

WHITE PAPER

The Power of Narratives

A Strategic Approach to Combatting Disinformation in Europe - Key Findings from the First European Narrative Observatory

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“I welcome the efforts of all partners in building a democracy fit for the future. The NODES White Paper contributes to this ambition. The 5 concrete recommendations bring an innovative energy based on a science for policy approach. My work in ensuring citizens of all generations have a voice and can engage meaningfully in our democracy, shows the importance of creating a safe, transparent space to exchange with each other, based on trust. We must fight with all the available tools to ensure that disinformation does not erode that trust.”



Dubravka Šuica

Vice-President European Commission for Democracy and Demography

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“Public opinion is the true sovereign in democratic societies. It sometimes makes governance difficult and can appear to be a weakness, but in times of crisis, it becomes a strength and an element of resilience.”

Germaine de Staël

The defining struggle of the digital age is the battle for the mind. Disinformation is increasingly being weaponised to recode the narratives that shape our world

In the 21st century, the most critical battleground is to be found as much in the mind, the psychological and virtual spheres playing on emotions and shaping perceptions, as it is on the physical world of troops, tanks and artillery or indeed in cyberspace. The digital age has at once, ushered in an era of unprecedented generation of access to information, and an equally unprecedented environment in which disinformation—the deliberate spread of false or misleading information designed to destabilise and polarise societies can flourish largely unchecked. Today, a battle is raging for the mind —how we think, what we believe, and how we make sense of the world— with truth, reason, facts and evidence.

Disinformation is not merely the dissemination of falsehoods; it is a strategic tool that exploits cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities, deepening social fragmentation and polarisation. It serves to undermine and paralyse the functioning of democratic societies by fuelling cycles of distrust. The rise of digital platforms has turbocharged this phenomenon, enabling disinformation to spread with unprecedented speed, reach, and impact, outstripping the spread of the factual and evidential by a factor of six.

Democracy, reliant on the oxygen of open debate and the free exchange of ideas, is particularly exposed in this environment that swiftly erodes trust. This vulnerability has been exploited by actors—internal and external—who seek to undermine the values that underpin the European model. They probe and exploit the weaknesses of the European Union to undermine its credibility and legitimacy. Their strategy has become clear: fuel polarisation, irrespective of ideological stance, fomenting the extremes to the detriment of a consensual centre ground, in order to generate political instability and impede the effective functioning of democratic systems to the benefit of more authoritarian approaches.

We see this paradox across Europe today. While there is a clear understanding that profound societal changes are needed to address the shortcomings of excessive globalisation and the twin transitions engendered by digitalisation, and climate change, the current context of political polarisation and fragmentation renders nigh on impossible agreement on - let alone implementation of - necessary, meaningful reforms. This dynamic perpetuates a cycle of distrust, reinforcing the very divisions that paralyse democratic processes.

All is not lost, however. By examining and analysing this environment using an alternative lens, we can begin to see emerge the prospect of routes and paths to discover and create contexts in which healthy public discourse based on mutual understanding can put our European demos and polity on a sound footing. Since its creation in 2023, by developing and applying a ground-breaking methodology, the European Narrative Observatory (NODES) has generated research and analysis revealing **a majority of societal polarisation stems from misunderstandings**, rather than from fundamental, irreconcilable differences. This indicates that the divisions we see today are not as deeply rooted or as insurmountable as they may appear.

The very fact that European society is so highly engaged - albeit excessively frustrated and too easily enraged - is in and of itself a sign of vitality and, properly channelled, can result in a rapid turnaround towards collective civic responsibility. Harnessed constructively, this energy has the potential to become the lifeblood of a more resilient and adaptive European democracy. Instead of fearing the diversity of voices that disinformation and polarisation seek to exploit, we can seize this moment of profound democratic renewal—a chance to rediscover the values that we hold dear as Europeans and distinguish our societal model, making us who we are, allowing us to reshape our collective narrative accordingly, towards a more hopeful and optimistic vision of the future we desire.

Central to understanding disinformation is recognising the crucial role played by narratives in shaping our perception of reality. **Narratives** in their more profound sense go well beyond stories: **they are deeply ingrained cognitive frameworks through which we process information and assign meaning to the events around us.** However, they are

often misunderstood. Narratives are dynamic and constantly evolving, shaped by individuals, communities, and societies in response to changing realities. Just as language evolves, so too do narratives adapt to remain relevant.

Research generated by the NODES Observatory reveals that we are living through a period of intense narrative transition. The frameworks that once helped us make sense of the world are no longer sufficient, yet the new narratives of tomorrow have not fully emerged. This uncertainty has made societies more vulnerable to those who seek to exploit division. However, **if we embrace this moment of disruption as a creative space, the diversity of voices in the public sphere can be transformed into one of the greatest assets for democratic renewal.**

Drawing on insights from Europe's first Narrative Observatory, this White Paper explores how disinformation functions as a tool of division, targeting the evolving narratives that hold societies together. The Paper proposes the addition of a new string to the European bow for combatting disinformation. As we move forward, it will be essential to embrace this sophisticated, multi-faceted approach integrating psychology, neuroscience, behavioural science, and philosophy into a broader strategy for strengthening democratic resilience. This unique approach could make a key contribution to the European Democracy Shield proposed by President von der Leyen, ensuring Europe is not only equipped to defend against false information and the manipulation of the narratives that shape our shared reality, but also to create the conditions for the emergence of a refreshed and reinvigorated European democratic space to help us successfully navigate and fully benefit from the extraordinary transformations and transitions underway and that lie ahead.

Chapter 2 - From Facts to Narratives: Understanding the Weaponisation of Disinformation

“Disinformation is the most effective weapon against democracy.”

Mikhail Gorbachev

“We need to do more to protect our democracy. This is why I will propose a new European Democracy Shield. As part of this, we will work to counter foreign information manipulation and interference online.”

Ursula von der Leyen

President of the European Commission

Disinformation exploits the narratives that shape our reality, requiring a shift to a deeper, systemic approach that addresses the psychological and social roots of the problem.

What do we mean by Disinformation?

By its very nature, disinformation, exploits narratives that shape our understanding of reality. The European Commission defines disinformation as “verifiably false or misleading information which is created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm”. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes, public goods such as health, the environment, or security, and broader societal stability.

Although disinformation is not a new phenomenon—propaganda and the manipulation of facts have long been used as tools of influence—the digital age has drastically expanded its scope, reach, and precision. The disintermediation brought about by the advent of social

media and other digital platforms has enabled disinformation to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, thereby escaping the rules and standards to which traditional media are subject, allowing it to spread directly to individuals. This is often achieved through algorithms that amplify emotionally charged content and through the exploitation of personal data, making it easier to target individuals with tailored falsehoods appealing to their interests or targeting their weaknesses.

The current landscape of disinformation is particularly challenging because it does not simply distort isolated facts. Rather, it manipulates entire frameworks of understanding, or narratives—the mental structures through which individuals and communities organise facts, ideas, and beliefs. Disinformation, in this sense, seeks not only to mislead but to fundamentally reshape and deform the way reality is interpreted and understood. By tapping into emotional triggers and cognitive biases, disinformation reinforces pre-existing beliefs and exploits the stories we tell ourselves about the world, making it all the more potent in shaping public opinion and deepening social polarisation.

What do we mean by Narratives?

Narratives are more than just stories; they are fundamental cognitive structures that enable individuals and societies to make sense of facts and give meaning to contexts. They are the mental structures through which people interpret the world, guiding how we process information and make sense of complex realities.

Narratives operate along three key dimensions:

- **Structure:** Structure refers to the underlying values and the progression of the narrative, determining whether things are perceived as improving or deteriorating. It shapes the storyline by establishing the protagonists, antagonists, and the goals or conflicts that drive the narrative.
- **Code:** Code encompasses the symbols, language, and characters that are used within the narrative. These elements shape how the story is told and received, influencing the emotional and cognitive responses of those who engage with it.
- **Community:** Community involves the groups who share and perpetuate the narrative. These are the spaces where the narrative is communicated, and the shared understanding is maintained within these groups.

It is crucial to recognise that every one of us operates within narratives, whether we recognise it or not, and these narratives profoundly shape how we interpret facts, guide our beliefs, and influence our actions. **Narratives are to facts what sentences are to words.**

While narratives are frameworks -mental constructs- it is important to recognise the limitations they hold, which impacts the understanding of our surroundings. Just as society once shifted from Roman numerals to Indian-Arabic numbers, the world itself did not

change, but our understanding of it was profoundly transformed. The introduction of new concepts, such as the Tragedy of the Commons, revolutionised how we interact with and comprehend the world around us. This illustrates the power of narratives: they shape our perception of reality, and when new ideas or frameworks emerge, they can fundamentally alter how we engage with that reality.

In fact, **narratives are constantly evolving**, as they are shaped by individuals, communities, and societies in response to an ever-changing world. Just as language evolves to remain relevant in new contexts, so too must our narratives adapt. What worked as a framework for understanding the world in one era may become obsolete in another, necessitating the creation of new narratives that better reflect contemporary realities.

Research from NODES reveals that we are currently in a period of intense narrative competition. Society is grappling with the rapid changes brought about by the digital revolution, rising inequality, climate change and geopolitical shocks. In this period of transition, narrative frameworks are being exploited to target and reshape the overarching metanarratives that define how we understand the world. This battle for a new interpretation of reality sets the stage for a deeper examination of how disinformation manipulates these evolving narratives and why we should be deeply concerned.

Misunderstanding Narratives and Disinformation

One of the most significant challenges in combatting disinformation is the widespread misunderstanding of how narratives function. Many people mistakenly believe that narratives are opposed to facts, assuming that while "we" hold the facts, "others" are misled by narratives. This view is not only inaccurate—since facts and narratives are not mutually exclusive—but also harmful, as it fosters an approach to disinformation centred on convincing others that our choice of narrative framework to decode reality is the only valid one. As we will explore later in this paper, this mindset exacerbates polarisation by framing the conversation as a battle between competing truths, rather than differing choices of viewpoints and narrative framing.

Today, most tools developed to combat disinformation focus primarily on verifying and correcting facts. While fact-checking is crucial, especially in an era of digital misinformation where editorial checks are often placed on the reader (post-publication), there is another fundamental dimension that is often overlooked: the dimension of meaning. This is where narratives hold the key.

A common misconception is that there are only two ways of seeing the world: "our way" and "the other way." Such a binary view is far from accurate. Due to the way our brains work and how narratives are constructed, there are typically between five and nine – narrative

frameworks on a given issue. Each of these frameworks corresponds to a narrative community that shares a common way of interpreting the world.

Narrative communities interpret the world through similar frameworks, sharing fundamental thinking patterns, heroes and villains, and a common "narrative language." Understanding this diversity is crucial as disinformation exploits diverse "narrative languages" in very sophisticated ways, by targeting audiences with codes that are often misinterpreted by other communities.

Communication between different narrative communities is often challenging because, while they may use the same words, they attach different meanings to them. This creates a significant barrier to understanding—akin to people speaking different languages with poor translation. Disinformation exploits these gaps in understanding, embedding itself within existing narrative frameworks and reinforcing cognitive biases and pre-existing beliefs, making it even harder for these communities to find common ground. This is explored more in detail in ANNEX I: Dimensions of Narratives Exploited by Disinformation.

Disinformation, Narratives and Polarisation

Research from NODES confirms the powerful connection between disinformation and polarisation. Disinformation flourishes in polarised environments, where identity and emotional alignment often take precedence over factual accuracy, rendering fact-checking efforts largely ineffective. Polarisation, in turn, is further fuelled by disinformation, which exacerbates emotional triggers and deepens misunderstandings between different narrative communities. This creates a vicious cycle: as disinformation spreads, it intensifies polarisation, eroding trust in credible information and pushing individuals to retreat further into their own narrative communities, becoming less willing to engage with those who hold different or competing perspectives.

In polarised environments, communication between different narrative communities becomes increasingly impaired. **Studies show that the more polarised an issue becomes, the less facts matter.** This phenomenon has been observed across a range of issues, from vaccine hesitancy during the COVID-19 pandemic to the debates around migration, LGBTQI+ rights, and climate change. Once polarisation sets in, communication between different narrative communities breaks down, creating parallel realities with no common ground.

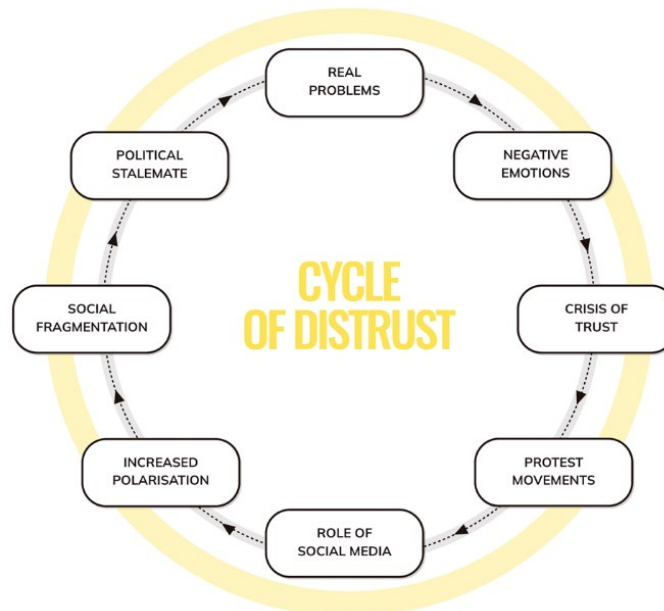
NODES research illustrates how disinformation thrives in divided societies, revealing that the more polarised a society becomes, the more susceptible it is to disinformation campaigns. This cyclical relationship not only deepens societal divisions but also weakens the foundations of democratic dialogue, making it increasingly difficult for meaningful dialogues to take place. Combatting this cycle requires more than just correcting false

information; it necessitates a deeper understanding of the appeal of narratives that give disinformation its power.

Interestingly, psychological theory shows that fact-checking tends to be most effective within narrative communities that are already less affected by disinformation. In contrast, those communities most vulnerable to disinformation often distrust fact-checking efforts altogether. It's important to note that in this research, “disinformation” is defined according to the standards established by European fact-checking organisations, including those under the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO).

Democracy, which relies on open debate, trust, and the free exchange of ideas, is especially fragile in environments characterised by deep polarisation. Both external and internal actors seeking to destabilise Europe have recognised and exploited this vulnerability. Their strategy is as straightforward as it is effective: amplify polarisation, irrespective of ideological positions, to create political deadlock and erode trust in democratic institutions.

This paradox is evident across Europe. While there is a broad consensus on the need for substantial reforms to tackle urgent challenges like digitalisation, globalisation, and climate change. Political fragmentation and polarisation have created an environment where significant reforms are nearly impossible to implement. **This political gridlock further entrenches the cycle of distrust, reinforcing divisions that undermine democratic governance and enhancing disinformation’s influence.**



Narratives as Vectors of Disinformation in a Polarised World

Disinformation campaigns don't simply distort facts—they embed falsehoods into narrative structures that resonate emotionally and cognitively with specific groups. These narratives can then spread rapidly, often without resistance, because they fit seamlessly into the pre-existing beliefs of certain communities.

As Anne Applebaum points out in *The New Propaganda War*, anti-democratic actors are not merely spreading lies; they aim to reshape entire worldviews by embedding narratives that subtly foster division and erode trust in institutions. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation campaigns tied public health measures to broader narratives of government overreach, loss of freedom, and elite control—narratives that already resonated with certain political and social groups.

NODES shows that while fact-checking efforts focused on disproving specific claims about masks and vaccines, they missed a crucial point: for many communities, these campaigns were never really about vaccines. They were about distrust—in government, in authority, and in corporate interests. The underlying message wasn't simply “don't trust vaccines” but “don't trust those in power” (see ANNEX I for further analysis). This focus on mistrust, rather than on specific medical claims, is what made these disinformation campaigns so powerful and persistent.

The effectiveness of this disinformation strategy became particularly clear when the focus of these campaigns shifted seamlessly from vaccines to other contentious issues like climate change, while maintaining the same underlying message of distrust. NODES has found that as public interest in vaccines waned, disinformation campaigns quickly adapted, framing climate policies as new forms of government control and elite overreach. This adaptability underscores that the core narrative was never truly about vaccines, climate, or migration—it was about fostering a deep-rooted mistrust in institutions.

This approach transcends traditional propaganda by manipulating the mental frameworks through which individuals interpret reality. Rather than attacking isolated facts, disinformation seeks to reshape the narratives that people use to understand the world, tapping into deeper emotional and psychological needs. This makes disinformation not only harder to counter but also more effective in sustaining division and mistrust within society.

By recognising this strategy for what it is, we are better equipped to counter disinformation. **Understanding that disinformation exploits pre-existing narrative frameworks allows us to focus on reshaping these narratives in a way that restores trust, promotes inclusivity, and encourages engagement across divided communities.**

Embracing a narrative-based approach is essential for building societal resilience and restoring the integrity of democratic dialogue.

Building Mental Resilience: Leveraging Narratives for Solutions

While much of the discourse surrounding disinformation emphasises its divisive and polarising effects, the NODES research reveals a more optimistic path forward: **a majority of polarisation is rooted in misunderstanding** rather than deep-seated, irreconcilable differences. This finding is transformative because it suggests that the gap between differing perspectives is often much smaller than we perceive and bridging that gap could be key to reversing the cycle of distrust.

Re-Imagine Europa's R.E.F.R.A.M.E Methodology, a tool extensively integrated into NODES research supported the formulation of **concrete strategies** to tackle polarisation through an understanding of **narrative dynamics**. Tools like narrative maps, narrative bridges, and the identification of narrative traps are designed to foster mental resilience against disinformation by targeting its emotional and psychological roots.

The efficacy of these tools is not unprecedented. Figures like Nelson Mandela have historically used narrative-based methodologies to shift the national conversation, as seen in his efforts to foster reconciliation in South Africa. What's new today is the scientific precision with which these tools can now be deployed. What previously required great instinct, and personal insight can today be bolstered with robust data analysis—both quantitative and qualitative—thanks to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the vast amounts of data available in the digital age.

For example, **narrative maps** help to identify different narrative communities engaged in a particular issue, alongside their metanarratives, values, objectives, language, and symbols. These maps illuminate where misunderstandings occur and reveal which communities are most vulnerable to disinformation. Once identified, **narrative bridges** can then be used to translate meaning between these communities, fostering dialogue and mitigating division. The **R.E.F.R.A.M.E Methodology** goes a step further by reframing polarising issues in ways that resonate across a broad spectrum of perspectives, avoiding the destructive “us vs. them” dynamic that disinformation often exploits.

Meanwhile, the identification of **narrative traps** helps expose the mental shortcuts and cognitive biases that many narratives contain. This allows communities and societies to uncover blind spots in their own thinking and address vulnerabilities that disinformation campaigns are likely to exploit.

By employing these tools, Europe can incorporate a narrative-based approach into its disinformation strategy. Rather than replacing existing measures, this approach would complement the current toolbox by addressing the deeper dimension of meaning, ensuring that the emotional and psychological underpinnings of disinformation are dismantled alongside factual inaccuracies. This layered strategy not only reverses the cycle of distrust but also fosters a more inclusive, informed, and resilient public discourse.

For more detailed information on these tools and methodologies, see ANNEX II: A Narrative Toolbox to Combat Disinformation and Polarisation.

Conclusions

The challenges posed by disinformation are intricately tied to the narratives that frame our understanding of reality. While fact-checking, media literacy, regulation of media platform, algorithms and incentive models are critical tools in countering falsehoods and in framing the media landscape, they address only part of the problem. Disinformation thrives on emotional resonance and deep-seated psychological biases, exploiting the narratives that define our worldview. The sophistication of today's disinformation campaigns goes beyond isolated facts, attacking the very structures through which societies organise meaning.

To effectively combat this, Europe must adopt a broader, more systemic approach—one that embraces the narrative frameworks in which these falsehoods are embedded. By leveraging tools like the R.E.F.R.A.M.E Methodology, narrative maps, and narrative bridges, we have an opportunity not just to correct disinformation but to rebuild trust, reduce polarisation, and strengthen democratic dialogue.

The European Democracy Shield proposed by President von der Leyen presents a timely opportunity to expand our approach to tackling disinformation. An additional dimension, narrative-based strategy—focused on reshaping the stories that connect individuals and communities—can play a key role in this effort. By recognising the power of narratives and using them to bridge divides, Europe can turn the tide against disinformation, transforming the negative forces that fuel polarisation into a source of democratic renewal.

In the next chapter, we will explore concrete recommendations for policymakers to incorporate these insights into actionable strategies. By integrating a narrative approach into the existing European disinformation toolbox, we can build mental resilience, foster inclusivity, and empower our societies to become more resistant to manipulation. Ultimately, if we harness this potential, the diversity of viewpoints in Europe can become our greatest asset—not a source of division, but a catalyst for a more vibrant, adaptable democracy.

Chapter 3 – Conclusions and Recommendations

“The confidence people have in their beliefs is not a measure of the quality of evidence, but of the coherence of the story the mind has managed to construct.”

Daniel Kahneman

Unlocking resilience in Europe’s democracy begins by mastering the narratives that shape our collective reality.

As the European Union begins a new political cycle, the fight against disinformation demands a strategic shift that harnesses the latest advances in psychology, neuroscience, behavioural science, and narrative analysis. In addition to the existing work on fact checking, media literacy, regulation of social media platforms and algorithms, an additional dimension focussed on “meaning” and the mental resilience is necessary. The NODES initiative, Europe’s first Narrative Observatory, has pioneered a new understanding of how narratives shape public discourse and drive polarisation. Building on these insights, the European Commission has the opportunity to implement practical measures that will not only enhance resilience against disinformation but also strengthen democratic processes and foster a more cohesive society.

We propose concrete recommendations to expand Europe’s disinformation strategy by integrating a narrative-based approach. These measures aim to address the deeper cognitive and emotional dynamics that make disinformation so potent, turning the energy of division into a force for societal renewal and democratic resilience.

Concrete Recommendations

1. Appoint an Expert Group on Narratives

EU institutions play a crucial role in framing the narratives through which societies understand reality. This influential role comes with both the opportunity and the responsibility to shape public discourse in a way that fosters dialogue. However, poorly framed narratives—whether by design or by accident—can exacerbate polarisation, deepen societal divisions, and fuel disinformation.

To address this, the European Commission should establish an Expert Group on Narratives. The group would be complementary to the existing initiatives already in place to combat disinformation that already focus on fact-checking and media literacy. This advisory body would be tasked with providing strategic, evidence-based guidance on how narrative structures can be used to foster more cooperative and constructive public discourse. By leveraging insights from narrative analysis, the group could help shape narratives that avoid terminology and framing that are polarising from the outset. Furthermore, in cases where issues have already become polarised, the Expert Group would provide tools to navigate these divides.

Core Responsibilities:

- **Strategic Narrative Guidance:** Offer the Commission scientifically robust advice on how to develop communication strategies that resonate with diverse communities, ensuring inclusivity while reducing polarisation.
- **Supporting Policy Framing:** Shape the narrative framing of key policies to make them more inclusive and appealing to different segments of the population, avoiding language that might alienate or polarise.
- **Proactive Disinformation Prevention:** Monitor narrative trends to identify vulnerabilities that may be exploited by disinformation campaigns, ensuring swift interventions that prevent disinformation from deepening societal divisions.
- **Research Support:** Advise the research agenda of European Narrative Observatories to ensure ongoing analysis of societal trends and narrative shifts.

The group would operate as an on-call body, activated when needed to provide targeted, issue-specific advice to help navigate and shape public discourse around contentious topics.

Use Case: Farmers' Protests and the Farm to Fork Strategy

The farmers' protests around the Farm to Fork Strategy highlighted how differing narratives can deepen polarisation and escalate conflict. A key issue was the framing of the strategy, which was perceived as a “people vs. planet” battle.

This narrative reinforced divisions between stakeholders who, in reality, share many goals—such as sustainability and economic stability—but prioritise them differently. Insights from narrative analysis could have detected this growing divide early on, helping to reframe the debate in a way that emphasised common ground. By adjusting the language and tone of communication, and focusing on shared objectives rather than opposition, the crisis could have been averted. Using tools like narrative maps and bridges, policymakers could have fostered more productive engagement, preventing the communication breakdown that led to the protests.

2. Support the Development of European Narrative Observatories

To effectively tackle disinformation and its role in polarising public discourse, Europe must expand its capacity to analyse and respond to the complex narratives that shape public opinion. Launched as a pilot project in 2023, NODES provides an innovative model for how narrative analysis can inform better policymaking and foster social cohesion.

Its success suggests a clear demand for and need to establish a network of European Narrative Observatories to serve as dedicated hubs to analyse and understand the narratives driving polarisation, disinformation, and public sentiment in different regions of Europe. Employing advanced data analysis techniques, including AI and big data, these observatories can map out the diverse and evolving narratives across the EU, providing crucial insights to policymakers.

Core Responsibilities:

- **Real-Time Narrative Analysis:** Provide continuous monitoring and analysis of public discourse across different European languages and regions, identifying emerging narratives and trends. These insights will inform policymakers on how to proactively address polarising issues before they escalate into larger societal divides.
- **Preventing Disinformation:** Through narrative analysis, observatories can pinpoint where disinformation is gaining traction and why specific communities are vulnerable, offering early-warning systems to combat falsehoods before they spread.
- **Promoting Social Cohesion:** By analysing the underlying values, concerns, and priorities embedded in competing narratives, observatories can help build bridges between fragmented communities and foster dialogue grounded in shared interests.
- **Policy Alignment:** The insights generated by these observatories will be invaluable in crafting EU policies that resonate with diverse publics, aligning EU communication strategies with the lived experiences and concerns of its citizens.

Expanding the network of Narrative Observatories would not only equip the EU with the tools to better combat disinformation but also foster a more united, informed, and resilient public sphere.

Use Case: AI Narratives in Europe

The current debate around AI is often dominated by sensational narratives about Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) and global competition. This framing, while attention-grabbing, is not particularly helpful in fostering a nuanced understanding of AI as a tool. The terminology itself—"Artificial Intelligence"—carries problematic connotations, leading people to either fear or idealise AI in ways that divert attention from its practical, more immediate uses.

These narratives risk deepening societal divisions, especially for communities that already feel alienated by technological advances. Insights from narrative analysis could help reframe the AI discussion, emphasising its role as a tool that can enhance healthcare, education, and other public services, rather than as an existential threat. By identifying and addressing these polarising trends early, policymakers can foster more inclusive, productive discussions around AI. Using narrative tools, such as maps and bridges, the European Commission could build a narrative that focuses on AI's practical applications, ensuring that all citizens see its potential benefits, and not just the risks.

3. Ensure Access to Data on Public Discourse for European Researchers

In the digital age, public discourse increasingly takes place on private platforms, such as social media and messaging apps, which makes it difficult for researchers to gain comprehensive insights into societal dynamics. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in tackling disinformation, polarisation, and evolving narratives. Public access to this critical data is often restricted, limiting the ability of researchers to identify trends and develop effective strategies to address these challenges. Raising awareness on the need for public access helps level the playing field, as major social media platforms already possess extensive data, which is readily available for purchase by commercial and political actors.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) includes provisions aimed at increasing transparency and granting data access for research purposes. Yet, to fully realise the potential of these provisions, the European Commission must ensure that researchers across Europe can effectively access and analyse this data, while adhering to GDPR and other European data protection regulations. Facilitating this access, through the support of these policies and awareness raising, will provide the evidence base necessary to develop informed, effective policies that safeguard democratic discourse and counter disinformation.

Core Responsibilities:

- Granting Access to Critical Data: Ensure that European researchers have timely and comprehensive access to anonymised data on public discourse, enabling them to study narrative shifts, disinformation trends, and polarisation dynamics across various platforms and regions.
- Supporting Research Initiatives: Collaborate with European universities and research institutions to support studies that leverage this data in order to analyse disinformation, understand the impact of narratives on public opinion, and develop tools for combatting information manipulation.
- Upholding Data Protection Standards: Work closely with data protection authorities to ensure that research access complies fully with GDPR and other privacy regulations, maintaining the trust of citizens while ensuring that important research is not hindered by data restrictions.

Ensuring timely access to data for European researchers will not only enhance the EU's ability to respond swiftly to disinformation but will also strengthen the foundation of informed, evidence-based policymaking, fostering a more transparent and resilient democratic discourse.

Use Case: Real-Time Data Access in Crisis Situations

During the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation narratives linking public health measures to government overreach spread rapidly across online platforms. Had researchers been granted real-time access to data on these emerging narratives, they could have provided policymakers with insights on how to adjust their communication strategies, potentially preventing the escalation of mistrust.

By enabling early identification of disinformation trends through real-time data analysis, the EU could respond more effectively to crises. This would ensure more targeted, pre-emptive measures that build trust and reduce the spread of falsehoods, safeguarding public health and democratic resilience.

4. Enhance Citizen Dialogues and Deliberative Democracy with Narrative Analysis

Citizen dialogues present a powerful avenue for democratic renewal, offering a safe space where polarisation can be mitigated, consensus built, and new ideas can flourish. Unlike politically charged environments, participatory initiatives allow individuals to engage with diverse perspectives, stepping outside their own narrative communities to discover how differently others see the world. Research shows that participants in these dialogues are more willing to listen, empathise, and co-create solutions that transcend entrenched polarisations.

By integrating narrative analysis methodologies, these initiatives can move beyond binary "either/or" debates and instead explore more creative, inclusive framings of societal issues.

This approach can foster new narratives that better align with the complex realities Europe faces today, encouraging a more dynamic public discourse that reflects a wide range of lived experiences.

With advances in digital technologies and public engagement platforms like the European-funded ORBIS project, there is potential to scale these dialogues across Europe. Doing so would not only amplify citizen participation but also unleash an unparalleled space for democratic creativity, enabling citizens to directly shape the future of European policymaking.

Core Responsibilities:

- **Narrative-Based Dialogue Design**: Incorporate narrative analysis tools to help design citizen dialogues that deeply explore diverse viewpoints, creating more meaningful engagement.
- **Translators of Meaning**: Act as "translators of meaning" by identifying and translating core values and concerns of different communities, fostering active listening and mutual understanding.
- **Strategic Public Engagement**: Expand the purpose of dialogues into strategic platforms for collaborative problem-solving. Democratic engagement should create inclusive spaces where diverse voices contribute on innovative ideas and solutions.
- **Scaling Dialogues**: Leverage technologies like the ORBIS socio-technical solution to scale up these actions across Europe, fostering a broader, more efficient and cohesive public dialogue that engages citizens at all levels.

Citizen dialogues offer a promising path for democratic renewal, providing spaces for diverse perspectives to interact constructively, reducing polarisation, and fostering collaborative problem-solving. By using narrative analysis these dialogues can cultivate more inclusive and creative public discourse across Europe.

Use Case: Public discourse around migration

Migration remains one of the most polarising issues in Europe, with narratives often detached from reality. António Vitorino, former Director-General of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), observed that migration debates are framed by deep-rooted worldviews, emotions, and value systems, leading to a discourse far removed from reality.

Narrative analysis tools can help identify the blind spots in these discussions, showing how deeply ingrained frames of reference prevent constructive dialogue. Rather than perpetuating polarising structures, narrative tools can be used to craft new, more inclusive narratives—narratives that reflect the complexities of migration and foster mutual understanding across communities. In short, these tools can pave the way for a new narrative on migration, one that is less divisive and more grounded in shared human experiences.

5. Foster International Collaboration on Narrative Analysis

Disinformation networks do not respect national borders, and combatting them effectively requires a coordinated, global effort. As President von der Leyen noted in her political guidelines, Europe's global role must include fostering international partnerships to tackle disinformation. Narrative analysis can provide the framework to lead this collaboration and strengthen global resilience to disinformation.

By partnering with national governments, international organisations, and Third countries, the EU can share best practices, research, and insights on how narratives shape public discourse and contribute to polarisation. Through shared efforts, Europe can address the growing influence of disinformation campaigns that exploit global divides and undermine democratic processes.

International collaboration on narrative analysis would not only help dismantle disinformation networks but also promote better mutual understanding across regions. Europe can play a critical role in uniting global efforts to combat disinformation and strengthen the resilience of democratic societies worldwide.

Core Responsibilities:

- **International Research Collaboration:** Facilitate cross-border research projects on narrative analysis, allowing for shared insights and data across regions.
- **Coordinated Responses:** Develop shared strategies to dismantle disinformation networks that operate across national boundaries.
- **Best Practice Sharing:** Establish regular training programs and workshops that bring together narrative experts from different countries to exchange methodologies and best practices in narrative analysis and disinformation resilience.

By fostering international collaboration on narrative analysis, the European Commission can more effectively combat disinformation while building stronger, more resilient global partnerships.

Use Case: Global narratives on Climate

Disinformation thrives on misunderstanding and exploits the distinct sensibilities of different regions, turning climate change into a source of global polarisation. Disinformation campaigns leverage pre-existing distrust, particularly between the Global North and South. These campaigns exploit underlying meta-narratives like the belief that the "developed world" is using climate change as a tool to restrain the development of the Global South, or the perception that bureaucrats are seeking to micromanage individual lives.

These disinformation efforts thrive on and fuel anti-Western sentiment and undermine trust in international and global institutions. Traditional fact-checking methods, though crucial, often fall short in these cases, as they inadvertently reinforce existing distrust toward authorities. A new narrative approach is essential at a global level one that addresses underlying values, frustrations, and concerns rather than just correcting factual inaccuracies. By focusing on shared concerns and fostering mutual understanding, narrative analysis could help counteract these disinformation tactics and reduce polarisation globally.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

The recommendations outlined here provide a roadmap for a more comprehensive and proactive approach to combatting disinformation and polarisation. With the rise of digital platforms and the speed at which disinformation spreads, Europe must be prepared to tackle not only the content of false information but the deeper narrative frameworks that shape public discourse.

As we move into the coming political cycle, the time is ripe to embrace new tools and methodologies that integrate narrative analysis, psychological insights, and cross-border collaboration. By doing so, the European Commission can build societal resilience, foster trust in democratic institutions, and counteract the forces that seek to undermine cohesion. This is not simply a matter of policy; it is an urgent necessity for protecting the integrity of our democracies in the digital age.

The European Union has always been at the forefront of innovation, and the battle against disinformation presents an opportunity to lead once again. By integrating these narrative tools into the broader democratic framework, we can transform polarisation into productive dialogue and mistrust into cooperation. The time to act is now, and with the right strategic vision, Europe can not only defend itself against the threats of disinformation but also strengthen its position as a beacon of renewed democracy and unity.

ANNEX I - Dimensions of Narratives Exploited by Disinformation

NODES was established to create a more robust understanding of the relationship between narratives and disinformation by examining three highly polarising issues characterised by significant disinformation: Climate Change, COVID-19, and Migration. Research has revealed not only a clear link between narratives and disinformation but also that narratives are the primary vectors through which disinformation spreads.

One striking finding, aligning with previous data, is that disinformation spreads far more rapidly than factual information. This heightened effectiveness stems from the deliberate crafting of disinformation to infiltrate communities swiftly, leveraging the most emotionally charged and resonant stories. In the research community, it is well-known that one of the quickest indicators of disinformation is the speed at which it propagates across networks. Currently, an estimated 40% of all information online is generated by bots, a figure expected to rise significantly with the advent of more advanced AI technologies.

Given this landscape, we must ask: why is disinformation so effective, and why do the tools we currently use to combat it often fall short? To answer this, we need to explore the different dimensions of narratives that disinformation exploits: priorities and worldviews; emotions and feelings; and semantics and symbolism.

A) Priorities and Worldviews

Disinformation often taps into existing priorities and worldviews within narrative communities. These are not just about the specific issues at hand—such as vaccines or climate change—but are often about deeper, more fundamental concerns like freedom, control, and trust.

This is linked to the structure of the narratives. How do we view ourselves? Who are our heroes and villains? Understanding this is crucial to see how disinformation exploits these vulnerabilities.

Example box: Disinformation During the Pandemic—Beyond the Surface Issues

Emerging Narrative: A growing global narrative suggests that bureaucrats are using crises as a pretext to erode personal freedoms and expand control.

Deployment During COVID-19: During the pandemic, this narrative was strategically used to frame lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccination

campaigns as tools of government overreach rather than public health necessities. The central message was not concerned with the scientific evidence for these measures but rather focused on the idea that the government was exploiting the crisis to strip away individual liberties.

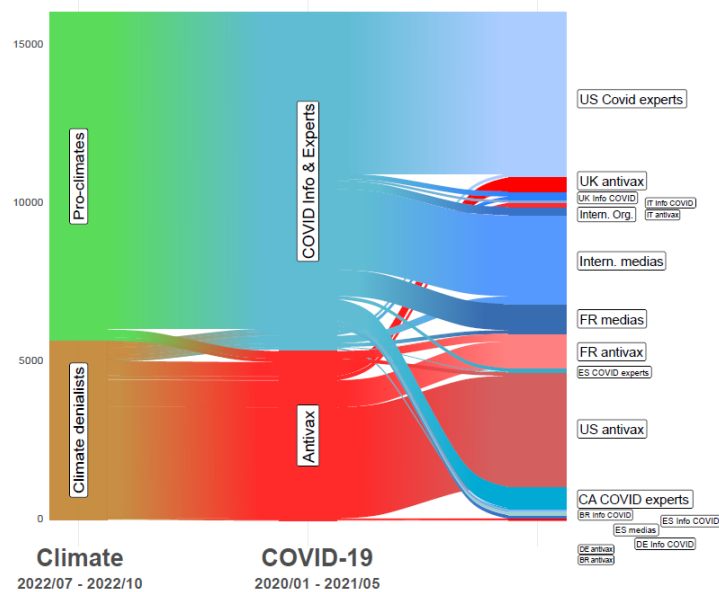
[VILLAIN] is using [ISSUE] to control [PROTAGONIST]
 [BUREAUCRATS] are using [COVID PANDEMIC] to control [ME]

Repurposing for Climate Change: As the immediate threat of the pandemic diminished, the same narrative was seamlessly adapted to the climate change debate. Here, the narrative shifted to suggest that climate regulations, like pandemic measures, were just another attempt by bureaucrats to exert control over people’s lives.

As is clearly seen when schematised in this way, the subject of this type of disinformation campaign is not climate, vaccines or migration. It is the “bureaucrats”. Fact-checking has the opposite effect on the communities that are susceptible to this type of campaign as it further underlines how bureaucrats are again trying to manipulate you. To debunk this type of disinformation you need to go beyond the obvious and understand the deeper message and how to speak to people who do feel this way.

[BUREAUCRATS] are using [CLIMATE] to control [ME]

Figure 1- Correlation between Climate and Covid narrative communities



Source: NODES (2024). The Narratives that Shape our World - Narrative Analysis Report [online] available at: [D2.2 Report on the Narrative Analysis \(nodes.eu\)](https://nodes.eu/D2.2-Report-on-the-Narrative-Analysis)

B) Emotions and Feelings

Our cognitive processes are deeply intertwined with our emotions. As António Damásio observed, "We are not thinking machines that feel; we are feeling machines that think." Our rationality often serves to justify our emotions rather than override them. When a story aligns with how we feel, we are more likely to accept it as true. Conversely, if a narrative contradicts our emotions or values, we are inclined to dismiss it as false or wrong, regardless of the facts presented.

Disinformation exploits this interplay between emotions and rationality by crafting narratives that resonate emotionally with specific communities.

Example box:

Consider the following narrative structure:

[PROTAGONIST] is drowning. [ISSUE] is important but not an immediate priority. [PROTAGONIST] cannot afford it. [ISSUE] is a luxury.

What does it make you feel? Who do you empathise with? What does it make you feel about the issue?

This is a key structure in the anti-migration debate:

[I] am drowning. [MIGRATION – HELPING PEOPLE WHO ARE STRUGGLING IN OTHER COUNTRIES] is important but not an immediate priority. [I] cannot afford it. [MIGRATION] is a luxury.

The emotions embedded in this narrative make it resonate with individuals who feel overlooked or marginalised. They perceive those in power as prioritising "others" over "us," creating a sense of injustice and frustration. Now consider how the same narrative structure is applied in the climate change debate:

[I] am drowning. [CLIMATE] is important but not an immediate priority. [I] cannot afford it. [CLIMATE] is a luxury.

Here, the narrative suggests that elites are diverting resources to idealistic goals instead of addressing the immediate needs of those struggling to make ends meet. This narrative structure effectively shifts the focus away from the scientific facts about climate change and frames the issue as one of economic survival versus environmental idealism.

Narratives do not operate in isolation—they respond to and interact with the framing of other narrative communities. In the example above, when climate advocates frame their message around necessary sacrifices, it can inadvertently reinforce the perception within this narrative community that "they" are the ones being sacrificed.

Understanding these narrative frameworks allows us to listen differently and recognise the deeper emotional and cognitive drivers behind public discourse. This understanding is crucial for developing strategies that effectively counteract the divisive power of disinformation.

C) Semantics and Symbolism

Language is a powerful tool in shaping and reinforcing narratives, but its meaning can vary widely between different narrative communities. Each community develops its own unique code and symbolism that resonates deeply within its members, making the same words—such as "freedom," "sustainability" or "justice"—carry different connotations depending on the context. Disinformation exploits these semantic differences, embedding itself within the language and symbolism that feels most familiar and credible to specific communities.

Example box:

Consider the following narrative structure:

AI is a revolutionary technology that will help us find better solutions to combat climate.

The words highlighted in red are trigger words that mean very different things to different communities. Here are different ways that this sentence will be understood by different communities:

AI is another technology that will disempower us. Climate is the excuse to do it.

AI will solve our problems.

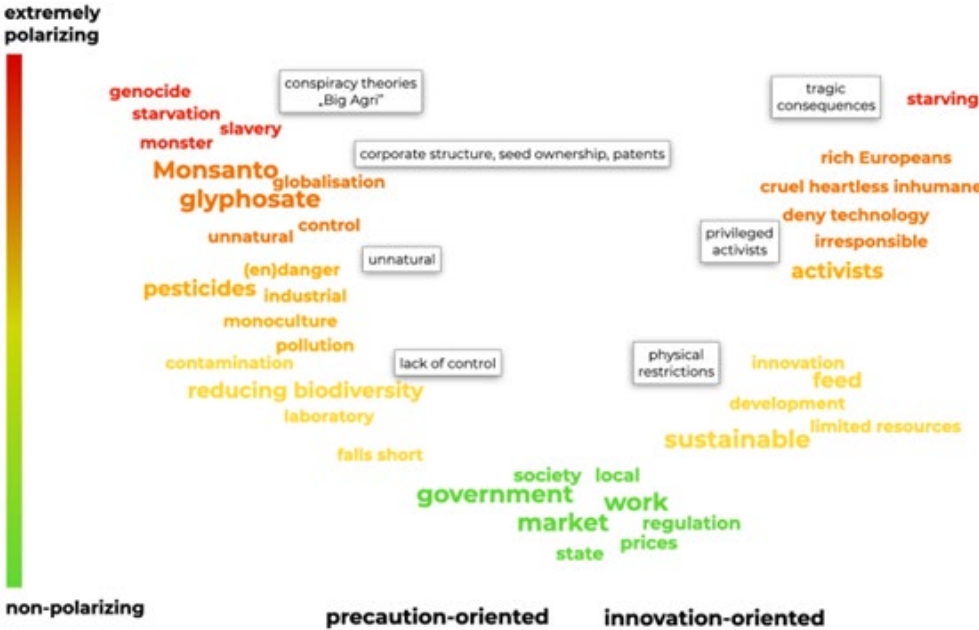
Technology is against nature, so this is just another hoax.

These differing interpretations show how the same sentence can be reframed according to the underlying beliefs and values of various communities.

The importance of semantics and symbolism shows in other debates such as the one on New Genomic Techniques (NGT). The graph below depicts how different phrases pertain to different narrative communities and can be used

as triggers of polarisation and division. The croissant maps out how specific words fall into varying degrees of polarisation through colour-codes—red for highly polarising, yellow for moderate, and green for neutral. It's crucial to recognise that the same word can resonate differently across narrative landscapes: "breakthrough technology" may signal progress for some, yet for others, it's a red-alert of caution.

Figure 2 - Trigger Croissant: Polarising Language on NGTs



ANNEX II – A Narrative Toolbox to Combat Disinformation and Polarisation

The battle against disinformation requires more than fact-checking—it demands a strategic focus on narrative dynamics. Narratives are the frameworks through which individuals and communities interpret reality, and disinformation campaigns exploit these to drive polarisation. The Narrative Toolbox, developed by NODES, offers a set of evidence-based tools designed to combat this by mapping narratives, building bridges between divided communities, and identifying common cognitive traps.

A) Narrative Maps

The primary purpose of narrative maps is to provide a comprehensive visualisation of the different ways that various communities engage with an issue. In doing so, they highlight the narrative communities that exist and show how their values, objectives, and concerns are expressed through their framing of the issue. This is essential for understanding polarisation, as it often stems from differing narrative structures rather than from fundamentally irreconcilable differences in values.

- i. Identifying Narrative Communities: Narrative maps categorise stakeholders into distinct groups, based on their worldviews, values, and emotional responses to an issue. These communities often interpret the same events or policies through very different lenses. A narrative map helps to reveal these different lenses, making it easier to understand why communication between them might be challenging.
- ii. Analysing Shared Values: One of the key strengths of narrative maps is their ability to pinpoint shared values and goals across seemingly opposed groups. By identifying these commonalities, policymakers can craft messages that resonate more broadly across the spectrum of narrative communities.
- iii. Detecting Vulnerabilities to Disinformation: Certain narrative communities are more vulnerable to disinformation than others, often because of emotional triggers, cognitive biases, or unmet needs. Narrative maps can help identify these communities by showing where the narratives they engage with leave them most susceptible to false or misleading information.

Structure of Narrative Maps

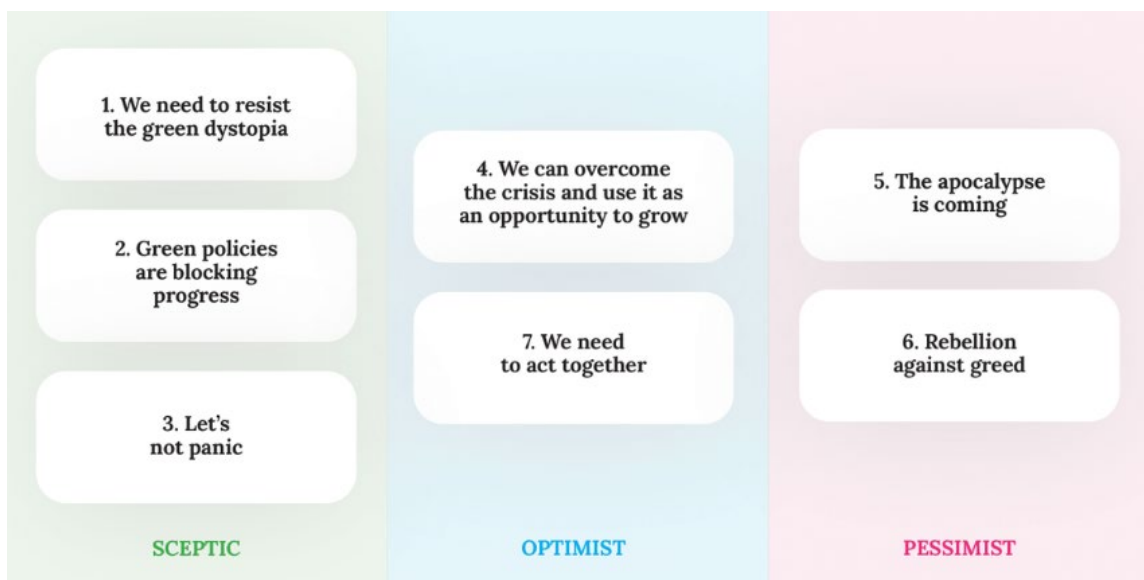
A typical narrative map focuses on three main elements:

- i. Structure of the Narrative: This element focuses on the overall progression and framework of the narrative. It determines whether the narrative community sees the situation improving, deteriorating, or in a state of conflict. It also highlights the key events or conflicts driving the story. For

example, in debates about migration, one community may view the narrative as a "crisis" worsening over time, while another might frame it as an opportunity for societal enrichment.

- ii. Values and priorities that unite the Community: This element identifies the core values and emotional drivers behind the narrative. It focuses on the "heroes" and "villains" that different communities create to make sense of the issue. For instance, in climate change debates, one community might frame corporate polluters as villains, while another might see environmental regulations as oppressive. This aspect reveals the emotional underpinnings of the narrative and helps explain why these communities interpret the same facts in drastically different ways.
- iii. Code (Symbols and Language): Different narrative communities often use similar symbols or language to convey vastly different meanings. The term "freedom," for example, might refer to personal autonomy for one group but signify freedom from regulation for another. This dimension of the narrative map highlights the specific terms, symbols, and language that resonate within each community and the different interpretations attached to them. Understanding these symbolic codes is crucial for effective communication and reducing misunderstandings between communities.

Example of narrative maps:



B) Narrative Bridges

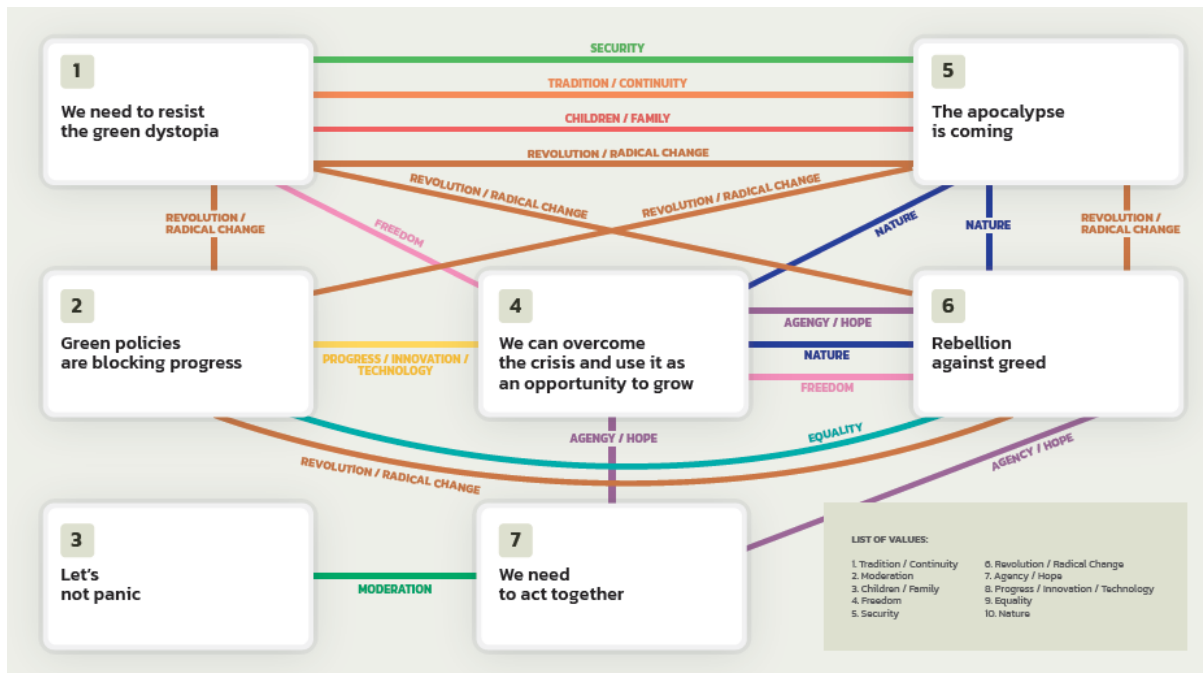
Narrative Bridges are tools designed to foster communication and understanding between distinct narrative communities. These bridges are built upon the common ground identified through Narrative Maps, focusing on shared values, emotions, and concerns, even when communities seem divided by opposing viewpoints. By translating key aspects of one narrative community's worldview into terms and symbols understood by another, Narrative Bridges help facilitate dialogue, encourage empathy, and ultimately reduce polarisation.

The importance of Narrative Bridges lies in their capacity to act as translators of meaning between groups that are often talking past each other. Many disagreements arise not from fundamental value differences but from misunderstandings or differing narrative frameworks. Bridging these gaps helps mitigate conflict, fosters collaboration, and enables communities to work together on common goals.

Key Elements of Narrative Bridges:

- i. Translating Meaning Across Communities: Narrative Bridges help transform how a message is communicated by adjusting the language, symbols, and values to resonate with a different community's narrative framework. For example, a message about climate change framed in terms of economic growth and job creation can appeal to communities that might otherwise reject it as merely an environmental issue.
- ii. Focusing on Shared Goals and Values: Rather than emphasising differences, Narrative Bridges concentrate on aligning shared goals. Even seemingly opposed communities often value similar things, such as security, family, or freedom, but express these values differently. By crafting narratives that highlight shared objectives—like economic security, environmental sustainability, or public health—bridges can be built to overcome polarisation.
- iii. Preventing Narrative Translation Errors: One of the core functions of a Narrative Bridge is to prevent narrative translation errors—miscommunications that arise when one community's language or symbols are interpreted differently by another. By identifying where these misunderstandings are likely to occur, narrative bridges can pre-emptively correct these errors, helping prevent polarisation from worsening.

Example of narrative bridges:



C) Narrative Traps

One of the key tools developed by NODES is the identification of narrative traps—cognitive biases and mental shortcuts that shape how individuals and communities interpret complex issues. These thinking patterns, as described by Daniel Kahneman, often persist even when they lead us to incorrect conclusions. Similar to how AI systems are often criticised for their “black-box” nature—reaching decisions without clear transparency—humans are prone to their own “black-box” thinking, in which ingrained mental fallacies influence perceptions without being fully examined. These traps, deeply embedded in our cognitive processes, guide how we frame issues and process information, often distorting reality.

By understanding these narrative traps, we can better recognise the subtle ways in which disinformation exploits our cognitive biases, leading to polarisation and mistrust. Recognising and addressing these traps is crucial in fostering more accurate, nuanced dialogues across divided communities.

Example Box:

In the context of climate change, NODES research identified several common erroneous thinking patterns shared across various narrative communities:

The Myth of People vs. Planet Dichotomy: The debate around climate change is frequently framed as a conflict between human needs and environmental preservation. However, this is a false dichotomy. In reality, the goal is to ensure

a habitat that remains suitable for human life. This framing obscures the inherent connection between protecting the environment and human survival, making it appear that we must make strange moral choices that are actually fabricated by our narrative structures.

The Myth of Necessary Suffering to Do Good: A pervasive belief in European thought suggests that doing “good” deeds requires self-sacrifice. This mindset is evident across various issues, from migration to COVID-19, and is particularly pronounced in the climate change debate. The idea that we must endure hardship to address climate change lacks support from research, yet it continues to shape public perception and policy.

As a result, two of the three prevailing stances on climate policy—those of pessimists and sceptics—frame these policies negatively. Pessimists view them as a “necessary sacrifice,” while sceptics see them as “luxuries we cannot afford.” Since these two groups are the most vocal, the dominant message, regardless of one’s stance on climate change, is that climate policies are inherently undesirable and will lead to a worse future. Whether seen as a burden or a sacrifice, the underlying narrative is the same: climate policies are bad.

The Myth of Sustainability vs. Innovation: Another widespread fallacy is the belief that sustainability and innovation are opposites—that innovation is somehow unnatural or incompatible with environmental goals. This flawed narrative ignores the potential for innovation to drive sustainable solutions. For instance, people may prefer “wood” to “gas” because it seems more “natural,” despite the fact that gas is less harmful to the environment. Or they might advocate for reducing technology use, which could actually be catastrophic for environmental sustainability if it reduces efficiency in energy or food production. We need a narrative that recognises innovation as a crucial element of sustainability.

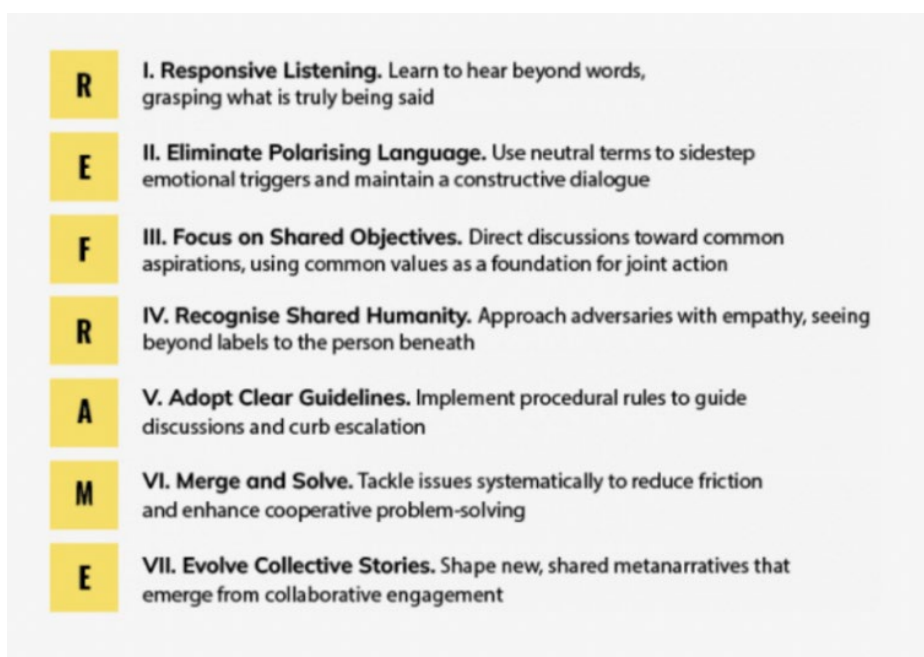
These examples highlight that all communities, regardless of their stance on specific issues, are prone to faulty reasoning. If we approach these discussions with greater humility and less defensiveness, we can work together to develop narratives that are more accurately aligned with reality and better suited to address the challenges we face.

D) The R.E.F.R.A.M.E Methodology and Depolarisation Manual

Long-standing conflicts often evolve into self-reinforcing cycles, where the mechanics of disagreement overshadow the actual issues at hand. Over time, debates may become more about perpetuating opposition than solving the problem. The R.E.F.R.A.M.E Methodology is designed to break these cycles by refocusing attention on the core issues, rather than allowing emotions and entrenched positions to dominate the discussion.

Rooted in psychology, semiotics, and communication theory, this approach is not about stripping emotions from debate. Instead, it acknowledges that emotions are integral to how people reason and decide. As António Damásio noted, "We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think." The goal of R.E.F.R.A.M.E is to navigate emotions constructively and avoid common pitfalls that escalate tensions.

The methodology is structured around seven key steps that offer a practical framework for depolarising discussions and fostering more productive dialogue. Rather than focusing on winning arguments, the aim is to foster mutual understanding, explore diverse perspectives, and create a range of potential solutions that address the needs and values of all stakeholders.



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N O D E S

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