

## Reassessing “Whose Story Wins”: The Trajectory of Identity Resilience in Narrative Contests

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Controlling and winning the narrative has become a prominent refrain in public diplomacy as political actors seek to dominate the information battlefield. However, while actors may readily engage in narrative battles, they struggle to win them decisively, especially when using social media. This article argues that narrative contests are inherently identity battles in that narratives contain intertwined elements of identity and image. Although intertwined, identity and image appear to have distinctive features, inhabit different information realms, and, when challenged, assume divergent narrative spheres and trajectories. Whereas images are largely contestable and follow a linear trajectory of narrative coherence, challenges to identity spark a trajectory of identity resilience that ensures the survival of the entity but results in a cascade of narrative paradoxes. Underexplored distinctions between identity and image raise the need to reassess strategic options in narrative contests, especially when using social media. The Israeli–Hamas narrative battle on Twitter during the Gaza 2014 conflict is used to probe examples of identity self-expression and self-preservation in the narrative trajectory of identity resilience.

*Keywords: public diplomacy, strategic narratives, identity, images, Israeli–Palestinian conflict*

In recent years, state and non-state actors have been increasingly engaged in narrative battles in an effort to win the hearts and minds of global publics. “Success,” stated Nye, “is not merely the result of whose army wins, but also whose story wins” (2004, p. 106). The phrase “whose story wins” originated with the writings of John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. The two RAND scholars foresaw narrative battles as part of a coming revolution in diplomacy and the emerging challenge of adversarial non-state actors, networks, and netwars (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001). Narratives were a vital aspect of netwars. As the information age intensified, the scholars argued, the clash of hard power on the military and economic

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battlefield would shift to soft power battles over ideas, images, and values in a global realm of the mind, or “noosphere.” Noopolitik, they opined, would eclipse realpolitik.

In the decade since their writings, public diplomacy has taken up the mantra of whose story wins. Political actors have become increasingly adept at constructing narratives and analyzing their opponent’s narratives, as evident in a mushrooming volume of literature (Archetti, 2013, 2015; Halverson, Goodall, & Corman, 2011; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013; Mor, 2009, 2014; Pamment, 2014). Yet even as states hone their narratives, they struggle to achieve a definitive victory, especially against weaker or rogue actors using social media. Counternarrative strategies, in particular, are producing narrative paradoxes or unexpected inconsistencies as weaker actors become defiant (Jan, 2015) and even co-opt messages (Bartolucci & Corman, 2015; Cottee, 2015). In practical terms, counterterrorism efforts are failing despite the urgent need (Presidential Task Force, 2009; van Ginkel, 2015).

These unexpected outcomes give pause to the idea of whose story wins. Nye equates the soft power goal of winning narratives to the hard power goal of winning military battles. Yet, are armies fighting on a military battlefield analogous to narrative battles in the global political arena, or in the global realm of the mind?

This study argues that narrative battles are inherently identity battles in that they contain intertwined elements of how an actor experiences itself (identity) and how it tries to project itself to others (image). Although intertwined within narratives, identity and image appear to have distinctive features, inhabit different information realms, and, when challenged, assume divergent narrative spheres and trajectories. Whereas images are largely contestable and follow a linear trajectory of narrative coherence, challenges to identity spark a phenomenon of identity resilience that ensures the survival of the entity but results in a cascade of narrative paradoxes. Distinctions between identity and images have been underexplored in public diplomacy and may suggest the need for reassessing the goals and strategies of narrative contests.

To develop this argument, this article takes an interdisciplinary approach, weaving together theoretical threads from literature on strategic narratives from public diplomacy with insights on identity and image from communication studies. The first section explores strategic narratives with a focus on identity. The second section focuses on the conceptual connections and distinctions between identity and image. The third section looks at how identity and image align to the differing information realms identified by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) in their discussion of noopolitik. The fourth section examines how identity and image diverge into different narrative spheres and trajectories during narrative battles. As a means of tracing the narrative trajectory of identity resilience, a probability probe is conducted using the Israeli–Hammas narrative battle on Twitter during the Gaza conflict in 2014. The article concludes with the strategic implications of identity resilience for narrative strategies in public diplomacy.

### **Public Diplomacy, Strategic Narratives, and Identity**

Over the decade since Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) spotlighted narratives, the narrative approach has received increased attention. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) suggested strategic

narratives as a lens for understanding the communication dynamics among actors in the international political arena. Political actors use strategic narratives "to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 4). Narratives become "strategic" in the sense that the "compelling story lines which can explain events" have the power to influence (Freedman, 2006, p. 22).

In public diplomacy, strategic narratives have become a critical tool for influencing publics and policy makers of allies (Pamment, 2014; Patterson & Monroe, 1998) as well as adversaries (Faizullaev & Cornut, 2016; Halverson et al., 2011). Strategies to introduce narratives include media interviews, op-ed articles, public statements, and speeches (Pouliot, 2010) as well as symbolic nonverbal diplomatic communication (Jönsson & Hall, 2005). While broadcast and print media have been the favored media for reaching publics, recently social media has been added to the mix (Dafoe & Lyall, 2015).

Identity is a central concept in strategic narratives. Actors give meaning to themselves and others through narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013), and narratives, in turn, have the capacity to shape who we are (our identity), what we know (our knowledge), and what we do (our actions) (Archetti, 2013). Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) suggested that narratives play a dual role. Internally, narratives help hold members within a network together and help provide a sense of shared identity. Externally, narratives convey the network's mission and purpose to outside audiences.

*Identity*, however, has been used inconsistently and often interchangeably with *image* by scholars (Alexandrov, 2003; Krause & Renwick, 1996). Within the literature, terms include *self-esteem* (Femenia, 2000), *self-presentation* (Mor, 2009, 2014), *self-understandings* (Alexandrov, 2003), and *self-imaginings* (Korostelina, 2014). Identity, as it relates to actors in the international arena, often refers to specific visible and intrinsic features, such as national flags, language, national leaders, territory, and span as well political, economic, and cultural spheres (Avraham & First, 2013). Alternatively, identity is used to signify national, political, cultural, or ethnic groupings and includes terms such as *national identity* (Neumann, 1998; Smith, 1991, 2002) and *collective identity* (Wendt, 1999). These external identity labels or features often eschew the internal, psychological sense of identity (Guibernau, 2004; Singh, 2013). Miskimmon et al. (2013), for example, cast their discussion of identity and narratives within the observable structure of the international system. The identity of great powers are those with leadership within the system. Normal powers are those that adopt the rules, institutions, and norms of the international system. Finally, weak and rogue states are so because of their position within or resistance to the system: "they do not follow the rules of the international system" (p. 39).

In turning to narrative contests, the idea of whose story wins suggests that if an actor can succeed in shaping the narrative, then he or she can win the political battle (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001). States wage narrative battles to define a situation and shape how events, policies, and actions are perceived (Entman, 2003). Narrative contests are particularly important for shaping perceptions of actors (Dimitrui, 2012), including perceptions of credibility and legitimacy (Faizullaev & Cornut, 2016; Miskimmon et al., 2013). Actors seek to project and protect their positive identity attributes while attacking those of adversaries in an effort to gain vital support during a conflict (Mor, 2007, 2014).

Although narrative contests are often waged over tangible issues and interests, they also have repercussions for identity (Neumann, 1998; Noll, 2008). In narrative contests, identity is often linked to underlying intangible dimensions of emotions and ideologies (Farrands, 1996; Fattah & Fierke, 2009). Miller (2012) suggests narrative contests are not so much between actors but what he calls "ideographs," or a constellation of images, emotions, understanding, connotations, and facts. Emotional dimensions of narrative contests impact national self-esteem (Femenia, 2000) and help define allegiances (Graham, 2014; Scott, 2011) and recognition (Lebow, 2008; Lindemann & Ringmar, 2012).

While influencing policy makers and the public is the goal, the assumed battleground of narrative battles is the media or media ecosystem (Miskommon et al., 2013). Because actors rely on media to tell their story (Dimitrui, 2012; Shumate, Bryant, & Monge, 2005), those who win access to the media first can gain dominance in setting the tone of the coverage (Wolfsfeld, 1997). Cultivated relations between officials and the elite media as well as cultural resonance can produce what Entman (2003) described as a cascading effect of favorable framing outcomes. In addition to framing, rhetorical strategies have been a dominant tool used for formulating and contesting narratives (Mor, 2007, 2009; Robert & Shenhav, 2014).

Traditionally, studies have focused on narrative contests between state actors and involve analyzing official statements and state actions as related in the elite media (Shumate et al., 2005). Increasingly, however, the nature of narrative contests is changing on two important fronts. First, as portended by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001), non-state actors have become more active in the political arena. States are increasingly finding themselves engaged in narrative contests with weak and rogue state actors as well as agile non-state actors (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010). Non-state and weaker actors are not only challenging state actors, they are using different media tools. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media platforms are now prime narrative battlefields (Siapera, 2014; Zeitzoff, 2011).

While narrative battles often begin with a zero-sum goal in mind, the outcome is often less definitive and may even counter the actual reality on the ground (Fink & Barclay, 2013; Miskommon et al., 2013). The relative size or power of the actor in the international arena does not necessarily determine the logic of engaging in narrative battles or determining who "wins" (Cottee, 2015; Jan, 2015; Roselle, 2011). The role of perspective and other intangible elements in narratives may be pivotal unspoken assumptions in the contestation of narratives. Counternarrative strategies, in particular, are failing to produce their intended outcomes (Archetti, 2015). For example, Goodall, Cheong, Fleischer, and Corman (2012) discovered that using humor and ridicule in counterextremist narratives can produce unpredictable results, especially when there are cultural differences between the parties.

How can one explain these narrative inconsistencies? Miskommon et al. (2013) did grapple with the challenge of defining narrative victory. The scholars observed that practitioners might achieve short-term success, but long-term success remained less certain. Interestingly, they pointed particularly to identity, suggesting that the process of long-term shifts in meaning rested on a better understanding of how identity and interest formed and the control that any actor has over the process.

### **Examining Identity and Image in Narratives**

This study picks up on Miskommon et al. (2013) and pursues identity as a pivotal key in unlocking our understanding of narrative paradoxes. As a fundamental point of departure from current scholarship, this study suggests that rather than short-term and long-term distinctions of identity, there are actually two separate phenomena: a short-term, *contestable* image and the long-term *noncontestable* identity. Although both are intertwined within the narrative, their distinctive features place them in different information spheres and trigger divergent narrative trajectories in narrative contests. As will be explored later in the case probe, the narrative trajectory of identity resilience lies at the heart of unexpected narrative events and paradoxes.

### ***Intertwined within the Narrative***

As mentioned earlier, the terms *identity* and *image* are often used interchangeably in the literature. This tendency may stem from the integral link between the two. At the micro level, symbolic interactionism captures the intertwined connection between how we see ourselves and how others see us (Mead, 1934). At the meso and macro levels, organizational communication scholars have described identity as the essence or core of "who we are," or that which is "central, enduring and distinctive" for an organization and its members (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006). Image represents how "others see us" as an organization (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Because of the rising importance of image in today's environment, Gioia et al. opine a circular dynamic as organizations continually compare "who we are" (identity) and "how others see us" (image). At the macro level of states, scholars have suggested a similar link between national identity and image (Aronczyk, 2008; Smith, 2014). The observation of the intertwined nature of identity and image suggests that both are embedded and continually present in narratives, including during narrative contests.

### ***Differing Features and Communication Dynamics***

Although intertwined, identity and image appear to have distinctive features and communication dynamics that are important for understanding how they function in narrative contests. Across communication studies, the most prominent fault line distinguishing identity and image is found along the internal/external axis. Interpersonal communication scholars speak of the distinction between self-concept as the internal experience of the self and self-image as the external representations (Gergen, 1971; Hamachek, 1971; Haney, 1992). The internal dimensions include intangible aspects such as emotions, feelings, and self-esteem. Private self as internal experience and public self as external image suggests a similar idea (Baumeister, 1986). In public diplomacy, scholars have extrapolated identity and image at the micro level of individuals to the macro levels of organizations and society. For states, the internal aligns with domestic publics and features, while the external is signified by foreign publics and features (Aronczyk, 2008; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015).

Communication scholarship also suggests a distinction between identity and image along an intentional/unintentional axis. Erving Goffman's (1959) seminal study of the presentation of the self provides the theoretical foundation for identity as unintentional self-expression and image as intentional

self-presentation. Goffman distinguished between "impressions given," which the individual may not be aware of but are readily apparent to observers, and "impressions given off," which the individual deliberately tries to create in order to elicit a specific response from others. Goffman's work on impression management and self-presentation has been applied to nations in narrative analysis (Mor, 2009).

Awareness may be another distinguishing communication dynamic of identity and image. Edward T. Hall (1976) highlighted the notion of in-awareness/out-of-awareness in intercultural communication. According to Hall (1976), in-awareness refers to the actor's ability to observe and monitor its communication behaviors, while out-of-awareness refers to an actor's lack of awareness of its communication behaviors. Extending these levels of awareness to narratives, the process that Miskommon et al. (2013) describe as a state's formulating and projecting its image would require in-awareness. Identity self-expression would be largely communicated out-of-awareness and reflect idiosyncratic features that a state might not be aware of but that others in the international community may find glaring as a source of national stereotypes (Kunczik, 1997).

An additional and perhaps unarticulated distinction that is especially critical in communication conflicts is ontological value. Ontological value referred to here as the relative significance or weight that the entity attaches to its identity versus its image. In interpersonal scholarship, identity and self-concept are pivotal concepts that describe an individual's awareness of self and sense of being in the world (Haney, 1992). The link between self-concept and communication is inseparable and credited with shaping all verbal and nonverbal behaviors as well as perception (Patton & Giffin, 1974; Wood, 2012; Zaharna, 1989). As the essence or communication core of the actor, identity has unparalleled ontological value. Because of the high ontological value, threats against identity can be perceived as existential threats. The lack of psychological distance between identity and the entity further suggests that identity is noncontestable and not readily subject to change; hence, identity's long-term enduring nature. At the macro level, Faizullaev (2007) speaks of the "experience of identity" of a nation. In contrast, image as a representation of the actor suggests it has comparatively less ontological value precisely because it is not the actual actor. In some societies with a strong concept of "face," image may have a comparable ontological value. However, the very idea that an entity can observe its own image speaks to the psychological distance as well as tangible aspect of images. The observable, tangible, and detached aspects of images make it possible for actors to measure it (as in opinion polls) and contest undesirable or negative images. The relatively lower ontological value of images makes them contestable; hence, the variability and short-term nature of images.

### ***Information Realms***

To understand how these distinctive features of identity and image may separate out into different narrative spheres, we return to Arquilla and Ronfeldt's (2001) original work on narrative battles in noopolitik. The scholars forecasted that, as information and communication come to matter more, so, too, would the realms or domains that define different types of information. In response, they suggested three coexisting information realms: cybersphere, infosphere, and noosphere. Although Arquilla and Ronfeldt were interested in the interplay of information and power, these spheres are relevant to

narratives because they suggest the possibility of envisioning different communication terrains and dynamics for waging narrative contests.

The scholars describe the first or inner sphere, the cybersphere, as the most technical; it refers primarily to the structure of the Internet and other communication technologies that allow for the global exchange of information. The second or middle sphere, the infosphere, is larger than the cybersphere and encompasses the Internet and a range of other information systems that may not be part of the Internet, such as libraries and other places where information is stored and exchanged. The scholars specifically mention broadcast, print, and other media (i.e., the mediascape) as part of the infosphere.

Ronfeldt and Arquilla were most concerned with the outer sphere, or noosphere, which encompasses both the cybersphere and infosphere. The scholars credited the term *noosphere* to the French theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who, in 1925, envisioned that one day the world would evolve into a circling realm of the mind or "thinking circuit." For the RAND scholars, the noosphere captured what they saw as the growing importance of ideas, values, images, and information in international relations, which would shape noopolitik (Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 2007, 2009). Noopolitik is receiving increased research attention, including for stateless actors (Xifra & McKie, 2012). In the current discussion, the noosphere is significant because it provides the conceptual space to explore the underexplored intangible mental realm of international relations, where powerful elements such as values, feelings, and emotions reside.

The intangible noosphere and more tangible infosphere make it possible to envision with greater clarity the idea of identity and image inhabiting different information realms and following divergent narrative trajectories. The tangible and observable features of image appear to align most closely with the information realm of the infosphere. The infosphere contains the media, where the actors compete for dominance. There is also an unspoken assumption that in order to construct credible media, actors need knowledge of media conventions to construct and disseminate viable media images.

The features and communication dynamics of identity appear to align most closely with the features of the noosphere. The intangible elements such as values, feelings, and emotions, as mentioned earlier, are foundational to identity. Here a special note on media tools is in order. The parallel rise of identity, the noosphere, and social media appears to be more concomitant than merely coincidental and reveals an important communication dynamic. Across the literature, scholars move from discussions of identity and image at the micro level of individuals to the macro level of states based on the rationale that individuals and states are organisms (e.g., Miskommon et al., 2013; Mor, 2009; Wendt, 1999).

This leap overlooks important communication assumptions. Micro-level theories, especially those on identity, are predicated on the assumption of *unmediated* face-to-face communication, in which the actor has the option to engage in the self-expression of identity without deliberate effort or engage in self-presentation of image with effort (Goffman, 1959). Until recently, macro-level communication presupposes *mediated* communication. To reach others on a mass scale, actors relied on the mass media tools, which by necessity meant engaging in deliberate efforts of self-presentation. Thus, whereas micro-

level communication dynamics allow actors to engage in *both* identity self-expression and image self-presentation, macro-level communication was limited largely to self-presentation of image.

The significance of adding social media to narrative contests is that it creates the possibility of *mediated* self-expression of identity on a macro level. Social media, as many have noted, allow actors to engage directly with the publics (Castells, 2007; Kampg, Manor, & Segev, 2015). However, more noteworthy are the personalized features, emotional cues, and sense of (interpersonal) immediacy of social media, which allows for mediated self-expression of identity on a macro level. Van Dijck (2013) discusses Twitter as a tool for "self-expression" and "self-promotion." Marwick and boyd (2010, pp. 5–6) highlight Twitter's affordance for "true-to-self authenticity" and rejection of audience, and inauthentic and "speaking to an audience." Actors are no longer limited to intentional, in-awareness *mediated* self-presentation through mass media tools; they now have the ability of mediated self-expression of identity using social media. With respect to Castell's (2007) idea of "mass self-communication," *mediated* self-expression of identity may be one of the most critical developments.

### **Divergent Narrative Trajectories: Image Repair and Identity Resilience**

The addition of social media and mediated self-expression of identity now make it possible to see how identity and image not only inhabit different information realms but, during a narrative battle, pursue divergent narrative trajectories. Although image and identity are often used interchangeably, the narrative trajectory of the image appears to be very different from that of identity.

The infosphere, where the image resides, suggests a singular narrative that follows a linear and coherent trajectory to a zero-sum conclusion. Narrative contests in the infosphere adhere to the assumption that the media is the central storyteller (Shumate et al., 2005) on which both parties rely to tell the story. The assumption that there is only one narrative may underlie the idea of narrative contestation and narrative control (van Ginkel, 2015). Actors are primarily other-oriented in the sense that they are motivated to secure a desired image to influence the others. Perceived attacks against an image may be damaging, but largely due to a degree of psychological distance between an actor and its image, the actor can engage in a deliberative, strategic response. Actors can actively deploy complex rhetorical strategies to thwart image attacks (Mor, 2009), engage in strategies to repair and restore their images (Mor, 2009, 2014), or reframe events that impact their image (Entman, 2003). The effectiveness of these strategies rests on their credibility and narrative coherence. Narratives that are not coherent or logical are not persuasive in commanding or controlling the narrative. In sum, the narrative trajectory of the image in the infosphere suggests a linear, cause-effect narrative, which follows a logic of attack and counterattacks.

Identity in the noosphere suggests a very different communication dynamic and narrative trajectory from that of the image in the infosphere. The noosphere, by definition of being the realm of the mind, reflects the perspective of the actual actor. Each actor, with the benefit of social media tools for mediated self-expression of identity, assumes the role of narrator. The actors are no longer dependent on the media to construct a single narrative. Because there are multiple actors, each assuming the role of



narrator, there may be multiple narrative spheres. The idea of "controlling the narrative" or even "countering a narrative" becomes tenuous because there is no one narrative to control or compete over.

Unlike the images in the infosphere, which may be repeatedly attacked and damaged during a narrative battle, attacks against identity in the noosphere represent an existential threat to an actor's sense of being. Because of the unparalleled ontological value of identity, any perceived threat can motivate an actor to assert and preserve its identity. Additionally, because of the lack of psychological distance, actors tend to react instinctively in identity self-preservation. Without identity, the entity would cease to exist in the realm of the mind. This response to a perceived identity threat in narrative contests is introduced here as the phenomenon of identity resilience. Identity resilience ensures the continued survival of identity in the realm of the mind but produces a narrative trajectory of cascading narrative paradoxes. Identity resilience is recognizable in narrative contests as identity self-expression and identity self-preservation. The narrative approach is self-oriented in that the actor is motivated primarily by self-preservation and even without regard to others. The trajectory of identity resilience is recognizable for its apparent lack of narrative logic. Unlike image repair strategies, which rest on credibility and conforming to narrative coherence in order to be accepted by the media, identity resilience may disregard narrative logic.

The absence of narrative coherence is what makes the recent narrative battles on social media so jarring; the linear logic demanded by media observers has been usurped by the actors. Rather than narrative coherence, the trajectory of identity resilience appears to trigger a cascade of narrative paradoxes. First, the out-of-awareness idiosyncratic aspects of identity self-expression can produce misperceptions and misunderstandings. Misunderstandings can prompt actors to try to assert their identity more aggressively and even attack the other as a means of drawing self-distinctions. Paradoxically, attacks and counterattacks may cause the parties to become more entwined in each other's image and produce mirror images as well as polarization. Because the goal is self-preservation, actors may appropriate their opponent's messages if it ensures their survival. In the face of defeat, actors may become more defiant or even declare a false victory. In the following case probe of Israelis and Palestinians on Twitter, we see how the social media may accelerate the pace of these paradoxes in the narrative trajectory of identity resilience.

Table 1 is a work in progress and part of a larger research agenda. The overarching observation and intent is to illustrate how identity and image coexist within a strategic narrative, yet each has distinctive features and communication dynamics, which in turn suggest different information realms, and ultimately divergent narrative spheres and trajectories.

**Table 1. Identity and Image:  
Distinguishing Features, Narrative Spheres, and Trajectory.**

Terms in the literature	Identity	Image
<b>Aspects</b>	National identity Collective identity Self-esteem	National image Self-image Reputation
	"who we are" Enduring (long-term)	"how others see us" Changeable (short-term)
<b>Internal/external</b>	Experience of self Self-concept (interpersonal) Private self Domestic public, issues	Representation of self Self-image Public self Foreign publics, issues
<b>Intentionality</b> (Goffman, 1959)	"Impressions given" Unintentional, spontaneous	"Impressions given off" Intentional, deliberate
<b>Awareness</b> (Hall, 1976)	Out-of-awareness	In-awareness
<b>Ontological value</b>	Existential being No psychological distance Noncontestable	Representation of entity Some psychological distance Contestable
<b>Information Realms and Media Tools</b>		
<b>Information realms</b> (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001)	Noosphere Realm of mind Intangible, unobservable	Infosphere Mediascape Tangible, observable
<b>Primary media tool</b>	Social media	Mass media Mixed mass media and social media
<b>Social media affordance</b> (van Dijck, 2013)	Self-expression	Self-promotion
<b>Authenticity</b> (Marwick & boyd, 2010)	True-to-self, authenticity Rejection of "audience"	Inauthentic, consciously speaking to an audience

### Narrative Spheres and Narrative Trajectory

<b>Narrative sphere/s</b>	Actor-as-narrator perspectives Multiple individual spheres	Media-observer perspective One dominant sphere
<b>Narrative goal</b>	Motivated to express and preserve the identity as experienced by self Self-oriented	Motivated to secure desired image as perceived by others Other-oriented
<b>Narrative battle</b>	Perceived existential threat Identity as noncontestable Resist annihilation	Perceived attack against image Image as contestable Maintain desired image
<b>Narrative trajectory</b>	<b>Identity resilience</b> Self-preservation Nonlinear, may lack coherence Zero-sum not possible Narrative paradoxes	<b>Image repair</b> Self-presentation Linear, narrative coherence Zero-sum scenario possible Image repair strategies

### Case Illustration

To explore identity resilience and its potential to undermine narrative coherence, we turn to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been described as “a prototypical example of an intractable conflict” (Halperin, 2008, p. 715). The intensity and duration of the conflict may well exemplify identity resilience in narrative battles.

The conflict has been studied from multiple angles over the years, including during the mass media era and through a narrative lens (Fattah & Fierke, 2009; Hammack, 2010; Mor, 2009, 2014). Both parties were also early adopters of social media tools and active in developing innovative approaches (Aouragh, 2011; Mor, 2009). The two sides’ use of social media specifically during times of conflict has received increasing attention by scholars (Baele, Sterck, & Meur, 2014; Sheffer, 2014; Zeitzoff, 2011).

The case illustration draws upon Mor’s (2007, 2009) examples of a “plausibility probe,” a methodology originally articulated by Eckstein (1975). Eckstein viewed a probability probe as an attempt to determine whether the potential validity may be considered great enough to warrant pain and cost of further testing. Rather than proving or measuring phenomena, a plausibility probe has the more modest goal of “seeking to establish the general relevance and potential validity of a concept” (Mor, 2009, p. 233). The current probe seeks to trace the narrative trajectory of identity resilience. Because aspects of image have been well documented in the literature, the probe focused specifically on identifying examples of self-expression and self-preservation of identity.

The military confrontation in Gaza during the summer of 2014 was selected for the probe. Twitter was selected primarily because of its potential for self-expression as well as self-promotion (Marwick &

boyd, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). The official, English-language Twitter feed for the military forces of the two sides were used: the Israeli Defense Forces (@IDFspokesperson) and the Hamas military wing al-Qassam Brigades (@Qassamsms). The time period selected, July 1–September 1, 2014, covers the start of intensified hostilities, an announced military operation into Gaza, and a cease-fire on August 26. Tweets with visuals were the primary focus because of the possibility of embedded cultural cues and idiosyncratic features. While the al-Qassam account was suspended and some of the early feed is no longer available, the combination of initial media reports as well as the Twitter feed for the remaining crucial days of the conflict provided ample material to identify illustrative examples in the probe.

### ***Case Probe***

When hostilities broke out in summer 2014 between Israel and Hamas, the two sides launched a parallel narrative battle on social media. The active use of social media was noted by the traditional media and represents the dynamics of image in the infosphere (e.g., Fleisher, 2014; Fowler, 2014; Gewirtz, 2014; Sherwood, 2014).

### ***Mediated Self-Expression***

The first aspect of identity self-expression in the Twitter feed is the out-of-awareness quality. The actors appeared unaware of the distinctive idiosyncratic stylistic features of their communication. The idiosyncratic cultural features of al-Qassam's self-expression in Twitter are most evident in the English word choice, misspellings, and visuals. For example, al-Qassam used language such as "genocidal aggression," "resistance," and "martyrs," which "may seem strong to Westerners but are part of the daily discourse among Palestinians" (Sherwood, 2014). Al-Qassam's visuals, in comparison to Western media, were also "more graphic, including the bloodied corpses of children" (Fowler, 2014). The illustrative al-Qassam tweet (see Figure 1) used the hashtag #infographics, includes the word *martyr*, had misspellings ("a journalis"), and unfamiliar phrasing ("20-07-2014" could be mistakenly perceived as "[the year] 2007 to 2014" rather than July 20, 2014).



**Figure 1. Al-Qassam identity expression**  
**(<http://t.co/cfpjQICuQU> [tweet]).**

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) self-expression was also evident on Twitter. Its Twitter feed was recognizable for its "sharp messages and catchy patterns" (Makuch, 2014) that were "clearly designed to get public opinion on Israel's side" (Gewirtz, 2014). The illustrative IDF tweet (see Figure 2), on Hamas rockets, incorporates high production graphics from intelligence units. Intentions, another aspect of self-expression, were also misconstrued.



**Figure 2. Israeli Defense Forces identity expression**  
 (<http://t.co/prjAmoQyJ9> [tweet]).

The IDF tweet (see Figure 3) suggests Israel's humanitarian intent by warning Gazans of impending strikes. However, with nowhere to flee, the prominent U.S. late-night commentator Jon Stewart made jest of the tweet by asking "Evacuate to where? Have you [expletive] seen Gaza?" ("The Daily Show's Jon Stewart brilliantly covers," 2014). Early on in the battle, both sides exhibited recognizable stylistic and idiosyncratic features as narrators.



**Figure 3. Israeli Defense Forces identity expression**  
 (<http://t.co/HxVWjjGpsC> [tweet]).

These examples illustrate the first unexpected narrative outcome of how an actor's lack of awareness of its characteristic self-expression can have the unintended effect of creating misunderstandings and negative misperceptions.

### **Asserting Identity, Triggering Identity Resilience**

In a narrative battle, actors seek to shape not only an image of the actor but the narrative. In the infosphere, narrative is singular because traditionally the two sides rely on the media to tell the story. However, on social media, one can see how identity resilience spawns the evolution of parallel narratives. In the probe, a ready illustration of the parallel narrative spheres was the appearance of the parallel hashtags #IsraelUnderAttack and #GazaUnderAttack.

The parallel narrative spheres help explain the unexpected emergence of a mirroring effect of the two parties. The mirroring effect of two opposing sides assigning similar but opposite attributes to each other (Haque & Lawson, 1980) has long been observed. In the probe, the mirroring effect is most evident in the Israeli–Hamas “victim–aggressor” parallel narratives. Each side tried to underscore its experience of identity as the victim by portraying an image of the other as the aggressor. However, because of the intertwined link between identity and image, what may be intended as an attack against the opponent's image can be perceived by the opponent as a threat to its identity, and thus trigger identity resilience to counterattack the opponent's image, which the opponent may perceive as a threat to its identity, thus triggering its identity resilience to counterattack. Identity resilience feeds a cycle of image attacks and identity threats and sustains the mirroring effect. The tweets of al-Qassam (see Figure 4) and the IDF (see Figure 5) mirror each other as both aggressor and targeted victim.



**Figure 4. Al-Qassam victim**  
(<http://t.co/T1CoLyXMmA> [tweet]).





**Figure 5. Israeli Defense Forces victim**  
(<http://t.co/fBkqnVyVrs> [tweet]).

As the narrative battle continues, the narrative trajectory of identity resilience reveals how the intensified efforts can cause mirror images to grow more frequent and proliferate to other dimensions, including powerful emotional ones. The emotional mirrors of fear and sadness are evident in the tweets about the Palestinian (see Figure 6) and Israeli (see Figure 7) civilian populations.



**Figure 6. Al-Qassam emotional mirror**  
(<http://t.co/z5f76OIPs6> [tweet]).



**Figure 7. Israeli Defense Forces emotional mirror**  
(<http://t.co/EdVt9IfzJk> [tweet]).

### ***Countering the Narrative: Polarization and Escalation***

During the Israeli– Hamas confrontation, both sides relied heavily on counternarrative strategies. Next to tweets telling their story, most of the tweets focused on refuting the legitimacy of the other's story. The escalation of counternarratives produced an interesting co-creational dynamic between the two sides. Because the IDF appeared to be more sophisticated and prolific in developing graphics, al-Qassam started appropriating IDF graphics. Figures 8 and 9 depict an original IDF tweet that al-Qassam reappropriated in its counterattack.

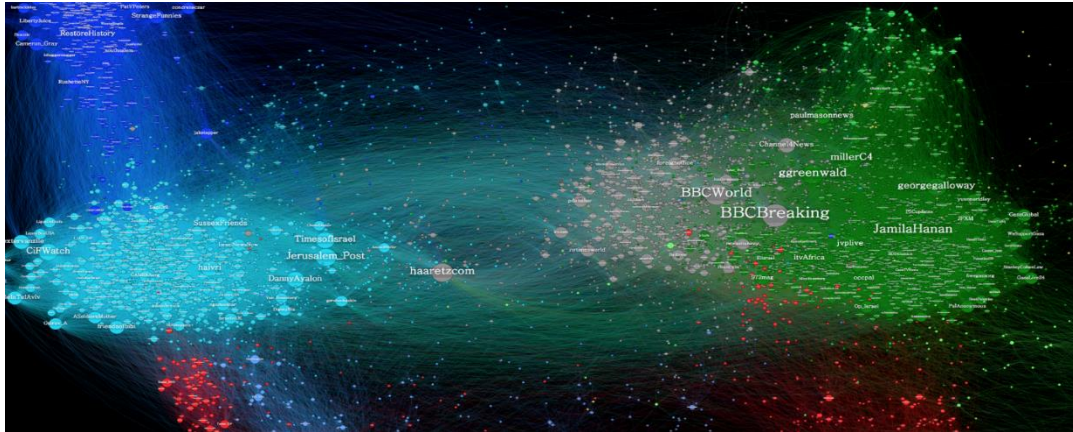


**Figure 8. Israeli Defense Forces original tweet**  
(<http://t.co/by2QzFI09d>).



**Figure 9. Al-Qassam appropriated tweet**  
**(<http://t.co/Xe19Uni742>).**

On the military battlefield, sustained physical attacks by one side often lead to the physical elimination of the other side. On the narrative battlefield, attacks often serve as triggers for identity resilience that prompt the actor to become more assertive in identity self-expression and self-preservation. The result of the dueling identity resilience can produce another narrative paradox: Rather than one side defeating the other, repeated attacks and counterattacks can cause the two sides to become more entrenched, with the mirror images producing a polarizing effect. Identity resilience helps sustain the polarizing effect of the cycle of counternarratives. The polarization on the Twitter battlefield was captured by Gilad Lotan (2014) in Figure 10. The “pro-Israeli” camp in blue is on the left, and the “pro-Palestinian” camp in green is on the right.



**Figure 10. Polarization on Twitter (Lotan, 2014).**

### **Defiance**

Again, unlike the military battlefield, it appears that relative size or power of the actor in the international arena does not necessarily determine who "wins." Despite the power difference between Israel, with the fifth largest military in the world, and the relatively weaker al-Qassam Brigades, one sees defiance in the narrative arch in an al-Qassam tweet (see Figure 11) threatening the safety of the Israeli airport.



**Figure 11. Al-Qassam defiance**  
(<http://t.co/k2eWEvOAL2> [tweet]).

This expression of defiance is one of the strongest manifestations of identity resilience and may help explain why counternarrative efforts can lead to narrative escalation rather than intimidation. Recent research reveals that intensified counternarrative efforts, especially by a more dominant power, may actually work in the opponent's favor. In his study of narratives of Taliban-affiliated groups, Jan (2015) found that the groups appeared to strengthen their narrative when challenged. In a study on U.S. efforts to counter extremists' narratives, Bartolucci and Corman (2015) found that extremists were co-opting U.S. themes and creating a "perverse outcome," where "the more successful Western diplomacy is, the more coherent and appealing extremist narratives become" (p. 1). Repeated high-visibility attacks by the stronger party may serve to bring greater visibility for the weaker opponent and provide attraction for like-minded new recruits with a shared experience of identity. Thus, another narrative paradox of identity resilience is that even when faced with a superior opponent, a weaker actor may not accede to defeat and instead may become more defiant in identity self-preservation.

### ***Both Sides Claim Victory***

The culmination of counternarrative strategies, polarization of parties, and defiance can produce one of the most perplexing narrative paradoxes: Everyone wins. Although media and analysts may portray narrative battles as a zero-sum win/lose scenario, the narrative trajectory of identity resilience allows for competing sides to both claim "victory," despite what might not be the case on the military battlefield. What is interesting in the examples from the IDF and al-Qassam tweets is how they thematically mirror each other, yet capture the distinctive idiosyncratic styles of self-expression.

Hamas claimed victory shortly after the end of the hostilities. In a video clip of an August 29 speech, the deputy political leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, asserted that "the Palestinian people has won the war on the military front, the political front, and the media front. . . . Our narrative has gained the upper hand in the media and was the more credible. Our image in the media was the more effective" (Dvorin, 2014). The meaning of the visual in the al-Qassam tweet (see Figure 12) may seem culturally obscured by the multiple layers of symbolism; however, the intent is to suggest a Palestinian version of triumph of the human spirit.





**Figure 12. Al-Qassam victory**  
 (<http://t.co/Ig9z3Ri6wS>).

The Israeli side also claimed victory. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a press conference that Israel had secured a "great military and political" achievement in the Gaza war and that Hamas had been dealt a "heavy blow" (Ravid, 2014, para. 1). On the diplomatic front, the prime minister said that Hamas had been isolated internationally, while Israel had "received international legitimization from the global community" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). The IDF tweet (see Figure 13) captures the Israeli victory narrative as relayed through a strong image and compelling statistics.



**Figure 13. Israeli Defense Forces victory**  
(<http://t.co/hgWGgVRRko>).

Thus, a final narrative paradox of identity resilience is that, unlike the decisive victory on the military or political battlefield, everyone can claim victory on the narrative battlefield.

### Implications and Conclusions

This article has explored the idea of “whose story wins,” introduced by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (2001) and given greater visibility by Joseph Nye (2004). One of the intriguing ironies of narrative contests is how readily actors engage in narrative battles, yet rarely win them decisively, especially on social media. This study offers a two-layered explanation.

First, narrative battles are not solely about contesting visible events, issues, or national interests. Narrative battles are inherently identity battles in that they contain intertwined elements of how an actor projects representations of itself (image) as well as how the actor experiences itself (identity). While the terms *image* and *identity* are often used interchangeably and both are embedded in narratives, their



distinctive features suggest different information realms and divergent narrative trajectories. The features of image align to the infosphere and one dominant media narrative. The narrative trajectory of image in the infosphere is largely linear with a strong narrative coherence in order to be seen as credible by the media and public. In contrast, the intangible features of identity align to the noosphere, or realm of the mind. In the noosphere, actors are no longer reliant on the media to tell their story; rather, they use the self-expressive features of social media to become the narrator. From the perspective of the actor-as-narrator, challenges to identity are perceived as existential threats, prompting the phenomenon of identity resilience. The narrative trajectory of identity resilience ensures the survival of the identity but often produces a cascade of narrative paradoxes that defy a coherent narrative logic.

The most significant takeaway from the study is that, although identity and image are intertwined in narratives, images are contestable and identity is not. The potential to inadvertently trigger identity resilience raises questions about the strategic wisdom of aggressively pursuing narrative contests. "The struggle for identity," as Daniel Nelson (2003) wrote, "lies at the nexus of war and peace" (p. 457). As Nelson explained, "endangered identity is the hallmark of war-proneness and the prognosis for peace rises when identities are not at risk" (p. 457). Until strategists are better able to distinguish between identity and image in narratives, engaging in aggressive narrative contests may be counterproductive, as illustrated by the mirroring and polarizing effect. Counternarrative strategies may be particularly vulnerable to being exploited by weaker parties who are primarily self-oriented and concerned with identity self-preservation.

The case probe of the trajectory of identity resilience suggests that the dynamics of winning on the narrative battlefield are not analogous to winning on the military one. The illusion of winnable narrative battles may be rooted in assumptions that worked well during the mass media era, when there were clearly identifiable and distinctive geopolitical entities, territories, media, and publics—and, most importantly, a single dominant media narrative. Social media, with its blurred boundaries, inherent interconnectedness as well as affordance of mediated self-expression and multiple narrators, suggests a need to reexamine assumptions about what constitutes viable goals and strategies in narrative contests. It is no longer as simple as whose story wins.

Additionally, there is a need to understand more deeply the underlying communication dynamics that link identity, social media, and noopolitik. Unexplored in this study are the possible connections between the prominence of image during the mass media era and the growing salience of identity and mediated self-expression in the social media era. As Berger (1963) noted, identity is socially bestowed and socially maintained. The social aspect of social media may be a critical area of further research for untangling the intertwined aspects of image and identity in narrative battles.

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