

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES IN MEGAPROJECTS

ABSTRACT

Megaprojects create environmental, social and political disruptions in its local environment along with creating value to the economy. Negative emotions towards the project can cause these stakeholders to oppose the delivery, boycott the services and even cause a democratic government to withdraw support for the project considering their vote bank. Narratives guide social action and hence both the promoters and the protesters of the project mobilize narratives to advance their interest. In this process, narratives and counter-narratives are (re)created and their interaction establishes the dominant narrative. We argue that understanding the dynamics between narratives and counter-narratives can help projects manage community resistances. Using the case of the 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 project evolve through narratives, counter-narratives, and contesting these counter-narratives.

KEYWORDS

Megaprojects, Project organizing, Narratives, Counter-narratives, Managing resistance

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). 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 management time and create environmental, social and political disruptions in its local environment (Sturup, 2009).

The stakeholders in the local environment in an attempt to reduce these disruptions conflict on many of the specifics of the planned megaproject (Olander & Landin, 2008). For example, the community raises issues on its basic design, function and alignment, the users for whom it caters, its impact on communities, the effect of project operations on land use, amenity and values, the utilities that the project will disrupt, the construction methods adopted, etc. 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. It is in this context that a project narrative 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). Because of the performative implications of narratives, narratives in the context of megaprojects can guide support for the project or protests in the project. Different

stakeholders in the megaproject because of their conflicting interests (Ninan et al., 2019) 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 can shape the organizations' worldviews but still can be challenged and negotiated (Frandsen et al., 2017). We argue that understanding the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives in megaprojects can help us understand resistance and manage these projects effectively.

The paper is structured as follows. In the literature review, the current knowledge of narratives and counter-narratives is summarized before arriving at a set of research questions. Then the methodology used to collect data from a megaproject in England is described. 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 potent tool 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 sensegiving as it crafts others' understanding and thereby an outcome of the collective construction of meaning. Together sensemaking and sensegiving iteratively develop a set of shared meanings and actions (Weick et al., 2010).

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 which people tell that offer resistance 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) claim 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 & 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. The promoters and protesters of a project strive to create a narrative to the project either to stabilize or

to destabilize the project. Adding to this gap in organization studies, understanding the dynamic between narratives and counter-narratives can help projects manage community resistances. 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 projects resist the counter-narrative?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address our research objective, we choose to conduct a single in-depth case study research. 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, 2003). The aim of a 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 beyond it (Stake, 2005).

We chose to study the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the UK. The project 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. The project 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 project 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 minutes at a cost of 30 billion pounds. The first phase was proposed in 2009 and is scheduled to be operational in 2026. We chose to study the project due to multiple theoretical reasons. First, the project had very active resistance 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. Second, to counter this massive opposition, the project was very active in trying to create a favorable narrative for the project. Finally, the HS2 project drew plenty of media attention, just like all megaprojects (Van Marrewijk et al., 2008) and therefore had a good archive of instruments and processes employed to mobilize narratives that 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 & Sonnett, 2010). Hence, the project was selected for theoretical reasons such as project narratives narrative, the presence of counter-narratives, and the accessibility of retrospective data.

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 ‘stimulus’ 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 news articles for the study were collected through a key word search in the ‘google news’ repository. Google news is one of the major aggregators of news on the web and is used as a scholarly source for research (Bandari et al., 2012). With the use of a news aggregator, we reduced the bias that would be created from the study of news from only one media outlet. The early stages of the megaproject are where narratives of the project are shaped in the process, drawing multiple narrative instruments and processes. Hence as part of theoretical sampling, we chose to study the early stages of the project from 2009 to 2012. We selected 113 news articles 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 10 January 2012, the whole month had close to 50 news articles debating the need for the project.

For analysis, this research used open coding of the data collected from news articles to arrive at theoretical constructs and thereby build theory. For this, the research employed manual coding as automatic methods could create a barrier to understanding (Kozinets et al., 2014). The data analysis was done parallelly 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 (Stegar, 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 (GoldenBiddle & Locke, 1997). The constructs generated are anchored in existing literature (Eisenhardt, 1989) for external validity.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

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

INTERACTION BETWEEN NARRATIVES AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

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

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

“I am excited about the possibilities that HSR 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 projects 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 project bring forward the counter-narrative by highlighting that the project does not fare well on these benefits. For instance, in one case a community member protested against the project 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, he would be eaten alive”* (Quoted from a news article dated 19 February 2011)

Here, the protesters attack the economic feasibility of the project and claim 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 alone is not the deciding factor on whether to have the project and early return on investments was not the criteria for the need for project comparing itself 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)

As highlighted above and depicted in Figure 1, the project narrative is dynamic and travels through multiple rounds of narratives and counter-narratives. The project narrative is a result of the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives.

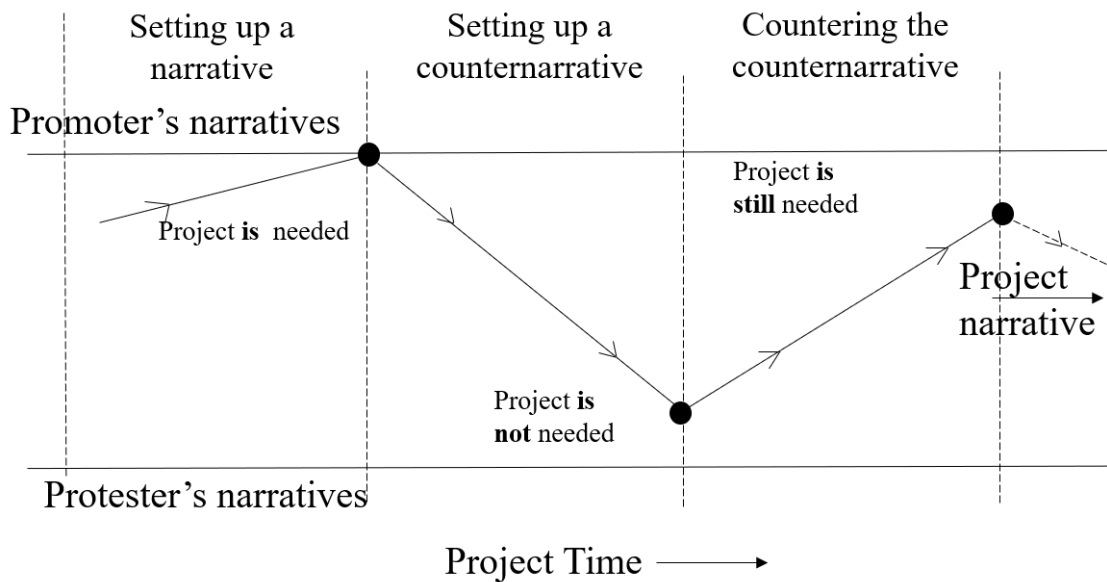


Figure 1: Interaction between narratives and counter-narratives

It is worth noting that the narrative of the need for project, as shown in Figure 1 is a simplified version and the practice of creating a narrative can go through multiple rounds of narratives and counter-narratives. Still, the project narrative linearly progresses through multiple stakeholder discourses and interactions between narratives and counter-narratives as highlighted in Figure 1. It should also be noted that the project narrative is not only dependent on the narrative of economics of the project or the need for project. There are multiple other narratives that strive to create a project narrative. One such narrative is the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process.

2. *Narrative of the stakeholder consultation process:* Narratives can be initiated by the protesters of the project also and a narrative that 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” (Quoted from a news article dated 28 February 2011)*

The protesters of the project emphasized 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 project claimed that they have 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 project aimed to destabilize the narrative of improper stakeholder consultation to create a counter-narrative of effective consultation. The protesters strived to stop the 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 project narrative was shaped by narratives and counter-narratives by the promoters and protesters of the project.

RESISTING THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Resisting the counter-narrative involves the processes followed in handling the pull to create a counter-narrative. The organization seeking to stabilize the narrative when counter-narratives emerge resort to different strategies. The strategies to resist the counter-narrative observed in the

case of the HS2 megaproject were rejecting, delaying, and accepting. 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 project was the project being environmentally friendly. In one instance, the protesters, in an attempt to create a counter-narrative claimed that the project would damage the Great Missenden, an area of outstanding natural beauty. The counter-narrative highlights that the project is not good for the environmental landscape of the country. To resist this counter-narrative, the promoters of the project 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)

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 and are opposing it by drawing 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)

Rejecting the counter-narrative giving proper reasons helps the narrative to continue and not be affected by the pull of the counter-narrative.

2. *Delaying*: Another strategy to handle the pull to create a counter-narrative was to delay the counter-narrative. The promoters of the project created a narrative that the project is along the most efficient route connecting London and Birmingham. In an attempt to create a counter-narrative that there are problems with the current route, the protesters claimed that an estimated 50,000 bodies would need to be exhumed to make way for the project. To resist the counter-narrative, the spokesperson of the HS2 project claimed:

“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)

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. In another instance, to create a counter-narrative of the most efficient route of the project, the protesters claimed that Britain’s oldest and largest wild pear tree, which is 200 to 250 years old, stands right in the center of the route of HS2. One of the protesters remarked:

“We will use this information about the pear tree as evidence the rail line should not be built here” (Quoted from a news article dated 23 February 2011)

To resist the counter-narrative, 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)

The strategy adopted here is delaying the counter-narrative 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.

3. *Accepting*: From the case study of the HS2 project, 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 narrative 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. 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)

The protesters claimed that the project 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. A community member described:

“Nobody knows what the level of compensation is going to be. There will be criteria like light and noise pollution. But if you are outside of the compulsory purchase zone, you have a massive headache because the -farther you are away from the infrastructure project, the less compensation you are likely to receive, even though the price of your -property may well have plummeted and you have an asset that is worth an awful lot less than it was at the beginning of the year” (Quoted from a news article dated 13 August 2010)

The project in an attempt to destabilize this counter-narrative agreed 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)

Therefore, the project accepted part of the counter-narrative, thereby mitigating some of the negative effects of the pull to create a counter-narrative. Figure 2 shows the three strategies employed to resist the counter-narrative from the case study of the HS2 project.

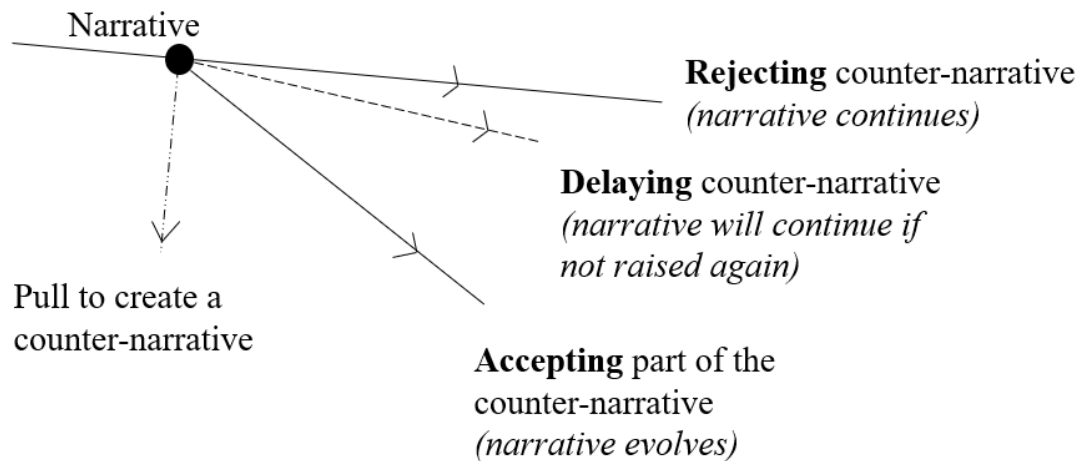


Figure 2: Resisting the counter-narrative

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. Finally, 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. Through these three strategies, the narrative of the project evolves in the process of the interaction between narratives and counter-narratives.

5. 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 project. While the promoters aimed to create a narrative in favor of the project, the protesters aimed to create a narrative to oust the project. 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 project and the narrative of the stakeholder consultation process. Thus, we argue that it is through a continuous process of interaction between the promoter narrative and protester narrative that the narrative of the project evolves in practice. 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, while the narrative will continue if issue is not raised again in the case of delaying the counter-narrative strategy. With the strategy of accepting part of the counter-narrative, the narrative evolves. Thus, the narrative evolves through the interaction between the narrative and counter-narrative across the shaping stage of the project.

To theory, we highlight that not only narratives are contested, but also counter-narratives. 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 project. To practice, we contribute an understanding of the interaction between narratives that helps us manage resistance in megaprojects. To methodology, we highlight news data is a good source to understand the dynamics at play in interacting with community and as a good source of retrospective data.

One of the limitations of this research is it does not explore how narratives and counter-narratives are created, rather explores how organizations resist the counter-narrative. Future

research can explore how narratives of promoters and protesters are created and highlight similarities and differences in the instruments and processes used to create the narrative.

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