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RESEARCH

Strategic narratives and participatory repertoires: the case of strategic humour

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Abstract
This article revisits the relationship between strategic narratives and public diplomacy through the prism of *participatory repertoires*—strategic communication tactics that trigger the involvement of publics in co-producing, amplifying, negotiating and validating narratives. Participatory repertoires can maximize audience outreach, decentralize strategic narratives, bolster their credibility through validation by non-state actors, and reshape the ways public diplomacy pursues influence. I specifically focus on *strategic humour*—the deliberate use of humour to engage domestic and foreign publics and promote narratives that advance state interests through wider outreach, persuasion and participation. State actors increasingly engage in competitive storytelling of foreign policy via parodies, memes, pranks, and satirical deepfakes in order to contest realities, challenge adversaries' narratives, and claim new positionalities in the international system. Taking the example of Russian public diplomacy, I demonstrate how strategic humour enabled state actors to promote and validate the strategic narrative of Russophobia—portraying Russia as a victim of unjustified Western hostility, deflecting external criticism, and legitimizing its global counter-hegemonic claim. The paper concludes by questioning the impact of participatory repertories on the 'success' or 'failure' of public diplomacy and the spiraling fragmentation of reality in international relations.

Keywords Strategic humour · Participatory repertoire · Contestation · Participation · Strategic communications · Narratives

Introduction

In summer 2025, two infamous Russian comedians, Vovan and Lexus, impersonated former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in a prank call with the ex-chief of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Samantha Power. During the call with fake Poroshenko, Samantha Power admitted that USAID had been transferring $1.5 billion in cash to Ukraine every month since 2022 and that tens of millions of dollars had been invested in Moldova to strengthen pro-European President Maia Sandu and to 'counter Russian influence' ahead of crucial elections (TASS 2025). Released fragments of the prank went viral online and were widely presented by Russian and some international news media as evidence that 'American taxpayer money played a crucial role in keeping Moldovan President Maia Sandu in power' (RT 2025). This seemed to echo Donald Trump's earlier claims that USAID spending had been wasteful and 'totally unexplainable' (BBC 2025). Citing the prank, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) condemned Power's admissions, suggesting that 'Samantha Power, who headed USAID—the institution of interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states—describes how much money was allocated to destroy Moldova's independence' (Gazeta 2025). Russian state actors have long maintained a strategic narrative that the war in Ukraine and controversial elections in Moldova were the result of Western financial injections into 'puppet' and 'corrupt' governments in the region, often under the guise of foreign aid or NGO grants. The prank, while not directly originating from state actors, was then used by them as 'proof' to further validate the strategic narrative.

This example demonstrates a curious shift in how strategic narratives are delivered in today's world of digital public diplomacy and news consumption. In this paper, I argue that public diplomacy (PD) is increasingly turning to

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participatory mechanisms and *competitive digital storytelling* (for example, reliant on humour and its viral spread) in both delivering and validating key elements of strategic narratives. I suggest that this shift involves several principal characteristics: (1) strategic narratives or their elements are increasingly reliant on storytelling repertoires that catch attention and encourage participation of digital audiences in liking, sharing, and otherwise (co-)producing and amplifying these narratives; (2) public participation maximizes strategic narrative outreach but may be unwitting, as audiences may enjoy the storytelling format (e.g. humour) rather than agree with the political message—the resulting persuasive effect is therefore limited; (3) strategic narratives are increasingly decentralized, with multiple non-state and proxy actors narrating foreign policy with viral pranks and memes, potentially contradicting or outperforming state ones; and yet (4) participation can be used to validate and bolster strategic narratives at a time when trust in government is declining—this is achieved when key elements of strategic narratives appear to originate from non-state actors, increasing narrative credibility and masking persuasive intent.

Russia is a case in point, as it finds its traditional PD instruments heavily constrained (e.g. with the EU ban on its external broadcaster RT in 2022) or mistrusted (e.g. a 2025 Pew Research Centre poll put median unfavorable view of Russia across 25 countries at 79%[1]). In recent years, Russia has strategically used humour and its participatory dynamics to deliver narratives to both domestic and foreign audiences. For instance, pro-Kremlin pranksters systematically target Western politicians (Emmanuel Macron, Andrzej Duda, Angela Merkel, Boris Johnson, Giorgia Meloni, to name a few) and trick them into making unguarded admissions, which are then quoted by Russian officials and media as credible evidence of the hypocrisy or subversive actions of the West. Russian embassies and external broadcasters widely use mockery in the form of memes and satirical videos to deflect external accusations and undermine narratives of Western governments—such as around the 2018 Skripal poisoning or accusations of the 2016 US election interference (Chernobrov 2022a, b; Kopper 2021). These trends are not exclusive to Russian strategic narratives and PD: American, Iranian, Israeli, Chinese, Canadian, and other diplomats too, have used participatory humour to ridicule accusations or deliver serious messages to external audiences (for example, see Malmvig 2023; Browning and Brassett 2023; Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019).

I therefore propose reconsidering the link between strategic narratives and PD through the prism of *participatory storytelling repertoires.* I discuss this on the example of strategic humour, although humorous formats are not the only participatory or competitive means of digital storytelling in PD. Today we face a complex and noisier PD environment, with a greater variety of actors, producers and amplifiers of strategic narratives than ever before. A joke can get more traction than factual argumentation—resulting in multiple, contested and fragmented realities of world affairs, which shape the terrain of policy discussions and the perceptions and behaviours of publics and actors. In the following sections, I build these arguments by discussing participatory storytelling and strategic narratives, the use of strategic humour by states, and the example of Russia's strategic narrative of Western 'Russophobia' delivered through PD humour.

Strategic narratives and audience participation

Audience engagement, uptake, and participatory amplification of narratives have traditionally been central to both PD and strategic narratives. PD presents 'the process by which international actors seek to accomplish the goals of their foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics' (Cull 2008: 31). Engagement in PD has traditionally focused on using 'interactive and networked public dimensions' (Snow 2020) to influence public perceptions and behaviours in line with the foreign policy agenda. Social media has enabled new communication channels and strategies as part of a 'Public Diplomacy 2.0' (Cull 2019) and a new digital media logic that prioritizes engagement and interaction (Pamment et al 2023). Digital channels have facilitated targeted audience analysis, trust building, and culturally sensitive communication. In a 'new public diplomacy', non-state actors including corporations, NGOs and even individuals play an increasingly important role (Melissen 2005). Besides traditional news management through framing, modern media engagement tactics also include paid, earned, owned, and shared content, necessitating a broader redefinition of mediated public diplomacy (Golan et al 2019).

Strategic narratives too, aim for mass audience engagement: their aim is to 'construct the reality of events for audiences' (Miskimmon et al 2013: 23) and to extend influence, shape discursive environments and behaviours. Even in the initial conceptualization of strategic narratives, Miskimmon et al. (2013: 11) pointed to the crucial role of participatory media ecologies that enable audience members to 'become actors themselves, commenting, liking, and remixing images, information, and narratives'. They built on Castells' (2009) analysis to emphasize that technology has empowered additional actors and that 'the ability to broadcast and narrate to many [is] no longer the preserve of elites, but

[1] https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/06/23/views-of-russia-and-putin-2025/

something anybody could potentially try' (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 2). From their inception, strategic narratives were not conceptualized as the exclusive domain of elites—even though state actors have dominated the study of both PD and strategic narratives.

Participation—the involvement of publics in co-producing, amplifying and negotiating narratives—in itself, is therefore not new to either PD or strategic narratives. In today's digital media environment, participation involves narrative co-production—a combination of top-down and bottom-up dynamics where elites seed narratives, non-elites amplify them and produce new content, and elites amplify it in turn (Starbird et al 2023). However, it is the forms, tactics, relative power of actors, and the deliberate exploitation of participatory dynamics by states that have evolved significantly over the last 10–15 years and reshaped the strategic narrative field. Social media and digitalization of PD have put publics and their online behaviours into the spotlight, yet both state and non-state actors have also adapted to the digital media logic and developed strategies 'to *use* participatory dynamics' (Briant 2024: 92). Such strategies trigger participation from both publics and the media and 'co-opt' citizens into spreading persuasive communications (Wanless and Berk 2021; Levandowsky 2022). The prank of USAID's Samatha Power is one of many such examples, where state actors come to rely on affiliated, or proxy actors, to trigger viral dissemination of its broader strategic narratives through participatory and competitive storytelling.

The growing role of participation has significant consequences for how we understand public diplomacy and strategic narratives. For one, participation blurs distinctions that have traditionally been central to the study of PD, propaganda and strategic narratives—such as those between the narrative creator and their target audience (Wanless and Berk 2021), between civilians and combatants in conflict (Crawford 2015), between foreign and domestic publics (Szostek 2018; Duncombe 2019), and between public diplomacy and propaganda. Both policy responses and academic analysis are playing catch up to these consequences of the 'participatory turn' across international relations, political communication, and media. Second, participation reshapes the tactics and metrics of success for audience engagement in PD. In a noisy and decentralized environment characterized by scarce attention economy and a plethora of actors narrating foreign policy, outreach and visibility of narratives come to matter more than argumentation. Digital PD increasingly pursues influence by managing which narratives circulate—using participation and algorithms to dominate the narrative space and reduce the visibility of alternative narratives. Challenging, disliking or otherwise reacting to adversaries' narratives would inadvertently boost their visibility through social media algorithms, which is why PD increasingly turns away from responding to adversaries' frames (Chernobrov 2022b; Golan et al 2019). Third, participatory and competitive storytelling enables states to not only dominate the narrative space, but to break through narrative and algorithmic filter bubbles and reach new audiences. Conventional narratives disproportionately reach users already likely to be receptive, due to their digital consumption patterns. Humour alters that—it becomes viral as many people may find something funny. Humour facilitates viral outreach—and even though a mocking tweet or satirical deepfake will not be enough to change political views of all users who see and share them, they can still maximize audience exposure to particular strategic narratives as well as dominate the contested narrative space.

Another important consequence of the evolving role of participation in PD and strategic narratives is its impact on trust, credibility and audience engagement more broadly. Participatory narratives can be more persuasive than communications that are top-down or that clearly originate from state actors, as individuals are more likely to believe information from people they know or find authentic (Turcotte et al 2015). On the contrary, audiences tend to be irritated if they see through undisguised persuasive intent (Innocenti and Miller 2016) or attribute the narrative to a state actor that is known or expected to be propagandistic. It is worth noting that audiences rarely recognize reinforcement of views as persuasive intent (Tchernev et al 2021) and despite mistrusting state or media sources, may still reproduce their strategic narratives (Szostek 2018; Vihalemm and Juzefovičs, 2020). With participatory narratives, however, members of the public are co-producing or amplifying the message, meaning that the original source is often obscured and manipulative or persuasive intent is less evident (Levandowsky 2022). This has created an opening for state actors to use participatory mechanisms in order to validate key claims that underpin their strategic narratives. For example, when Samantha Power admits pumping billions into Ukraine and Moldova in a call with Russian pranksters and this news is then virally reshared by online users, Russian state actors are then able to draw on the prank as activist-sourced 'evidence' for its wider strategic narrative of Western hypocrisy and Russia-West confrontation. For audiences, prank versions of foreign policy are more credible and convincing than government narratives precisely because pranks do not seem to originate from a state actor (Chernobrov 2024), but then the step from accepting a pro-Kremlin prank's version of world affairs to accepting the state strategic narrative is short and logical. Participation and competitive storytelling repertoires such as humour can therefore be used strategically by state actors to narrate foreign policy to publics.

New strategic narrative repertoires: the case of strategic humour

Humour is a competitive storytelling repertoire that state actors increasingly deploy to trigger audience participation and deliver strategic narratives. However, the increased use of humour is not simply an evolution of strategic narratives and PD tools for their delivery—digital media has enhanced the range of strategic functions that humour can fulfill for narrative actors. Humour has long been theorized as a grassroots tool of resistance and a creative channel for counter-hegemonic narratives, hierarchy contestation, and political critique (Davies 2015; Kraidy 2016; Brassett 2016), among its other political functions. Today, humour's digital and participatory affordances have provided new opportunities for *state* actors to claim the position of resistance and establish counter-hegemonic strategic narratives of world affairs.

For instance, in 2018 Iran engaged in a 'meme war' with the White House over the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and framed the US as a collapsing superpower (Malmvig 2023). In late 2025, following US strikes on Iranian targets, Tehran mocked America's untrustworthiness and signaled caution in resuming nuclear negotiations with a viral mural 'Behind the Promises of Freedom', which featured the Statue of Liberty crowned with portraits of deceived, dead or imprisoned heads of state who had trusted the US (BRICS News 2025). During the Covid pandemic, China unusually resorted to humour to dispute accusations over the virus origins and to contest US Covid narratives (Browning and Brassett 2023). Or during the war in Ukraine, Russia regularly produced deepfake parodies of Western leaders to claim ineffectiveness of sanctions and affirm resilience under pressure (Chernobrov 2023). In all these cases, humour ensured a spike in audience participation and rallied domestic audiences behind state strategic narratives. Participatory humour therefore enabled state actors to claim a counter-hegemonic position[2] of contesting dominant Western narratives. However, even more importantly from the PD perspective, these examples became viral with global audiences and were reported in international news media. They enabled diplomatic actors to reach wider and new audiences, who may not be their usual followers and would not be routinely exposed to their messaging. Participatory humour was able to either circumvent traditional news gatekeepers by directly reaching foreign audiences with strategic narratives, or to solicit the attention of traditional news gatekeepers by packaging strategic narratives in a humorous, provocative and newsworthy form. By comparison, the same narratives delivered in a more conventional, 'serious' form and clearly attributed to state actors often fail to reach the same levels of attention, as they are deemed unnewsworthy or discredited as untrustworthy.

In previous work, I develop the concept of *strategic humour*—the deliberate use of humour to engage domestic and foreign publics and promote narratives that advance state interests through wider outreach, persuasion and participation (Chernobrov 2022a). Strategic humour can play a variety of functions in sustaining and promoting strategic narratives: it can be used to contest political reality and (re) frame international events to one's advantage; embarrass, discredit and ridicule foreign governments and their narratives; deflect external accusations or criticism; legitimate foreign policy and validate key elements of strategic narratives; maximize the outreach of one's narrative through virality and audience participation; and communicate or test controversial and provocative messages. Strategic humour turns storytelling advantages of humour as a narrative genre—its memorability, accessibility, emotional resonance with transnational publics through shared cultural references, ability to catch attention and mobilize a sense of identity, and even its relative political expediency—into a strategic PD repertoire that triggers participation and involves audiences in the creative (re)production of strategic narratives.

Strategic humour seemingly focuses on specific events, claims and personalities—characteristics typical of an issue narrative in IR. For example, humorous Russian embassy tweets[3] in 2018 rejected accusations of responsibility behind the Salisbury poisoning and mocked UK Prime Minister Theresa May. They delt with a specific event, framed its representation, and challenged the UK policy response—enabling a widely mistrusted actor to make headlines and deliver a viral counter-narrative. However, strategic humour is not simply a tactic to tell a story about a specific event in a better and more engaging way—it is also means to tell a *wider* story that weaves humorous punchlines into broader narratives, delivers complex messages, and pursues multiple goals. The Salisbury tweets, for example, affirmed a strategic narrative about Russia's return as a global power and the revival of Cold War confrontation to domestic audiences; and to European and British audiences—encouraged mistrust towards the UK government and ridiculed its inability to provide security to British citizens. Samantha Power's prank, while exposing specific USAID activities, was then cited by Russian state actors to sustain a much broader claim of Western interference into Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Or memes about Russian tanks

[2] It is worth noting that this does not apply only to authoritarian states and their use of humour in PD. For instance, NATO members actively used 'backstage mockery' to challenge the US and Trump while avoiding open criticism for fear of retaliation (van Rythoven 2022).

[3] For example, https://x.com/RussianEmbassy/status/992364747059355649 and https://x.com/RussianEmbassy/status/973993379024556032

being towed away by tractors, widely shared by Ukrainian officials in 2022, were not simply about the failure of an isolated Russian offensive but were part of wider efforts to shape favourable context for a firmer European and NATO response to the war. Alone, strategic humour may not offer a full-scale, complete narrative of world affairs and the international system. It delivers a memorable punchline, attacks inconsistencies in an adversary's narrative, exposes faults, or recontextualizes and trivializes serious political developments as absurd and unworthy of attention. It is precisely these highly visible, memorable, and participatory exposures that political actors weave into their wider strategic claims. Strategic humour therefore presents a crucial storytelling repertoire for strategic narratives that enables their participatory co-production, amplification, and validation.

Strategic narratives are a highly contested space, where actors compete to establish their narrative as the 'commonsense understanding of the past, present, and future of international relations' (Miskimmon et al 2013: 109). Participatory storytelling repertoires such as strategic humour make narrative contestation even more decentralized and asymmetrical. Foreign policy is already narrated by a plethora of non-state actors, who too, can employ humour to drive participation and persuasion to both support and offer alternatives to state narratives. For example, the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), a meme-based social media movement, has become a cross-border actor in the information war around Ukraine that has challenged Russian state narratives and raised funds for Ukraine (Johais 2024). Or European comedians defied Trump's 'America First' policies with a parody series *Every Second Counts* (Surowiec-Capell et al 2025). For state actors, participatory storytelling repertoires such as humour can reduce government's ability to control the message but widen creative opportunities for nation branding and mobilizing publics (Brassett et al. 2021). While more dependent on audience participation, such repertories are at the same time less dependent on the state's traditional PD resources. When the latter are limited or constrained by sanctions, war, asymmetries of relative power and status, participatory storytelling repertoires such as humour can present a low-resource yet high-impact method of narrative contestation.

Participatory humour and the strategic narrative of Russophobia

In this section, I look in closer detail at several examples of how Russian state actors have used humour to affirm an overarching strategic narrative of Russophobia. In recent years and particularly after 2022, Russia has actively promoted a vision of foreign policy based on identity narratives of a powerful Russia, nationalist Ukraine, and hypocritical West (Bradshaw et al 2024). Russian government and state-backed media have actively constructed a strategic narrative of Russophobia, portraying the country as a perpetual victim of unjustified Western hostility stemming from the Cold War and even the imperial past. This strategic narrative is used to delegitimize and dismiss external criticism—whether it concerns foreign policy, human rights, or accusations of disinformation—by framing it as deep-rooted, irrational and historically inevitable anti-Russian prejudice. Domestically, this strategic narrative reinforces a besieged national identity and mobilizes the public against a perceived external threat. Internationally, it legitimizes Russia's claim as an opposing, alterative power to the US-led Western hegemony.

To affirm this strategic narrative, Russian state actors combine 'serious' and humorous messaging and draw on participation. They point out statements from Western politicians that describe Russia as a threat—such as Emmanuel Macron saying in March 2025 that Russia 'has become and will remain a threat to France and Europe' (The Guardian 2025). But while EU leaders link their stance to Russia's actions in Ukraine and growing concerns over nuclear, military and information security, the narrative of Russophobia shifts blame from Russia's actions to Western prejudice, creating an entirely different set of coordinates for international actors' identities and decisions. This narrative is systematically advanced though spectacular and memorable humorous exposures in the form of pranks that trick foreign leaders into unguarded and therefore seemingly 'authentic' admissions, viral diplomatic trolling, or satirical external broadcasting. Often it is non-state or proxy actors that stand behind such humorous exposures, enabling officials to both maintain distance and claim greater credibility of such 'outsourced', participatory and therefore more credible evidence of Russophobia. Strategic humour therefore validates this state narrative through participation, maximizes global narrative outreach, and restores a collective sense of superiority through the act of sharing the 'last laugh'.

Unlike 'serious' political messaging where inaccuracies and pretense carry a greater risk of adverse reputational consequences, strategic narratives delivered through humour can more easily involve fictitious scenarios that exaggerate or deceive an adversary to expose their true motives. Such tactics capitalize on widespread public distrust of politicians: for example, in the UK, only 9% of the public expect politicians to tell the truth (Ipsos 2023). It is therefore unsurprising that confidential admissions made to pranksters by Western politicians become viral and can be framed as 'evidence' for an alternative explanation of their policies. For instance, in 2017 Russian pranksters Vovan and Lexus tricked US Congressman Maxine Waters into believing that

Russia had interfered into elections in a fictitious country of Limpopo, leading her to promise tougher sanctions. Russian officials and diplomats widely exploited the prank to ridicule accusations of the 2016 US election interference—for example, the presidential spokesman remarked sarcastically: 'We highly value the fact that it has not crossed anyone's mind to accuse the Kremlin of this until now. This testifies to some fleeting enlightenment' (TASS 2017). In another prank in 2023, comedians spoke to members of the UN Human Rights Council, posing as a Ukrainian serviceman who had suffered abuse while held captive by Russian forces. Council members appeared to take the story at face value, while a follow-up prank about abuse at the hands of Ukrainian soldiers was dismissed—enabling pranksters to claim that international investigations into war crimes in Ukraine are politically biased against Russia from the start (Izvestiya 2023). Russian state actors widely framed these viral exposures originating from proxy actors as evidence that Western politicians were all too willing to invent, believe, and act on anti-Russian falsehoods.

The same overarching narrative has consistently been promoted via humorous diplomatic posts on social media. Tweets from the Russian Embassy in London after the 2018 Salisbury attack, for example, directly connected with the wider strategic narrative of Russia as a convenient target for accusations and sanctions because of Russophobia—as one embassy tweet mused, 'Does Russia's dialing code 007 make James Bond a "Russian spy"?[4]'. In 2017, again mocking accusations of US election interference, Russia's MFA posted voicemail instructions for its diplomatic missions on April Fool's Day: 'To use the services of Russian hackers, press 2; to request election interference, press 3' (Hemment 2022). Or in 2023, Russian embassies widely reposted a deepfake parody[5] produced by RT to mock yet another, 11th package of Western sanctions. The clip depicted visibly exasperated Joe Biden, Rishi Sunak, Ursula von der Leyen, Olaf Scholz and Emmanuel Macron at their wits' end about what else to ban and resorting to sanctions on anything Russian – Russian salad, dolls, wolfhounds, and even cartoon characters. The video (in English with Russian subtitles) was widely shared by diplomats, through RT digital platforms, by international news media and ordinary users, achieving extraordinary levels of engagement while delivering Russia's strategic narrative to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Participatory co-production of the strategic narrative through humour could also be observed in affirming the theme that Russophobia comes at a cost for Europeans while Russia remains resilient. In 2022, Russian external broadcaster RT launched an 'anti-Russian Christmas' ad showing deteriorating circumstances of a once well-off European family. The family now must power their home with a hamster running on a wheel, and a glimpse of the future shows the same family in extreme poverty having to cook their pet for the following Christmas. The clip ends with the message, 'Merry "Anti-Russian" Christmas! If your media doesn't tell you where this is all going, RT is available via VPN'. The video does not explicitly mention Ukraine, the war, or EU-imposed restrictions on energy imports from Russia, leaving it to the audience to draw the obvious conclusion. In another example promoting a similar message, in 2022 the Russian embassy in Spain reposted a viral video 'Time to move to Russia',[6] promoting life in Russia despite sanctions and boasting cheap gas and electricity, beautiful women, traditional values, ballet, vodka, absence of cancel culture, and ending with the ominous jab at the cost-of-living crisis in Europe—'don't delay… winter is coming'. The video reduced complex controversies around Russia to a simple message—Russia is flourishing and has values. Initially produced by an anonymous pro-Russian Telegram channel *Signal*, it was then made part of a Russian PD campaign, receiving millions of views on X. Interestingly, Ukraine quickly responded to the video with its own viral parody versions featuring empty shelves, moldy food and Russian police suppressing protests (Euronews 2022). The Ukrainian parody promoted an equally simple message—Russia is failing and blatantly lying. In all three cases—RT's Christmas ad, 'Time to move to Russia' video and the Ukrainian parody—humorous content was co-produced with audiences or originated from non-state or proxy actors but was then amplified and exploited by state actors to frame political realities in ways that affirm their strategic narratives.

These examples illustrate how state actors can repeatedly rely on humorous messaging to deliver and affirm a wider strategic narrative. Changing audience views may not be the primary goal of strategic humour, particularly as participatory humorous narratives are harder to control and can lead to no less pithy counter-narratives. However, strategic humour tends to be more successful in reinforcing and shaping political views and therefore mobilizing publics (Chernobrov 2024), as well as in validating strategic narratives through participation and delivering them to new and wider audiences.

[4] https://x.com/RussianEmbassy/status/972790993962586112

[5] https://x.com/RussianEmbassy/status/1669034554647011338

[6] https://x.com/EmbajadaRusaES/status/1552886838926479360?s=20&t=MDIuGHk6kF-1OSIO-vb5Uw

What next for strategic narratives?

This essay has discussed a specific element in the relationship between strategic narratives and PD - the increasingly important role of *participation* in competitive digital storytelling, and the emergence of *strategic humour* as a strategic narrative repertoire. However, these developments are significant as they impact strategic narratives in multiple ways—from their production to projection and reception, and from the relative power of actors to affirm, contest and validate narratives, to the new positionalities and opportunities that actors can claim with repertoires such as strategic humour. This has wider implications for both the conceptualization and practical application of strategic narratives.

The evolving role of participation is changing the tactics and metrics of narrative promotion and the degree of actors' engagement with adversaries' narratives. Miskimmon et al (2013) already cautioned against a 'template' for narrative success, and participatory dynamics further complicate the idea of the persuasive 'success' or 'failure' of strategic narratives. Participatory repertories such as humour can simultaneously speak to different audiences with different messages and purposes—for example, mobilizing domestic publics through mockery of the opponent, exploiting and encouraging mistrust towards government in segments of a foreign audience, undermining an adversaries' narrative, benefiting from validation by non-state and proxy actors, or simply stimulating viral outreach—with varying degrees and even meanings of 'success' across these goals. Participatory repertoires therefore pose broader questions about what strategic narratives and PD are meant to achieve, what effect they have and for whom, and how world affairs should be narrated strategically in an increasingly decentralized and competitive digital environment.

The collapse and fragmentation of reality in IR is another concern. Strategic humour operates with often fictitious, comically exaggerated, and almost always inaccurate, yet popular versions of political reality. Pranks claim to expose true motives of international actors, yet at the same time reinforce public mistrust and conspiracies with a central underlying message—you are being lied to. Or opposing conflict sides can both use humour to attack and contest each other's narratives, as seen in Russia-Ukraine war memes or the example of 'Time to move to Russia' video and the Ukrainian parody on it. While humour enables both sides to achieve effective engagement and mobilization, their audiences inhabit fragmented, mutually disengaged realities that disagree even on basic facts. Participatory repertories can therefore promote strategic narratives but also drive reality contestation and fragmentation in unprecedented ways, further reducing meaningful shared ground for diplomacy and for polarized audiences.

Strategic narratives are crucial means of contestation, which is central to public diplomacy. Yet a strategic narrative also aims to affirm and hold a reality together—by constructing shared meaning and a version of the international system that would explain actor behaviour, restore certainty, and shape expectations. Participatory repertories can help strategic narratives advance this purpose yet can also threaten it. A powerful satirical punchline exposing a fault remains politically advantageous to state actors only as long as there is a wider strategic narrative that it can support, otherwise it undermines narratives without offering a consistent and complete alternative. A strategic narrative builds a reality that meets foreign policy goals—strategic humour can question the idea of something being 'real' in politics altogether. Beyond this, participation enables a variety of non-state actors to produce alternative narratives of world affairs. In short, participatory repertoires reshape yet also challenge our understandings of the pursuit of influence, persuasion, narrative and reality contestation—elements that are central to both strategic narratives and public diplomacy.

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Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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