

Disruptive Narratives

A New Research Paradigm

1. Introduction*

In this article, we seek to delineate a new research paradigm that involves the analysis of disruptive narratives. The term covers (1) conspiracy narratives (such as QAnon, the Reptoid Hypothesis, and the Great Replacement); (2) stories spread in the context of disinformation campaigns (by companies like Cambridge Analytica, Cyberfront Z, Harris Media, and Jorge) as well as by populists (such as Boris Johnson, Hans-Georg Maaßen, Donald Trump, or members of the German right-wing political party AfD), and (3) narratives that call for radical changes of our life styles (such as those used by “Extinction Rebellion” [XR]). Some of these stories propose largely invented (or fictive) ideas and events, while others convey fictional stories about ideas and events which are still clearly fact-based. What all disruptive narratives have in common, however, is their potential to shock: they try to present radically alternative events and thus urge their recipients to challenge established authorities. For us, ‘disruption’ is a descriptive category that primarily signals an interest in disturbing a given political order. In ethical terms, it is neither clearly positive nor negative, but has complex and ambivalent normative implications.

Disruptive stories deserve greater attention because they play an ever more important role in the public spheres in Western countries such as Britain, Germany, or the United States. We will thus address questions such as: How are these narratives structured? What about the interplay between the content and the form? What are these stories trying to achieve? What about their ideological ramifications or political consequences? Who spreads them? Who feels attracted by them? In what follows, we will begin by defining the term *disruptive narrative* and we will compare our definition to similar or related phenomena (such as the notion of ‘conspiracy theory’). In a second step, we will then present our trans-disciplinary methodology for analyzing disruptive narratives, which involves a fusion of ideas and concepts from the fields of narratology, linguistics, and political sciences. Finally, we will discuss three examples to illustrate how different disruptive narratives can try to influence the world views of their recipients.

2. Theory and Methodology

2.1 What is a Disruptive Narrative?

In this section, we will provide a working definition of disruptive narrative, and we will address the specific qualities that make the phenomena we are interested in narrative (i.e., story-like) and disruptive (i.e., challenging). *We argue that disruptive narratives (such as the ones mentioned in the introduction) seek to shock their audiences by confronting them with radically alternative events that lead to the questioning of established authorities.* What exactly makes them narrative or story-like? David Herman defines the term ‘narrative’ as

[...] (i) a representation that is situated in – must be interpreted in light of – a specific discourse context or occasion for telling. (ii) The representation, furthermore, cues interpreters to draw inferences about a structured time-course of particularized events. (iii) In turn, these events are such that they introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld involving human or human-like agents, whether that world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc. (iv) The representation also conveys the experience of living through this storyworld-in-flux, highlighting the pressure of events on real or imagined consciousnesses affected by the occurrences at issue [...]. [N]arrative is centrally concerned with [...] ‘what it is like’ for someone or something to have a particular experience. (2009, 14)

From our perspective, Herman’s definition is advantageous because it enables us to see that cultural phenomena can be more or less narrative – depending on how many of the mentioned features they display. Furthermore, Herman’s definition in terms of multiple characteristics helps us to get a better grasp of the specificity of disruptive narratives: he emphasizes the potential of narratives to articulate personal experiences from the perspectives of individuals who are immediately involved in the events of a story (experientiality). Herman also argues that a minimal degree of disruption is always involved in storytelling as a peculiar sort of public communication. In other words, he foregrounds two aspects of storytelling that we consider to be particularly important when it comes to public (i.e., socially and politically influential) stories, like the ones we will analyze.

We argue that disruptive narratives, first, display a rather low degree of narrativity and thus qualify as “minimal narratives.”¹ They are often short and vague, and they tend to contain gaps and ambiguities, which enable their audiences to further the stories themselves and thus to engage in forms of collective storytelling. Second, despite this low degree of narrativity, disruptive narratives involve emplotment in the sense of Hayden White (1987, 1–2). White uses the term to denote the transformation of historical material into the shape of a story or plot with “well-marked beginning, middle and end phases” (2). He suggests that the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (24). For White, the process of emplotment in historiographic narratives entails moralizing endings, and hence, ultimately serves the purpose of moralizing judgments. This is also true of disruptive narratives, where the connecting of (typically very few)

event sequences also goes hand in hand with a certain degree of constructedness (regardless of whether the represented events are largely fictive or fact-based) which then leads to moralizing judgments. Third, disruptive narratives evoke storyworlds they are concerned with, but typically only one or two events and a limited number of characters that can easily be grouped according to a rather simple distinction between ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ Fourth, disruptive narratives are usually experiential narratives, in which the question of ‘what it is like’ to have an experience takes center stage.² The central human experience that disruptive narratives represent is typically some kind of suffering which is not properly addressed by the elite and should thus be dealt with by others as soon as possible. Fifth, all disruptive narratives refer to and make claims about reality while at the same time using fictional elements and creative metaphors in order to integrate and transform these reality claims into a comprehensive narrative with a clear story line.

In this latter respect, there are important gradual differences between manifestations of disruptive narratives that matter regarding their political functions and normative implications. From our perspective, there is (1) a *wide* and (2) a *narrow understanding of disruption*. This distinction concerns the way in which the factual and the fictional elements of a story are related to each other and how they are prioritized, but also the question of what exactly is disrupted through the stories in question. (1) *In the wide sense, disruptive narratives challenge people’s automated perception and take them out of their established life styles and ways of thinking.* From this perspective, a wide range of narrative interpretations of reality (among them also fact-based narratives) would qualify as being disruptive. This wider understanding closely correlates with Stefan Iversen’s (2022, 360) take on disruptive narratives: he describes them in terms of what he calls “metanoic reflexivity.” His use of the term *metanoic* as an adjective subscribes to the general trajectory of disruption, rethinking, and potential transformation encapsulated in the notion of metanoia (which, etymologically speaking, means something like “afterthought”). The term thus denotes “a reflective act in which a person returns to a past event in order to see it anew” (Myers 2011, 8). For Iversen (2022, 360–361), disruptive narratives involve “metanoic reflexivity,” i.e., defamiliarization (or estrangement); debates about facts (based on the question “what, if anything did actually happen?”); divisiveness (they spread divisions because they are understood differently by different audiences); and a display of ingenuity (or simply rhetorical skill).

As we will argue below, disruption in general, also when understood in this wider sense, implies a certain degree of dynamic fictionalization as a further characteristic element of the stories in question. When this dynamic of fictionalization exceeds a certain level, this element can start to dominate the logic of stories to an extent at which it increasingly undermines their potential to account for independent facts. This is when disruption in the narrow sense starts to dominate a narrative’s logic. (2) *In the narrow sense, disruptive narratives seek to disturb some of the most fundamental premises of our perception of the world by proposing radically alternative, i.e., largely fictive states of affairs.* The goal is typically to discredit someone or

something through made-up elements. In many cases, such narratives call into question the liberal democratic system, but sometimes also knowledge-based institutions, science, the media, or forms of political, gender-related, and religious Otherness.

Moreover, we argue that our conception includes, but also exceeds the phenomenon usually labeled as ‘conspiracy theory.’ For us, QAnon (see Amarasingam and Argentino 2020) or David Icke’s (2001) “Reptoid Hypothesis” (see also Lewis and Kahn 2005) hardly qualify as *theories* in any sense of the term. From our vantage point, we are not confronted with theories but with narratives that people tell one another for specific reasons: they serve certain purposes and hence speak to some of the recipients. Furthermore, the field of disruptive narratives covers a great variety of different phenomena, including their wide and narrow variations as well as marginal cases in between these two types.

This differentiated conceptual framing calls for cautious, gradual distinctions rather than clear-cut, yet simplifying binary separations. Scholars who work within the framework of ‘conspiracy theories,’ however, often use such clear-cut categories and relegate the analyzed conspiracies to the world of the false, irrational, or stupid. Following the critical rationalist Karl Popper (2014, 459), who describes conspiracy narratives as “primitive kind[s] of superstition,” Michael Butter (2018, 39), for instance, associates them with ‘the realm of imagination’ (in German he speaks of “das Reich der Fantasie”) (see also Cosentino 2020, 64). By contrast, we do not think that it is helpful to approach disruptive narratives by starting from strictly separated binary oppositions such as factual vs. fantastic, rational vs. irrational, intelligent vs. stupid, or sophisticated vs. primitive. By means of our transdisciplinary framework, we rather try to find out how these stories function and why they speak to certain individuals; we are primarily interested in the question of what they do to their recipients and why they follow them. We argue that starting from this angle proves that cautious gradual distinctions instead of strict binary separations are more adequate and more helpful to understand the peculiar logic of the stories in question. Such a gradual approach also enables a more differentiated elaboration of the potentially problematic aspects especially of narrow disruptive narratives, as opposed to the partly constructive effects of other (especially wider) variants, while at the same time accounting for the permeable character of this distinction and the smooth transitions, ambivalences, and grey zones between its opposites.

Finally, disruptive narratives are distinctly political phenomena, an aspect which the use of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ also often tends to miss or at least to misrepresent. Not only does it imply that there is a ‘right and wrong’ understanding of theory and facts, which can be clearly outlined from a scientific position (Butter 2018, 37 and 52–53); its analytical usage also often tends to treat ‘scientific’ forms of knowledge and discussion as a generally valid prescriptive model of social communication in public discourses, which in our view tends to promote a problematic crypto-normative “epistemization of the political” (see Bogner 2021). In contrast to this rationalistically narrowed understanding of

politics inherent in the concept of conspiracy theory, we propose a narratological understanding of politics as the basis of our analysis. Accordingly, we assume that disruptive narratives are not completely different from public-democratic practices of deliberation and narration – or even, as some understandings of conspiracy theories suggest, simply the opposite of rational-scientific argumentation. Rather, they make use of certain narrative elements that are generally integral components of many forms of public-political storytelling. On the other hand, however, they are not simply identical with them, but constitute a more specific class of phenomena. We thus argue that disruptive narratives are a specific form, or a sub-type, of political narratives. They can be distinguished from political narratives in general because the peculiar way in which they apply the elements of political storytelling significantly deviates from their ‘normal’ use in political narration.

2.2 Disruptive Stories as Deviant Political Narratives

We argue that disruptive narratives vary the basic motives of political storytelling in a way that converts them into strategic narrative elements (see Roselle et al. 2014) of destructive infiltration of socially established stories and patterns of interpretation. This radically disruptive political thrust against established political narratives gives them a specifically militant and deviant character. Consequently, the characteristics of disruptive narratives can be conceptualized as a set of formal affinities with and at the same time specific deviations from the general practice of public political storytelling. In what follows, we examine various definitions of political narrative and use them to identify the major characteristics of disruptive narratives and also to elaborate on their specifically deviant narrative logic.

We particularly take up the triangular definition of political narrative provided by Frank Gadinger et al. (2014) which is especially helpful for our purposes. According to this definition, there are three general characteristics of political narratives. They function, first, as media of conveying political meaning and generating legitimacy, second, as media of embodying claims to political power, and, third, as media to convey ‘fictionality’ and ‘polyphony’ as constitutive elements of political interpretations of reality. This triangular scheme can be fruitfully applied for a conceptualization of our object of analysis. When reinterpreted for our specific purposes and complemented with a number of additional examinations from political science and narrative theory, it can help to integrate the more general features of disruptive stories identified in the previous section into a systematic and empirically applicable conceptual framework.

Our conceptualization accordingly suggests to also focus on three major characteristics for a working definition of disruptive narratives. We argue that their specific practical logic results from the interplay of peculiar deviations from the three central elements of political narratives just sketched. These deviations are

first the central motif of disruption itself (deviating from the basic political motif of meaning and legitimacy formation), furthermore a peculiar idea of political counter-power (which deviates from the general power motif of political narratives), and, finally, a deviating, specifically dynamic way of dealing with the fictional and polyphonic elements of political storytelling. At this point, we will examine each of these three elements by highlighting their derivative nature and specific relation to the political functions of legitimation, the generation of power, and the use of fictionality in interpreting reality.

2.2.1 Disruption as Political Meaning

Most approaches for the empirical analysis of narration in political discourse understand stories as specific communicative means for generating meaning and political legitimacy by way of integrating a set of formal ingredients into meaningful comprehensive patterns. The “Narrative Policy Framework,” for instance, one of the current “key approach(es) for the study of narratives” (Blum / Kuhlmann 2023, 3), suggests that the political character of stories can be determined by looking at the ways in which they integrate their major formal elements, such as their settings, characters, plots, and morals (Jones et al. 2014, 5; Shanahan et al. 2018), into a specifically political ‘story line’ that makes sense of and legitimizes the political system as a whole or the peculiar political projects they refer to. Disruptive narratives can be understood as conveying such a peculiarly political ‘story line,’ but one that is radically focused on elements of discontinuity and delegitimation, thereby turning it into a story of disruption. Hence, disruption constitutes the first characteristic in which disruptive narratives deviate from ‘normal’ political stories. We are confronted with a deviant way of generating political meaning by means of storytelling. Like all three characteristics we consider, this first (and most basic) deviating motif points toward a gradual rather than a clear-cut or absolute difference between political narratives in general and disruptive narratives in particular. In disruptive narratives, certain features of political stories are emphasized, sometimes exaggerated, while others of these general features are suppressed or even largely excluded. Regarding the first characteristic, this dynamic of exaggeration and suppression plays out between the conflictual and disruptive motifs of political stories on the one hand and their integrative and legitimizing elements on the other.

In order to function properly as resources of meaning and legitimacy, political narratives must not only be integrative in terms of content. They also have to be embedded in broad participatory practices. They are produced in practices of “collective storytelling” (Gadinger et al. 2014, 10) which are open to active participation. Also, a large number of ‘authors’ are involved in them. As a consequence, they must offer enough space for different positions, which is why political narratives are always both integrative and conflictual in character. On the one hand, they “participate in the stabilization of the symbolic social order.” On

the other hand, they contribute to “keeping this order in a state of flexible incompleteness” (Koschorke 2017, 397). Providing “individuals and collectives with a sense of purpose and place” as well as “grounds for common understanding and interpretation,” while at the same time helping to articulate conflict and to challenge such “common understandings” (Patterson / Monroe 1998, 321), they include both narrative forms of justification and forms of criticism. Crucial for the integrative effect of such (partly always controversial) practices of collaborative storytelling is their potential to successively transform, precisely “by means of this interplay” of affirmation and criticism, “confrontational language strategies into processes of collective self-understanding” (Gadinger et al. 2014, 11). Among other things, this works through the consciously ambiguous use of political symbols which enables “the transformation of individual intentions and actions into collective results and purposes” (Stone 2002, 157), but also through practices of mediation between the center and the periphery of collective narrative processes. These practices involve a narrative “diffusion of meaning” and an application at different levels of articulation (Koschorke 2017, 161) as well as narrative activations of established and widely shared public topoi in order “to mobilize the power of institutionally ingrained narratives” (Gadinger et al. 2014, 11) and “to find support for generally recognized plot conventions” (Koschorke 2017, 334). These communicative tools support the integration of heterogeneous narrative strands into one common political narrative, even if it consists of many tensions.

The peculiar sort of deviation of disruptive narratives with regard to this first defining characteristic of political narration results from the fact that they refuse to participate in this gradual transition toward forms of integrative collective self-understanding in public discourse. They instead radicalize the critical-confrontational moment of narrative strategies – hence their potential for the “subversion” and “evisceration” of other stories (Fisher 1987, 144–145) – and make this the primary function of storytelling. At the same time, they radically detach themselves from the overall integrative drift that political narratives normally unfold by mediating between the narrative center and its periphery and between criticism and affirmation in public spheres. By contrast, their narrative thrust turns directly against this integrative drift and reverses it into a permanent drift toward disruption. Hence, while the conflict between different positions and “metanarratives,” an affinity with “stories of decline,” and the tendency to juxtapose “the forces of evil against the forces of good” (Stone 2002, 138) are three typical features of political storytelling (see also Koschorke 2017, 236–247), disruptive narratives go beyond the normal scope of political decline, conflicts, and black-and-white stories. They tend not only to radicalize and hypostatize disruptive motifs, but also to permanently disrupt the bonds between center and periphery and between criticism and affirmation altogether, thereby turning conflict and disruption into an end in itself and into the story’s dominant theme.

The experiential core around which the drift of such narratives toward disruption mostly crystallizes is the question of ‘what it is like’ (see above) to personally suffer from the injustices and the overwhelming powers of corrupt

elites, ignorant social majorities, or the corrupt ‘system’ of society altogether. The strong moralizing judgments which usually help to fire up the anti-integrative fervor of disruptive stories therefore often articulate a strong sense of being trapped within a wrong, twisted and / or mendacious public narrative dominating and corrupting society as a whole. Consequently, disruptive emplotment practices, since they are applied to construct the strong claim that reality is fundamentally different than most people perceive it, usually reach a particularly high level of artificiality. In terms of content and political orientation, furthermore, the alternative interpretations at which disruptive narratives orient their story line are usually located at a level beyond the common “forceful ‘meta-narratives’ of liberalism, conservatism, or socialism” reproduced and juxtaposed by most political narratives (Groth 2019, 5). They instead open up a radically alternative political frame of reference which questions the whole set of established metanarratives altogether, thus actively deviating even from the most common topoi of public understanding. Like any political narrative, disruptive narratives are “stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end,” and they have their “heroes and villains and innocent victims” (Stone 2002, 138). However, all these basic narrative elements are here redefined in terms of disruption, which gives them a specifically deviant twist.

2.2.2 The Mobilization of Political Counter-Power

The argument that “stories of power” (Stone 2002, 142–162) are constitutive ingredients of any kind of political storytelling is a common denominator of almost all definitions of political narrative (see Blum / Kuhlmann 2023). Accordingly, within the triangular scheme we use, the embodiment and articulation of political power claims is the second major function of political storytelling (Gadinger et al. 2014, 11). Political stories do not only provide legitimacy and meaning; they also generate and help to (re-)distribute political power. They typically work as media of the situational formation of ‘symbolic’ or ‘interpretive’ power, i.e., a specifically ‘soft’ sort of power, which helps to frame perceptions in a way that can influence patterns of behavior and facilitate the achievement of specific goals (11).³ Regarding this peculiarly soft sort of power, the effective functioning of political stories depends upon their ability to mobilize generalized forms of social and political trust and to use them for their own power purposes, for instance by establishing symbolic links to widely accepted figures and institutions or notions of authority (19–20; see also Vorländer 2006, 18–21).

In this respect, very different sources of political trust and authority can be narratively used, and it is helpful for our purposes to bring in a further differentiation of narrative types at this point, namely the distinction of political stories into “formal” and “informal” variants (Shenhav 2006). Formal political narratives directly focus on the official and institutionalized part of a political system,

whereas informal political stories are rather located in the wider political discourse of a society, with only loose connections to its institutionalized center (247–248). In terms of their power functions, the formal variant obviously implies a classical top-down-model of political power, like the one proposed by Max Weber (1984, 89–93), primarily referring to institutionalized and routinized forms of authority or domination. Accordingly, they directly refer to the “state” and its various institutions as their symbolic authoritative backups, by claiming some sort of official authorization.

The informal variant, in contrast, rather refers to a bottom-up-model, like the one classically proposed by Hannah Arendt (1970, 35–56), where power is primarily understood in terms of civic engagement and common initiatives as well as their active support by citizens. Consequently, informal political stories refer to and try to appropriate civil society or “the people” as their major sources of political authority, in contrast to the formal variant’s direct reference to the state and its institutions. They are even often critical of official authorities and their claims of authorization as sources of legitimacy. While the latter usually privilege functional minorities and political elites, informal stories refer to “the people,” practically to the majority of citizens as the decisive source of legitimate political power. The slogan “we are the 99 %” put forth in the Occupy Movement’s political narrative (see Gadinger et al. 2014, 16) is a case in point. What both variants have in common, however, is their constitutive narrative linkage to established figures and generalized forms of political trust and authority as sources of power.

Disruptive narratives, by contrast, follow a radically dissociated idea of interpretive power which conflicts not only with the center of official government institutions and policies, but with the presumably “legitimate” mainstream of public political discourse altogether. In doing so, they gradually dissociate themselves from the power-generating logic of both formal and informal narratives. They obviously strongly oppose the top-down model of power and instead mostly follow a bottom-up logic of power generation, which at first glance is similar to the logic of informal narratives. At the same time, however, they focus not so much on majorities of citizens as the legitimate subjects of power, but rather on distinct minorities – counter-elites of resistance against the state *and* the majority, which represent the knowing few or at best the “real people” yet to be awakened politically. In terms of power, disruptive narratives typically convey a story of “the few” opposing the state- *and* the mainstream-based interpretive power of “the many.” As a consequence, while political narratives always try to positively connect to widely shared narratives of symbolic representation for generating some sort of legitimate interpretive power position, disruptive narratives directly oppose these widely shared narratives and instead refer to distinctly oppositional, anti-authority-oriented, radically alternative or subversive political contexts. Accordingly, they use their narrative means not so much to participate in but rather to reverse the power potential of such established interpretive authorities and to attack them with their own weapons, so to speak.

In doing so, disruptive narratives seek to mobilize distinctly *negative* sources of interpretive power. The peculiar power-generating logic they therewith imply may best be understood with reference to Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of counter-power. Generally emphasizing the flexible character of power relations, Foucault contends that constellations of power always and necessarily generate particular possibilities of resistance against them. Hence one can speak of resources of counter-power. Crucial for Foucault is that these counter-power potentials are not primarily derived from sources external to the power relations in question. Rather, they are themselves inherent from the start in the very power constellations they seek to oppose. For Foucault, the power game is a

complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault 1978, 101)

In a similar sense, political narratives can be understood as generating not only interpretive power, but at the same time potentials for interpretive resistance against them, sources of narrative counter-power. Disruptive stories, consequently, are directly driven by such counter-effects of established political narratives. They seek to activate the latent sources of counter-power provided by political narratives and turn them against themselves. Concretely, they seek to generate their interpretive counter-power directly from the contradictions and tensions that any kind of established, powerful political narrative inevitably produces as an unintended side-effect.

Consequently, disruptive stories, although they typically avoid any positive reference to established symbolic authorities, whether state or popular, nonetheless directly depend on these established authorities, yet in a negative sense. They strategically exploit the contradictions and gaps that every political narrative inevitably leaves open in order to derive a comprehensive counter-narrative (see Hyvärinen 2021) from them. Since this counter-narrative directly contradicts established narratives, but on the other hand is also directly anchored in them, even if only in their weak points and gaps, it in effect often succeeds to turn their symbolic power directly against themselves, therewith generating a peculiar sort of interpretive counter-power. In order for this peculiar strategy of gaining interpretative counter-power to work effectively, disruptive narratives must use the element of fiction in political storytelling in a certain way. This brings us to the third characteristic of disruptive narratives. It is of central importance for the above-mentioned distinction between a broader and a narrower understanding of disruption.

2.2.3 *Monophonic Fictionalization*

The third major deviation which defines disruptive narratives relates to the creative and fictional elements characteristic to political storytelling. In disruptive

stories, although they usually (like most political stories) remain “minimal narratives” (see above and note 1), these fictional elements are often strongly emphasized, and they are put to work in a peculiar way, one which exerts a particularly strong influence on their narrative logic. In political narratives, fictional elements are usually applied in order to articulate and convey both factual and interpretive aspects of heterogeneity and multiplicity. Since public debates always constitute pluralistic spaces with many different positions and partly strong tensions between them, political narratives are never entirely unambiguous or uniform. This affinity of storytelling to pluralist articulations – its “fuzziness, ambiguity and clouding of terms” – leaves room for “cultural improvisation” and makes it particularly apt to convey widely applicable and flexible descriptions of political reality (Gadinger et al. 2014, 13). It is here where the constitutional function of fiction in political narrative comes in. By strengthening this descriptive flexibility and ambiguity of narratives, fictional elements can open up horizons of possibility and thereby render various possibilities for concrete action. They can also, more fundamentally, foster the productive gradual dissolution of the boundaries between reality and fiction or, more precisely, the creation of “sliding transitions between fiction and reality – in both directions.” Fictional narration thus “lets the real appear in the horizon of imaginable alternatives” (Koschorke 2017, 397).

This gradual fictionalization of political realities does not, however, result in a ‘post-factual’ or ‘post-truth’ negation of facts in general. It rather enables a very constructive ‘co-production’ of two processes which are simultaneously concerned with both documentary evidence and the elucidation of empirical facts and the coherence of their symbolic representation within a consistent story (334–335). The better a narrative succeeds in integrating documentary and empirically evident elements into its story line, the more convincing can it function in terms of symbolic representation. The “power of persuasion of a story” depends, among other things, “on its power of absorption with regard to the factual material brought into it” (334), and its fictional parts work well as long as “they can absorb the evidence of the factual through configurative interventions” (Gadinger et al. 2014, 14). At the same time, however, this linkage of political narratives to the “evidence of the factual” can never be complete. If a story, even “the most faithful factual report” in politics, ought to be able to meet the most “elementary requirements for coherence” necessary for creating “meaning,” a “minimum of compositional freedom” has to be left open beyond all factual restraints (Koschorke 2017, 334). Without such gaps which provide room for different interpretations and for negotiations between them, political narratives “could not establish a lasting social bond” in the first place (396).

In sum, political stories apply fictional elements primarily for two purposes: to interconnect meaning with facts and to articulate the pluralist character of public discourses by translating it into a polyphony of various legitimate positions, voices, and understandings. Disruptive narratives, in contrast, apply their fictional elements for the exact opposite goal, namely to replace the polyphony of political narratives with a forced form of unambiguity, definiteness, and ex-

plicitness and often to also seal up this forced definiteness from factual ambiguities. Their strong claim of one monophonic story to be absolutely and unambiguously true (which often comes along with equally unambiguous ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ distinctions) paradoxically often results in a dynamic process of hypertrophic fictionalization, with the effect of weakening and potentially dissolving altogether the storyline’s connection to any factual basis.⁴

At this point, the anti-integrative drift and the counter-power logic (which are both characteristic of disruptive narratives) form a functional connection with a specific way of dealing with the fictional element in storytelling. It thus becomes clear why disruptive narratives are highly dynamic political phenomena often sparking self-enforcing and self-accelerating processes of self-radicalization. Concretely, since the narrative practice of fictionalization in disruptive stories seeks to take advantage of the constitutive fuzziness of political narratives, they directly target their unavoidable evidence gaps with their deviating configurative interventions. To be successful and convincing in terms of disruption, these interventions must create a forced clarity by way of conveying a monophonic, unambiguous story. At the same time, they have to contradict some aspects of established political narratives. As a consequence, their fictional interventions primarily attack the boundaries of the accepted “negotiation leeway for deviations and doubts” (Koschorke 2017, 396) which established political narratives always leave open, yet not in order to expand these boundaries, but rather to redefine them by radically contracting them around the core messages of their monophonic story. The more clearly the fictional element primarily serves to establish this one unambiguous truth of a monophonic narrative, the more strongly it tends to cut itself loose from any sort of factual basis. This is especially the case when disruptive stories try to combat particularly strong and flexible public narratives. The stronger the power of absorption of established narratives “with regard to the factual material brought into [them]” (Koschorke 2017, 396), and the greater their fictional space for (re)interpretations and negotiations, the more strongly disruptive narratives tend toward radically hypertrophic fictionalizations, the more strongly they are forced to dismiss facts for the sake of further strengthening their contradictory and monophonic qualities.

Hence, in sum, we suggest to conceptualize disruptive narratives as minimal political counter-narratives which convey a comparatively reduced plot and set of characters in a clear ‘good vs. evil’-storyline. They aim at articulating the experience of suffering from the injustices of overwhelming illegitimate powers and at strategically delegitimizing the established mainstream political narratives that back up these powers. In doing so, they systematically deviate in three characteristic respects from the usual logic of political narratives in that they, first, focus on disruption as the major symbol of political meaning and legitimacy, second, concentrate on the generation of interpretive counter-power, and, third, use fictional elements to create a monophonic political story. Regarding the third deviation, there are significant gradual differences between narrow and wide variants of disruptive narratives. We argue that this concept opens up new perspectives for empirical research on important public discursive phenomena. In

terms of methodology, it provides the conceptual basis for a transdisciplinary descriptive-narratological approach that unites accounts from narratology, linguistics, and political science.

2.3 Our Transdisciplinary Methodology

Our conceptual framing suggests that cautious gradual distinctions are more adequate and more helpful than strict binary separations to understand the peculiar logic of public narratives. Such a gradual approach enables a more differentiated elaboration of the experiences underlying them and of the potentially problematic aspects of some of them, especially by distinguishing between a wide and a narrow sense of disruption, while at the same time accounting for the permeable character of this distinction and the often smooth transitions, ambivalences, and grey areas in-between. Our conceptualization of disruptive narratives enables us to first examine the discursive-narrative functioning of such stories and to reflect on their destructive (but maybe also partly constructive) democratic potential.

To do so, we examine the peculiarly political forms of interpretation (Sigwart 2012, 473–488; 2013) these narratives apply to make sense of reality while at the same time generating power to resist this reality or to co-shape and influence it. Using narratological methods (see Alber 2017a; 2021), we look at the environment or space in which the story is set – because characteristics of the storyworld may already carry ideological weight (Alber 2017a, 9) – as well as at the characters, including the question of who we are invited to side with and of “hierarchies or power imbalances between the characters” (9). With regard to the plot, we pay particular attention to the ways in which the represented events are connected, and to the central human experience that the narrative seeks to represent. In addition, we analyze the narrators and/or storytelling scenarios (see Alber 2017b) as well as the narratorial style or ductus (register, authority, unreliability) and focalization (what kind of information restriction are we confronted with, and what are the effects of this?) (Alber 2017a, 9).

A further important characteristic of all the narratives we examine is that they are directed against existing established narratives. If we relate this to the arguments presented in these narratives, we can see that it must necessarily be counter-arguments (Niehr 2022a, 167–168) which not only attempt to substantiate assertions argumentatively, but are at the same time always directed against certain other arguments that are based on the same or at least a similar *quaestio*. This dual character of the argumentations is also reflected in their form. Furthermore, the style of argumentation is often characterized by a loose connection between the underlying data and the consequences drawn from them. One could therefore speak of persuasive texts which do not necessarily meet the standards of rational argumentation (Niehr 2022b, 369–370) in the sense of fulfilling certain plausibility criteria and not blatantly contradicting common sense (Toulmin 1996). Regarding this level, it is also worth looking at the examination of various

speech genres in ancient rhetoric, particularly of court speech, where argumentation and the intentions underlying a speech in court – which are usually about “winning the judge for us” (Quintilianus 2015, IV 2, 21) – play a similar role like in the modern concept of *narrative*, one which is usually described in terms of ‘framing’ (see Entman 1993). In both cases, it is a matter of bringing what has happened into a meaningful relation and thus creating a plausible ‘story’ which conveys a certain perspective, i.e., a particular view of the world, to the recipients and seeks agreement with one’s own point of view (ibid., 21).

Additionally, by including factors such as “knowledge, way of thinking, evaluative position and intellectual horizon” (Schmid 2010, 101), the peculiarly disruptive ethos or attitude of the textual whole can be examined. Such ethos attributions, which are “part of the more general issue of how people make meaning from and with texts” (Korthals Altes 2014, 5–6), are based on textual features, but they still involve a certain degree of hypothesizing. They require us to move to and fro between the micro-level of textual features and the macro-level of the narrative as a whole. Generally speaking, we address the intentions behind disruptive narratives on the basis of hypothetical intentionalism, a cognitive approach in which “a narrative’s meaning is established by hypothesizing intentions authors might have had, given the context of creation, rather than relying on, or trying to seek out, the author’s subjective intentions” (Gibbs 2005, 248; see also Alber 2010; 2018). In the final section, we will examine three very different examples of disruptive narratives in order to illustrate the range of phenomena our concept aims at as well as the particular analytical perspective it provides. These case studies also represent the different cultural contexts we are interested in, i.e., the United States, Germany, and Britain.

3. Discussion of Three Disruptive Narratives

3.1 Disruptions in the Narrow Sense: The Cases of QAnon and Populist Discourse

QAnon, our first example, is a particularly effective disruptive narrative in the narrow sense of the term. On October 28, 2017, someone called “Q Clearance Patriot” (or simply “Q”) began posting cryptic messages (so-called “bread crumbs” or “QDrops”) on 4chan to spark people’s curiosity regarding certain political issues. Q claimed to be a U.S. government insider with Q-level security clearance. The story behind QAnon is a fabricated one that involves a rather low degree of narrativity: Satan-worshipping pedophiles (primarily liberal Hollywood actors and actresses, Democratic politicians, and government officials) run a global child sex-trafficking ring (Cosentino 2020, 59–60). These pedophiles extract adrenaline from the children’s blood to produce the psychoactive drug adrenochrome. Furthermore, Donald Trump, who was President of the United States when Q was active (his posts appeared between 2017 and 2020), tries to

destroy this cabal. The story is based on a simple distinction between ‘good’ characters (namely the innocent children and Trump) and ‘evil’ characters (the pedophiles who are opposed to Trump’s policies). In his posts, Q predicts a future political disruption, namely that the evildoers will be arrested in the context of “the Storm,” and that the rest of humanity will learn about the true evil when “the Great Awakening” will take place (Robertson and Amarasingam 2022, 194).

We argue that the effectiveness of QAnon as a disruptive narrative has to do with the interplay between characteristics that concern the level of the story and features of the narrative discourse. Monika Fludernik (1996, 16) has famously argued that the identification of experientiality can provide access to the meaning of stories. The central human experience the QAnon narrative represents is the experience of oppression and/or suffering: children are imprisoned and abused by adult evildoers. From our vantage point, the story manages to create a sense of urgency through the (emotionally charged) plot element of exploited children who should be freed from their perpetrators immediately. At the same time, the abusive relationship between the Satan-worshipping pedophiles and the children can serve as a metaphor for recipients with a corresponding “experiential background” (2014, 4) in the sense of Marco Caracciolo. For him, our engagement with narratives is always projected against “a repertoire of past experiences and values that guides people’s interaction with the environment.” Building on this framework, we argue that recipients who see themselves as the innocent victims of a corrupt and unaccountable (political and cultural) elite but also individuals whose anti-elitism entails fear of persecution can easily recognize themselves (at least metaphorically) in the story’s abused children.

Furthermore, at the level of the narrative discourse, QAnon is notably full of ambiguities, gaps, vacancies, suggestive questions or directives, obscure references, false prophecies, and invitations to do your own research. We argue that these features somewhat paradoxically increase the attractiveness and credibility of the story. They enable the recipients to add their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences and thus to participate in the creation of a collective story into which their personal impressions can be embedded.

The emplotment of this story is clearly supposed to elicit moralizing judgments. Q invites his followers to see Trump as a redeemer, who wants to free the abused children, and his political enemies as Satan-worshipping pedophiles. It is also worth noting that the story blurs the distinction between fictionality and factuality. It urges its readers to perceive the real world in terms of an invented story which not only makes strong claims about reality, but it also represents this reality in a strictly monophonic plot in which virtually everything in politics receives its definitive meaning as a part of the one ‘good vs. evil’-confrontation ‘uncovered’ by Q. Furthermore, through the plot element of abused children, whom the recipients are supposed to empathize or identify with, the story evokes intense emotions that lead to extreme reactions in the context of attempts to mobilize and empower political counter-elites. Its negative power strategy does not aim exclusively at delegitimizing established understandings of

democratic processes, institutions, and politicians. Q also depicts them as lies, false facades, and large-scale deceptions, thus directly reversing their interpretive authority into the interpretive counter-power of those who expose them for what they are. This negative symbolic self-empowerment strategy can result in direct violent action against the ‘facades’ of democracy. QAnon did not only spark off various harassment campaigns. In December 2016, a man entered a Washington pizzeria with a rifle to free the children whom he thought to have been enslaved in the basement (Cosentino 2020, 61). In addition, various individuals decided to storm the U.S. Capitol in January 2021 in the name of QAnon to save the political power of their redeemer (Packer / Stoneman 2021, 273).

We argue that what makes the QAnon story particularly attractive is that it is incomplete, which enables recipients to bring in their own experiences. Axel Bruns (2008, 215) has identified a new phase of media creation and distribution in the context of which internet users and content producers blur together in the activity of the “producer.” The effectivity of the narrative can (at least partly) be explained by pointing out that Q and his followers were fused into a “producer” known to the world as QAnon (Packer / Stoneman 2021, 262). We argue in addition that it is the strict and unquestionable orientation toward an indubitable, unambiguous, and monophonic version of events that provides this collective narrative with its unity and tightness (despite its incompleteness and openness). The result is a new kind of collective storytelling that freely combines Q’s posts and the experiences of his followers into one monophonic narrative. This fusion provides a comforting context for severe attacks on the political opponents: according to this fabricated story, Trump’s enemies are Satan-worshipping pedophiles who have to be punished for their brutal deeds.

Our second example, which concerns the situation in Germany, is a political narrative that is also disruptive in the narrow sense, yet used in a substantially different, clearly populist context. Various approaches to populism exist (see, e.g., Diehl 2011, Müller 2016, Münkler 2011, Priester 2012). We would like to point out that populists frequently use minimal narratives to sway their recipients. These narratives typically operate on the basis of a clear distinction between ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ Populists often distinguish between “the people” (*das Volk*), who are conceptualized as a homogenous group they seek to represent, while outsiders are constructed as being radically different and hence a threat. These ‘others’ may be members of other nationalities, religious communities, or cultures. In contemporary political discussions, refugees typically form such a group, which displays several of the already mentioned characteristics at once. Therefore, this group is particularly suited to being portrayed as being different, foreign, and threatening. Other important components of populism are the goal of disruption and the attempt to mobilize political counter-power by positioning oneself against the (political) elite. Populists always pretend to fight on the side of “the people” against elites who act only in their own interests, while actually forming a counter-elite (partly of former elite members) whose real support by “the people” is all but clear.

In this context, we look at a speech given by Hans-Georg Maaßen, the former President of the German Domestic Intelligence Service, on June 10, 2023. Interestingly, in 2018 Maaßen lost his job due to doubts about his democratic convictions. In the meantime, he has become chairman of the so-called “Werte-Union.” WerteUnion is a right-wing conservative movement founded in 2017 by conservative members of the CDU/CSU. It is now highly controversial within the CDU, as leading players more or less openly sympathize with right-wing extremist positions or at least do not clearly distance themselves from them.⁵ Excerpts from Maaßen’s speech are quoted below as an example of a disruptive narrative presented to convince the audience of a particular point of view. The assessment of what is disruptive is also a matter of perspective: for representatives and supporters of the extreme right, what Maaßen claims in his speech is a sad reality and nothing new. For this narrative, which makes claims about reality, is very widespread among the extreme right in Germany: it assumes that the German government is systematically pursuing policies against its citizens, who are suffering tremendously. The economy of Germany is being destroyed, and a totalitarian and/or fascist state is being created that will completely incapacitate its citizens. Here is an excerpt from Maaßen’s speech:

We are facing dramatic changes in this country. I think it has already become clear to the vast majority of people that what we are seeing around us is not just the mistakes of stupid politicians, that it is not just undesirable developments that we are seeing, but that we are dealing with an obvious system change that some leading politicians from the Greens and the Social Democrats are openly describing as a transformation, a major transformation, or an ecological or climate transformation. (04:09–04:43)⁶

Maaßen here interprets the political situation in Germany in a strictly monophonic way by simply claiming that a “self-proclaimed elite” of communist and neo-Marxist “fanatical religious warriors” form an extremely powerful “green cartel” that comprehensively dominates the political process in Germany. For him, we are confronted with a treacherous political system in democratic disguise which disrupts the whole political framing of established public self-perceptions. The terms “major transformation” and “system change” do not only involve a particular kind of emplotment; they were probably also chosen deliberately because of their connotations. They should presumably be understood as alluding to the idea of a *Great Reset*. This expression, in turn, summarizes a narrative according to which elites in politics and business strive for a globalized dictatorship (see Camus 2011). This quotation provides the framing, i.e., a perspective from which the German government is to be viewed.

If this is indeed achieved by the opening quotation, then one will be prepared to accept the following as a plausible political assessment as well:

In any case, they want a different social system [...] It’s about the fact that – from my point of view – neo-Marxists have reached high offices and in cooperation with a – I’ll just call them: climate sect – try to shape the country according to their ideas. [...] We are obviously dealing with fanatical religious warriors who want to impose their ideology. (04:43–06:15)

According to Maaßen, it follows logically from this that not only the political system but every individual is threatened by such fanatics, that conditions like those under the Taliban are imminent, so to speak:

What we perceive now is a great transformation in the direction of a totalitarian state, which in my view could even have fascist features, where ultimately the individual, the citizen can no longer decide how he wants to live, how many kilocalories he may eat a day, whether he may eat meat, whether he may drive to work or fly on vacation by plane. But this is what the self-appointed elite would like to impose on us. Ladies and gentlemen, what is at stake is nothing less than our future and that of our children and grandchildren. And it is also about nothing less than our past, about everything that grandparents, parents and we ourselves have built up, which is obviously to be consumed here by the politically inspired elite. (06:50–07:52)

Maaßen leaves absolutely no doubt that the politicians he describes in this way are not doing all of this out of incompetence, but deliberately. They are acting with destructive intent to the detriment of the German people:

They can destroy, they are in the process of destroying our economic order, our social order. They are in the process of destroying internal cohesion by letting millions of migrants into the country, all of whom we cannot provide for. They are in the process of destroying our energy economy, but they can't build anything. They are stupid, they are uneducated. And when I look at the federal cabinet – they're not the brightest lights in the lamp store either. (19:21–19:50)

En passant, migration policies come into play here, which should be seen as further evidence that the government is actively planning a transformation. In fact, a transformation that, according to Renaud Camus (2011), the French mastermind of the New Right, is to be understood as a Great Exchange or Replacement. The peoples of Europe are to be replaced by immigrants from Africa and the Middle East. Another part of the disruptive narrative is that the movement of people to Europe is not the result of persecution and need, but rather a secret plan of those in power in this country.

In his speech, Maaßen uses a model disruptive narrative, understood as a story that seeks to disrupt a legitimized form of power – in our case, a democratically elected government – or to end its rule. This narrative proceeds by first unfolding a general threat scenario: the government (especially the Green Party and the Social Democrats) wants to change the social order. They aim for a Great Reset and thus destroy our economic order. This danger becomes more concrete by showing what effects this transformation will have on each individual: the fanatic regulatory frenzy does not stop at individual dietary habits. It culminates in the exchange or annihilation of the European population. The (largely fictive) framing that Maaßen uses here creates the horror scenario of religious fanatics who are in power and who will stop at nothing to enforce their anti-human ideas against all odds. With this narrative, Maaßen leaves the playing field on which democratic debates usually take place: by claiming that his political opponents are not interested in solving social problems but instead wage a war against their own people, an argumentative debate about factual issues becomes more difficult, if not impossible. The appeal to the recipients is therefore – even if it is not explicitly expressed – to defend themselves with all available means in order to avoid their own downfall. In the end, the whole narrative aims at empowering

the WerteUnion as the small political core of a possible counter-movement, presumably representing all the defamed, discredited, and excluded in their fight for the good political order of the German Constitution. That this “small club” of oppressed will succeed against the overwhelming power of the “Green cartel” is explained by Maaßen with a most simplistic variant of the counter-power idea: “We will prevail because our opponents can’t do it” (19:19–19:21).

3.2 Disruption in the Wide Sense: The Case of Extinction Rebellion

Our third example helps to better understand and illustrate the category of disruption in the wide sense. It focuses on the activist movement “Extinction Rebellion” (XR), one of the most visible and influential groups within the climate justice movement since its founding in Britain in 2018. This third exemplary case highlights the normative ambivalence of the group of phenomena we deal with. It brings to the fore important democratic and emancipatory functions disruptive narratives can have, especially in hardened or partly irresponsible public debates confronted with extreme injustices or extraordinary emergencies. It furthermore indicates strong capacities of such narratives to emphasize unsettling “truths” in such situations, and hence their potential to apply interpretive disruption and fictional elements in order to highlight and integrate empirical facts previously ignored, therewith making them matter politically (see Shuman et al. 2020). But it also underscores and illustrates, as we argue, some nonetheless problematic features characteristic to all disruptive narratives, particularly their inherent propensity toward radical monophonic fictionalization.

Like the climate justice movement in general, XR represents a comprehensive catalog of very concrete political demands most of which are ambitious, yet rationally argued and often based on scientific expertise (see Buzogany / Scherhauser 2022). It is also obvious that XR’s activist practices are based on and permanently reproduce a specific political narrative with a strong political story line evolving along expressive political characters. What is more, and perhaps surprising, the movement’s narrative also displays a number of features characteristic to disruptive storytelling, even if they are associated with utterly different political motives than the ones we examined so far. What the XR narrative does share with our previous examples is a strong focus on experiences of powerlessness and of being confronted with an extremely powerful and overall malicious “system,” as well as a decided scepticism against ‘normal politics’ and the abilities of established democratic processes to provide help against the ‘system’ or to solve the real problems.⁷ In terms of experientiality, the core motives of the XR story are despair, political rage and fear in the face of an absolute catastrophe, the experience of preparing, “both emotionally and practically, for a disaster” (Farrell et al. 2019, 73), while established politics is complacent and ignorant of the imminent emergency situation unfolding before everybody’s eyes or even participates in bringing it about. At the same time, however, these strong motives

of despair, hopelessness, and dystopia are eventually embedded in a utopian outlook on a still possible better future and hence integrated in an overall emancipatory story line (see the interpretation of XR's utopian narrative in Friberg 2022). Its beginning is marked by the growing ecological awareness in the wake of the past decades' public debates and scientific research on climate change. It culminates in the present generation's utter despair and hopelessness which eventually will spark the global rebellion needed for humanity's survival and which will potentially lead into a possible future of not only serious, globally coordinated coping exertions, but also of global solidarity and love, "the love we are currently lacking," yet "desperately need" (Farrell et al. 2019, 13). Hence, the moral of the story is not to "just avoid extinction or merely survive," but rather to start "a movement built on solidarity and well-being so everyone, and every part of everyone, can flourish" (25), with a vision of a "compassionate, inclusive, sustainable, equitable and connected [society] where creativity is prioritized and where the diversity of our gifts is recognized, celebrated and encouraged to flourish" (11).

Against the background of this idealist and inclusive story of political emancipation, the XR narrative nonetheless depicts a clear black-and-white picture, juxtaposing "the limitless greed of the 1 per cent, their blindness to the ecological limits the Earth sets and the limits set by social justice and human rights" (5) on the one hand with the "majority world" (12) of the historical victims of capitalism and colonialism on the other. The latter represent not only "the world's poorest people and indigenous communities" (21), but also the great majority of "Earth citizens," "led by women and children and people of colour" (12); together, these groups form the "Earth Democracy" (8) of legitimate politics. Accordingly, the story has its innocent victims and its (founding) heroes, like the "fifteen people who had studied and researched the way to achieve radical social change" and gathered "in a small English town" to start off Extinction Rebellion (9). And it has its villains of "politicians and powerful elites" (22), ranging from "the shrouded Westminster" (98) and "Macron and his friends in the Davos set" (87) to public relations campaigners working for the fossil fuel industry and cynical billionaire-figures planning their individual survival in a future catastrophe they themselves help to bring about (58). This ensemble of villains is accompanied and supported by the representatives of "mainstream politics" in general (82), even "the mainstream proponents of sustainability" (85) which have still not understood the current state of emergency, such as the members of the IPCC, who turn out to pursue a policy "so poor, it's almost funny" (74).

Accordingly, the narrative clearly conveys a strong element of scepticism against "mainstream" or "normal politics," against "gradual reform and rotten compromise" (11) and against the majority of people in general. Not only do "most people seem to have no idea of how bad things really are" (71), the majority of people even actively denies the facts of climate change (65). The lesson from the 'normal' politics of mass protests and Green NGOs' fundraising and environmental campaigns is that it's all a waste of time (Hallam 2019, 5) and that

“you don’t wait until everyone is ready, because you’ll be waiting for ever” (Farrell et al. 2019, 105). Consequently, the idea of an alternative counter-elite figures prominently also in the XR narrative. Although the latter often refers to the people and the “world majority” as its sources of legitimacy, it still more often appears as a minority narrative “aimed at those disillusioned with normal ‘environmental’ activism” (127), at the few disillusioned people who really “have had enough” and are ready for rebellion (105). The story’s real heroes are the alternative “1 per cent” of the population with the potential of actively opposing the greedy 1 per cent of villains.⁸

Despite this clear black-and-white rhetoric, the movement’s self-articulations convey a highly reflexive storytelling practice, one which concretely tells and performs the story just sketched while at the same time permanently reflecting upon this narrative practice. This highly self-reflexive perspective, on the one hand, opens room for self-critical reflections, for instance on the inherent danger of disruptive storytelling of “collapsing into sectarianism” (67) or into “fighting the wrong war” by condemning society altogether instead of following a more realist model of “harm reduction” (40–45). On the other hand, it also enables the consciously planned use of storytelling as a political strategy. The latter becomes especially apparent in the movement’s focus on disruption as its major narrative message as well as its clear aim of generating resources of interpretive counter-power. The motive of disruption, to begin with, or more specifically, the political idea of non-violent “sacrificial disruption” (Hallam 2019, 38–39) is surely one of the major symbols determining the movement’s political orientation. Roger Hallam, one of the movement’s co-founders, depicts this core motive of the group’s self-perception and its rebellion story as follows:

Material structures exist within a larger social space subject to mass psychological dynamics. Direct-action design has to create desirable symbolic interruption – the meaning structures through which people interpret whether the disruption is justified. To work symbolically like this, the Rebellion needs to engage at many different cultural levels: with art, design, music, feeling and discussion. It needs to be ‘human’ and ‘fun!’ [...] Disruption has to be combined with our willingness to show our vulnerability and to suffer. The disruption then simply sets the stage for the symbolism of fearless sacrifice. It is the sacrifice which brings about the social change not the disruption in itself. [...] This then sets the scene for mass transgression; an act of mass sacrifice and a major public drama. The symbolic interpretation is people versus power on an epic scale. (Hallam 2019, 39–41)

As the last sentence indicates, XR’s political strategy regarding “the thorny topic of framing – the way in which we communicate the message” (11) mainly aims at generating and maximizing the movement’s “symbolic” power by way of setting up “intense political drama” (10), therewith “winning hearts and minds” and changing “people’s attitudes” (38–39). The formula “people versus power” just quoted, however, is nonetheless somewhat misleading, or at best only part of the movement’s power-generating story. Its other part is the movement’s clear rejection of ‘normal’ forms of political action, even of established forms of environmental activism. XR’s collective practice of storytelling clearly opposes the “formal” narrative of the “system” and its interpretive power, “held in place by

a toxic media (power without truth); by toxic finance (power without compassion); and toxic politics (power without principle)” (Extinction Rebellion UK n.d.). And it particularly opposes the “denial” narratives of “nefarious political players” (Farrell et al. 2019, 65) who consciously seek to take advantage of established legitimizing political symbols like ideas of political “balance” and compromise, of continuity, progress and scientific certainty. But it is also aimed against the continuity stories and “reformist framings” of “mainstream politics” in general (Hallam 2019, 55) and hence against the interpretive power of the various informal narratives which make up the public discourse (see also Buzogany / Scherhauser 2022). It thus clearly focuses on sources of negative interpretive counter-power against established top-down as well as bottom-up forms of formal and informal power.

Accordingly, XR’s highly reflexive power strategies particularly include forms of “creative power [...] through non-cooperation” (Farrell et al. 2019, 7) and forms of civil disobedience. Instead of threatening, coercing or actively demonstrating the movement’s force, it seeks to generate interpretive power by actively exposing the “vulnerability” of the individuals involved, “by also throwing our own bodies on the line” (23). These bodily practices of self-exposure and of actively becoming vulnerable (see also Joyce 2020) as well as “the self-sacrificial idea of arrest at the core of Extinction Rebellion’s strategy” (Farrell et al. 2019, 96) are perfect examples of symbolic counter-power at work: “One of the most powerful ways to bring about change is when people are willing to be imprisoned for non-violent civil disobedience,” because this is an extremely effective way of “gently disarming the arm of the law by linking arms with it” (96), i.e., by reversing its symbolic power and turning it against itself. By actively exposing and making use of the inevitable contradictions and dilemmas inherent in any application of political power, the movement’s symbolic strategies draw their disruptive force directly from the overwhelming powers of the system they oppose: “The central dynamic here is the ‘dilemma’ action. When you create a dilemma for the authorities you open a space of opportunity which was not there previously. Within that space you can get noticed, speak truth to power, negotiate, and more” (102).

Finally, and most importantly, this counter-power strategy is connected with a peculiar role of fictionalization within the movement’s collective storytelling practice. And here we find its most striking similarities with narrower variants of disruptive narratives. In fact, the XR example seems to suggest that, in order to be able to effectively cut a straight path through the polyphony of established public discourses, disruptive narratives in the wide sense, too, exert a certain tendency to be hardened into one monophonic story, irrespective of their initial empirical plausibility. According to the claims of its proponents, the XR narrative is particularly “clear, straightforward and led by science” (10). And it indeed sets a strong emphasis on facts and scientific expertise, displaying a strong potential to absorb the “evidence of the factual” (Gadinger et al.) into its story line. It also claims, however, that to really understand and realize climate emergency, more than merely facts or information and knowledge are needed: In order to

“break through our disaster blindness,” it is necessary to really “feel” the catastrophe and to be able to make others feel it as well (Extinction Rebellion Hannover 2019, 19–20). Such a real disruptive breakthrough against the omnipresent public denial practices and the strong “mechanisms inside ourselves that allow us to cut off from what we know” (Farrell et al. 2019, 66) can only be accomplished by the fictional ability to “envision what is happening when it isn’t right in front of us” and by a narrative with the capacity to make people feel the experience of despair: “to come into knowing is to come into sorrow. A sorrow that arrives as a thud, deadening and fearful” (66).

It is against this backdrop that the XR narrative’s usage of fictional elements receives a strong impulse toward monophonic fictionalization. The story’s underlying assumption is that all possibly important issues, “in fact, every issue, resides within the most important issue bar none: the planet” (70). As a consequence, the story’s fictional elements are almost obsessively concentrated on the one exclusively legitimate topic of emergency, in fact: of the catastrophe already unfolding (see De Moor 2021). Driven by the conviction, furthermore, that “we need to be reacting as we would if an Armageddon-sized meteor was hurtling towards Earth” (Farrell et al. 2019, 77), the narrative is forced not only to exclusively focus on and to actually envision such “Armageddon-sized” scenarios, but also to – at least partly – present these visions as articulating the one undisputable truth there is, as “a matter [...] of simple maths and physics” beyond all ideology, of “basic structural sociology” beyond all “political party preferences,” or simply as nothing but “common sense” (Hallam 2019, 7–8). “Tell[ing] the truth” is consequently XR’s first principle (Extinction Rebellion Hannover 2019, 17; Farrell et al. 2019, 13), and there seems little doubt that knowing and telling the one truth beyond any discussion should not be quite easy and simple, provided someone had the courage to really feel the catastrophe. At this one single unambiguous truth, even the movement’s strong claim to “question everything,” including the whole “life that society thinks is an appropriate one for you, a life that serves the way things are at the moment” (Sandford 2020, 112), seems to find its definitive limit. As a consequence, the story’s fictional elements indeed seem to primarily serve the purpose of creating a forced clarity and to radically constrict the boundaries of legitimate doubts, ambiguities, and indecision around the unambiguous core message of a monophonic catastrophic narrative. Regardless of its empirical plausibility, this narrative of a post-apocalyptic near future does not leave much room for doubts – let alone a plurality of voices, assessments, and perspectives. Following the monophonic logic of XR’s narrative, almost any sort of polyphony borders on denial.

4. Conclusion

Disruptive narratives become more and more dominant in the public (political) discourse of countries like Germany, Great Britain, and the U.S. In this article,

we have presented a definition of disruptive narratives; we have distinguished between disruption in a narrow and a wide sense; and we have provided three selected illustrative examples. The latter are anything but exhaustive, but rather meant to indicate the wide variety of phenomena that can be meaningfully described and analyzed with our concept. As we have shown, disruptive narratives are minimal narratives that involve a low degree of narrativity; they operate on the basis of a rather simple distinction between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ characters; they focus on experience and typically foreground feelings of suffering, hopelessness, or despair; they involve a specific kind of emplotment that leads to moralizing judgments; they make claims about reality; and they involve disruption as a theme, the institutionalization of political counter-power, and a kind of fictionalization which aims at monophonic narratives.

This last characteristic, viz. the monophonic tendency of disruptive narratives, is crucial with regard to the difference between narrow and wide variants of disruptive storytelling. Both types seek to shock their audiences by confronting them with radically alternative events that lead to the questioning of established authorities, and they apply fictional elements to do so. In the narrow sense, disruptive narratives try to disturb some of the most fundamental premises of our perception of the world by proposing radically alternative, i.e., largely fictive realities. In the wider sense, by contrast, disruptive narratives challenge people’s automated perception and take them out of their established life styles and ways of thinking. To be able to do so, however, also wider variants of disruptive narratives tend to apply their fictional elements to narrow down the story’s logic to a monophonic plot about one unambiguous truth beyond all discussion. As our exemplary cases indicate, it is this monophonic deviation of disruptive stories from the polyphonic logic of political narratives which provides them with their unusually strong potential to generate interpretive counter-power. But it also makes them prone to derailing into anti-democratic political radicalization. The latter seems to be the case with fact-based narratives as much as with fabricated ones, although there may be major differences in degree in this respect between them. The complex reciprocal dynamics in which these interrelations between disruption, counter-power, and wide and narrow forms of monophonic fictionalization play out in different political contexts may be one of the worthwhile objects of further examination our concept can help to pursue.

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¹ Jacques Ehrmann and Jesse Dickson (1971–1972, 3) define minimal narratives in terms of “the elementary structure” or “the smallest unit of narrative.” Gérard Genette’s (1988, 20) minimal narrative is “nothing more than “The king died.” He argues that as soon as there is an action or an event, even a single one, there is a story because there is a transformation, a transition from an earlier state to a later and resultant state. ‘I walk’ implies (and is contrasted to) a state of departure and a state of arrival (19).

² In *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*, Monika Fludernik defines experientiality in terms of “the quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life’ experience” (1996, 16). Samuli Björninen defines the notion of ‘experiential authority’ as follows: “the appeal to it is made by evoking experience, personally or vicariously, that can be seen as truthful or representative” (2019, 361).

³ On the concept of “interpretive power” see also Leonhardt (2022), Schaal (2013), Schulz (2006), Sigwart (2012, 274–283), Stoellgen (2014), and Vorländer (2006). The specifically narrative techniques of interpretive power formation applied in political storytelling entail, for instance, symbolic claims to represent general purposes and values by referring to and appropriating prestigious, captivating, and rousing public characters or by claiming the paradigmatic,

representative nature of a particular incident (see, for instance, Stone [2002, 144] on the technique of ‘synecdoche’). Furthermore, the temporality of the events narrated (Gadinger et al. 2014, 12) is also often tampered with to generate or apply interpretive power. This includes strategies of “temporalization” (like attempts of actors to create their own significant “history” as political actors and interpreters) as well as strategies of “de-temporalization” (like narrative attempts to use and implicitly update past notions of authority for present purposes) (Vorländer 2006, 25). Finally, also symbolic practices of ostentatiously staging and visualizing, or – alternatively – of concealing, the political influence and significance of actors, including the narrator’s own power and influence, are important interpretive power techniques (26).

⁴ Hannah Arendt (2020) marks this difference between fictionality and hypertrophic fictionalization by highlighting the speculative, fictional strength of narrative and at the same time its danger of becoming hypertrophic: “History (consists) of nothing [...] but stories [...]. They become futile and dangerous only if one believes that they can be used as objections to the reality of what actually happened [...] and if one forgets that the number of actually existing alternatives is principally arbitrary [...]. The consideration of historical alternatives is a thought experiment which is helpful for reflecting on real events as long as it is consciously bound to reality” (359; our translation).

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Values_Union (accessed on September 26, 2023).

⁶ The speech can be found on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUyp5zwwkprg>). All quotations are taken from this speech and have been transcribed and translated into English by us.

⁷ A good example in this respect is the anonymous foreword in Hallam (2019, 5–6); see also Hallam (13–14) and Extinction Rebellion Hannover (2019, 54–56).

⁸ XR activists stress that it is only this 1 per cent – or at most 1 to 3 or 3.5 per cent (Farrell et al 2019, 104, 126) – which is needed for a successful, i.e., a system-changing movement of mass civil disobedience. These numbers are clearly an important part of the XR narrative, conveying major and partly fictional implications (similar to the Occupy Movement’s 99 % symbol). The 3.5 % margin is directly taken from social science research and applied politically, yet may also be seen as a misuse of scientific knowledge which negatively effects the movement’s political strategies (see Matthews 2020).