses its news value and fades away. [Fig. 4](#) shows the promoter narrative continuing if the pull to create a counter-narrative by the protesters is not raised again after delaying.

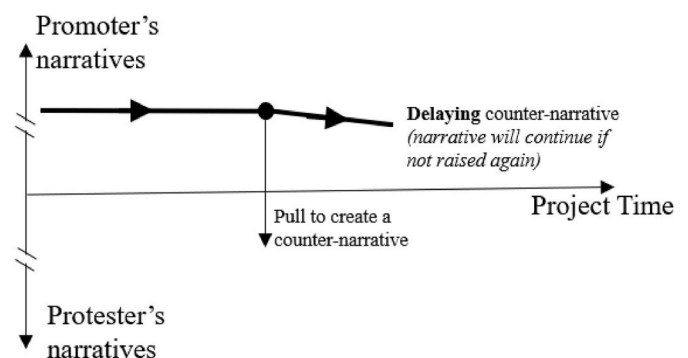


Fig. 4. Narrative continues if counter-narrative is not raised again after delaying.

3. *Accepting*: From the case study of the HS2 megaproject, it was observed that the project team even accepted part of the narrative and made amendments to it. As highlighted earlier, one of the promoter's narratives was the project being environmentally friendly. To destabilize this narrative, the protesters claimed the project to be harming the Chilterns' ecologically sensitive area as a counter-narrative. The project team accepted part of this counter-narrative and made amendments to the route by adding 7.5 miles of tunneling and 3.5 miles of deep cuttings along the 13 miles of proposed line through the Chilterns. Similarly, when the protesters claimed that the people who are affected by land acquisition are paid compensation while those who are near to the project are not paid any, the project agreed to buy and lease back homes affected by the route to destabilize this counter-narrative. Therefore, the project accepted part of the counter-narrative, thereby mitigating some of the negative effects of the pull to create a counter-narrative. Fig. 5 shows the promoter narrative evolving after accepting part of the pull to create a counter-narrative by the protesters.

Sorsa and Vaara (2020) highlight that narratives progress through struggles, ambiguity, and contradictions. It is seen from the case study that narratives experience a pull to create a counter-narrative from those opposing the narrative. The most preferred strategy to resist the counter-narrative is to reject the counter-narrative by showing proper evidence for rejection and even destabilize the credibility of those creating the counter-narrative. By rejecting the counter-narrative, the narrative continues unaffected. Another strategy to resist the counter-narrative is to delay the counter-narrative through political long grass. With time, the narrative will continue unaffected if the counter-narrative is not raised again. Additionally, the supporter of the narrative can accept part of the counter-narrative, thereby reducing the impact of the pull of the counter-narrative. In the process, the narrative evolves. Using these three strategies, the narrative of the project evolves through the process of interaction between narratives and counter-narratives. Aaltonen and Sivonen (2009) discuss how projects respond to stakeholder pressures through adaptations, compromises, avoidances, or dismissals. Similarly, negotiations, trade-offs, incentives, and concessions (Chinyio and Akintoye, 2008; Yang et al., 2014) can be employed to manage demands of stakeholders. Adding to existing literature, this research highlights similar processes for handling counter narratives and thereby managing stakeholders.

The New Stakeholder Theory (McGahan, 2021) focuses on understanding how and why particular stakeholders get control over strategically valuable resources. Conflicts over these resources boil down to enfranchisement, which is disagreements about who is in and who is out, and claimancy, which is who gets what (Klein et al., 2019). For both people and organizations, McGahan (2021) highlights it is the creativity, humanity, morality, and vulnerabilities of people that give rise to stakeholder control over valuable resources (McGahan, 2021). Collective action problems and control over resources are more critical for

polycentric megaprojects which has key nonmarket stakeholders (Gil and Fu, 2022). The interaction between narratives and counter-narratives is the means by which stakeholders renegotiate claimancy rights and enfranchisement. This interaction has implications for co-creation of value in megaproject organizations.

6. Conclusion

This research sought to explore the interaction between the narratives and counter-narratives in the context of the HS2 megaproject in England. It was seen that both the promoters and protesters strived to create a narrative for the megaproject. While the promoters aimed to create a narrative in favor of the megaproject, the protesters aimed to create a narrative to oust the megaproject. Both the narratives were contested by the opposition to create a counter-narrative as seen from the instance of the narrative for the need for megaproject, the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process, and the narrative of environmental sustainability. Thus, we argue that it is through a continuous process of interaction between the promoter narrative and protester narrative that the narrative of the megaproject evolves in practice. We note that different battles of narratives are fought by stakeholders to win the war of delivering the project. We then explored how projects resist the counter-narrative and record strategies such as rejecting the counter-narrative, delaying the counter-narrative, and accepting part of the counter-narrative. It was seen that the narrative continues when the counter-narrative is rejected and if the issue is not raised again as in the case of delaying the counter-narrative, and the narrative evolves with the accepting part of the counter-narrative. Thus, the narrative evolves through the interaction between the narrative and counter-narrative across the shaping stage of the megaproject.

To theory, first, we highlight that not only narratives are contested, but also counter-narratives. These contestations can occur in multiple iterations in the process shifting from one equilibrium to another. Second, we propose a model of how narratives of the project evolve through narratives, counter-narratives, and contesting these counter-narratives, taking the instance of promoters and protesters of the megaproject by studying the narrative of the need for the megaproject, the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process, and the narrative of environmental sustainability. Third, we trace the dynamics of contesting the counter-narrative by resisting, delaying and accepting partly. The findings from this research have implications for narratives of innovation, narratives of technology adoption, or narratives of safety, as each of these narratives evolve through the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives between different stakeholders. To practice, first, we emphasize the role of rhetoric and discourses in shaping narratives and counter-narratives of different aspects of the megaproject. Second, we also contribute an understanding of the interaction between narratives by different stakeholders that would help us understand the process of social resistance in megaprojects. Third, we highlight how stakeholders can continue on their dominant narrative by rejecting or delaying the counter-narrative. To methodology, we highlight news media data as a good source to understand the dynamics at play during interactions with community and as a good source of retrospective and longitudinal data. The study of interactions between stakeholders in the news media can be extended to understand how value can be co-created in the digital space.

One of the limitations of this research is its focus on an embedded single case study. Future research can consider cases from other contexts to refined the findings. Another limitation is the study does not explore how narratives and counter-narratives are created, rather explores how organizations resist the counter-narrative. Both countering old narrative and creating new narrative are important. Future research can explore how narratives of promoters and protesters are created and highlight similarities and differences in the practice of creating a narrative. Another limitation of this study is that all news media sources relating to HS2 megaproject in the study period may not be indexed in the 'google news' repository search, even when it is one of the major aggregators of

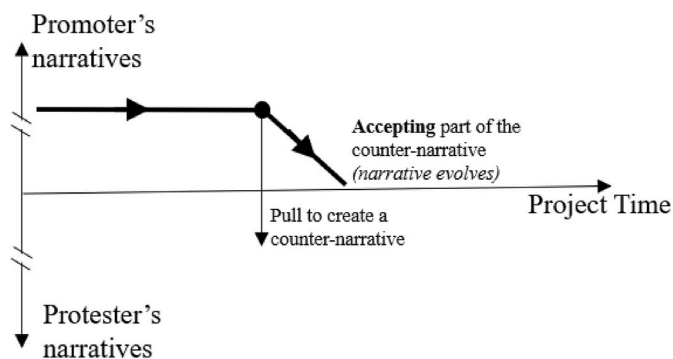


Fig. 5. Narrative evolves by accepting part of the counter-narrative.

news on the web. However, the data collected is adequate for this research effort as we only sought to explore the interaction between different narratives rather than a comprehensive list of all the narratives in the megaproject. Another limitation is the lag between the dates of reporting the narratives and counter-narratives in the news article. This could be because narratives take time to gain traction and be reported in news articles. Similarly, counter narratives also take time to be reported. Future research can also consider other media such as social media to study the evolution of narratives as social media gives voice to stakeholders and is very important in the modern digital era.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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