

# Comparisons as a discursive tool: shaping megaproject narratives in the United Kingdom

Natalya Sergeeva <sup>1</sup> and Johan Ninan <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London (UCL), London, UK

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Civil Engineering and Geosciences, TU Delft, Delft, The Netherlands

Dr Natalya Sergeeva is an Associate Professor at the Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction, University College London (UCL). She lectures on project management and innovation management at the postgraduate and executive levels. She has some practical experience managing construction and infrastructure projects and consultancy. Her research explores the nature and role of narratives in leading projects and firms, individual and organizational identities, and the ways leaders articulate and translate narratives and identities. She has published a number of articles in leading journals, such as *Industrial Marketing Management*, *International Journal of Project Management*, *Project Management Journal*, *International Journal of Innovation Management*, and *Creativity and Innovation Management*.

Dr Johan Ninan is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Geosciences, Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), the Netherlands. Previously, he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Bartlett School of Sustainable Construction at University College London (UCL). His research focuses on megaprojects, stakeholder engagement, collaboration, innovation, and project organizing with a particular emphasis on the role of digital media. He has studied infrastructure megaprojects in Australia, India, the UK, and the Netherlands, and published widely in leading project management journals such as the *International Journal of Project Management*, *Project Management Journal*, and *Construction Management and Economics*. He is recognized with the PMI Young Researcher Award, the IPMA Global Young Researcher Award, and the APM Paper of the Year Award.

Corresponding author: Natalya Sergeeva, Bartlett School of Construction and Project Management, University College London (UCL), 252A, 2nd Floor, 1-19 Torrington Place, London WC1E6BT, UK. Email: [n.sergeeva@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:n.sergeeva@ucl.ac.uk)

## Abstract

The mobilization of narratives is essential in integrating people and constructing identities that help in navigating complexity, uncertainty, and conflictuality. This paper explores how comparisons are used as a discursive tool to shape narratives and bring about changes in policy and society, using the High Speed Two megaproject in the UK as a case study. We examine the comparisons that promoters and protesters employ in an organizational setting. In particular, we explore how the narratives that result from these comparisons—on questions including the need for the megaproject, the benefits of the megaproject, alternatives to the megaproject, and issues of noise, sustainability, compensation, and branding—help their efforts to organize. The research highlights how comparisons serve as an important cue in discourse and how different forms of comparison can help to create narratives and shape policy outcomes.

**Keywords:** narratives, comparisons, organizing, megaprojects, policy outcomes

The term “narrative” is used to refer to a set of events and the contextual details surrounding their occurrence (Bartel & Garud, 2009). Narratives integrate and unite people by serving as an organizational

glue or bond between its members (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Narratives persuade decision-makers and the public while also shaping all stages of the policy process and therefore are central to the policy making (Crow & Jones, 2018). Thus, narratives can inform and shape actions and therefore are very important in the study of complex public management endeavors such as megaprojects (Esposito et al., 2022).

Infrastructure megaprojects not only bring about positive changes in the society but are also captivating, complex, controversial, and laden with control issues (Frick, 2008). Due to these characteristics, conflicts and uncertainties are prevalent in these megaprojects. It is difficult to achieve changes in pluralistic organizations, such as megaprojects, due to conflicting interests and dispersed power among the actors (Denis et al., 2001). There is a need to understand the processes through which these often-conflicting actors create and transform their institutional contexts (Esposito et al., 2021). It is in this context that a project narrative, which portrays different parameters of the project including the mission and vision of the project, can be considered as a tool to navigate the complexity, uncertainty, and conflictuality of megaprojects to shape policy outcomes and bring about changes in the society.

Due to the multiple implications of narratives in the process of organizing, organizational researchers following a “narrative turn” have investigated how narratives are mobilized in organizations (Fenton & Langley, 2011). Narratives are mobilized through storytelling, and there is a “story turn” before the “narrative turn” (Boje, 2008). Stories are personalized, entertaining, and emotional in nature and can generate a common understanding and shared vision among organizational members (Vaara et al., 2016). Narratives are also mobilized through labels employed meaningfully and purposefully in organizations (Sergeeva, 2017). Steger (2007) discusses how narratives are mobilized by metaphors, regarding them as a “lens” or a “container” that gives insights into organizations. Vaara et al. (2016) claim that narratives are also produced in many other ways as part of discourses and communication. In this research, we seek to explore the role of comparisons, which is a discursive tool, as a cue in the sensemaking process to enable a meaningful interpretation of organizations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Narratives can also arise from different actors, and no one narrative can be considered as true as there are “as many narratives as there are actors” (Cooren, 1999). Narratives are subject to resistance, and members interested in supporting the completion of the megaproject are promoters and those interested in derailing the megaproject are protesters (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021). Thus, we address the following research questions: (a) What are the comparisons employed by promoters and protesters in an organizational setting? and (b) How do narratives resulting from comparisons help in organizing from a sensemaking perspective? Following a literature review on comparisons, we discuss the case study of a high-speed project in the UK to research the role of comparisons in organizing.

## Making sense of comparisons in shaping narratives

Organizational narratives are defined as temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for an individual, social, or organizational sensemaking and sensegiving (Vaara et al., 2016). The process of narrativization can be called as sensemaking (MacIntyre, 1981), which is conceived as the formation of meaningful interpretation of organizational events and institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The meaning created subsequent to sensemaking is a primary generator of individual action (Drazin et al., 1999), and therefore, sensemaking is critical in the way people organize and act. After all, from a sensemaking perspective, organizations are narratively constructed through a network of conversations (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). On the process of sensemaking, Weick (1988) theorizes that sensemaking starts by noticing and bracketing and then by labeling. Noticing is the process of discerning cues. According to Wiggins (2012), sensemaking at its core is a process initiated by cues that are formed in memory and that are present as an array of stimuli in the environment. There are many cues in everyday life such as informative statements, opinions, and jokes, and comparison is an important social cue (Lamertz, 2002) and therefore a key source of sensemaking.

Comparisons exist as a daily activity helping people make sense of information as judgments are developed subsequent to comparison with others (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). People give importance to comparisons even when they have adequate information that they are doing better than average (Seta et al., 2006). Different types of comparisons are discussed in the literature. While comparisons with self are called self-referent comparisons, those with others are called other-referent comparisons. Self-referent comparisons in the form of comparisons of performance with expectations are instrumental

for fulfillment (O'Neill & Mone, 2005). Other-referent comparisons in the form of comparisons with the treatment of peers help in determining fairness (Lamertz, 2002).

People's comparisons with one another are discussed at length in the social comparisons theory (Greenberg et al., 2007). Suls et al. (2002) define social comparison as comparing oneself with others in order to evaluate or to enhance some aspects of the self. Festinger (1954), in his theory of social comparison, suggests that people evaluate information sources in terms of personal relevance, using similar others for comparison. He notes that the more similar someone is, the more relevant his or her views are for understanding one's own world. After all, meanings are "relational and comparative" as meaning derives in part from comparisons between categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Greenberg et al. (2007) discuss the role of comparisons in organizational justice, performance appraisal, virtual work environments, affective behavior in the workplace, stress, and leadership. The social comparison also gives an idea of fairness in the eyes of the beholder (Lamertz, 2002). Festinger (1954) noted that the more ambiguous the situations, people rely on comparisons to assess them. He noted that even in situations of uncertainty individuals seek comparative information. Therefore, comparisons are important for organizations in their initial stages as this period is marked with ambiguity and uncertainty. Adding to this, while social comparisons are generally discussed at the individual level, social comparisons at the organizational level are still not explored. We argue that social comparisons play a big role at the organizational level as they are effective in shaping narratives during the early stages of the organization.

## Methods

Case studies provide in-depth knowledge for theory building and therefore can help us theorize how narratives resulting from comparisons help in organizing. Single case studies, in particular, provide excellent opportunities to enhance contextual understanding because of their depth of data collection and analysis (Lundin & Steinhórrsson, 2003). Even though only one case is studied in a single case study research, there are multiple instances within this case study, which provide sufficient data for theorization. The single case study selected for this research is the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the UK. The megaproject was selected for theoretical reasons for its ability to answer the research questions. First, in our general survey of the news articles related to the megaproject, we observed multiple comparisons at play in an attempt to shape the megaproject narrative. Second, the HS2 megaproject being a megaproject drew plenty of media attention and therefore has a good archive of comparisons that can be collected and analyzed retrospectively. Third, there is also the presence of a strong opposition group in the form of multiple protester groups that attempt to create a megaproject counternarrative. Thus, the case study of the HS2 megaproject was considered a critical case because of the presence of comparisons, presence of protesters who are determined to create a megaproject counternarrative, and the availability of instances of comparisons from the archive of news articles.

We retrospectively studied how promoters and protesters of the megaprojects use comparisons by observing their exchanges in the daily news articles. Narratives in the news articles for the HS2 project in the UK were studied by Ninan and Sergeeva (2021, 2022). We used the same dataset to explore the practice of comparisons in crafting narratives and organizing. Thus, 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), and Bucks Herald (5 news articles). Other newspaper agencies such as Independent and Financial times that had less than four articles each were also considered for the study. Within the news articles, we identified instances where the promoters or protesters of the megaproject employed comparisons as in comparing oneself or other with others (Suls et al., 2002).

As highlighted in Table 1, we analyzed 49 instances of comparisons according to who is using the comparison, the type of comparison used, and how these comparisons help in organizing. As an example of coding the type of comparisons, we coded the use of comparisons with economic context, institutional context, and state of infrastructure context. These were grouped as comparisons with context and distinguished from comparisons with organizations. Thus, we open coded the data with multiple revisions such that the categories extracted remain exclusive and collectively exhaustive.

**Table 1.** Types and effects of comparisons observed from the HS2 megaproject.

Sl. no.	Instance	Comparison by	Comparison type	Comparison effect
1	The UK does not have money like France, Germany, and China (10 February 2012)	Protester	Context	Events
2	The UK cannot afford to be left behind France, Spain, Germany, and Denmark (18 April 2011)	Promoter	Context	Events
3	Only areas around the stations will benefit, and Coventry would lose investments to Birmingham (10 January 2012)	Protester	Context	Events
4	HS2 will only benefit London and not Wales, South West, and rural economies (19 February 2011)	Protester	Context	Events
5	Pumping £32 billion into high-speed travel for the wealthy few while ordinary commuters suffer is not the answer (10 January 2012)	Protester	Context	Organization
6	The HS2 megaproject is the greatest threat to the home since the English Civil War (1 October 2010)	Protester	Context	Processes
7	Compensation for affected land currently exists for businesses and homes but not for schools (17 July 2011)	Protester	Context	Processes
8	The business case for HS2 is such that the minister would be eaten alive if he took it to the Dragon's Den (19 February 2011)	Protester	Context	Processes
9	The UK is amazingly conservative and anything new is dealt with the deepest suspicion due to which it is one of the poorest developed countries in the world (10 January 2012)	Promoter	Context	Events
10	HS2 megaproject would result in 9 million road journeys and 4.5 million plane journeys being taken by train each year (10 January 2012)	Promoter	Context	Organization
11	The current journey time from Birmingham to Leeds is as long as between London to Brussels (28 July 2011)	Promoter	Context	Events
12	Passengers could face slower and less-frequent services if the HS2 megaproject went ahead as Euston station will become a building site for 7 years (10 January 2012)	Protester	Context	Events
13	HS2 is more environmentally friendly than road journeys (10 January 2012)	Protester	Context	Characterization
14	High-speed rail is an unbeatable option for inter-urban travel compared to short-haul flying and driving (14 November 2011)	Promoter	Context	Organization
15	Billions will be spent on HS2 just for 28 min faster than the present system (3 September 2010)	Protester	Context	Organization
16	In France, the classic rail network was much less efficient than that in the UK, so the high-speed rail added something (10 January 2012)	Protester	Context	Events

(continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Sl. no.	Instance	Comparison by	Comparison type	Comparison effect
17	The UK does not need 250 mph trains like France or Spain where they have to cover longer distance (14 November 2010)	Protester	Context	Events
18	There are cheaper and more efficient alternatives than HS2 such as adding carriages to trains, lengthening platforms, and upgrading existing trains and tracks (14 November 2010)	Protester	Context	Events
19	Due to the HS2 megaproject, Birmingham airport would be closer to the capital than Stansted and Luton (11 December 2010)	Promoter	Context	Events
20	Noise from trains is no worse than noise from the highway (28 February 2011)	Promoter	Organization	Characterization
21	Government is avoiding low-cost and risk-free alternatives that fully meet future capacity needs (14 November 2010)	Protester	Organization	Events
22	The big transportation schemes in the past actually made a difference in our regions and drove economic growth (9 December 2011)	Promoter	Organization	Events
23	HS2 is the most significant transport infrastructure project since the building of the motorway (10 January 2012)	Promoter	Organization	Organization
24	HS2 will slash journey times and improve connectivity in a way unmatched since the building of motorways in the 1960s and 1970s (28 July 2011)	Promoter	Organization	Organization
25	The announcement day of HS2 megaproject is a history day similar to the heyday of the Victorian railway pioneers (10 January 2012)	Promoter	Organization	Organization
26	Protests going to be worse than the protests over the Newbury bypass (14 November 2010)	Protester	Organization	Organization
27	The government is simultaneously pushing rail as a green option while also pushing the controversial international airport on the Thames Estuary (27 January 2012)	Protester	Organization	Characterization
28	Land acquisition of HS2 could be similar to the bitter experience of compulsory purchase during the A5 highway project (10 February 2012)	Protester	Organization	Processes
29	Viability of HS2 is questionable because the HS1 (Rail link to Eurotunnel) is unable to make money (13 August 2010)	Protester	Organization	Events
30	There was no great early return on investment even for the Victorian rail (24 July 2012)	Promoter	Organization	Events
31	Updating the existing west coast mainline is a better investment than spending £17 billion for a new megaproject (28 February 2011)	Protester	Organization	Events
32	For local benefit, there is a perfectly good station at Great Missenden and HS2 would not stop here (13 November 2011)	Protester	Organization	Events

(continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Sl. no.	Instance	Comparison by	Comparison type	Comparison effect
33	The transport secretary who drives HS2 had opposed plans for a freight line passing through his constituency (13 November 2011)	Protester	Organization	Processes
34	HS2 will transform Britain as railways did in the 19th century (6 March 2011)	Promoter	Organization	Organization
35	HS1 evidence shows that people's views change when the megaproject is completed as it would not have impacts they thought it would have (11 December 2011)	Promoter	Organization	Characterization
36	In HS2, pricing should be similar to airline style, "Easytrain" pricing (30 December 2009)	Protester	Organization	Characterization
37	Trains in HS2 will be newer and quieter compared to rolling stock used in Eurostar (11 December 2012)	Promoter	Organization	Characterization
38	In HS1, compensation was limited to those lands subject to compulsory purchase; here, we are also going to compensate people who will suffer a significant diminution in value (11 December 2010)	Promoter	Organization	Processes
39	Countries in Europe and Asia are going ahead with an ambitious plan for high-speed rail while our key rail arteries are closer to capacity (28 February 2011)	Promoter	Organization	Events
40	Japan, Spain, Germany, Italy, and China are going for high-speed rail, while the UK is one of the poorest among developed countries in terms of infrastructure (10 January 2012)	Promoter	Organization	Events
41	Holland's experience of building a similar high-speed project was disastrous as passengers were not willing to pay more and taxpayers had to pay for the megaproject (8 January 2012)	Protester	Organization	Organization
42	Slow HS2 trains down to 186 mph as other trains in the continent to have curved tracks and avoid areas of land acquisition (23 February 2011)	Protester	Organization	Characterization
43	Dutch high-speed rail is a commercial disaster, running 85% empty and requiring a 250 million bailout by taxpayers (14 January 2012)	Protester	Organization	Organization
44	Unemployment in Lille, one of the key TGV stations, has continued to rise despite the high-speed rail (10 January 2012)	Protester	Organization	Organization
45	While there are complaints about the noise of freight trains in Germany, there are no such complaints about the high-speed Deutsche Bahn trains (28 February 2010)	Promoter	Organization	Characterization
46	TGV had bitter resistance, but they completed the project through consultation and compensation (10 January 2012)	Promoter	Organization	Processes

(continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Sl. no.	Instance	Comparison by	Comparison type	Comparison effect
47	The whole developed world is going ahead with high-speed rail as it is the green solution to providing fast, high-capacity connections between cities (19 February 2011)	Promoter	Organization	Characterization
48	The new route of the project has less intrusion, noise, and visual impacts (10 September 2010)	Promoter	Organization	Characterization
49	If we are elected to power, we will start the project 2 years earlier than the current government's plan (11 March 2011)	Protester	Organization	Organization

HS1: High Speed One; HS2: High Speed Two.

## Types of comparisons

In this section, we present the findings from the case study of the HS2 megaproject in the UK and highlight the different types of comparisons employed. The types of comparisons observed are comparisons with context and comparisons with organizations each of which are discussed below.

### Comparisons with context

We observed comparisons with the economic context, institutional context, and the state of transportation context. Comparisons with economic context involved the promoter-initiated comparisons of comparing the economy of the UK being left behind other countries,

The clear majority view is that this is a project that will benefit the UK economy and we can't afford to be left behind France, Spain, Germany, Denmark. (Quoted from a news article dated 18 April 2011)

Comparisons with context were also employed by the protesters of the megaproject. They claimed that compared to other countries, the UK does not have enough money to invest in such a project. There were comparisons with the institutional context too. Institutional context is defined as the political, social, and legal ground rules that establish the basis for production, distribution, and exchange (Davis & North, 1971). This involved comparing the way things are done to create a narrative. The protesters claimed that the governance process in the UK as in the selection of megaproject and the business case did not stack up and compared it to how businesses are awarded in a popular television show "Dragon's Den." One businessman remarked,

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 [the Secretary of State for Transport] took this to Dragon's Den, he would be eaten alive. (Quoted from a news article dated 19 February 2011)

Another comparison observed was the comparison to the state of transportation context. Here, a comparison is made with the state of infrastructure or transportation that exists in the UK or elsewhere and not with any project per se. The protester group claimed that the UK does not need 250 mph trains because there is no long distance to cover, unlike France or Spain.

### Comparisons with organizations

In the megaproject, we observed comparisons with organizations within the UK, with organizations outside the country, and even with the organization itself. Comparisons with organizations within the UK involved comparisons with the performance and practices of other megaprojects. In an instance, one of the protesters of the megaproject warned that protests in this megaproject would be worse than protests in the earlier megaproject. Comparisons with megaprojects in other countries were also observed in the

case study. The protesters claimed that trains should be slowed down to have curved tracks similar to trains in megaprojects of other countries so that the oldest and largest wild pear tree in the UK need not be cut down as highlighted that,

If the train was slowed down to 186mph - the same as trains on the continent - then the track be curved to avoid these areas. (Quoted from a news article dated 23 February 2011)

Adding on to comparisons with megaprojects in the UK and in other countries, both the promoter and protester employed comparisons with the megaproject itself. Protesters such as the opposition party claimed that if they were in power, they would have started construction of the project earlier than the current government's plan. The shadow transport secretary claimed that,

If the Conservatives are elected to power, they would start work on the project in 2015 - two years earlier than the government's plan. (Quoted from a news article dated 11 March 2011)

### **Effect of comparisons: to mobilize narratives**

Comparisons were used to mobilize a narrative that is instrumental for organizing. In this section, we highlight how narratives resulting from comparisons help in organizing by creating narratives of events, narratives of characterization, narratives of processes, and narratives of organization. These narratives were instrumental for promoters and protesters to navigate the complexity, uncertainty, and conflictuality of megaprojects and shape policy outcomes.

#### **Narratives of events**

Here, we discuss how comparisons were employed to justify the event, i.e., the selection of the megaproject by creating narratives of the need for the megaproject and narratives of dismissing alternatives of the megaproject.

#### *Narratives of need for the megaproject*

Both the promoter and the protester of the project contested the narratives of the need for the megaproject. While the promoter using comparisons argued that the megaproject is needed, the protesters argued that there is no need for the megaproject. The promoters also compared the HS2 megaproject with previous transportation schemes in the UK to create a narrative that these kinds of megaprojects drive economic growth and the country cannot afford not to build high-speed rail. The prime minister of the country remarked justifying the need for the project that,

I profoundly believe if you look around at what things that actually made a difference to our regions and to our cities and ask yourself what's really helped drive economic growth I think the answer always comes back it's those big transport schemes. My argument would be not can we afford HS2, but can we afford not to build high speed rail. (Quoted from a news article dated 9 December 2011)

The protesters too used similar comparisons to shape their narrative of why there is no need for the HS2 megaproject. They used comparisons of context and similar megaprojects in the UK and other countries. They claimed that instead of faster transport, the project could slow down transport for passengers in the coming years as the Euston station (hub station for railways in London) will become a building site. The local protesters occupying lands where the railway line passes through said that there is no need for the megaproject as it does not provide any local benefit as the trains do not stop for them and that they are well serviced by the existing project in the form of the Great Missenden station near them.

#### *Narratives of dismissing alternatives of the megaproject*

While promoters of the megaproject claimed that this project is the need of the hour, the protesters aimed to shape a narrative that the megaproject under consideration is not the best option as alternatives were not thoroughly considered. They claimed that the government did not consider low-cost and risk-free alternatives that fully meet future capacity needs. These included adding carriages to existing trains, lengthening platforms, and upgrading existing trains and tracks so that specific problems in the current state of the infrastructure can be addressed. The protesters claimed that,



Adding carriages to trains and lengthening platforms would ease overcrowding, and upgrading existing trains and tracks would allow trains to run at speeds up to 180mph, Trains at this speed could also run along new tracks which could be built along existing railways or motorways and minimise damage to the environment. (Quoted from a news article dated 14 November 2010)

## **Narratives of characterization**

Comparisons were employed to characterize parts of the megaproject. These involve creating narratives of the quality of a parameter of the megaproject such as the narrative of noise and a narrative of sustainability, which are discussed later.

### *Narratives of noise*

Noise from the operational high-speed train was one of the points of concern for the project. A study by the government's Department for Transport claimed that around 4,860 homes within the UK would experience extra noise as a result of the proposed megaproject. Hence, there was a need for the promoters to create a narrative that the noise level is tolerable. The promoter compared the noise from the trains with the noise from highways and claimed that the occasional noise from trains is more acceptable than the constant buzz throughout the day and night from the highways as highlighted that,

Broadly speaking these trains are no worse than the noise from a highway and generally more acceptable in that the noise is not continuous, whereas the noise from a highway is a constant buzz throughout the day and often throughout the night as well. (Quoted from a news article dated 28 February 2011)

Through a comparison of the noise level from the HS2 megaproject with that of a highway, the promoters aimed to create a narrative that the noise level is comparable to the practice elsewhere in the country. There was also a comparison with the noise levels of similar high-speed rails in other countries. The promoters compared the noise level of freight trains in Germany with that of the high-speed trains already operating there to claim that there were no complaints regarding noise from the high-speed trains. In addition to the comparison with organizations in the UK and organizations in other countries, the promoter made a comparison with the organization itself. The promoter compared the revised plan of the megaproject with the earlier plan to highlight that there are less intrusion, noise, and visual impacts.

### *Narratives of sustainability*

The sustainability narrative of the megaproject was essentially contested. The promoters of the megaproject claimed that since the megaproject is a rail megaproject, it is more environmentally friendly than road journeys, thereby comparing it with other transportation megaprojects.

Do you want people to travel? If yes, they must be allowed to do so. And how will you do so? Put them in the air, on the road? Compared to road journeys HS2 is a great deal more environmentally friendly. (Quoted from a news article dated 10 November 2012)

The protesters also used comparisons with other projects in the country to highlight that sustainability is not an agenda for the government. They claim that the government is pushing HS2 as a rail option while simultaneously planning a controversial international airport on the Thames Estuary.

## **Narratives of processes**

Narratives of processes aim to highlight how things were in the past, are at present, or should be in the future. Narratives of processes involve the trajectory of events (Vaara et al., 2016). To understand the role of comparisons in creating narratives of processes, we discuss narratives of the compensation process.

### *Narratives of the compensation process*

Fairness is an important attribute when it comes to dealing with external stakeholders, especially when it comes to land acquisition (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). While the promoters tried to create a narrative of

the fair compensation process, the protesters tried to create a narrative of unfairness. We highlight that comparisons with context and organizations were important for creating both these narratives. The promoters compared the resistance and compensation process with that of the Trains à Grande Vitesse (TGV) high-speed megaproject in France. They claimed that even though TGV had bitter resistance earlier in their megaproject, the promoters of the megaproject were able to complete the megaproject through consultation and compensation. Supporters of the megaproject remarked,

When the TGV was going south in France, there was bitter resistance. Parts, like in Britain, were beautiful and protected and lots of people lived alongside. But they did it, and they compensated people properly – which I think is crucial – and they consulted and in the end they got the lines through. It's not easy, but the idea of not doing it is utter madness. Do we want to live in the 19th century? (Quoted from a news article dated 10 January 2012)

The protesters also compared the land acquisition of HS2 with that of other projects in the UK and said that they had bitter experiences in the past such as with Birmingham Northern Relief Road.

### **Narratives of organization**

Here, we discuss how comparisons were employed to create a narrative of the organization. In contrast to events, characteristics, or processes, these include narratives of an organization such as promotion and branding of the organization as discussed later.

#### *Narratives of branding the megaproject*

The promoters tried to create a narrative that the megaproject would bring benefits to the country. For this, they relied on past successes in the UK by comparing itself with the iconic old megaprojects in the UK. The transport secretary of the UK said promoting the megaproject that,

The new line could transform Britain's competitiveness as profoundly as the coming of the railways in the 19th century. (Quoted from a news article dated 6 March 2011)

The promoters also compared the future performance of the megaproject in comparison to if the megaproject was not there. They claimed that the project would result in 9 million road journeys and 4.5 million plane journeys being taken by train each year. [Ninan et al. \(2019\)](#) record the comparisons of a megaproject with another, claiming that the other projects look up to them can awaken community sentiments and thereby are effective in branding. On the contrary, the protesters of the megaproject used comparisons to brand the megaproject as disastrous. They compared the megaproject with similar megaprojects in other countries such as the Netherlands where the high-speed project was disastrous running 85% empty. There were also comparisons with the context to claim that the megaproject should not go ahead. The protesters claimed that the megaproject coming at a huge cost would only benefit the wealthy few while ordinary commuters suffer and hence should not go ahead. The protesters also compared the HS2 megaproject to an existing megaproject operating on the same route. They claimed that spending billions on the HS2 megaproject would only result in a mere 28-min time saving in travel time when compared to the existing train service between London and Birmingham. Narratives of branding the megaproject can be categorized as future-oriented narratives wherein the promoter or the protester seeks to create a narrative of what the megaproject would become in the future.

### **Discussion**

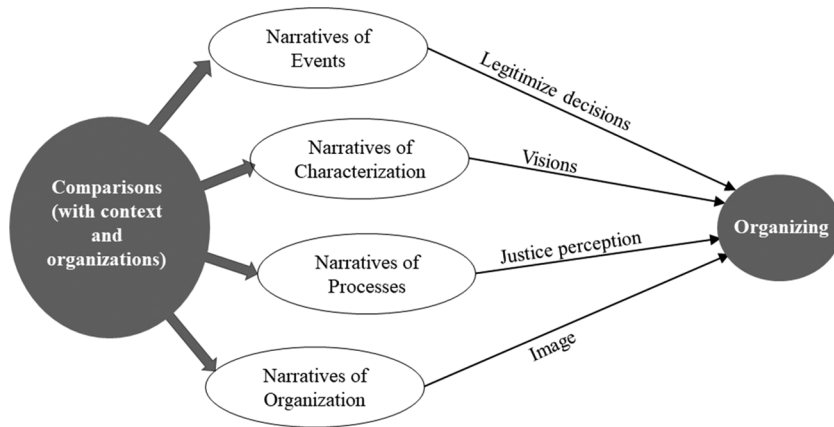
This study contributes to the discussion on narratives that shape policy outcomes and bring about changes in the society. Previously, [Esposito et al. \(2022\)](#) used justification theory with its seven justifications such as civic, fame, market, industrial, domestic, inspired, and green to operationalize the study of proponents' and opponents' narratives. From the case study of the Lyon–Turin high-speed railway, the authors note how the proponents mobilize the industrial, green, and civic orders by narrating the megaproject as a form of (a) technological progress to improve the regional transportation system, (b) sustainable innovation to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and (c) collective interest issuing from democratic processes of official decision-making. The opponents challenged these arguments by unveiling the technical, environmental, and democratic inconsistencies of the proponents' narrative arguments. Such a

counternarrative succeeded to mobilize tens of thousands of individuals against the megaproject construction, causing dramatic implementation delays with negative effects on the megaproject cash flow. They thus show that narratives have an effect on policy outcomes. Using a sensemaking process, we extend these findings by highlighting how comparisons can be considered as a tool to shape narratives and policy outcomes.

We began by asking what types of comparisons are employed by the promoters and the protesters of the temporary organization. We recorded comparisons with contexts and comparisons with organizations from the case study of the HS2 megaproject in the UK. History has a role in the making and unmaking of organizational order (Hansen, 2012). In the case of the HS2 megaproject, we see comparisons with historical institutional context, such as civil war, being used to unsettle the land acquisition process. Thus, history, in the form of comparisons with history, is used by the agency for their own vested interests (Weindruch, 2016). Such use of history for purposes in the present is called the “uses of the past” (Wadhvani et al., 2018). Comparisons with context are also similar to Weick’s notion of enactment (Weick, 1988), referring to the fact that when people act they bring structures and events into existence and set them in action. This enactment results in an environment with real objects or contexts; however, the significance, meaning, and content of these objects will vary because of the sensemaking enabled by comparisons.

The comparisons with organizations included comparisons with temporary organizations within the UK, with temporary organizations outside the country, and even with the organization itself. Zelditch et al. (1970) record that local comparisons alone are insufficient to promote feelings of inequality. Here, we see both the protester and the promoter using comparisons with megaprojects in other countries in the process of creating a narrative. Comparisons with self are used in the research on megaprojects to claim that megaprojects frequently underperform. Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) compared the performance of 256 megaprojects in 20 countries with their initial estimates to claim that 90% of these megaprojects underperform. This comparison created a narrative that medium- or small-scale projects are better than megaprojects (Ansar et al., 2014). However, in the context of the shaping stage of the HS2 megaproject, comparisons with itself were observed to be less in contrast to comparisons with other temporary organizations. This could be because the megaproject organization is in its early stages of shaping, and once the megaproject moves to the later stages or in construction and operation, there could be more comparisons with the earlier stage of the megaproject to evaluate the expected performance and actual performance (Liu, 1999). The literature exists on internal and external comparisons in organizations (Greenberg et al., 2007). While internal comparison refers to comparisons with members of the same organization, external comparison refers to comparisons with members of other organizations. This boundary changes in the context of promoters and protesters of a megaproject as they compare the project with other projects within the country in power of the same government and projects outside the government’s jurisdiction.

In describing the narratives resulting from comparisons and their use in organizing, we contrast between narratives of events, narratives of characterization, narratives of processes, and narratives of organizations, as shown in Figure 1. The narratives of events involved giving rationale support for decisions already made for legitimizing advocated actions (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007) by comparing with context and other organizations. In the case of HS2, the protesters used comparisons with megaprojects in the UK and other countries to change the narrative and thereby the attitude of people (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Here, the narrative is used to legitimize the decisions already taken in the organization (Whitten, 1993), and this leads to organizing around those decisions. The narratives of characterization involved creating visioning narratives of different parameters of the megaproject such as the narrative of noise and a narrative of sustainability (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022). These narratives are an ongoing effort and result in organizing around specific visions. The narratives of processes involved narratives of the trajectory of events (Vaara et al., 2016). This includes a comparison of the compensation process with megaprojects within the UK and in other countries to create a narrative of the compensation process, which can influence an organization’s justice perception (Lamertz, 2002). The narratives of the organization involved narratives that create an image of the organization. Narratives have branding implications as they are classified as tools that foster the spread of common understandings within communities in the work by Patriotta (2003). The sensemaking literature records how people make sense of legitimacy, justice, image, and identity influence their organizing (Deng & Leung, 2014; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). We argue that comparisons and the ensuing narratives are a cognitive instrument as they impact the



**Figure 1.** Comparisons shape multiple narratives, leading to organizing.

subject's thinking, thereby bringing people together and resulting in organizing (Rappaport, 2000). Thus, we highlight how comparisons can be considered an important cue in the sensemaking process as they generate narratives and influence the subsequent interpretation of organizations, thereby becoming a primary generator of individual action.

Vaara et al. (2016) differentiate between narratives of events and narratives of processes. Narratives of events provide a description of the events, while narratives of processes provide a description of the trajectory of events that unfold. We extend this work by recording narratives of characterization and organization. Narratives of events are narratives to justify an event that has already taken place and can be classified as past-oriented narratives. Narratives of characterization are narratives of the quality of a parameter and can be classified as past-, present-, or future-oriented narratives. Narratives of processes are narratives of the trajectory of events and are also past-, present-, or future-oriented narratives. Narratives of organizations are future-oriented narratives that describe how the organization will perform.

With comparisons, we saw that both the promoter and the protester employed upward and downward comparisons (Buunk et al., 1990). Upward comparisons included comparisons with those doing better such as with other countries that have a better infrastructure. Downward comparisons included comparisons with those doing worse such as with the Holland high-speed rail that did not make money. While upward comparisons focus on how organizations should be, downward comparisons focus on how organizations should not be, and both have narrative implications for megaprojects. While organizational change is widely discussed in the literature, we highlight how change can be brought about in complex, uncertain, and conflicting contexts by the use of comparisons. The research highlights comparisons as an important cue in discourses on the society where different forms of comparisons can help in creating narratives of the need for the initiative and fixing the benefits of the initiative. Comparisons and narratives can also have policy implications for mobilizing collective action toward tackling grand challenges in the society.

## Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the strategic use of narratives in the organization of megaprojects, with a main focus on one specific narrative instrument, which is comparison. Comparisons play an important role in creating narratives that help in navigating complexity, uncertainty, and conflictuality and thereby organizing. Through the case study of the shaping phase of the HS2 megaproject, we highlight that organizations make comparisons with contexts and organizations. We highlight the implications of comparisons toward creating narratives of events, narratives of characterization, narratives of processes, and narratives of organizations. We, therefore, provide empirical evidence on the importance of narratives in the process of organizing.

The contributions from this study are that, first, we extend the classification of narratives as events and narratives of processes by Vaara et al. (2016) to include narratives of characterization and narratives of organization. Second, we distinguish between past-, present-, and future-oriented narratives. While narratives of events are past-oriented narratives and narratives of the organization are future-oriented narratives, narratives of characteristics and processes are past-, present-, and future-oriented narratives. Third, we record how the promoters and protesters of the project create their own narratives through the same process of comparisons. Thus, we extend the work by Esposito et al. (2022) by highlighting how comparisons can be considered as a tool to operationalize policy outcomes. Fourth, we empirically highlight that upward comparisons focus on how organizations should be, and downward comparisons focus on how organizations should not be, and both have narrative implications for megaprojects. Lastly, we highlight comparisons as an important cue in project settings where comparisons with other projects can help in creating narratives and thereby organizing from a sensemaking perspective. Therefore, comparisons as a cue are effective in the making sense of the relevance and importance of the policies.

There are certain limitations to this research, which afford multiple opportunities for future research. The study was limited to the shaping stage of the HS2 megaproject in an attempt to understand the role of comparisons in shaping the organizational narrative. One limitation of this approach was the lack of instances of the organization comparing the organization with itself. Future research can investigate mature organizations that have more instances of comparisons with self to understand the implications of such comparisons. Future research can also differentiate between comparisons that create a narrative and comparisons that maintain a narrative. Also, even though we distinguished between promoter and protester narratives, future longitudinal research could trace out how comparisons are used to contest and create a new narrative. Additionally, the use of comparisons by some personalities among promoters or protesters can be perceived as more important than others, and this can be investigated in future research. It is worth noting that comparisons are one of the instrumental tools that shapes the organizational narrative. There are other meaning-making devices that also play a role in shaping narratives (e.g., stories, symbols, and material elements) and merit further empirical investigation.

## Funding

This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council Grant ES/R011567/1.

## Conflict of interest

None declared.

## References

- Ansar, A., Flyvbjerg, B., Budzier, A., & Lunn, D. (2014). Should we build more large dams? The actual costs of hydropower megaproject development. *Energy Policy*, 69(6), 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2013.10.069>.
- Bartel, C. A., & Garud, R. (2009). The role of narratives in sustaining organizational innovation. *Organization Science*, 20(1), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1080.0372>.
- Boje, D. (2008). *Storytelling organizations*. Sage.
- Buchanan, D., & Dawson, P. (2007). Discourse and audience: Organizational change as multi-story process. *Journal of Management Studies*, 44(5), 669–686. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00669.x>.
- Buunk, B. P., Collins, R. L., Taylor, S. E., Van Yperen, N. W., & Dakof, G. A. (1990). The affective consequences of social comparison: Either direction has its ups and downs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(6), 1238–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.59.6.1238>.
- Cooren, F. (1999). Applying socio-semiotics to organizational communication: A new approach. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 13(2), 294–304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318999132006>.
- Crow, D., & Jones, M. (2018). Narratives as tools for influencing policy change. *Policy & Politics*, 46(2), 217–234. <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557318X15230061022899>.
- Dailey, S. L., & Browning, L. (2014). Retelling stories in organizations: Understanding the functions of narrative repetition. *Academy of Management Review*, 39(1), 22–43. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0329>.

- Davis, L. E., & North, D. C. (1971). *Institutional change and American economic growth*. Cambridge University Press.
- Deng, H., & Leung, K. (2014). Contingent punishment as a double-edged sword: A dual-pathway model from a sense-making perspective. *Personnel Psychology*, 67(4), 951–980. <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12074>.
- Denis, J. L., Lamothe, L., & Langley, A. (2001). The dynamics of collective leadership and strategic change in pluralistic organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(4), 809–837. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3069417>.
- Drazin, R., Glynn, M. A., & Kazanjian, R. K. (1999). Multilevel theorizing about creativity in organizations: A sensemaking perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 24(2), 286–307. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259083>.
- Esposito, G., Nelson, T., Ferlie, E., & Crutzen, N. (2021). The institutional shaping of global megaprojects: The case of the Lyon-Turin high-speed railway. *International Journal of Project Management*, 39(6), 658–671. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2021.06.001>.
- Esposito, G., Terlizzi, A., & Crutzen, N. (2022). Policy narratives and megaprojects: The case of the Lyon-Turin high-speed railway. *Public Management Review*, 24(1), 55–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1795230>.
- Fenton, C., & Langley, A. (2011). Strategy as practice and the narrative turn. *Organization Studies*, 32(9), 1171–1196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840611410838>.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>.
- Flyvbjerg, B., Bruzelius, N., & Rothengatter, W. (2003). *Megaprojects and risk: An anatomy of ambition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Frick, K. T. (2008). The cost of the technological sublime: Daring ingenuity and the new San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge. In H. Priemus, B. Flyvbjerg, & B. van Wee (Eds.), *Decision-making on mega-projects: Cost-benefit analysis, planning and innovation* (pp. 239–262). Edward Elgar.
- Gioia, D. A., & Thomas, J. B. (1996). Identity, image, and issue interpretation: Sensemaking during strategic change in academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 370–403. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393936>.
- Greenberg, J., Ashton-James, C. E., & Ashkanasy, N. M. (2007). Social comparison processes in organizations. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 102(1), 22–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.09.006>.
- Hansen, P. H. (2012). Business history: A cultural and narrative approach. *Business History Review*, 86(4), 693–717. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007680512001201>.
- Kim, W. C., & Mauborgne, R. (2003). Fair process: Managing in the knowledge economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 81(1), 127–136. <https://hbr.org/2003/01/fair-process-managing-in-the-knowledge-economy>.
- Lamertz, K. (2002). The social construction of fairness: Social influence and sense making in organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23(1), 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.128>.
- Liu, A. M. (1999). A research model of project complexity and goal commitment effects on project outcome. *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*, 6(2), 105–111. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb021103>.
- Lundin, R. A., & Steinhórnsson, R. S. (2003). Studying organizations as temporary. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 19(2), 233–250. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0956-5221\(02\)00006-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0956-5221(02)00006-4).
- MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue*. Duckworth.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226550>.
- Ninan, J., Clegg, S., & Mahalingam, A. (2019). Branding and governmentality for infrastructure megaprojects: The role of social media. *International Journal of Project Management*, 37(1), 59–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2018.10.005>.
- Ninan, J., & Sergeeva, N. (2021). Labyrinth of labels: Narrative constructions of promoters and protesters in megaprojects. *International Journal of Project Management*, 39(5), 496–506. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2021.03.003>.
- Ninan, J., & Sergeeva, N. (2022). Mobilizing megaproject narratives for external stakeholders: A study of narrative instruments and processes. *Project Management Journal*, 53(5), 520–540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728221102719>.
- O'Neill, B. S., & Mone, M. A. (2005). Psychological influences on referent choice. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 17(3), 273–292. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40604502>.
- Patriotta, G. (2003). Sensemaking on the shop floor: Narratives of knowledge in organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(2), 349–375. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00343>.

- Rappaport, J. (2000). Community narratives: Tales of terror and joy. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005161528817>.
- Rhodes, C., & Brown, A. D. (2005). Narrative, organizations and research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 7(3), 167–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2005.00112.x>.
- Salancik, G. R., & Pfeffer, J. (1978). A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 23(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2392563>.
- Sergeeva, N. (2017). Labeling projects as innovative: A social identity theory. *Project Management Journal*, 48(1), 51–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/875697281704800104>.
- Seta, J. J., Seta, C. E., & McElroy, T. (2006). Better than better-than average (or not): Elevated and depressed self-evaluations following unfavorable social comparisons. *Self and Identity*, 5(1), 51–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860500380551>.
- Steger, T. (2007). The stories metaphors tell: Metaphors as a tool to decipher tacit aspects in narratives. *Field Methods*, 19(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X06292788>.
- Suls, J., Martin, R., & Wheeler, L. (2002). Social comparison: Why, with whom, and with what effect? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11(5), 159–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00191>.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed.) (pp. 7–24). NelsonHall.
- Vaara, E., Sonenshein, S., & Boje, D. (2016). Narratives as sources of stability and change in organizations: Approaches and directions for future research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 10(1), 495–560. <https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2016.1120963>.
- Wadhvani, R. D., Suddaby, R., Mordhorst, M., & Popp, A. (2018). History as organizing: Uses of the past in organization studies. *Organization Studies*, 39(12), 1663–1683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840618814867>.
- Weick, K. E. (1988). Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 24(4), 305–317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1988.tb00039.x>.
- Weindruch, B. (2016). *Start with the future and work back: A heritage management manifesto*. Hamilton.
- Whitten, M. (1993). Narrative and the culture of obedience at the workplace. In D. Mumby (Ed.), *Narrative and social control: Critical perspectives* (pp. 97–118). Sage.
- Wiggins, M. W. (2012). Making sense of sustainability: A cue-based approach to sustainable organizational performance. In G. Avery & B. Hughes (Eds.), *Fresh thoughts in sustainable leadership* (pp. 38–48). Tilde University Press.
- Zelditch, M., Berger, J., Anderson, B., & Cohen, B. P. (1970). Equitable comparisons. *Pacific Sociological Review*, 13(1), 19–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388401>.