

Developing Inclusive Narratives to foster Inclusion at Local Level

An Operational Policy Paper

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the **spreading of inaccurate information** - either unpurposely or by design - is nothing new in the political discourse, social media and the internet have exacerbated existing trends. Disinformation and misinformation are global phenomena enacted by States or national leaders through international platforms - and yet their **impact at the local level** is massive: city governments lose trust, the social fabric is torn, and the adoption or implementation of intercultural policies becomes more and more costly from a political point of view.

Fake news, rumours, click-baiting headlines are successful because they manage to connect individual emotions and stories with social and collective challenges through **narratives**, i.e. logical and internally coherent reports connecting single events to collective stories. In the past decade, narratives have become a powerful tool to foster polarization, target vulnerable groups, and mainstream racist and discriminatory policies.

Yet political narratives can also work the other way around: they can help break polarizing dynamics; make communities more aware and resilient against mis-/disinformation; and strengthen consensus for inclusive policies. Taking advantage of its long experience in the field, ICEI intends to build an **operational model to support local authorities in the development of effective, inclusive, and intercultural narratives**.

1. Disinformation, misinformation, and their impact on local government

1.1 Disinformation and misinformation: definitions and features

In recent years, information spreading dynamics and trends have become central in democratic societies. In public discourse, populist narratives stigmatizing minorities and social groups are on the rise; in the private spheres, social networks foster the creation of info-chambers of like-minded individuals that are increasingly impenetrable to external ideas.¹

Clearly, neither **disinformation** - i.e. false information that is deliberately created to harm, mislead or evoke an emotional response in a target audience - or **misinformation** - inaccurate information that is held true and thus shared in good

¹ *Claiming the power of dialogue - Toolkit for antirumours dialogue*. Council of Europe, 2021

faith - are new phenomena.² Yet both gained problematic characteristics due to some mutually reinforcing dynamics:

- the internet and the social networks have allowed for a **faster, cheaper and wider spreading** of news and **reinforced social bubbles** through algorithms that filter and redirect information sharing;
- the dissemination of false but emotionally impactful news is **monetised** through revenue systems (i.e. 'page views') combined with aggressive strategies (such as click-baiting);
- high levels of **distrust towards institutions** constitute a fertile soil for the spreading of false information, which further increases distrust in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

1.2 The effects of disinformation at local level

In the last few years, the spreading of false information prompted several institutions to take action: for instance, the European Union has set up different tools to tackle the phenomenon, in particular in view of the [EU24 elections](#).³ Yet, despite the fact that disinformation is usually reported when interfering with national (or supranational) elections, **harmful and meaningful impacts can be observed also, and especially, at the local level.**

Examples of disruptive effects of disinformation on city governments are everywhere to be found. As a consequence of the US24 electoral debate where the then-candidate Donald Trump repeated a debunked claim about Haitian migrants in Springfield (OH), the City Hall was closed following a bomb threat and the Springfield City School District evacuated two elementary schools following an email threat, not to mention the sufferance caused to the Haitian community living in the city.⁴ In 2017, an alt-right news platform published an article that falsely claimed that a 'mob' of more than 1,000 refugee men had embarked on a violent rampage during New Year's Eve celebrations in the German city of Dortmund. The fake news was allegedly linked to the then-forthcoming federal elections (September 2017).⁵

Both cases show how disinformation is often **targeting marginalised or vulnerable groups and individuals**, expanding social rifts and increasing tension

² *Disinformation in the city - Response Playbook*. The University of Melbourne, 2024

³ *Foreign interference around elections - Parliament's investigations, warnings and measures*. European Parliament, 2024.

⁴ *'I am afraid': The aftermath of Springfield, Ohio, misinformation on Haitians who live there*. Poynter, 16/09/2024

⁵ *German police quash Breitbart story of mob setting fire to Dortmund church*. The Guardian, 7/01/2017

between communities: disinformation reduces trust both in institutions and among different groups; and it can erode social cohesion, as specific identities are overrepresented in targeted disinformation campaigns (migrants, Roma, religious minorities, LGBT+ people, women).⁶

The impact of rumours and fake news can be long-lasting and deep. In recent years, ICEI has designed and participated in several projects aiming at implementing intercultural-oriented policies at local level, i.e. capacity building of local officers, supporting cities in developing intercultural or anti discrimination action plans, facilitating grassroots participation through participatory assemblies, etcetera. These actions have highlighted some challenges, especially concerning the **effectiveness and resilience of these strategies in the long term**. On the one hand, approving a regulation or an operational plan is for a public body only the beginning of a long journey: **mainstreaming** an intercultural approach requires changing the institutional culture in all sectors and levels, and among all employees; moreover, it is crucial to build the necessary **consensus** around intercultural and anti-discriminatory policies, not only to endorse them, but also to make them resilient and safe from daily political pettiness.

Both processes, mainstreaming and consensus-building, can be undermined by the spreading of rumours or fake news, which increase the policies' political costs and disengage allies or targets.

2. The role of political narratives in shaping the public discourse

2.1 Narratives: connectors of individual and collective stories

Disinformation and misinformation do not emerge in a vacuum: they are part of a more complex and articulated picture. Agents spreading disinformation know and take advantage of pre-existing emotions, that they help reinforce. Rumours are based on - and strengthen - widespread stereotypes and prejudices. Click-baiting headlines catch our attention because they offer clear and easy solutions to distressing real-life problems. All of them succeed because they manage to connect our individual emotions and stories with social and collective challenges through particular constructs called **narratives**.

According to the Council of Europe, a narrative is *“a logical, internally coherent report and interpretation of connected events and characters [that] give a*

⁶ *Disinformation in the city - Response Playbook*. The University of Melbourne, 2024

meaning to the story, connecting singular happenings to a more general, collective story”.⁷ While there are different definitions of narrative⁸, the one adopted by the Council of Europe is particularly useful as it stresses two elements:

1. A narrative does not simply line up a few facts or data (as a chronicle, or a list), but unites them through **causal interpretation**. According to the great Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov, “if I tell you that the king died, and then the queen died, that’s not narrative; that’s plot. But, if I tell you that the king died, and then the queen died of a broken heart, that’s narrative”⁹. Stories, as historian Drew Gilpin Faust writes, “impose purpose and meaning on experiences that often seem random and discontinuous”.¹⁰
2. Other than a linear causal interpretation, narratives offer also a **vertical connection between individual stories** (lower-case s) **to collective** (upper case, history books’) **Stories**. In other words: a truly effective narrative links what happens to individuals to political and social events on a national or global scale.

2.2 “They steal our job”: the case of an oppressive narrative

Several theories have investigated the reasons why narratives can be effective to persuade readers (or viewers, or listeners): narratives have the capacity of **reducing resistance to beliefs or thoughts** by making individuals leave their thoughtful and focused state (on the contrary to what factual-based, non-narrative literature would do) and are **easier to remember** than other forms of writing, facilitating the transfer of information (**processing fluency**). Furthermore, narratives create a strong connection between their users and the character (**parasocial interaction**), their point of view (**identification**), and/or their world (**transportation**).¹¹

⁷ WE CAN! Taking Action against Hate Speech through Counter and Alternative Narratives. Council of Europe, 2017.

⁸ So many that the American collective Pop Culture Collaborative declares that “[...] in the context of designing a narrative system, I will venture to say that it doesn’t really matter how we define “a narrative.” Instead, it is critical that cultural strategists, artists, organizers, and grantmakers begin to share an understanding of the definition and function of narrative archetypes in the context of narrative systems.” *From Stories to Systems: Using a Narrave Systems Approach to Inform Narrave Change Strategy*. Pop Culture Collaborative, 2022.

⁹ *The State of Narrative Non-Fiction Writing*. Nieman Reports. Other sources attribute the quote to different authors, including E.M. Forster.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Convergences: Themes, Texts and Images of Composition*. Bedford/St. Martin, New York, 2005.

¹¹ *Impact Study - Effectiveness, risks, and potentials of using counter and alternative narratives in combating hate speech*. Council of Europe - Justice for Prosperity Foundation, forthcoming.

From the point of view of activists and institutions, though, the core of a political narrative is not a passive persuasive mechanism, rather the capacity to create a vertical connection between individual experiences and collective elaborations and **involve political actors in collective experiences**.

According to John Powell¹², a US civil rights activist historian and founder of the Othering and Belonging Institute, there is a direct link between individual psychological processes and racist attitudes.¹³ Social dynamics that unfold very rapidly - such as climate change, technological developments, or demographic shifts - can produce anxiety, an emotional state that the [American Psychology Association](#) defines as “*feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes*” which, unlike fear, does not focus on a “*clearly identifiable and specific threat*”.

Such an indefinite feeling cannot hover for long. For example, in recent years, narratives related to immigration and ethnic-racial diversity, about the invasion and loss of prosperity due to the newcomers (the well-known expression “*migrants steal our jobs*” and its countless declinations) have become widespread. Such narratives are remarkably successful not only because they are simple and intuitive, but also - and above all - because of their deep emotional meaning: “migrants steal our jobs” transforms a generic anxiety towards the loss of one's wellbeing into **fear** (of something concrete) and **anger** (towards someone identifiable); it focuses individual malaise on a cause (and, therefore, a target); and it allows a state of mind to be collectivised, creating a common front (“us”) against the alleged culprits (“them”). Through a narrative, the social changes taking place become

- **comprehensible**, because they are framed through cause-effect relationships (“*I lose my job because another steals it*”);
- **shareable**, as they relate to those who are experiencing the same situation (*there is no longer just ‘me’ and ‘the other’, but ‘us’ against ‘them’*);
- and **addressable**, since a solution (consequential to the way the problem is defined¹⁴) is in sight.

It is important to note that “migrants steal our jobs” is not a narrative per se, but rather a rumour based on stereotypes. Both - rumour and stereotypes - are the

¹² Who, similarly to bell hooks, writes his name in lowercase letters.

¹³ From his [keynote speech](#) at 2023 Othering and Belonging Conference in Berlin.

¹⁴ As psychologist Drew Westen put it, “the stories our leaders tell us are important [...] because they orient us towards what is, what could be, and what ought to be”. *What happened to Obama?*. New York Times, 6/08/2011. Council of Europe's We CAN manual puts it in a similar way: “[narratives are] the framework [through which] we think about the world and the possible solutions to the problems we encounter [and thus] what we intuitively consider possible”.

visible elements of narratives, which are, however, also made up of non-explicit components, such as: the **context**; the **relationships** that are established between the subjects; the characters' **emotions**; and others.¹⁵ In fact, there is not one version of a narrative any more than there is one version of an archetype or myth: these are plastic materials that adapt to the messenger, the media through which they are conveyed, and the contexts.

3. Developing inclusive narratives at local level

3.1 Human Rights-based New Narratives

To summarize: social, technological and demographic changes generate negative emotions such as anxiety and malaise, that people need to cope with. Due to their fictional structure and persuasive potential, narratives (especially when shared by leaders) provide a coherent and collective explanation of what is happening, why it is happening, and what needs to be done to make sure it never happens again. Due to existing and deeply rooted classist, racist, and sexist biases, many narratives target vulnerable or marginalized groups, such as migrants and racialized persons, women and LGBT+ individuals, less affluent people, and others; these oppressive narratives increase polarisation, mistrust, and violence. In recent years, a network of extreme right-wing movements, parties and policy makers have adopted very similar styles, slogans and narratives to mainstream their themes and keywords¹⁶: they were so successful that, when the French government adopted a very restricting immigration law, the far-right opposition party claimed it “an ideological victory”.¹⁷

Yet narratives can also be used to promote an inclusive and human rights-based view of society. Barack Obama’s “Yes, we can” slogan was a powerful crystallization of an emancipatory narrative that put a collective character in the middle of the story.¹⁸ “We” is also the protagonist of Angela Merkel’s “*Wir schaffen das*” [“we will do it”], pronounced by the then-Kanzlerin to overcome fears and resistances against Germany’s open-doors policy towards Syrians fleeing the civil war.¹⁹

¹⁵ We CAN manual identifies five elements - structure, characters, relationships, context, meaning - and three dimensions - spatial, temporal, emotional - of each narrative.

¹⁶ Slow and Mainstream Wins the (Far Right) Race: the mainstreaming of authoritarian populist ideas on migration and climate. Connecting the Dots, Othering and Belonging Forum, 2024

¹⁷ *Marine Le Pen scores big win on toughened immigration bill*. Politico, 19/12/2023

¹⁸ *WE CAN! Taking Action against Hate Speech through Counter and Alternative Narratives*. Council of Europe, 2017.

¹⁹ [5 years on from Angela Merkel's three little words: 'Wir schaffen das!'](#) Politico, 31/08/2020

In recent years, several institutions and CSOs have worked on deploying narratives' potential in different fields: against [radicalisation](#); to combat [hate speech](#); in the field of [arts and grantmaking](#); and many others. ICEI believes that the development of [human rights-based](#) narratives could support local authorities to:

1. **Break the “us-them” dynamic** and **identify new solutions** (and not culprits) to social problems;
2. Make societies **more aware and resilient against disinformation and misinformation**, mending social fabric torn by fake news, depowering rumours, and change negative stereotypes;
3. Create, strengthen, and recover **consensus in favour of inclusive policies**, especially in an area - that of migration and ethnic/racial diversity - where mainstreaming is in the hands of xenophobic and racist movements.

3.2 A 3-pillar strategy

In order to achieve this goal, ICEI has developed a 3-pillar strategy

3.2.1 Capacity building

ICEI will develop a **capacity building module** for city officers, policy makers, and CSOs personnel. Theoretical elements of narratives will be complemented by practical skills such as tools to map and analyse existing narratives and to develop collective ones together with local stake- and needholders. A combination of methodologies may be used, including: non-formal education, participatory dialogue, antirumours, future studies. Special attention will be dedicated to the synergy with the anti-rumours methodology, which ICEI has been promoting for several years through a close cooperation between local authorities, youth workers, and the youth.

The expected output is a standard training module for local authorities.

3.2.2 Implementation

ICEI will lead activities aiming at **developing, implementing, and evaluating human rights-based narratives at local level**, involving local authorities and local stake- and needholders in the process through participatory, collective methodologies. The aim is to directly address and depower existing rumours, preventing the spreading of fake news, and mending the negative effects of disinformation. This work will be supported by the EU funded STAND Project (2025-2026), led by ICEI and involving 16 European cities from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Latvia and Germany.

The expected output is a strategy for local authorities with clearly identified and replicable steps.

3.2.3 Networking

As already mentioned, several actors are working on developing knowledge and practical tools to shape human rights-based, inclusive, and emancipatory narratives. ICEI will support a continuous **exchange of experiences and practices** among different actors, including partner cities, networks it is member of, other CSOs and the academia. ICEI will support this process through existing and new communication channels and the organization of dedicated online and offline networking events.

The expected output is a community of practices on the topic of narratives and virtual spaces to share experiences, reflections, and materials.

4. Further readings

Council of Europe, 2017. *WE CAN! Taking Action against Hate Speech through Counter and Alternative Narratives.*

Council of Europe, 2021. *Claiming the power of dialogue - Toolkit for antirumours dialogue.*

Council of Europe - Justice for Prosperity Foundation, forthcoming. *Impact Study - Effectiveness, risks, and potentials of using counter and alternative narratives in combating hate speech.*

Othering and Belonging, 2022. *Othering and Belonging in a Europe in crisis.*

Pop Culture Collaborative, 2022. *From Stories to Systems: Using a Narrative Systems Approach to Inform Narrative Change Strategy.*

The University of Melbourne, 2024. *Disinformation in the city - Response Playbook*