

THE POWER OF NARRATIVE: HOW STORIES SHAPE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF NATIONAL SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed national security strategies, enabling states to conduct extensive surveillance for crime prevention, counterterrorism, and intelligence gathering. However, this increased surveillance raises ethical concerns regarding privacy, human rights, and civil liberties. This paper explores the intersection of technology, surveillance, and privacy within the framework of humanities and ethical considerations in national security. It critically examines how digital surveillance technologies, such as artificial intelligence, biometrics, and data mining, challenge traditional notions of personal privacy and freedom. Drawing on philosophical, sociological, and legal perspectives, the paper analyzes the ethical dilemmas posed by mass surveillance and the balance between security imperatives and individual rights. Additionally, it evaluates the role of humanities in fostering ethical reflections on surveillance policies and advocating for responsible digital governance. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for transparent regulatory frameworks that uphold human dignity while addressing national security concerns in the digital age.

Keywords: Surveillance, Humanities, National Security, Digital Ag

Introduction

In an era marked by complex, interlinked global challenges, understanding the mechanisms that shape public discourse and policy decisions is more critical than ever. Among these mechanisms, narrative has emerged as a foundational element. Far from being mere entertainment or rhetorical flourish, narratives actively construct social reality. They shape how people understand threats and opportunities, who is considered responsible or vulnerable, and what actions are deemed necessary or feasible. This is particularly evident in the domains of national security and sustainability, where the stakes are existential and the consequences of misunderstanding profound. In Nigeria and across Africa, storytelling has long been an indigenous method of transmitting knowledge and values, making narrative an especially potent force.

Theoretical Foundations

Narrative, Framing, and Ethics in Surveillance This paper draws primarily on three interrelated frameworks: **Narrative Theory, Framing Theory, and Ethical Theories in Surveillance Studies.**

1. **Narrative Theory**, as proposed by Jerome Bruner (1991), asserts that narrative is a primary way through which human beings construct and understand their world. Bruner emphasizes that narratives organize experience in a temporal, meaningful, and intentional framework, helping individuals and societies comprehend complex realities such as security threats and sustainability crises. In African societies, storytelling is not only cultural but epistemological—meaning knowledge is shaped, preserved, and transmitted through narrative practices such as folktales, proverbs, and oral histories.
2. **Framing Theory**, advanced by Entman (2004), posits that the way issues are presented—or framed—significantly influences perception and response. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest remedies. This theory is especially relevant in the digital age, where mass media and algorithmic feeds curate how narratives around security and privacy are consumed. Framing contributes to whether surveillance is perceived as protective or oppressive.
3. **Ethical Theories in Surveillance Studies** further provide a moral framework for analyzing how surveillance technologies intersect

with individual rights. Drawing from deontological ethics (which emphasize duty and moral rules) and consequentialist ethics (which assess outcomes), the discourse on surveillance necessitates a careful balance between national security goals and the preservation of civil liberties. This approach aligns with the broader field of **humanities and ethics**, which emphasizes human dignity, agency, and justice in policy design and implementation.

National Security

Narrative Construction of Threats Traditionally, national security has been framed through the lens of military strategy and state sovereignty. However, modern security challenges are increasingly transnational, including terrorism, cyber warfare, pandemics, and climate change. The framing of these issues relies heavily on narrative.

In Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency has been constructed through competing narratives. The government's narrative often emphasizes military success and downplays ongoing threats, while affected communities tell stories of displacement, loss, and resilience. These contrasting narratives influence public perception and international response. Similarly, in countries like Mali and Somalia, narratives about terrorism often intersect with historical grievances, underdevelopment, and identity politics, complicating efforts at peace building.

Additionally, the framing of national security has implications for who is perceived as a threat. For example, in South Africa, narratives around migration have often linked immigrants to crime, fueling xenophobic violence and influencing immigration policy. In contrast, human rights organizations deploy counter-narratives that emphasize shared humanity and economic interdependence.

Sustainability Stories of Crisis and Hope

Sustainability is inherently a narrative-driven domain, encompassing themes of catastrophe, resilience, and transformation. Climate change, perhaps the most pressing sustainability issue, is a prime example. The way climate change is narrated—whether as a global emergency, a development challenge, or a moral imperative—significantly affects policy responses and public engagement (Nisbet, 2009).

In African countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria, stories of local adaptation—such as community-led reforestation, renewable energy cooperatives, and sustainable agriculture—offer hopeful alternatives to narratives of helplessness. At the same time, narratives of environmental degradation, such as oil spills in the Niger Delta, highlight systemic injustices and the failure of governance, fueling social unrest and activism. The role of youth and women in sustainability narratives is also significant. Programs like the Nigerian Youth Climate Coalition and the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) have amplified stories of grassroots innovation, thereby challenging stereotypes of African passivity in global climate discourse.

The Intersection of National Security and Sustainability

National security and sustainability are increasingly intertwined. Climate-induced migration, resource conflicts, and pandemics represent overlapping concerns. The narrative framing of these intersections is pivotal. For example, in Nigeria's Middle Belt, farmer-herder conflicts have been linked to desertification and dwindling resources. Narratives that frame these conflicts as ethnoreligious can exacerbate tensions, while those that emphasize climate change and resource management may foster cooperation.

In Lake Chad, shrinking water levels have been framed as a driver of both poverty and extremism, influencing regional security policies and international humanitarian aid. Constructive narratives that emphasize shared vulnerability and regional cooperation are crucial in shaping sustainable peace. Similarly, the Horn of Africa's recurring droughts and famines are often framed either as natural disasters or as consequences of failed governance—each framing prompting different policy responses.

Media, Politics, and the Economy of Storytelling

Media institutions play a crucial role in narrative dissemination. Through selective framing and repetition, they influence what issues are salient and how they are interpreted. Political actors leverage narratives to mobilize support, frame opposition, and construct national identity (Entman, 2004). In Africa, state and private media often diverge in their storytelling, with significant implications for public trust and policy.

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become arenas where narratives are contested. For instance, the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria utilized digital storytelling to highlight police brutality, galvanizing both national and international support. Conversely, misinformation campaigns have also proliferated, influencing elections and public health responses.

The role of diaspora media is also noteworthy. African Diasporas contribute to shaping narratives about their home countries, often providing alternative perspectives on governance, security, and development. This transnational storytelling has implications for international policy, remittances, and diasporic engagement.

Case Studies

- i. **The Great Green Wall Initiative:** The African Union's Great Green Wall project aims to combat desertification across the Sahel by planting trees and restoring degraded land. The narrative surrounding the project emphasizes environmental regeneration, economic empowerment, and regional cooperation. Countries like Senegal and Ethiopia have used this story to mobilize youth and secure international funding. The framing of the project as a "green miracle" contrasts with narratives of Africa as environmentally degraded and dependent, reshaping global perceptions.



Title: The Great Green Wall Initiative
Source: www.UN-Water.com

- ii. **Boko Haram and Environmental Degradation:** The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria has been linked to environmental degradation and economic hardship, particularly around Lake Chad. Narratives that highlight the role of climate stress and unemployment in fueling extremism have shaped donor strategies and military cooperation (United Nations, 2020). However, counter-narratives that emphasize corruption, marginalization, and identity also circulate, complicating efforts at holistic intervention.



Title: A case against Shell in UK High Court over oil spills in Nigerian-Delta

Source: Theguardian

- iii. **Oil Spills and Environmental:** Justice in the Niger Delta In Nigeria's Niger Delta, decades of oil spills have led to narratives of environmental injustice and systemic neglect. These stories have fueled activism and legal battles, influencing corporate accountability and environmental policy. Communities use storytelling as a means of resistance and mobilization. Documentaries, Community Theater, and social media campaigns have amplified these narratives globally.



Title: A case against Shell in UK High Court over oil spills in Nigerian-Delta

Source: <https://royaldutchshellplc.com>

- iv. **Climate Migration in the Sahel Region:** The Sahel has become a hotspot for climate-induced migration. Countries such as Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger face recurring droughts that displace rural populations. The narrative framing of these migrations—as either security threats or humanitarian crises—significantly affects international funding and regional cooperation. NGOs are increasingly pushing for narratives that center human dignity and adaptive capacity.



Title: Putting climate refugees on international agenda

Source: Swissinfo.ch

Implications for Policy and Practice

Recognizing the narrative foundations of public understanding has significant implications. Policymakers and communicators must be intentional in crafting narratives that are inclusive, evidence-based, and forward-looking. Training in narrative competency should be integrated into education, diplomacy, and media.

Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial. Scholars, journalists, activists, and artists must work together to develop compelling narratives that resonate across cultural and political divides. In Africa, leveraging traditional storytelling alongside modern media offers unique opportunities for impact.

Incorporating narrative into policy design can also improve outcomes. For example, integrating community stories into environmental impact assessments can enhance legitimacy and compliance. Similarly, using narrative-based simulations in military training can prepare personnel for complex security environments.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Engaging with narrative power raises ethical questions. Who gets to tell the story? Whose voices are marginalized? There is a risk that dominant narratives can entrench power imbalances or justify coercive policies. Ethical storytelling requires reflexivity, representation, and a commitment to justice.

There is also the danger of oversimplification. Complex issues like climate change or terrorism are often reduced to binary narratives of good vs. evil or progress vs. backwardness. Such simplifications can obscure root causes and hinder sustainable solutions. Ethical engagement demands nuanced storytelling that embraces complexity and diversity.

Conclusion

The power of narrative in shaping our collective understanding of national security and sustainability is profound and far-reaching. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world—where Africa faces mounting challenges such as climate change, political instability, resource scarcity, and socio-economic inequality—the stories we tell are not just reflections

of reality but active agents in shaping it. Narratives influence policy choices, frame public discourse, and inspire individual and collective action.

By embracing the narrative dimension of these critical issues, we open the door to responses that are not only more comprehensive but also more inclusive and empathetic. A narrative approach allows us to move beyond technocratic solutions and embrace the human, cultural, and emotional dimensions that often define the success or failure of any intervention.

Ultimately, our capacity to imagine and articulate compelling narratives may well determine our ability to build a safer, more sustainable, and more inclusive future for Africa and the world.

Contribution to Knowledge

This paper contributes to academic and practical discourse in the following key ways:

1. **Establishes Narrative as a Critical Analytical Tool:** Positions narrative as essential to understanding and shaping the fields of national security, surveillance, and sustainability, particularly within the African context.
2. **Advances Interdisciplinary Engagement:** Bridges the gap between security studies, media theory, ethics, and the humanities—promoting a more holistic and inclusive approach to complex social and technological issues.
3. **Promotes Humanistic Approaches to Surveillance and Policy:** Emphasizes the need to integrate ethical reasoning, literature, and sociocultural analysis into the design and evaluation of surveillance technologies, challenging the dominance of purely legalistic and technical approaches.
4. **Explores the Intersection of Digital Technology, Ethics, and Governance in Africa:** Provides nuanced insights into how digital technologies interact with governance structures and ethical concerns, advocating for contextual and indigenous approaches.
5. **Contributes to Debates on Digital Sovereignty and Participatory Governance:** Offers a fresh perspective on digital sovereignty in Africa, encouraging ethical digital transformation and participatory oversight of surveillance practices.

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