

Measuring Fabulation in Russo-Ukrainian War Online Narratives: Conceptualization and Operationalization

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Abstract

The paper aims to investigate a series of narratives concerning the Russo-Ukrainian war by the perspective of Lyotard and Turner (1979; 1982) – who emphasize the narrator/performer as an integral part of the narratives – and according to the approach of Benjamin (1936) – who recognizes the *aura* of the *narrator* as a key factor in audience engagement. The goals are twofold: first, to proceed with the definition and operationalization of the concept of *fabulation* (cf. Jedlowski, 2022), testing it as a new detection tool (Früh 2007; Neuendorf, 2002) in order to examine a phenomenon increasingly evident from the observation of online war narratives; second, to extract valuable data for subsequent investigations. The research focuses on analyzing a series of posts published on Telegram by several Italian channels during March-April 2022 regarding the destruction of the hospital and theatre in Mariupol. To test the tool and manage the subjectivity of interpretations (Faggiano, 2022), a content analysis was carried out through the collaborative efforts of three coders. The objective is to assess the extent to which narratives – particularly war narratives spread on social media by professional, institutional, and non-expert storytellers – may evoke instances of engagement and affection, surpassing the empirical objectivity of the conveyed information. Consequently, this could improve our understanding of the mechanisms through which war narratives can influence the emotional impact on the reader/user and, thus, contribute to the formation of public opinion.

Keywords: information war, narratives, social media.

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1. Theoretical assumptions

Since the conclusion of the first year of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict – which began with the Moscow forces' attack on Ukraine on 23rd February 2022 but had been a subject of analysis and international attention ever since 2014 – numerous publications have emerged across various scientific disciplines and with diverse approaches. These investigations have contributed to a significant increase in entropy within the academic discourse and have frequently spilled over into the broader realm of public opinion. The global focus of the scientific community, in addition to the journalistic community, on this ongoing phenomenon highlights the following:

- On one hand, the *discursive* domains implicated in, and influenced by, the Ukrainian conflict have been considerably broader and transnational ever since its outset – especially when compared to the physical-geographical territories and the nations directly involved in the military aspects. This trend corresponds to the typical dynamics observed in armed conflicts in the present-day era (cf. Fröhlich, 2020).
- On the other hand, reflecting the prevailing trend of conflicts and systemic polarization in digital media, particularly in Western media, which is inherent to the *infosphere* (Floridi, 2014; Quattrociochi & Vicini, 2016, 2023), the scientific discourse itself often adopts entrenched positions, primarily marked by dichotomous perspectives, especially regarding the subject under investigation.

Among the many we can point out the contributions of Sergei Medvedev (2023) and Benjamin Abelow (2022), which present a sharp interpretive contrast that leaves limited room for intermediate perspectives.

As for texts published in the Italian context, between late 2022 and early 2023, in addition to the works of Noam Chomsky and C. J. Polychromiu, translated by Vincenzo Ostuni (2022), the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was analysed through different perspectives. Among many, we can mention the historical-political analysis of Canfora and Borgonovo (2022), the historical-military analysis of Franco Cardini and Fabio Mini (2022) or the geopolitical perspective of Lucio Caracciolo (2022) and Greta Cristini (2023).

Also, to be mentioned are the sociological-international approach of Alessandro Orsini (2022), the more journalistic perspective of Marco Travaglio (2023) and, among the others, the war diaries of Italian correspondents such as Nello Scavo (2022), Luciana Coluccello (2023) and Luca Steinmann (2023), which have given rise to intense transmedia debates involving political figures and opinion makers.

From a purely academic point of view, we can refer to the critical geopolitical contribution of Angelo Turco (2022), to the sociological analysis of

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Davide Bennato, Manolo Farci and Giovanni Fiorentino (2023) and to the intriguing work of Michele Mezza (2022), focused on the interaction between the global media system and war, which leads to a real militarization of journalistic narration for war purposes.

It is mostly apparent, though, how the narrative of the ongoing conflict in Eastern Europe has been predominantly shaped through mainstream international media outlets and online platforms, particularly social media, in which various actors and processes have taken on the role of the main gatekeepers of the narrative (Nazaruk, 2022).

Within this framework, it is quite evident how daily intelligence reports, such as the bulletin of the British MI6 press office or the Russian Ministry of Defence, played a significant role. Furthermore, official channels of the political authorities and personalities involved, often bypassing traditional intermediaries, contributed to adopting platforms as the main vehicle for their communication¹.

The work carried out by accredited reporters also unveiled novel practices in contrast to previous war experiences, likely shaped by different environmental and political conditions, involving requirements for authority to control the narrative, and the availability of new and different technological tools and skills.

In the Western context, for example, we observed the evolution of embedded war correspondents, supported by what are commonly referred to as “fixers”² – local individuals appointed by Ukrainian authorities to serve as personal liaisons for journalists, providing continuous assistance in gathering, processing, and disseminating information.

On the other front, in the context of the mainstream Russian institutional communication, we observed the utilization of both traditional embedding methods for national and international war correspondents and the notable presence of military war correspondents directly affiliated with the battalions on the field. This, indeed, could resemble a kind of modern development reminiscent of political commissars from the Soviet-era, with notable figures amongst them like Ilya Ehrenburg or Vasily Grossman, whose monumental historical *memoirs* during the Great Patriotic War gained recognition. Many of these war storytellers, often referred to as *milbloggers* (military + bloggers), are actively involved on the frontlines, facing enemy fire, or participating in assaults on fortified positions, armed solely with their smartphones or GoPro cameras.

¹ We can highlight, among many others, the communicative action of President Zelensky or Elon Musk on Twitter and Instagram, not to mention that of the President of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov on Telegram.

² Cf. <https://www.valigiablu.it/ucraina-fixer-zunino-bityk/> (24/05/2023)

Through their Telegram accounts, despite their explicit political positioning, they have managed to attain a certain level of notoriety and *credibility* even among Western analysts and journalists.

Through continuous updates from various fronts involved in the conflict, disintermediated Russian war correspondents – although there are also more and more examples in the Ukrainian field – have enjoyed greater freedom of movement and, more importantly, have exercised a more incisive critical faculty even towards Russian military and political authorities compared to many of their colleagues employed in the mainstream media system. Their role as *warrior narrators*, through their technical independence from institutional channels for producing and transmitting their content – often filmed in *selfie* mode or presented in the form of war diaries – as well as their own political positioning, have frequently served as a warrant to the public. One could argue, in fact, that it is a guarantee not of the *truthfulness* of their narratives, but rather of their *authenticity*.

With a sensitivity often rooted in nationalism – although Russian nationalism frequently merges with romantic Soviet revanchism – Russian *milbloggers* have paradoxically embodied, even to a greater extent than their Western counterparts, one of the most intriguing innovations in the narrative of the Ukrainian conflict. They represent a resurgence of the exaltation of the narrator's subjectivity, even as their war narrative is inherently partisan, constructed with an epic and identity-driven approach.

However, the phenomenon of Russian military correspondents is just a byproduct of a trend that has impacted the entire international war narrative, indicative of the altered relationship between the media system and the narration of armed conflicts. In addition to the previously mentioned dominance of major international media outlets, large social media platforms, and institutional channels, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has witnessed the emergence of a significant number of freelance reporters, OSINT analysts, investigators, commentators, military experts, and content creators who are not officially affiliated with any authority or news media organization and are rarely physically present on the front lines.

These first-person narrators primarily utilize their social media accounts – particularly YouTube, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, or V Kontakte – to disseminate their content. Most of their material is generated through continuous monitoring, collection, processing, and dissemination of other online experiences. Despite primarily recycling information from others, they have gradually become crossroads of data and narratives, storytellers, and gatekeepers of the conflict, akin to *bards*, sometimes presenting themselves as neutral but often aligning with the grand narrative of one faction or the other. They are protagonists in the narrative war and, as such, are at the forefront of

the information war, conveying an immense amount of material sourced from the web through their *digital personas*, becoming soldiers in a war fought with words: *boots on the digital ground*.

Indeed, as highlighted by other observers who perceive it as one of the defining characteristics of what appears to be the first major conflict between technologically advanced societies in the new millennium (cf. Mezza, 2022; Bennato et al., 2023), this phenomenon is indicative of a broader trend. It characterizes not only the media system of *platform societies* (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Van Dijck et al., 2019), with reference to *citizen journalism* or *self-publishing news production*, but also aligns with a trajectory that embraces a return to subjectivity in narratives, as previously outlined by Lyotard (1979) as a prominent feature of postmodernity.

The involvement of the narrator's body, even in the form of digitized avatars, appears to be a crucial factor that connects narration, the narrator, and the audience in a cohesive liturgy that significantly contributes to the construction of social identity. This process also reflects the relationship between performer/celebrant, performance/ritual, and audience, which are characteristic of Turner's dramatic rituals (Affuso, Giungato, 2022).

Considering the perspectives of Lyotard and Turner (1979; 1982) – which emphasize the narrator/performer as an integral part of narratives – as well as drawing on Benjamin's approach (1936) – which recognizes the significance of the narrator's *aura* in engaging the audience, this study aims to investigate the narratives encompassing the Russo-Ukrainian war. The objective is to offer a fresh theoretical and methodological redefinition of the transdisciplinary framework established by the concept of *fabulation* (Jedlowski, 2022). Moreover, the study aims to assess its potential application in the field of sociology of communication as an exploratory paradigm for examining contemporary information wars (cf. Arquilla, Ronfeldt, 1999; Fröhlich, 2020; Gray, 2006; Jean, 2000; Libicki, 1995).

2. The concept of *fabulation*

With specific reference to the research object, which is the social-media narration of storytellers in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, *fabulation* can be understood as the narrative dimension of news, presenting news in the form of a *fabula*. It is constructed by establishing a coherent and necessary sequence of cause-and-effect connections, with characters, including the narrator, acting within specific narrative times and places (cf. Brooks, 1984; Genette, 1972).

The concept of “fabulation” first appeared in Bergson's work (1932), drawing on Durkheim's thought about the elementary forms of religious life

(1912). Bergson describes *fabulation* as an innate human instinct to shape reality in the form of a story to find meaning in the world. Later, Deleuze (1985) adopts the term, specifically referring to the role of *fabulation* as a driving force in social transformation. However, Paolo Jedlowski (2022) further develops the concept by associating it with *testimony*. *Fabulation/testimony*, as proposed by Jedlowski, refers to the two narrative tensions that animate the narrator in the story. *Fabulation* enhances reality by uncovering potential worlds, whilst *testimony* involves the narrator's *first hand* experience in recounting reality, adhering to a stringent documentation criterion. Both of these possibilities coexist within the same narrative, albeit with differing degrees of emphasis.

The most common objection to the scientific use of narratives, particularly war narratives, has been, and continues to be, the question of their scientific legitimacy. This raises doubts that can be categorized into two levels: a general level that questions the methodological rigour of data collection procedures, and a specific level that focuses on the truthfulness or falsehood of the information conveyed by the narratives (Czarniawska, 1997; Hansen, Kahnweiler, 1993; Nash, 1990; Riessman, 1993; Schegloff, 1997; Vosoughi et al., 2018). These apprehensions may stem from a fundamental misconception that confuses the ontological plane – which pertains to the existence and objectivity of reality – with the methodological plane – inherent in postmodern philosophical contemplation.

Jedlowski's perspective emancipates the study of narratives from the intention of a mere analysis of the content of truth, shifting attention to a properly phenomenological level. In other words, it is an approach that studies narratives in terms of *discourses* (Foucault, 1971), that is, as linguistic procedures and methods that constitute a valuable repository of material for investigating the positioning of the narrators. Additionally, they offer insight into the cognitive value of narratives thereby providing information about individuals, their psychology, relationships, social processes, and the institutions in which they are involved (Longo, 2023).

On the other hand, the connection between war communication and oral communication is highlighted by the nature of mediated content. As observed by Mezza (2022), Bennato et al. (2023), Turco (2022), and Iorio's (2022) broader reflections on *memetic wars* – not to mention Floridi's definition of *post-truth* (2014) – narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian war often consist of information *chewed up* by the complex global media system, including legacy media and online counter-information. This information is mainly derived from the *primordial soup* of social platforms, where numerous anonymous accounts incessantly contribute to the creation of a digital “Khôra”, although such information often lacks verifiability and demonstrability (Mezza, 2022).

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Nevertheless, such raw material, often provided by authorities or composed of preexisting content recycled from images of previous wars in different territories, deliberately staged, or even created through computer graphics using AI, is disseminated by multiple narrators and assumes various meanings depending on the political orientation, ideology, or affiliation to one military group or another of those propagating it. The reliability of these contents cannot be certified solely based on their presentation as proven and verifiable facts or their placement within a de-personalized narrative. Instead, it relies on a combination of factors, including the credibility and reliability of the spokespersons who vouch for the authenticity of the information: the narrator. In other words, the substance of the narrative, composed of raw, digitalized, fragmented, and incoherent material abundantly available on the *continuum* of the Internet, seems to derive its aggregating strength to form a coherent story from the vital energy of a living character, whether real or fictional. Thus, the narrator takes on the role of the central organizing principle of the narration.

The interpretive key provided by the narrator not only offers coherence but also holds an inherent interpretive authority within the narrative itself. This is why implausible stories, such as the so-called “Phantom of Kyiv”, the “heroes of Snake Island”, or the “red babushka” with the Soviet flag, were able to spread across the info-sphere to support various forms of propaganda, during the first months of the war. It is precisely because they were conveyed by a narrative authority that surpassed their (im)plausibility.

Furthermore, if the substance of information warfare consists of conflicting narratives that seek to impose themselves as the only legitimate interpretation of reality to the involved audiences, then it is clear that these narratives could be investigated as narrative objects, irrespective of their nature as documentation of the *real* and, on the contrary, by considering their mimetic tension towards the phenomenal world as one of their most intriguing features to be observed and analysed.

This is particularly true for the *narrative worlds* (cf. Eco, 1985) to which war narratives refer to, forced into continuous mediation and constant polarization – we could even say agonizing polarization – between reality and its representation. Such *worlds*, in fact, stand at the very crossroads between a physical, material, bloody, and destructive dimension of organized violence – in which armies, through their weapons, manoeuvres, devices, and the blood of their fallen soldiers, disrupt the territories, cities, and populations they come into contact with – and a purely fictional, symbolic, immaterial dimension – in which myth, ideology, and imagination assume the vital importance that marks the difference between life and death for a community. This is why the war narrative, like the *mediashock* for Grusin (2017), possesses an ontological status that differs from both the phenomenal-reality and the narrative-reality. It is, in

fact, a novel that is inevitably and directly involved in a violent interaction with reality, a wrestling match in which the champions of the physical and symbolic realms, like two titans, continually attempt to overturn their opponent.

As a narrative of reality, the ontology of the war narrative places itself, by its very nature, in a grey area between the *fabula* and what it aims to *testify*. Therefore, it constructs itself around – and not apart from – those elements that strive to assume the *aura* of incontrovertible facts – taking on as such the entire range of information concerning events, locations, characters, and, more broadly, all the pre-narrative material on which the public's collective knowledge should essentially concur. Just like the *aura* of a work of art (cf. Benjamin, 1936), factual information, extracted from the infinite centrifugal reproduction of the network, becomes all the more valuable when it seems to shine with the uniqueness – the *hic et nunc* – of reality, faithfully showing what *has been* or what truly *is*. However, it is precisely around this *aura* that the narrative twists into conflicting narratives that have the same *encyclopaedia* at stake. Indeed, once one of these factual elements becomes a part of the *fabula*, it inevitably takes on a position and an interpretation. This depends on the narrator's performance, in a process akin to Ricoeur's (1983) differentiation between *knowledge* and the *comprehension* of historical facts once they are incorporated into a narrative.

The narrative-universe of the war-tales aspires to create a representation of the empirical world in which the recipient of the narrative can recognize themselves. In this sense, the greatest ambition of war news as a narrative is to build a narrative world that coincides with the empirical world. The narrator becomes the spokesperson and interpreter of this connection, testifying to the alignment between the narrative-world and the empirical-world through their very existence. As an inhabitant of both worlds – with the narrative acting as the *bridge* – the narrator becomes a ferryman, a connecting node between worlds, and therefore, a guarantor of the story. The narrator, like the chorus of a tragedy, stages his or her own body – along with his or her attitudes, beliefs, skills, experiences, inspiration, and political-ideological adherence – to testify to the fairness of his, or her, experience through the construction of a coherent narrative. In their *narr-action*, one can identify the characteristics of their work – *the potter's hand on the cup*, as Benjamin (1936) puts it – as well as the typical peculiarities of the *fabula*.

3. Why and how to detect *fabulation*

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Considering the aforementioned, the objective of this article is twofold: on one hand, to provide a definition and operationalization of the concept of *fabulation*, testing it as a new detection tool (Früh, 2007; Neuendorf, 2002); on the other hand, to extract useful data to guide subsequent investigations. The theoretical and methodological effort lies in using a classic concept from Italian sociology (cf. Jedlowski, 2022) in order to study an extremely current phenomenon that emerges from online narratives – without falling into easy reductionism or simplifications (Fuchs, 2017; 2019) – in an attempt to address the challenges posed by contemporary social research (Addeo & Masullo, 2021).

The structuring of the underlying theoretical model allows for the formulation of some research questions and general hypotheses, even though the “novelty” of the investigated concept (Schreier, 2012, p. 147) also requires following an exploratory research model that is open to detecting unexpected empirical evidence.

The main research questions guiding this pilot-phase are:

1. Is *fabulation* always present in online Russo-Ukrainian war narratives?
2. Does the degree of *fabulation* change depending on whether the narrator belongs to a specific faction, or not?
3. Are there elements of *fabulation* that occur more frequently in the presence of other factors?

The following hypotheses follow:

H1: Narratives always contain a certain degree of *fabulation*.

H2: *Fabulation* is more prevalent if the narrators are explicitly aligned (pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian) rather than if they do not define themselves as partisan.

H3. A high level of polarization manifests when there is a co-occurrence with the use of references derived from the deep imaginary of the target audience.

The aim of this exploratory investigation, particularly in its qualitative and socio-semiotic dimension, is to investigate the actual differences in *fabulation* detected within the texts.

To conduct the detection, the platform Telegram has been identified as relevant to facilitate the comparison between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian online war narratives. Indeed, Telegram seems to be one of the primary hubs for narratives on the conflict (Nazaruk, 2022), serving as a significant source of information for institutions, audiences, and global news media outlets – both as a primary and secondary source (Stolze, 2022). This, in our perspective, could be due to a series of factors, including, but not limited to:

- The substantial absence or reduced relevance of information filtering or regulation algorithms, that have, conversely, impacted other social media platforms such as Meta, Twitter, or V Kontakte.

- The widespread use of the app in the geographical areas affected by the conflict (Maathuis & Kerkhof, 2023; Stolze, 2022).
- The integrated function of automatic text translation.
- The wide dissemination of informative broadcast channels on the platform.

Consequently, since the beginning of the conflict, Telegram has progressively emerged as one of the ideal digital arenas through which to observe the developments in the war narrative (Pavlik, 2022).

For comparative purposes, two emblematic events were identified – the destruction of the paediatric hospital and the drama theatre in the besieged city of Mariupol – both occurring during the Russian siege of the city in the same period (March 9 and March 16, 2022). The choice to isolate these two events was driven by the fact that, despite the same actual occurrences, both attacks produced dichotomous narratives depending on the different polarizations assumed by the respective narrators. Both the bombing of the hospital and the theatre served as a pre-text for a conflict of interpretations, revolving around information, whose credibility was often tautologically confirmed by the narratives themselves. Despite the destruction, the responsibility for the attack, the number of victims, and the dynamics of the bombing itself took on diametrically opposed connotations.

The selection of narratives was conducted by initially focusing on the most widely shared accounts in the Italian language, identified through a cross-referencing search using the online tool provided by the service www.tgstat.com. Secondly, the period was limited to the immediate aftermath of the events, between March 8 and April 11, 2022. Finally, the search tool provided by the Telegram platform was used with the keywords “*ospedale Mariupol*” and “*teatro Mariupol*” (Italian words for “hospital” and “theatre”).

Particular attention was paid to the variability of the material. Since the purpose was to test the tool, it had to be sufficiently limited. On the other hand, the material itself had to be substantial enough to detect significant differences (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 134). The ability to test each of the identified dimensions was considered a fundamental requirement (Schreier, 2012, p. 150). Considering the narrative frame of online war stories, we believe that the breadth of the material considered allows for the detection of each of the operationally defined indicators (Früh, 2007). In conclusion, the material consisted of 135 posts containing textual and visual elements, analysed through a combined qualitative-quantitative and socio-semiotic approach.

In order to evaluate the tool and manage the subjectivity of interpretations (Faggiano, 2022), content analysis was conducted with the collaboration of three coders – experts in narratives and adequately trained – which were

supervised by the researchers. A trial coding was performed initially in a “blind” mode, followed by a subsequent comparison. Considering the level of agreement reached (see section 3.3), as suggested by Rustemeyer (1992), it was deemed unnecessary to proceed with further testing.

3.1. Conceptualization of the concept of fabulation

The most significant issue, crucial for conducting the investigation, revolved around the conceptualization – and subsequent operational definition – of *fabulation*.

The construction of the *fabulation* index was conducted through the identification of some peculiarities inherent to war narratives. In identifying them, the criteria of unidimensionality, exhaustiveness, saturation, and mutual exclusivity (Früh, 2007; Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 2004; Rustemeyer, 1992) were considered necessary to construct a coding scheme capable of systematically describing the selected material.

The first dimension that characterizes *fabulation* is *polarization*, following the classic *fabula* schema (Propp, 1928). By *polarization*, we refer to the narrator’s clear and unambiguous positioning towards the story, objects of value, or actors. In other words, *polarization* manifests in every aspect of the narrative where the narrator suggests or explicitly aligns with the hero, the antagonist, or other identifiable actors in the story (Greimas, 1970), through a *friends or foe* schema.

The first indicator of *polarization* relates to terms (nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and positive or negative verbs such as “assassin”, “massacre”, “reward”, “infamous”, “happy”, “abduct”, “savagely”, etc.) that contribute to highlighting the friend/enemy dichotomy in the narrative schema (aggressor/victim, invader/invaded, executioner/victim, kidnapper/child, etc.). In war narratives, polarization often takes on the value of an ethical dichotomy, forcing the narratee to take a specific stance as well. In this sense, it also becomes a determining element for the framing, i.e., the narrative matrix that serves as a framework for constructing further stories. An exemplary case in this regard is the *satanic* matrix that characterized a huge portion of the propaganda during World War I, as analysed by Lasswell in 1927.

The second dimension is delineated in connection with the presence of conspicuous *actantial structures*. The first identified indicator pertains to the emergence of a schema that explicitly encompasses the functions from Campbell’s archetypal model (1949), which includes hero, mentor, threshold guardian, messenger, shadow, shapeshifter, and trickster. The second dimension is established through the identification of specific roles, categorized

according to terminology drawn from literary, comic, cinematic, and video game genres within fantasy and science fiction (king/prince, barbarian/orc, warrior/paladin, cleric/healer, sage/mage, thief/trickster). This choice appeared consistent with phenomenological evidence concerning part of the contents and codes disseminated by both propagandas from the early days of the conflict, in which a constant reference to these narrative universes could be observed. Consequently, if the first indicator relates to the identified *functions*, the second relates to the *roles* performed by the characters.

The third dimension pertains to the identification of elements that reveal: a) an *employment*, following a model based on the contributions of Ricoeur (1983), Genette (1972), and Brooks (1984); b) an anthropomorphic *doing* (Greimas, 1970); c) the emergence of obvious temporal and cause-and-effect connections that determine narrative consequentiality. This latter indicator was investigated through the detection of:

- Sequences or terms proper to a transformative or performative action, with temporal and/or cause-and-effect patterns.
- Attributions of state, referring to the agents of the story (such as adjectives or qualifying attributions referring to news characters – for example: “Putin malato” [sick Putin], “Biden pazzo” [crazy Biden], etc.
- Presence of modal statements revealed by verbs like «dovere» [must], «volere» [want], «potere» [can], «sapere» [know], «fare» [do], and «essere» [be], indicating a relationship between actors.

The fourth dimension relates to portions of text that identify all the elements revealing a meta-narrative or external action in which the *narratee* is included among the characters involved in the construction of the *fabula*. This can occur, for example, through a call to action or through phatic appeals (“cari amici” [dear friends], “voi che leggete” [you who are reading], etc.) or even through the promise of a revelation that functions as an elixir, but only if shared with others (in tantalizing titles to be completed by clicking on them, verbal constructions like “the newspapers don’t talk about it”, etc.).

Finally, it was necessary to investigate how the *fabulation* dimension can also be found in other sedimented and profound elements shared with the narratee, thereby strengthening the construction of the narrative world by the narrator.

The transmedia paradigm (Jenkins, 2006), in fact, following the footsteps of Lyotard’s theory (1979) and according to the *logic* of digital media (cf. Altheide & Snow, 2017), shows how the narrative fragmentation of postmodernity has effectively been interpreted by the hyperproliferation of means of production, treatment, dissemination, and above all, appropriation of narratives, typical of *network societies* (Castells, 1996). This requires a particular approach to the dramaturgies of contemporary reality, particularly those that traditionally contribute most to the construction of an identity-based epic, as is

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the case in armed conflicts (cf. Anderson, 1991). In other words, it must be considered that the centre of the mediation process does not necessarily consist of a coherent set of elements connected with others in sequences of complete and given meaning, typical of the linear text model. Nor can we assume that storytelling takes place in contexts governed by explicit social norms shared by all participants in the communicative liturgy. On the contrary, in the *networked society*, the specific weight of communication shifts from the context to the subject of the ritual. Consequently, the proliferation of narratives in the interconnected digital space enhances their value as constellations of ergodic text fragments (cf. Aarseth, 1997), where both narrators and narratees contribute to the ongoing writing of a story that is never definitively completed, resembling the dynamics of role-playing games. This phenomenon becomes more evident when exploring the depths of social networks, characterized by a hyperproliferation of content and unverifiable accounts. Consequently, the elements of the story become even more significant when their connective value, or their ability to resonate with the nodes of the narratee's system of meanings, is high. In this process, the narratee, in turn, assumes the role of a narrator, following the logic of the *meme* (Dawkins, 1976), ensuring the contagion and proliferation of the narrative.

In this regard, all the keywords (or their combinations) with evident semantic marks (or connotations) related to the following aspects – indicated as *memetic potential* – have been identified:

1. Mythology: narrative structures or characters that carry significant narrative weight and reference mythological elements (e.g., Proserpina-women, Trojan War, Gospel, Argonauts, etc.).
2. “Surface” imaginary: the constellation of subcodes, genres, trends, and icons relevant to contemporary society (social media, information warfare, influencers, technological innovations, entertainment personalities, current events, or the use of languages typical of youth trends or social media).
3. “Deep” imaginary: the sedimentation of material and immaterial culture that is widely, socially and historically shared, forming part of collective memory and traditions, serving as matrices of the collective imaginary (patriotism, ideologies, folklore, history, references to cultural heritage, etc.).

Table 1. Conceptualization of the concept of fabulation.

Dimensions	Indicators
1. Polarization	1.1 nouns/adjectives/adverbs/verbs
	1.2 subjects
2. Actantial structures	2.1 functions (e.g., hero, mentor, threshold guardian, messenger, shadow, shapeshifter, trickster)
	2.2 roles (e.g., king/prince, barbarian/orc, warrior/paladin, advisor/helper, senex/mage, puer/trickster, cleric/healer)
3. <i>Emplotment</i>	3.1 cause-effect connections
	3.2 state attributions referring to story agents
	3.3 presence of modal statements
4. Meta-narrative action	4.1 call to action
	4.2 promises of reward
5. Memetic potential	5.1 mythology
	5.2 surface imaginary
	5.3 deep imaginary

3.2. Operationalization of the Concept of fabulation

The operational definition of *fabulation* was therefore conducted through the construction of a tool aimed at detecting the presence (1) or absence (0) of different dimensions, that is, the corresponding indicators that constitute them. It was not deemed necessary to specifically quantify any occurrences, as they are not indicative of the intensity that *fabulation* can assume, although this topic could be, and is, widely debated in quantitative analysis of textual content (cf. Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 2004; Stewart, 1943). Thus, the tool takes the form of a simple data collection sheet (Fig. 1), which lists the identifiers of the extracted text portions per row and the indicator codes per column. A codebook is associated with it, which presents the dimensions, indicators, variables, and detectable modalities for each individual post.

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Figura 1. Data sheet extract.

Codificatore:												
Id testo	1.1	1.2	2.1	2.2	3.1	3.2	3.3	4.1	4.2	5.1	5.2	5.3
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Given the complexity of the topic and the identified dimensions, the three coders³, who were already experienced in narratives, were trained to specifically detect *fabulation* based on the aforementioned criteria before proceeding with the actual data collection. Familiarity with the tool is crucial for both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002). The coding was performed simultaneously since the number of variables to be recorded was sufficiently limited to allow for immediate complete coding (MacQueen et al., 2009).

The data was recorded in matrix form from the beginning to facilitate statistical and mathematical operations. By detecting the concept of *fabulation* through dichotomous variables, different scores were obtained for the various dimensions, resulting in additive indices and a single synthetic index that reflected the actual degree of *fabulation* in each selected narrative. The data was analysed using Excel spreadsheets and the statistical analysis software SPSS 25.0.

To gather useful data for comparative and interpretative purposes, two additional variables were directly added to the data matrix by the researchers:

³ The coders group: Patrizia Miggiano (Ph. D, Postdoctoral researcher) and Gustavo D'Aversa (PhD St), Department of Social and Human Sciences, University of Salento, Lecce, Italy; Luigi Giungato (PhD St), Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Calabria, Arcavacata di Rende (Cs), Italy.

1. The narrator's declared affiliation alignment: pro-Ukrainian (1); pro-Russian (2); indeterminate (3).
2. The topic addressed: hospital (1); theatre (2); both (3).

In the initial phase, the comparison among the coders led to the redefinition of part of the conceptualization. Specifically, the dimension of *polarization*, initially including different indicators for nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, was reconceptualized during the process with a single indicator, as no significant differences were found that justified such a fine division.

In the second phase, after individually coding the text in a “blind” mode, a more in-depth discussion clarified the meanings and interpretations. A series of major discrepancies that emerged after the initial “blind” phase were attributed to:

- Coder distraction.
- Interpretation errors.
- Insufficient definition of dimensions and indicators.

Subsequently, substantial agreement among the coders, achieved through the comparison of indicators and the respective variables detected in the texts, highlighted that dimension 5, related to the imaginary, required more extensive discussion. While the detection of the other four dimensions proceeded automatically once the identification criteria were refined, in fact, the dimension concerning cultural and mythological elements required greater attention. This was assessed to be because dimension 5, more than the others, necessitates interaction between the cultural codes of the narrator and the narratee, whereas the first four dimensions mainly concern the narrative grammar of the text. However, once the detection criteria were defined, even this dimension yielded uniform interpretations.

The presence of the three coders ensured the possibility of testing the reliability of the tool by assessing the consistency of their responses and evaluating internal validity through an inter-subjective approach.

3.3. Reliability and validity

The reliability of the instrument (Bryman, 2008; Seale, 1999) was assessed by examining the level of consistency among the responses provided by the three coders (Schreier, 2012, p.167). Specifically, the agreement coefficient, as defined by Krippendorff (2004) and Neuendorf (2002), was calculated. This coefficient represents the percentage of agreement obtained by dividing the number of coding units on which all coders converge by the total number of coding units.

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Regarding the agreement on individual indicators, it was observed that all three coders converge (100.0%) on the identification of *functions* (2.1), indicators related to *emplotment* (3.1-3.2-3.3), and *meta-narrative action* (4.1-4.2). However, lower agreement percentages were found for the dimension of polarization, both in terms of noun identification (58.5%) and subject identification (67.4%). Similarly, lower agreement percentages were observed for the dimension related to the *memetic potential*, including mythological references (58.5%) and references to surface (44.4%) or deep (54.8%) imagery. Notably, the indicator concerning the identification of fantasy *roles* (2.2) showed an extremely low degree of agreement, with only 36.3% agreement among the three coders.

Recomputing the agreement coefficient for the more problematic dimensions, excluding dimensions 3 and 4, a level of agreement of 47.4% was found for the dimension related to polarization, 36.3% for actantial structures (which aligns with the disagreement on indicator 2.2), and 14.8% for the dimension related to the *memetic potential*. Among the five dimensions, this is the only dimension that involves the interaction between narration and the narratee, thus necessitating a higher level of interpretation, considering the complexity of the analysed material (Früh, 2007).

The data collected in the triple blind trial coding indicated problematic agreement for indicator 2.2 and dimensions 1 and 5, leading to a group discussion to reach consensus on the interpretations. After extensive deliberation, unanimous agreement (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002) was achieved among the three expert coders of narratives, particularly regarding dimension 5. For dimension 2, agreement was reached by providing a clearer distinction between the functions (2.1) and roles (2.2) of actors and characters within the narrative, along with further clarification of the categories used in the fantasy and science fiction imagery.

Considering the above findings, we can deem the analysis conducted through this instrument (Boyatzis, 1998) acceptable, at least within the Italian context and the examined online war narratives.

In terms of validity, given the novelty of the operationalized concept, evaluation was performed in relation to face validity, “WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get)” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 115), as well as content validity to assess the actual detection of each dimension (Schreier, 2012, p. 185). Considering the objectives of the analysis and the focus on detecting manifest indicators that explicitly indicate the presence or absence of specific narrative elements, no significant issues regarding detection (Berelson, 1952) were identified, despite the inevitable role played by interpretation (Schreier, 2012, p. 176).

In particular, the following phases were followed:

1. Comprehensive reconstruction of the reference literature to identify concept-driven categories.
2. Reading the selected texts to identify any additional categories (data-driven).
3. Comparison among the distinct categories that emerged.
4. Elimination or modification of some categories.
5. Research group discussion.
6. Discussion with narrative experts.
7. Elimination or modification of some categories.
8. Application of the new coding frame.
9. Repeating the process for each change.

Finally, considering that the validity of the instrument is inevitably linked to its reliability, and that one of the researchers is part of the group of experts and one of the coders (Früh, 2007), we can consider our instrument sufficiently valid.

Naturally, in this way, we are testing internal validity. Our instrument is calibrated on online war narratives, using a limited number of accounts, exclusively on a single platform, within the Italian socio-cultural context, and solely based on what is evident from the text (not on the intentions of the narrators or the interpretations of the readers, for example). Therefore, we do not have elements to establish the external validity of our results.

4. Initial Empirical Evidence from Online Narratives on the Russo-Ukrainian War

The data were reanalysed, considering suggestions and interpretations from the research group and other coders, leading to the identification of common scores for all identified indicators. The presence of three coders, along with the detection of dichotomous variables, facilitated the process (Schreier, 2012, pp. 204-207).

Considering the characteristics of the data and the complexity of the concept under investigation, the results will be presented through a combination of socio-semiotic analysis and interpretation with a qualitative approach.

The content analysis of Telegram posts related to the events surrounding the destruction of the paediatric hospital and theatre in Mariupol, which occurred during the city's siege by Russian armed forces, reveals various levels of *fabulation* ranging from 1 to 12.

A moderately high level of *fabulation* has been observed in the 135 posts (7 points on average) and remains consistently present, as hypothesized in H1. In

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contrast, only one-fifth of the posts (19.3%) exhibit low levels (up to 4 points out of 12) of *fabulation*.

Among the posts with the lowest level read, for example, the number 80:

“Secondo le autorità ucraine di Mariupol la distruzione del teatro non ha provocato vittime.”

At the other extreme we find posts like number 40:

“Un militante del battaglione Azov è riuscito a fuggire ed è passato dalla parte dell'esercito della DNR. Ha raccontato delle atrocità commesse dai nazisti ucraini a Mariupol. Ma la cosa più importante è che il quartier generale dei militanti ucraini si trova nel seminterrato del teatro di Mariupol e l'atrio è gremito di civili, che sono sorvegliati da 12 militanti di Azov, che non li lasciano andare via. Precisazione: garanzie che non si tratti di un attore ingaggiato? Ovviamente nessuna.”

In which all the indicators were found, except 3.3 (modal statements), 4.1 (call to action) and 5.1 (references to mythology). Consider also post 116, in which only 4.2 is absent (promises of reward):

“🤔 Il video mostra una bambina miracolosamente sopravvissuta che ha perso la madre, il padre e la sorella durante il bombardamento del Teatro Drammatico di Mariupol. La ragazza è stata salvata dai nonni, che sono sopravvissuti miracolosamente in quell'inferno. ! Le storie dei residenti di Mariupol devono essere ascoltate dal mondo intero. In modo che l'intero pianeta venga a sapere che tipo di male russo vive tra di noi. Il male che uccide i bambini con le madri, spara alle persone disarmate e violenta le donne innocenti.”

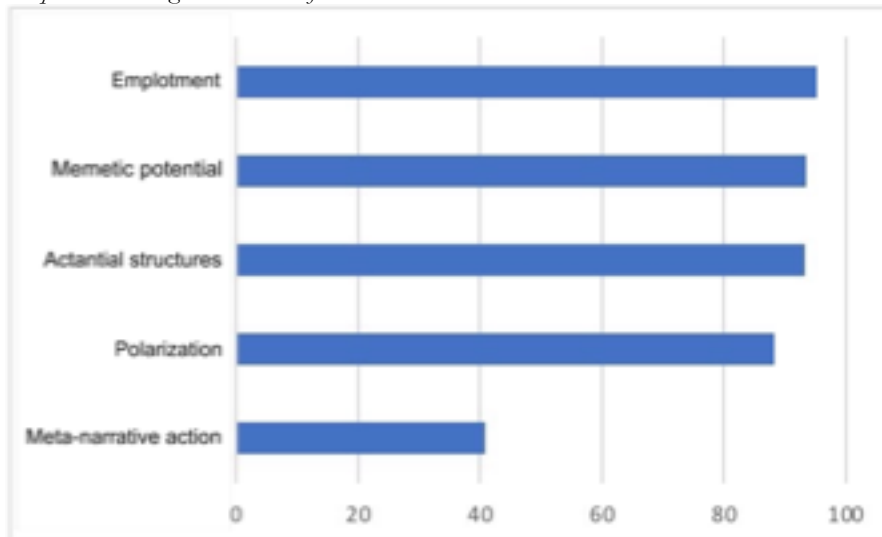
The data also appear to confirm the second hypothesis, H2, effects that suggests that openly declaring oneself pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian influences the level of *fabulation* ($p < 0.00$). As evident, non-aligned narrators exhibit lower levels of *fabulation* (48.6%), while aligned narrators show intermediate or high levels. This is the most significant finding of our research. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the level of *fabulation* is linked to the narrator's positioning towards the actual event. This supports the hypothesis that, even with the same factual information, the narrator's alignment effects the interpretation of the event, while more impartial narrators tend to downplay their position in the story.

Moreover, the observed data gains further relevance when considering the interaction between different dimensions. While dimensions related to actantial

structures (2), emplotment (3), and memetic potential (5) appear equally prevalent in all posts, a significant association has been found between dimension 1 (polarization) and 4 (metanarrative). This suggests that narrators more frequently seek active participation from the narratee – either through a direct *call to action* or by promising a reward – when an explicit ethical positioning between *friends or foes* is present. However, due to the limited diversity of the considered accounts, it is not possible to determine if there is a particular alignment where *fabulation* is more or less significant than others. Therefore, this aspect requires further investigation in future research.

Summarizing, the percentage distribution of dimensions and indicators in the posts is as follows:

Graph 1. Percentage distribution of dimensions.



All dimensions appear to be positively correlated. Specifically, the dimension of polarization (dimension 1) exhibits the highest degree of correlation with dimension 2 (actantial structures) and dimension 5 (memetic potential). The correlation between dimensions 1, 2 and 5 can be intuitively explained by the fact that as the explicit gap between the hero and antagonist widens, the corresponding actantial structures and the use of archetypes from mythology or the imaginary become more apparent. Notably, there is a significant correlation between indicators 1.1-1.2 and 2.2 ($r=0.480$). Additionally, the second correlation is of interest as it appears to support hypothesis H3, which posits that a greater reliance on mythological references

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and both superficial and deep imagery in the text is directly proportional to a more pronounced positioning of the narrator in the story. In this regard, the correlation between indicator 1.2 (polarization of actors) and 5.3 (deep imagery) is particularly relevant ($r=0.434$).

When examining individual indicators, it is evident that the most prevalent ones are 3.1 (cause-effect concatenations: 93.3% of cases) and 2.1 (archetypal actantial structure: 90.4%), while the least prevalent ones are associated with 4.1 (call to action: 14.1%) and 5.1 (references to mythology: 28.9%). Consequently, it is apparent that these less prominent indicators may hold greater significance in determining the degree of *fabulation*, and their presence or absence may contribute to revealing a stronger or weaker positioning of the narrator in relation to the story. This is exemplified in the case of post number 5:

“Mariupol. Attacco diretto delle truppe russe all’ospedale di maternità. La gente, i bambini sono sotto le macerie. Questa è atrocità! Per quanto ancora il mondo sarà complice nell’ignorare il terrore? Chiudete subito il cielo! Fermate subito gli omicidi! Avete potere. Sembra che stiate perdendo l’umanità.”

in which it is evident that the *call to action*, combined with the use of mythological imagery (mother goddess, hell, heaven), represents a positioning where the actual event (the destruction of the hospital) takes on the characteristics of a *pre-text* around which the narrative is constructed.

5. Conclusions

The literature on the media narratives of the Russo-Ukrainian war is still a work in progress, making it premature to conduct a comprehensive survey at this point. In the first paragraph, we attempted to highlight the most relevant publications thus far, primarily in Italy. Regarding social media contexts, particularly the social platform Telegram, significant analyses have been conducted by Maathuis and Kerkhof (2023), Stolze (2022), and Nazaruk (2022).

However, the researchers’ focus seems to be primarily on identifying themes or user sentiment through the massive scraping of data from social media accounts, with the aim of inferring possible interpretive patterns in an inductive manner. In contrast, this study attempts to take a deductive approach, first building a theoretical model of analysis that positions the object of study – namely the narratives of the Russian-Ukrainian war – in the perspective of a social fact. Indeed, this paradigm investigates the communication of war events

as a ritual relationship between the narrated text, the narratee, and the *narrator in fabula*. According to this model, hypotheses are compared with data analysis.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that the potential limitation of many data-driven studies lies precisely in the lack of clear theoretical frameworks capable of interpreting the enormous amount of material drawn from social media (Yousefi et al., 2020). The identification of tools capable of empirically detecting *fabulation* represents an endeavour to offer further investigative possibilities for social scientists. The aim is to assess the extent to which narratives, particularly those pertaining to war, disseminated on social media by professional, institutional, or non-expert narrators, can engender phenomena of engagement and affection, beyond the empirical objectivity of the conveyed information. As a result, this could enhance our comprehension of the mechanisms through which war narratives can influence the emotional impact on the reader/user and, thus, contribute to the shaping of public opinion.

6. Limitations and perspectives

The concept of *fabulation*, or more precisely its conceptualization and operationalization, has enabled the development of a tool that is valuable for analyzing war content and has the potential to examine additional narratives. Consequently, there are plans to expand the study by enlarging the database, including more narrators, and incorporating other social networks.

Analyzing only Telegram posts hinders the evaluation of the tool's applicability to other platforms and the understanding of how their nature influences narrative processes. The limited number of analysed posts and, consequently, the restricted number of post samples per narrator have also hindered a comprehensive comparison among different accounts.

Another significant issue arises from the diverse nature of the analysed materials, which encompass both textual and visual forms. Therefore, integrating visual analysis, particularly in certain cases, would be desirable.

It should be noted that reactions and post shares, which could provide valuable material for further investigation, were not taken into consideration. However, this issue was not the primary focus of this initial research step. Additionally, the topics examined in this study were both related to tragic events in the Ukrainian war. It would be interesting to compare different narrators across diverse types of events.

Furthermore, potential future investigations could explore the concept of *testimony* in addition to the investigated concept of *fabulation* (cf. Jedlowski, 2022). These studies could involve a sample of non-expert coders who are

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explicitly polarized towards specific positions in the field, facilitating a comparison in the detection process with the findings of neutral coders. Moreover, the data could be categorized not only by topic but also by individual accounts, considering not only the posts directly produced by the narrators but also the most significant shares. Finally, the study could be developed using machine learning tools to test the possibility of automatically extracting *fabulation*, while acknowledging the interpretative role of the human factor, particularly regarding dimension 5, which involves a more interactive and creative involvement between the narrator and the narratee in constructing meaning.

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