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# **MOBILIZING MEGAPROJECT NARRATIVES FOR EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS: A STUDY OF NARRATIVE INSTRUMENTS AND PROCESSES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Megaprojects combine multiple external stakeholders, and a common narrative is essential to drive the project among often conflicting objectives. Narratives help organize people towards an agenda and therefore have performative and strategic implications. In this research, we explore how narratives are mobilized through narrative instruments and processes using the case study of the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the UK. We record the use of three instruments - stories, labels, and comparisons, that undergo four processes - repeating, endorsing, humorizing, and actioning. These instruments and processes enable megaprojects to mobilize a narrative that help in managing external stakeholders.

## **KEYWORDS**

Megaprojects, External stakeholder management, Project organizing, Narratives, News Media

## INTRODUCTION

Megaprojects are projects that cost more than USD 1 billion (Flyvbjerg, 2014) or projects of a significant cost that attract a high level of public attention or political interest because of substantial direct and indirect impact on the community, environment and state budgets (Söderlund et al., 2017). Pitsis et al. (2018) suggest the distinguishing features of megaprojects are its reach, duration, risks and uncertainties, widely disparate actors, arenas of controversy, and legal and regulatory issues. Megaprojects combine multiple stakeholders with different interests, values and rationality (Van-Marrewijk, 2015). While internal stakeholders, such as the contractor building the project, have a contractual relationship with the client, external stakeholders do not have such relationship and rely on regulators, political influence or public campaigns to enforce a claim (Winch et al., 2007). External stakeholders include stakeholder's peripheral to the project such as owners of the land from whom the land is acquired, those who are inconvenienced by the construction noises, vibrations, diversions, etc. and those who stand to benefit from the project improving the services (Viitanen et al., 2010; Ninan et al., 2021). Ignoring the needs and expectations of the external stakeholders can generate social unrest or community resistance through collective action against the project (Liu et al., 2018; van den Ende & Van-Marrewijk, 2019) through petitions, protests, picketing or even vandalism (Oppong et al., 2017). Mok et al. (2015) note that conflicts or resistance from the public can adversely affect or even kill the project despite the public being an external stakeholder who lacks a formal project authority. These external stakeholders seek to shape major megaproject decisions including budget and scope in accord with specific vested interests and are also referred to as the 'stakeholders of the shadows' (Winch, 2017). Thus, as Smith and Love (2004) record, successful management of external

stakeholders can result in the reduction in waste of effort, time and resources in project management.

In comparison to internal stakeholders who can be managed by systems integration through innovative contracts (Davies et al., 2009), decomposing the project into manageable entities (Davies & Mackenzie, 2014), improving communication across these organizations (Roehrich & Lewis, 2014) and collective decision-making processes (Gil & Pinto, 2018), external stakeholders cannot be governed by these. In such situations where different stakeholders have different objectives, there is a need to achieve strategic convergence among these conflicting objectives (Denis et al., 2007). A common narrative is essential to drive the project among these conflicting goals. After all, narratives help create common identities by bringing plausibility and coherence to disparate experiences (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Vaara & Tienari, 2011; Grayson, 1997). As noted by Sturup (2009), narratives have significant importance in the context of megaprojects which cause significant environmental, social and political disruptions in its local environment. By structuring a message as a narrative, it becomes more persuasive as people become absorbed in a story than an analytical illustration of a product's features which distracts people's attention (Escalas, 2007). Narratives of purpose, relevance and scope act as 'gatekeeper' in terms of inclusion and exclusion of meaning, and thereby influence the meaning production within the community (Veenswijk et al., 2010). Megaprojects require favorable narratives as such narratives can build strong brand attitudes and brand loyal behaviors (Ninan et al., 2019; Grayson, 1997). As Olander and Landin (2008) note it is important to brand the project with good reputation and media image right from its start and hence building a narrative upfront is essential for the successful delivery of projects from an external stakeholder management perspective.

Organizational practices, such as achieving strategic convergence, can be understood as symbolic manipulation being combined with persuasive rhetoric, and there is a need for investigating such phenomena in the context of megaprojects (Bresnen & Marshall, 2001; Ninan et al., 2019). Sorsa and Vaara (2020) have longitudinally studied conflicts between proponents and challengers in building a new parking center in the historic square and constructing new high-end condos in the downtown harbor area in a Nordic city. They note how the use of narratives and rhetorics were instrumental in moving from initial contestation through gradual convergence to increasing agreement between the proponents and challengers. Hence, stakeholder's acceptance towards a project can be achieved through narratives. We argue that in spite of the importance of narratives in achieving strategic convergence of objectives in megaprojects and thereby external stakeholder management, the practice of mobilizing narratives in the context of megaprojects are yet to be explored. This research seeks to explore the instruments and processes through which narratives are mobilized in the context of the High Speed Two Ltd. (HS2) megaproject in the United Kingdom. We record the use of instruments such as stories, labels, and comparisons by both the promoters and the protesters of the project. It is seen that these instruments undergo multiple processes such as repeating, endorsing, humorizing and actioning to mobilize and bring people together.

In the next section, we review the project management and organization studies literature on narratives, following which two research questions are proposed. The research methodology section outlines the rationale behind focusing on the HS2 megaproject, the rationale behind selecting news articles as the source of data and describes the process of analyzing the data. The findings from the megaproject case study are then discussed and anchored in the existing literature to finally create a framework to explain how narratives are mobilized in practice. Potential research

implications of the findings are then discussed, and some future research directions are suggested. The concluding section summarizes the key insights of the article and highlights the limitations along with scope for future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section, we review the relevant literature associated with stakeholder management, stakeholder management discourses, project narratives, and mobilizing narratives. By doing so, we summarize state of knowledge in the area, demonstrate the need for this research and propose the research questions for this study.

## **STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT**

The literature on stakeholder management challenges the notion that shareholders are the only group that deserves the attention of an organization (Parmar et al., 2010). Stakeholders can include customers, suppliers, employees, financiers, and communities (Dunham et al., 2006). Among these, primary or internal stakeholders have contractual relations with the project while secondary or external stakeholders do not have any contractual relations, are not accountable to the detailed project report, and operate in permeable boundaries (Ninan et al., 2021). Poor relationships with stakeholders can result in lawsuits, boycotts, strikes, spreading negative sentiment, or a refusal to engage with the organization (Jones et al., 2018). However, poor relations with external stakeholders in project settings can result in the stakeholders not only opposing the construction but also boycotting the project services during the operation phase and even causing a democratic government to withdraw support for fear of electoral consequences (Ninan et al., 2021).

Stakeholder theory as recorded by Donaldson and Preston (1995) has four parts: descriptive which describes what organizations actually do, instrumental which focus on outcomes of managerial behaviors, normative which provides guidance on what focus on what organizations should do, and managerial which speaks to the needs of the customers. Of these, the most commonly used are the normative and instrumental views on stakeholder theory. Henisz et al. (2014) record that in the normative view there is only a moral management with no real returns while in the instrumental view there is a focus on company image with more returns. Noland and Phillips (2010) explain instrumental and normative view as strategic and moral respectively based on the goal, manner and method of management. Investing in the company image can alter stakeholder behavior, generate shareholder value and ensure that the business plan will proceed on schedule and budget (Freeman, 2010). Instrumental stakeholder theory focuses on managing stakeholders for achieving an organization's corporate objectives (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Thus, stakeholder engagement stems from the normative perspective and stakeholder management stems from the instrumental perspective.

Strategies such as adaptation, compromise, negotiation, concession and avoidance are used for managing stakeholders in project settings (Chinyio & Akintoye, 2008). However, Di Maddaloni and Davis (2017) note that despite attempts by projects to adopt these strategies, stakeholders are often adversarial and hence most projects lack the 'reservoir of support' from the community. It should also be noted that the most affected stakeholder may not necessarily be the most vocal (Van Marrewijk et al., 2008) and the activities of the vocal few can result in the project not delivering on its intended benefits. In contrast to the normative view, strategies such as marketing (Turner et al., 2019) and branding (Ninan et al., 2019) can help projects focus on the project image and ensure that the project will proceed as planned. In project settings, Derakhshan et al. (2019) explain

instrumental stakeholder theory as managing stakeholders for their role in maximizing organization's benefits, rather than because of their legitimate rights. One way of managing stakeholders for maximizing organizational benefits is through discourses.

## **STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT DISCOURSES**

There are different types of discourses for managing stakeholders. Discourses for moral management includes communication solely for the sake of reaching agreement rather than in order to pursue any particular interests (Noland & Phillips, 2010). Such communication should be uncorrupted by power differences and strategic motivations. In contrast, discourses for strategic management have a strategic intent with a focus on achieving an organization's corporate objectives (Zakhem, 2007). They are undertaken with strategic, though not necessarily intentionally dishonest or malicious, motivations (Noland & Phillips, 2010). In project settings, Ninan et al. (2020) using organizational power theories differentiate these two types of management in an infrastructure megaproject's use of social media. Social media for persuasion involved the project reaching out to community for mutual agreements and can be categorized as moral management. In contrast, social media for framing and hegemonizing involved the project using strategic discourses to influence stakeholders to move towards the projects interests and can be categorized as strategic management. Strategic discourses aimed at external stakeholders can also affect the project team rationalities and decision making as these discourses percolate and trickle down to the internal stakeholders (Ninan et al., 2021). Our focus in this paper is on the strategic management of external stakeholders using narratives.



## **PROJECT NARRATIVES**

Stakeholder theory is often highlighted as a ‘genre’ as it includes a number of theories and a range of applications all involving stakeholders at the center of it. The theory focuses on a broad array of disciplines such as business ethics, corporate strategy, finance, accounting, management, and marketing (Parmar et al., 2010). Within these, a focus on marketing involves developing marketing theory and practice along stakeholder theory lines (Roper & Davies, 2007) which has implications for the instrumental view of stakeholders. For projects, it is important that the core narrative should be stable and promoted because that is the reason the project is there. A stable narrative is necessary to ensure that the objectives of the project do not change during pre-construction or construction phase (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). Narratives are defined as conversations, dialogues and stories that communicate a phenomenon (Garud & Turunen, 2017). Narratives are cultural mechanisms that refer to a set of events and the contextual details surrounding their occurrence (Bartel & Garud, 2009). People make sense of their lives via narrative thought as the temporal and dramatic dimension of human existence is emphasized in them (Polkinghorne, 1991). They organize their experiences and create order out of random incidents and events (Grayson, 1997). Such order helps people describe and understand the passage of events (Ricoeur, 1991). Within projects, narratives determine how the project team deals with emergent problems and even how projects are perceived by others (Havermans et al., 2015; Enninga & van der Lugt, 2016).

Language is at the very center of project organizing as it helps construct project events instead of just representing them (Havermans et al., 2015). Therefore, projects can be understood as social constructions that are produced and re-produced in its everyday narrative interactions (Lindgren

& Packendorff, 2007). Project narratives are important vehicles through which meanings are negotiated, shared and contested (Veenswijk & Berendse, 2008). They help in creating a shared memory or a collective brand image at the levels of firm and sector as a whole (Duman et al., 2018). For example, the Environ megaproject employees considered in the work by Van Marrewijk (2007) were able to strongly identify themselves as innovative and entrepreneurial when they were referred to as the 'Gideon's gang' - a biblical metaphor for a brave group of men that knows no fear and uses creative, innovative methods to reach their goals. Explaining this further, Havermans et al. (2015) note that whether the project is described as 'routine' or 'ground-breaking' or whether those with opinions on the project are described as 'nuisance' or 'an important source of new ideas,' are dependent on how leaders frame them. While coherent and consistent project narratives is required for the survival of the project, they are contested by different agencies across the lifecycle of the project (Boddy & Paton, 2004). It is here that we situate this research to understand the dynamics through which megaproject narratives are mobilized in the external stakeholder environment.

Polkinghorne (1991) notes that how people organize is dependent on the cues emanating from external perpetual senses, internal bodily sensations, and cognitive memories. He argues that narratives are one of the main cognitive organizing processes as it gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot. Similarly, Rappaport (2000) claims that narratives can be treated as a 'cognitive instrument' as they can impact subject's thinking and emotional life. Narratives can be targeted at audiences and can have performative and strategic implications thereby making them effective in constructing organizational identities (Dailey & Browning, 2014; Sergeeva, 2019; Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). Thus, narratives can mobilize and bring people together (Duman et al., 2018). From a governance perspective, Abolafia (2010) records how

policymakers employ plotted, plausible and repeated narratives to shape the reaction of people to the changes occurring around them. Narratives are powerful mechanisms for translating ideas across the organization so that they are comprehensible and appear legitimate to others (Bartel & Garud, 2009). Vaara et al. (2016) claim that narratives are mobilized in many ways as part of discourses and communication. Our research goal is to understand how project organization's mobilize narrative for external stakeholders.

### **MOBILIZING NARRATIVES**

Stories are recorded as one of the main discourses used to mobilize narratives particularly in the works of Boje (2008; 2014). He highlights that there is a 'story turn' before the 'narrative turn' demonstrating the role of stories in creating a narrative (Boje, 2008). Stories exist in organizations as fully developed stories with a beginning and end or in fragments as bits and pieces (Boje, 1991). In all forms they are part of the organizational discourse and can construct identities and interests across space and time (Vaara & Tienari, 2011). Literature records other discursive instruments employed to mobilize narratives. Sergeeva (2017) notes that narratives are also mobilized through labels, wherein she highlights how labels are used meaningfully and purposefully in organizations. Czarniaswka and Joerges (1995) argue that labels are quasi-objects that easily travel and translate ideas from one place to another. The strategic nature of labels is highlighted in the work of Granqvist et al. (2013) wherein they call labels as a 'resource' in organizations. Similarly, Suchman (1994) calls labels as a 'technology of control.' There are other discursive ways in which narratives are represented in organizations such as in the form of verbal, visual or written forms or their combinations (Sergeeva, 2019). Narrative tools such as these can persuade people to change,

get them to work together, enable knowledge transfer, neutralize the rumor mill and create a compelling new future (Denning, 2005).

Along with discourses, there are also activities that help in mobilizing narratives. Notable among these is narrative repetition from the work of Dailey and Browning (2014). They record how stories are repeated in organizations whether over the water cooler or in a formal quarterly meeting, yet researchers give little attention to the form, function, and implications of the recurrence of stories. They note that retelling is an important component of narrative theory as it performs functions such as control/resistance, integration/differentiation and stability/change within organizations. Boje (2008) refers to dialectic of sameness and differences in narrated identity building upon the work of Ricoeur (1992):

*“Narrative control makes one way of coherence, the only (approved), talked about way of sensemaking in an organization. Yet the officially narrated identity (of sameness) is always susceptible to some new (different) way of making sense of an organization, that can turn into some new complexity, envisioning some new strategic plot, or device some way to transform a privileged way into a restored way to make sense in a storytelling organization”* (Boje, 2008: 19).

Even though there are isolated instances of storytelling, labels, and repetition within organizational settings, there is still a lack of understanding on how these help in creating a narrative. Riessman (2002) stresses the importance of tools and structures employed by the narrator and calls for more research to uncover them. Similarly, Sergeeva (2019) highlights that multiple narratives exist in an organizational setting as a ‘meshwork’ of discourses and activities. We argue that we can understand how narratives are mobilized in megaproject external stakeholder

management practice by differentiating narrative instruments and narrative processes. We define narrative instruments as tools, devices or resources which enable the creation of a narrative such as stories and labels reviewed above. We define narrative processes as the technique, methods or procedure that is followed for using the instruments such as narrative repetition reviewed above. Thus, narrative instruments are used in particular narrative processes to achieve a purpose, i.e., mobilizing the project narrative. The aim of this research is to empirically explore the different narrative instruments and narrative processes and show how they are used together to mobilize narratives in megaproject settings. Therefore, we seek to answer two research questions: (1) How narrative instruments help in mobilizing megaproject narratives for external stakeholders, and (2) How narrative processes help in mobilizing megaproject narratives for external stakeholders.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

To address our research questions, we used a qualitative approach as it enables a better understanding of people's lived experiences and generates closer and empathetic understanding of these experiences (Pink et al., 2010). We conducted a single in-depth case study research as the study phenomena within a single context to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2003). The aim of a single case study is to optimize understanding of some concepts, such as narrative instruments and narrative processes, in this instance, within the case rather than to generalize beyond it (Stake, 2005).

We chose to study the High Speed Two (HS2) megaproject in the United Kingdom. The megaproject is delivered in multi-phases and plans to connect the city centers of London, Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds by 345 miles of new high-speed railway track. The megaproject aims to bring UK's cities closer to each other by effectively shrinking the distance

and time taken to travel between them. The first phase of the megaproject intends to connect London and Birmingham with a 140-mile-high speed rail line to reduce the travel time between the two cities to 45 minutes at a cost of 30 billion pounds. The first phase was proposed in 2009 and is scheduled to be operational in 2026. We chose to study the megaproject due to multiple theoretical reasons. First, the megaproject had very active resistance from the external stakeholders along the route of the high-speed rail because they saw only the demerits of noise and vibrations with no visible benefits as the project passed through their lands with no nearby stoppages. These stakeholders even campaigned their councils to invest huge sums of money in opposing the construction of the project as recorded in the below news article:

*“Along the route more than £1.2 million has been pledged by councils fighting the plans, including £500,000 over three years by Bucks County Council”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Extra 50,000 to be spent on fighting HS2’ dated 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012)

Second, to counter this massive opposition, the project was very active in trying to create a reputation for the megaproject and sought to recruit proactive press officers and digital media advisors for managing the project’s reputation as reported below:

*“The publicity team will include a “proactive press officer” and “digital social media advisor,” responsible for managing the rail route’s reputation on Twitter, Facebook, and other websites”* (Quoted from the news article ‘HS2 sparks a jobs boom for a quango’ dated 7<sup>th</sup> April 2012).

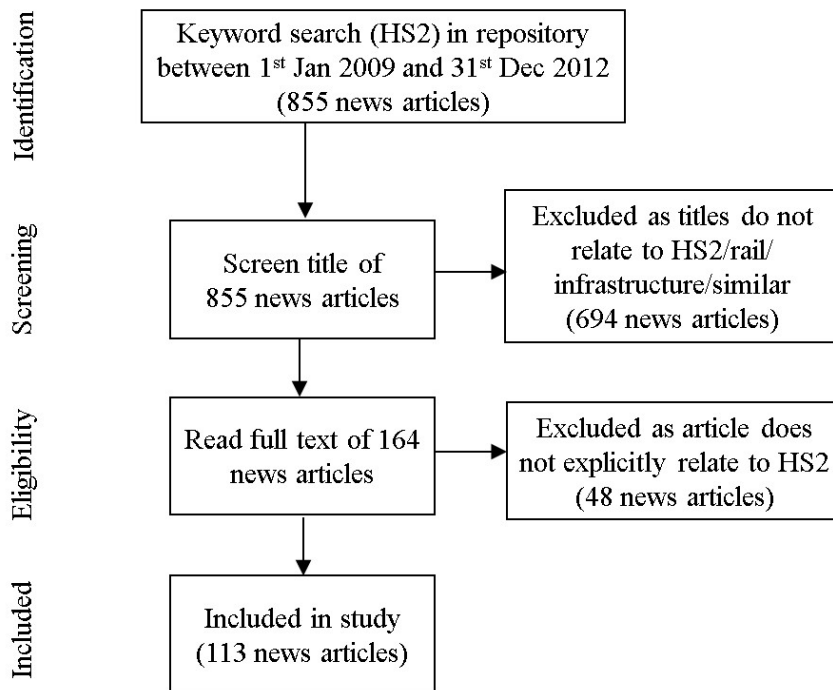
Finally, as seen from the data sources above, the HS2 megaproject drew plenty of media attention (Strauch et al., 2015; Van Marrewijk et al., 2008; Pitsis et al., 2003). News media plays

a large role in perpetuating public perceptions through images, hyperbolic reportage, and reporting comments from public officials (Morehouse & Sonnett, 2010). Digital news media can be used as a data source and it holds an archive of retrospective data which can help researchers understand projects better in the 21st century (Ninan, 2020). Hence, the project was selected for theoretical reasons such as the need for creating a narrative, the presence of narrative instruments and narrative processes, and the accessibility of retrospective data.

Thus, the data that informs this research is captured from naturally occurring news media articles. Naturally occurring data or naturalistic data arise without a researcher intervening directly or providing some 'stimulus' to a group of respondents (Silverman, 2001) and hence do not have researcher's biases during the data collection stage as with interviews or questionnaires (Ninan, 2020). The news articles for the study were collected through a key word search in the 'google news' repository. Google news is one of the major aggregators of news on the web and is used as a scholarly source for research (Bandari et al., 2012). With the use of a news aggregator, we reduced the bias that would be created from the study of news from only one media outlet.

The early stages of the megaproject are the most critical and turbulent phase (Levitt & Scott, 2017) as narratives are shaped and attributes acquired here are retained in later stages (Gioia et al., 2013). Hence as part of theoretical sampling, we chose to study the early stages of the project including events such as the first announcement of the project in 2009, the community consultation of the project in 2011, the green light for the project from government in 2012, and the judicial review of the consultation process of the project in 2012. We restricted our study to this period as our aim was to study the narrative instruments and processes in the project and not to trace all the events relating to the project in its lifecycle. Thus, we used the keyword 'HS2' to search for news

articles relating to the project in between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2012. A total of 855 news articles were retrieved from the search. We manually screened the title of each news article to identify whether the article related to HS2, rail, infrastructure or anything similar. There were 694 news articles that did not relate to HS2 but had the keyword ‘HS2’ within them as hyperlinks to HS2 news articles. These were excluded. Following this, we went through the text of the remaining 161 news article and excluded 48 news articles that did not explicitly relate to the HS2. The remaining 113 news articles were included in this study. Figure 1 summarizes the process of inclusion and exclusion of news article relating to the HS2 project.



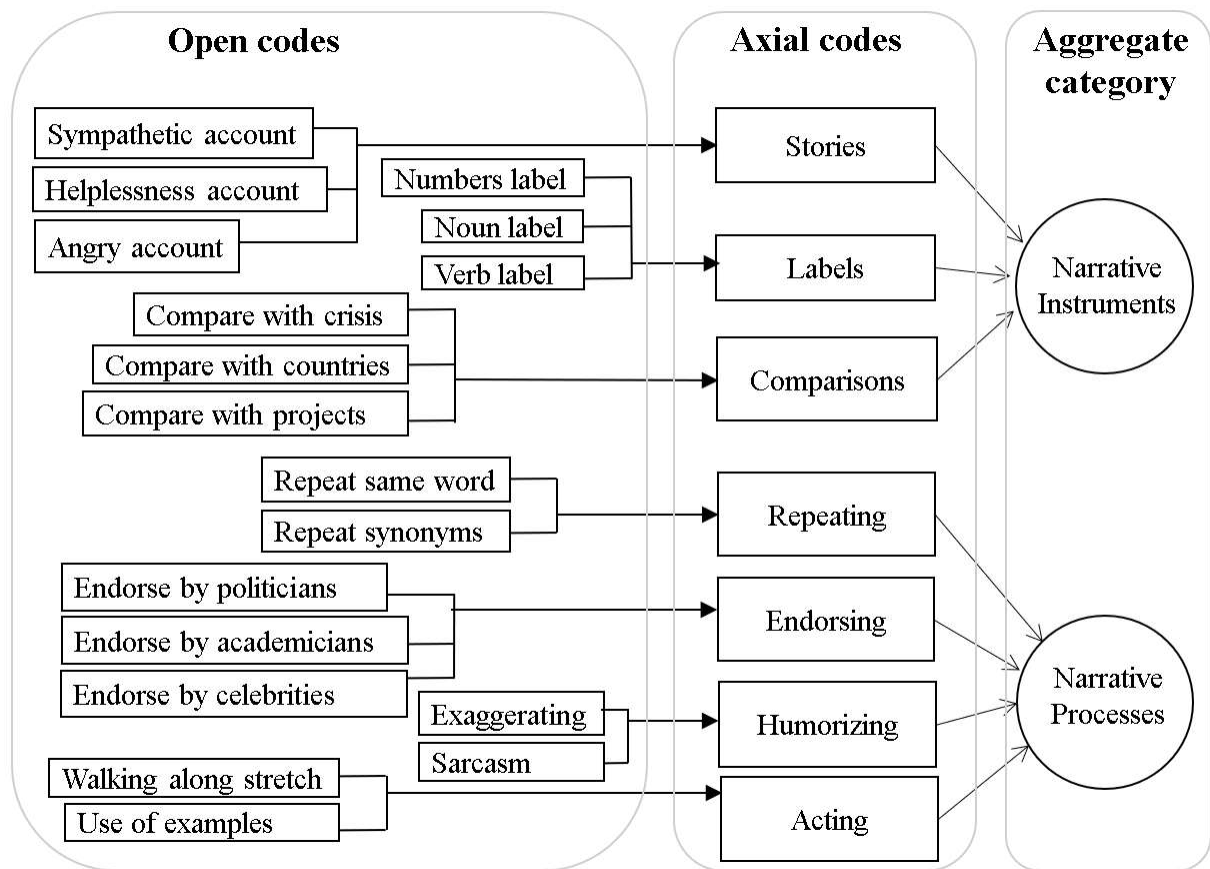
**Figure 1:** Process of inclusion and exclusion of news article relating to HS2

We thus selected 113 news articles from different newspaper agencies such as the Telegraph (32 news articles), British Broadcasting Company (29 news articles), Daily Mail (7 news articles), Bucks Herald (5 news articles). Other newspaper agencies such as Independent, Financial times,



etc., that had less than 4 articles each were also considered for the study. We also studied the 612 comments by readers below the selected 113 news articles. The comments were studied to understand the community's response to the news article.

For qualitative analysis, this research used open coding of the data collected from news articles to arrive at theoretical constructs and thereby build theory. For this, the research employed manual coding as automatic methods could create a barrier to understanding (Kozinets et al., 2014). The data analysis was done in parallel with data collection, and with each new data point, the existing codes were revised. The analysis was done mainly in an inductive manner (Wodak, 2004) with some abductive reasoning as the researcher went back and forth between theory and empirical data to create an increasingly elaborative understanding of instruments and processes for mobilizing narratives. For example, literature records the process of repetition for stories (Dailey & Browning, 2014), however, we found empirical data on the repetition for stories, labels and comparisons. Thus, we moved back and forth between theory and data. Such moving back and forth between theory and data helped us to anchor the data in literature and extend it to sharpen generalizability, improve construct definition, and raise theoretical level following the guidance of Eisenhardt (1989). The coding pattern employed is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Coding pattern

We used thematic analysis of the statements from official spokesperson of the project, politicians, or resistance group and did not use the interpretation of these quotations by the journalists. We tried to understand the narrative instrument and narrative process employed in these statements. From the open coding, we created codes such as ‘sympathetic account,’ ‘helplessness account,’ and ‘angry account.’ We then employed axial coding and grouped these as ‘stories.’ The categories or codes emerged from the data and were not predetermined. For example, when there were claims of HS2 creating 10,000 jobs, we initially coded it as belonging to the narrative instrument ‘numbers,’ as numbers were used as an instrument to describe the amount of jobs created. Subsequently, when HS2 was claimed to be fast, frequent and revolutionary transport

system, we noted that the project is being labelled to a well-established category and therefore, we modified the narrative instrument category from ‘numbers’ to ‘labels.’ Thus, multiple revisions were carried out such that the categories extracted remain exclusive and collectively exhaustive (GoldenBiddle & Locke, 1997). When the same labels were highlighted by the Prime Minister, we categorized it as belonging to the narrative process ‘endorsing’ as the narrative instrument ‘labels’ was used in a particular narrative process ‘endorsing.’ Careful and repeated readings are important because some constructs often are not obvious until the second or third reading (Stegar, 2007). We discuss the concise and insightful ‘power quotes’ in the body of the article to show the essence of the category while a few more instances and quotes are displayed in tables as ‘proof quotes’ to show the prevalence of the category following the suggestion of Pratt (2008). The constructs generated are anchored in existing literature (Eisenhardt, 1989) for external validity.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the news articles from the HS2 megaproject during the study period helped us understand the narrative instruments and narrative processes employed. We discuss both the narratives of the promoters and the protesters of the megaproject but do not differentiate between them as our goal was to understand the instruments and processes employed in the context of megaprojects. The narrative instruments and narrative processes are discussed below.

### **INSTRUMENTS FOR CREATING NARRATIVES**

Different narrative instruments employed in the HS2 megaproject by various stakeholders were stories, labels, and comparisons. Each of these is discussed in detail below.

*1. Stories:* Grayson (1997) highlights that stories have, for a long time, been tools of persuasion quoting the instances of Aesop’s fables and Sesame Street. Storytelling is defined as an activity of telling or sharing stories about personal experiences, life events and situations (Sergeeva & Trifilova, 2018). Stories also entertain, explain, inspire, educate, convince, generate and sustain meaning (Gabriel, 2000). They are conceived by the sender with an intention to convey a meaning to an audience (Pace, 2008). A personal account of a farmer in an attempt to create a narrative that the community does not need the project is quoted below,

*“I’m just gutted, and it will be horrifying if it happens. It would ruin the farm and our land won’t be worth anything. We don’t need High Speed rail and we can’t even catch it here anyway”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Woman stunned by plans to bulldoze her frith hill home for high speed trains’ dated 15 March 2010)

Other instances show the general sentiments of the community who are affected by the project. A news article reported a quote of one of the community members as below,

*“I will lie down in front of the bulldozers. They cannot wreck such a beautiful part of England. It is not just about my house and my view but about many other people and what the Government is doing to this country”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle England on the march as revolt over 250mph rail link grows’ dated 14 November 2010)

Other representative instances and proof quotes that can be categorized as stories are recorded in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Proof quotes for stories

Instances	Proof quotes
Horticultural nursery owner gets angry and claim he will do everything to stop the project	“I have spent nearly 20 years building up my business and I will do everything I can to stop it going ahead. Plenty of others will do the same.” (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle England on the march as revolt over 250mph rail link grows’ dated 14 Nov 2010)
State of helplessness by house owner	“Who wants to buy a house that will have high-speed trains thundering along 500 yards away?” (Quoted from the news article ‘Who wants to buy a house that will have high-speed’ dated 14 Nov 2010)
Helplessness in understanding HS2 plans	“It is exceptionally difficult to find out what HS2’s plans are. You email them and they just send back spam. You call them and they just respond with a script from their press release” (Quoted from the news article ‘High speed line noise will affect 50000 people’ dated 18 Dec 2010)

Gabriel (2000) notes stories are not just descriptions but an avenue for emotional engagement with the audience. Stories are personalized, entertaining and emotional in nature (Sergeeva & Green, 2019; Vaara et al., 2016). Accounts such as suffering by the displaced people of the project seek to create empathy and understanding from others (Gabriel, 2000), such as the readers of the news article. A reader commented on the news article quoted above calling for a fight to keep the countryside, as highlighted below,

*“And there was me thinking we lived in a democracy! What is the point in working yourself silly to build up a business when the government can come along and make a compulsory purchase of your property if you just happen to be in their way! It's a disgrace. Come on you people of Buckinghamshire, let's fight to keep our countryside!”* (Quoted from the comments of a news article ‘Woman stunned by plans to bulldoze her frith hill home for high speed trains’ dated 15 March 2010)

The stories of the people displaced by the project resulted in news readers empathizing with these stories and creating a shared vision that the government is making compulsory acquisition

of properties that are in their way. The shared vision resulted in a call for organizing among people to fight to keep their countryside as seen above. Thus, as Weick et al. (2005) claim stories can be considered as being an integral part of organizing. As seen in the case of the HS2 project, stories help in organizing as it generates a common understanding and shared vision amongst members (Perkins et al., 2017; Sarpong & Maclean, 2012).

2. *Labels*: According to Weick (1995), Weick et al. (2005) and Weick et al. (2010), sensemaking is about noticing and labelling. Activities may be labelled in ways that predispose practitioners to find common sense. Logue & Clegg (2015) record that labels can be used as political tools or resources as it builds or reinforces systems of meaning. Labels are usually ‘nouns’ that are used to name a topic or issue (Surber, 2001). When organizations claim the label of a well-established category, it triggers assumptions of its products and practices similar to the category it claimed (Pontikes, 2018). The high-speed rail was labeled using adjectives such as ‘modern,’ ‘reliable’ and ‘fast’ mode of transport along with nouns such as ‘prosperity’ and ‘benefits.’ The transport secretary of the UK in a statement to the House of Commons said:

*“A modern and reliable and fast service between our major cities and international gateways befitting the 21st Century will transform the way we travel and promote Britain's economic and social prosperity”* (Quoted from the news article ‘HS2: High-speed rail go-ahead prompts mixed reaction’ dated 10th January 2012)

On the contrary, the protesters of the project called the project a ‘complete waste of taxpayers' money.’ A quote from a news article is highlighted below,

*“The chairman of the Stop HS2 group, called the project "a complete waste of taxpayers' money when we can least afford it” (Quoted from the news article ‘Government starts high-speed rail consultation’ dated 28th February 2011)*

Labels such as the largest, innovative, worst, etc., were employed in the case of the HS2 project. In one instance the promoters of the project called the consultation process as the largest ever undertaken by the government as highlighted below,

*“This was one of the largest consultations ever undertaken by a government with over 30 events along the line of route attended by tens of thousands of people” (Quoted from the news article ‘Fury for home owners booted out to make room for a high-speed rail link...but minister behind it halted a similar project in his own back yard’ dated 13 November 2011)*

Within the project context, Sergeeva (2017) and Ninan et al. (2020) note that adjective labels such as being ‘innovative’ or ‘largest’ can improve the acceptability of the project. Chreim (2005) records that clichéd labels such as ‘innovation,’ ‘ability to change’ and ‘commitment of employees’ are effective in creating organizational change.

Similar to labels, we highlight that numbers also trigger assumptions of the topic in discussion and reinforces systems of meanings. It was seen from the HS2 megaproject that numbers are used in the process of creating a narrative by showing the magnitude of impact of the topic. In an instance, the protesters tried to create a narrative on the inefficient consultation process by claiming that the views of over 50,000 people were ignored as below,

*“They effectively excluded over half those affected by the proposal from participating in the consultation and in practice ignored the views of over 50,000 people and businesses*

*who did respond*” (Quoted from the news article ‘Councils-launch-bid-to-block-high-speed-rail’ dated 2 April 2012)

The cost to each family in the form of numbers was used to create a narrative that the community does not need the project. A campaigner against the project remarked,

*“We have consistently said that there is no business, economic, or environmental case for HS2. Research has suggested that HS2 would cost each family in this country at least £1,000”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Treasury delays put HS2 plan in jeopardy’ dated 19 May 2012)

In another instance, the promoters of the project in an attempt to create a narrative of the benefits of the project claimed that the project would create 10,000 jobs as quoted below,

*“Lord Adonis said the project would create 10,000 jobs and yield £2 in benefits for every £1 spent”* (Quoted from the news article ‘High-speed rail plans announced by government’ dated 11 March 2010)

Within the context of megaprojects, Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) claim that 90 percent of megaprojects underperform in terms of time, cost and scope citing optimism bias and strategic misrepresentation as the causes. Highlighting the magnitude of failure, future research in the field, such as Ansar et al. (2014), created a narrative that medium or small-scale projects are better than megaprojects. Numbers as a narrative instrument create a perception of the magnitude of the parameter. Existing literature highlights the role of labels as ‘nouns’ that are used to name a topic or issue (Surber, 2001). From the case study of the HS2 project, it is seen that along with nouns such as ‘prosperity’ and ‘benefits,’ adjectives such as ‘modern,’ or ‘fast’



and numbers that quantify the magnitude of the topic such as ‘10,000 jobs’ or ‘cost of £1,000 per family’ can also be categorized as labels as it triggers assumptions of the topic in discussion and reinforces systems of meanings. Other representative instances and proof quotes that can be categorized as labels are recorded in Table 2.

**Table 2: Proof quotes for labels**

<b>Instances</b>	<b>Proof quotes</b>
Business case labeled as flawed	“HS2 isn't green, the business case is flawed, and curing the north-south divide is pure fantasy” (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle England on the march as revolt over 250mph rail link grows’ dated 14 Nov 2010)
Transport secretary label the people resisting as implacably opposed and not up for negotiations	“There is a hard core who are absolutely implacably opposed. Quite frankly I am not going to shift those” (Quoted from the news article ‘Philip Hammond high speed rail will be a pleasant surprise for many’ dated 11 Dec 2010)
Protesters labeled as wealthy few	“It is a worry when a very small group of people from a tiny slither of one of the wealthiest areas in the country seek to thwart a major infrastructure project that would be of huge benefit to the whole country and that was a manifesto promise of all three main parties” (Quoted from the news article ‘Nimbys’ begin struggle over High Speed 2’ dated 18 April 2011)

When labels such as ‘complete waste of taxpayer’s money’ was used, the readers of the news articles echoed the same label as seen below,

*“HS2 is a complete waste of taxpayer's money. It's unnecessary, making the train journey slightly shorter for rich business people. Why not spend the money replacing more useful standard track, torn up by previous governments, to take some traffic off the roads and improve rural transport? Then nationalize the railways as we 're still paying for it anyway”* (Quoted from the comments of a news article ‘Trains are a rich man's toy, says transport secretary’ dated 13 November 2011)

The ‘complete waste of taxpayer’s money’ label resulted in the news readers identifying and interpreting the project as ‘unnecessary.’ The label resulted in readers claiming that taxpayer’s money can be put to better use by replacing existing tracks. Thus, as noted by Czarniawska-Joerges (1994), labels change the identity of the project and can influence the interpretation of the organization.

3. *Comparisons*: Comparisons involve comparing oneself or other with others (Suls et al., 2002). Davies et al. (2017) suggest that one of the rules of managing complex megaprojects is to assess what has been done before and learn from the past similar projects, as has been successfully done with Heathrow Terminal 5. The HS2 megaproject was constantly compared with other projects in an attempt to create a narrative. To create a narrative on the need for the project, the promoters of the project compared the economic development of the UK with other countries and the contribution of the HS2 project towards it as recorded below,

*“Countries across Europe and Asia are already pressing ahead with ambitious plans for high speed rail, while some of our key rail arteries are getting ever closer to capacity. We cannot afford to be left behind - investing in high-speed rail now is vital to the prosperity of future generations”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Government starts high-speed rail consultation’ dated 28 February 2011)

The promoters also compared the HS2 megaproject with previous transportation schemes in the UK such as railways and motorways, to create a narrative that these kinds of megaprojects drive economic growth, and the country cannot afford not to build high speed rail. They claimed that the debate should be whether the country can afford not to build the project as quoted below,

*“I profoundly believe if you look around at what things that actually made a difference to our regions and to our cities and ask yourself what’s really helped drive economic growth I think the answer always comes back it’s those big transport schemes. My argument would be not can we afford HS2, but can we afford not to build high speed rail”* (Quoted from a news article dated 9 Dec 2011)

In one instance where the protesters claim that their property value has diminished because of construction and operational noise, the project spokesperson comparing the compensation provided in this project with the High Speed One (HS1) project remarked,

*“When the first high speed line was built through Kent, compensation was limited to those that were subject to compulsory purchase orders ... What we are talking about here is going wider, I think this is unprecedented, paying compensation to people who do not have their properties taken, but who will suffer a significant diminution in value”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Philip Hammond high-speed rail will be a pleasant surprise for many’ dated 11 December 2010)

Within the project context, Ninan et al. (2019) record how a megaproject using comparisons and claiming that another project in a different city looks up to them resulted in a positive community sentiment and a favorable narrative for the project. Other representative instances and proof quotes that can be categorized as comparisons are recorded in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Proof quotes for comparisons

<b>Instances</b>	<b>Proof quotes</b>
Compare division of neighborhood as was during the civil war	“This house has been here for 500 years. This neighbourhood would be divided as badly as it was during the Civil War” (Quoted from the news

	article 'quainton manor facing greatest threat since civil war' dated 1 Oct 2010)
Comparison with noise from the highway	"Broadly speaking these trains are no worse than the noise from a highway and generally more acceptable in that the noise is not continuous, whereas the noise from a highway is a constant buzz throughout the day and often throughout the night as well" (Quoted from the news article 'How loud will the new high-speed train be?' dated 28 Feb 2011)
Comparison with change of people's views from the HS1 project	"One of the areas we are getting the most flak from is where the line is going past in a deep cutting. It's difficult to know what to say to people...but just wait and see. Evidence from HS1 is that once it's in, people's views change, it doesn't have the impact they thought it would have" (Quoted from the news article 'Philip Hammond high-speed rail will be a pleasant surprise for many' dated 11 Dec 2010)

When the promoters claimed that other countries are pushing ahead with high-speed rail and we cannot afford to be left behind as highlighted above, one of the readers of the news article echoed,

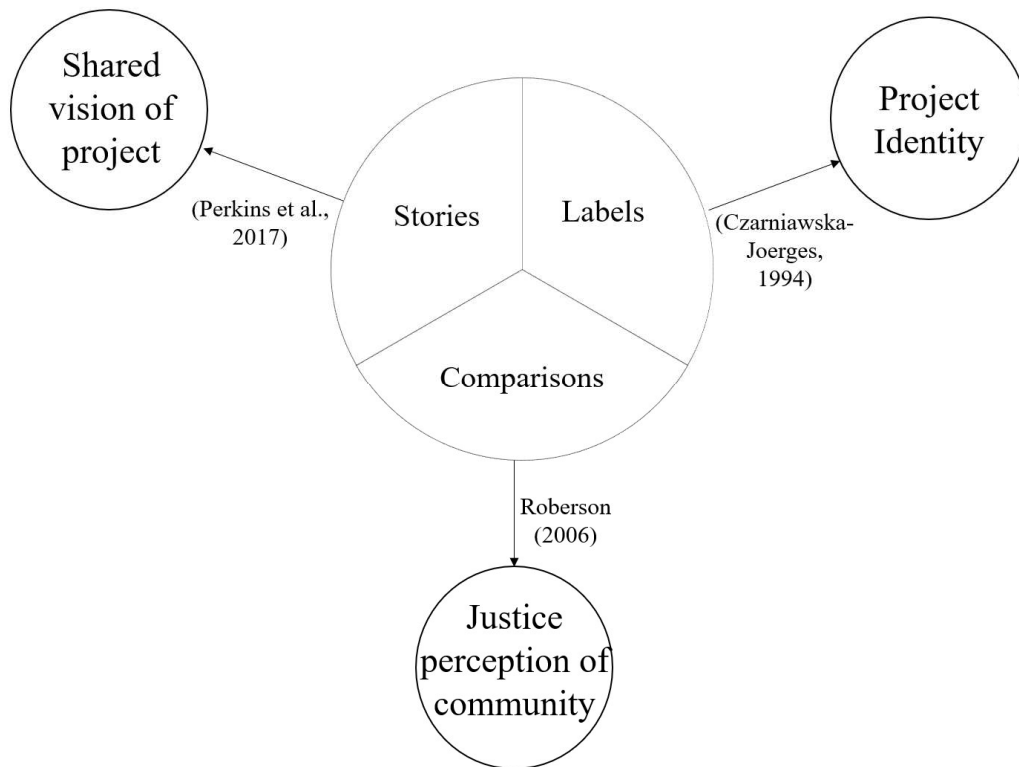
*"The sooner we build it, the better. There's always negativity around expanding motorways and railways, with the inevitable people in the area saying 'Not in my back yard', but when it's up and running, it becomes the lifeblood of our nation. 40 years ago, there was outrage at the motorway, 100 years ago, it was the railways. Imagine us with neither today!"*  
 (Quoted from the comments of a news article 'Government starts high-speed rail consultation' dated 28 February 2011)

The readers of the news articles also echoed the presence of resistance in previous projects. The comparison resulted in the news readers claiming that similar resistance will always be there, and justice is done for the people affected even though they are protesting. They proclaimed that the only way forward is to build the project sooner as there will always be negativity around the

project. Similarly, narratives such as unprecedented compensation in HS2 in comparison to HS1 as discussed above, aimed to highlight that more is done to accommodate the concerns of the protesters than the earlier project. Such a comparison with the compensation provided in other projects seeks to provide proof that the stakeholders are treated fairly or better, i.e., justice is done for them. While Greenberg (1990) discusses the perception of fairness in how individuals are treated by authorities in their workplaces, we discuss the perception of fairness in how stakeholders are treated by government, or vice versa in comparison to earlier or similar instances. In an intra-organizational context, Roberson (2006) highlights that comparison with peers in an organization can influence an individual's perception of justice. So, when the project compared the practice of compensation with that of HS1, the community would feel that they got justice. Rawls (2020) notes that similarity or comparisons is effective for the perception of fairness. Organizational justice theory includes distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). From our data, it was seen that there was always a focus on results or outcomes when comparisons were employed, and hence distributive justice (Colquitt et al., 2001) was most common type of justice observed in our study. Studies on justice and fairness within project settings (Unterhitzberger & Moeller, 2021) is gaining popularity, and this research extends the concept of justice to external stakeholders.

As discussed, the narrative instruments of stories, labels and comparisons serve different functions in project organizing. While stories help in creating a shared vision of the project, labels help in creating an identity for the project, and comparisons help in enhancing the perception of justice for the community as shown in Figure 3. These different functions together contribute to a public image for the project which can lead to external stakeholder support or resistance for the project (Oppong et al., 2017). The perception of justice can lead to external stakeholder acceptance or

rejection of the project and the project purpose (El-Sawalhi & Hammad, 2015). Whether positive or negative, these community experiences with the megaproject organization can influence its legitimacy in the eyes of the external stakeholders (Derakhshan et al., 2019).



**Figure 3:** Narrative instruments and their different functions in megaproject organizing

### PROCESSES FOR MAINTAINING NARRATIVES

Narrative processes involve the procedure followed to put the instruments in use. The processes observed in the case of the HS2 megaproject are repeating, endorsing, humorizing, and actioning. Each of these is discussed below.

*1. Repeating:* We observed from the case of the HS2 megaproject that stories that tried to create a narrative that the community does not need the project was repeated in the news articles in different stories as highlighted below,

*“The Government are proposing to put a rail track through the back garden. It is a crazy idea. Why do we need it? How many people want to move from London to Birmingham and Birmingham back to London, cutting 35 minutes off their journey”* (Quoted from the news article ‘A London to Birmingham rail link would destroy swathes of countryside and hundreds of homes. So is it worth it?’ dated 13 August 2010)

Garud and Turunen (2018) note that retelling stories is a way of reinforcing cultural norms and values. We also observed that the label of the HS2 project being ‘fast’ was repeated in other instances too as below,

*“This new line, with fast, frequent services could, with attractive fares, start to revolutionize intercity rail travel”* (Quoted from the news article ‘High-speed rail plans announced by government’ dated 11 March 2010)

Numbers were also repeated in the process of mobilizing narratives. There were multiple instances where the protesters of the project claimed that the project would cost every family £1,000 and would give equivalent benefits such as in the instance below,

*“[The] MP for South Northamptonshire, said the proposals were “eye-wateringly expensive” and did not represent value for money at £1,000 for each family in Britain.”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Nimbys begin struggle over High Speed 2’ dated 18 April 2011)

Comparisons were also repeated in an attempt to create a narrative. In the instance of creating a narrative of the need for the project, the promoters of the project employing comparisons with other countries remarked,

*“Countries across Europe and Asia are already pressing ahead with ambitious plans for high speed rail, while some of our key rail arteries are getting ever closer to capacity. We cannot afford to be left behind - investing in high-speed rail now is vital to the prosperity of future generations”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Government starts high-speed rail consultation’ dated 28 February 2011)

Kotter (2012) highlight that ideas sink in only after they have been heard many times. Repeating is largely discussed in the literature for stories (Dailey & Browning, 2014; Garud & Turunen, 2018). It was seen in the case of the HS2 that labels and comparisons were also repeated in the process of mobilizing narratives. Within megaproject context, Love et al. (2018) highlight that the persistent reverberation of the convenient narratives of optimism bias and strategic misrepresentation in both academia and media as the causes of megaproject failures has led to these explanations becoming an accepted norm. Other representative instances and proof quotes that can be categorized as repeating are recorded in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Proof quotes for repeating

<b>Instances</b>	<b>Proof quotes</b>
Repeated that the project has no benefits	“We don’t think it will bring any benefits — environmentally, economically or socially. It will only bring adverse effects” (Quoted from the news article ‘High-speed line noise will affect 50000 people’ dated 18 Dec 2010)
Repeat the economic benefits from the project	“I do believe that high-speed rail has a really effective role to play in bringing our country closer together and spreading economic benefit



	throughout all our country” (Quoted from the news article ‘Local MP Andrea Leadsom Quizzes Prime Minister Over HS2 Consultation’ dated 23 Dec 2010)
Repeat UK being left behind other countries	“The clear majority view that this is a project that will benefit the UK economy and we can’t afford to be left behind France, Spain, Germany, Denmark. It delivers significant benefits to the UK economy” (Quoted from the news article ‘Nimbys begin struggle over High Speed 2’ dated 18 April 2011)

2. *Endorsing*: Support from people who occupy a prominent status in the society can help in mobilizing a narrative. The narrative that the community does not need the project was highlighted to be supported by academicians who have expertise in the area. In an instance, an honorary professor of public policy at the University of Warwick remarked,

*“This rail link and the 250mph trains are economically unnecessary and environmentally destructive ... The cost is enormous at a time when public finances are under severe strain, and the business plan is based on over-optimistic forecasts of passengers ... The project does nothing to tackle the immediate problem of overcrowding on trains because it will not be completed for another 15 years”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle-England-on-the-march-as-revolt-over-250mph-rail-link-grows’ dated 14 November 2010)

Elected representatives hold significant influence in the society. The Prime Minister of the UK employed comparisons to signify that the HS2 project would help the country compete with other countries, as highlighted below,

*“If we want to be a world-beating country with world-beating businesses I think it is the right answer to be looking at high speed rail”* (Quoted from the news article ‘David

Cameron: high speed trains crucial to make Britain 'world-beating' dated 9 December 2011)

Within megaprojects, publicizing the visit of regional leaders and celebrities to the construction site is discussed in Ninan et al. (2019) as a branding strategy effective in changing the project community to advocates of the project. Endorsing of the stories, labels, or comparisons by people who occupy eminent positions can enhance trust. Lim et al. (2006) record that trust transference through associations with existing reputed people or organizations is instrumental in trust-building. Other representative instances and proof quotes that can be categorized as endorsing are recorded in Table 5.

**Table 5:** Proof quotes for endorsing

<b>Instances</b>	<b>Proof quotes</b>
Conservative MP using comparisons with France or Spain	“I am absolutely against this route. I am in favour of improving the transport infrastructure but we should do it using the existing transport corridors. We don’t need 250mph trains in this country. It’s not like France or Spain where they have to cover longer distances” (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle England on the march as revolt over 250mph rail link grows’ dated 14 Nov 2010)
Celebrity businessman active in the infrastructure sector claims the benefit-cost equation unacceptable	“Such grand projects develop real momentum, driven by strong lobbying and can become difficult and unpopular to stop, even when the benefit-cost equation does not stack up, or the environmental and landscape impacts are unacceptable.” (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle England on the march as revolt over 250mph rail link grows’ dated 14 Nov 2010)
PM endorses a commitment to mitigating the noise and visual impact of the project	“I am determined that we will do everything we practically can to mitigate the noise and visual impacts of the proposed line” (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle England on the march as revolt over 250mph rail link grows’ dated 14 Nov 2010)

3. *Humorizing*: It was seen from the case of the HS2 megaproject that instances which had humor in them were shared and enjoyed by the community, and these can help in the process of mobilizing a narrative. The protesters created a parody video<sup>1</sup> titled ‘Downfall of HS2’, dubbing a famous scene from ‘Downfall’ - a film that charts Adolf Hitler’s final days in his Berlin bunker. The video was created in an attempt to shape a narrative on the flawed business case. A news article reported on the video that was widely shared as below,

*“The HS2 parody, which was put online this week, starts with Hitler – in the role of Secretary of State for Transport – saying to his generals: “Don’t worry, we have the business case” ... However, one of his staff replies: “It barely breaks even, despite the insane increase in traffic we forecast.” At this, Hitler flies into a rage: “Even with the million jobs we made up you still couldn’t get it right. We said it would reduce flights from Heathrow – it won’t. It’ll only create 10,000 jobs in the Midlands – less than last month’s increase in unemployment in Birmingham alone”* (Quoted from the news article ‘HS2 rail link gets Hitler parody’ dated 4 Oct 2012)

The project used humor in comparing the transport secretary of state for transport to Hitler. The need for the project was labeled as an ‘insane increase in traffic’ and the whole parody was structured as a form of storytelling as it is personalized, entertaining and emotional in nature (Vaara et al., 2016). In another instance involving an attempt to create a narrative of the benefits of the project, the promoters compared the time taken for the journey with the duration of football matches and other daily activities, as quoted below,

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<sup>1</sup> The video titled ‘Downfall of HS2’ was found through a YouTube search after its mention in the news article. It is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WUuagYAj\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WUuagYAj_w) and was accessed on 15 January 2020

*“London to Manchester in less time than it takes for United to play Arsenal? Birmingham to London quicker than it takes to enjoy a pint and an order of fish and chips down the way at the Queen’s Head pub? Birmingham to Leeds in the time it takes to enjoy a pot of tea? It could all happen – and via train, no less – now that the U.K. government has given the go-ahead to a national high-speed rail network called HS2”* (Quoted from the news article ‘UK high speed rail HS2 gets go ahead’ dated 20 January 2012)

Jarzabkowski and Le (2017) record that humor can either affirm or shift an existing response in an organization. Adding to the literature, we note that humor in the case of the HS2 megaproject was used to promote and market the discourses such as stories, comparisons, and labels in order to mobilize a narrative. Discourses that have a sense of humor in them are clearly memorable and rendered more (Sergeeva & Green, 2019). Humor can also help to form a cohesive team, thereby bringing unity and also create a positive cultural environment to help manage conflicts successfully (Ponton et al., 2019). Other representative instances and proof quotes that can be categorized as humorizing are recorded in Table 6.

**Table 6:** Proof quotes for humorizing

<b>Instances</b>	<b>Proof quotes</b>
Exaggerating protests to world war 3	“If they think the protests over the Newbury bypass were bad, they ain't seen nothing yet. It will be World War III” (Quoted from the news article ‘Middle England on the march as revolt over 250mph rail link grows’ dated 14 Nov 2010)
Sarcastic story of horse race farm owner	“We have spent 17 years building this place to what it is now. This land is perfect for training horses .... HS2 will pretty much split us in half - right through the middle of the gallops. We wouldn't be able to use the other side. You can't take racehorses over a bridge across a high-speed railway” (Quoted from the news article ‘Ed McMahon's challenge is to build’ dated 21 April 2010)

Exaggerating inconvenience due to construction work along with the use of comparisons	“It would take seven years to build the railway; seven years of dust, noise and lorries and an encampment bigger than the Dale Farm travellers’ site in Essex to cater for the army of construction workers” (Quoted from the news article ‘Home owners booted make room rail link Buckinghamshire’ dated 13 Nov 2011)
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4. *Actioning*: Processes carried out to mobilize narratives include putting discourses into action. Walking along the entire HS2 route was highlighted in the news article as an activity to mobilize the narrative that the community does not need the project as recorded below,

*“The line will go through the field where Colin Firth made his debut... it just won’t exist anymore,” says \*\*\* [name of person], from Culworth, who has campaigned relentlessly against the plans, including walking the entire HS2 route”* (Quoted from the news article ‘the chron looks at what it will mean to Northamptonshire if the HS2 is created’ dated 16 January 2012)

Here, we see that the protesters use personalized stories in their action of walking along the entire HS2 route. Similarly, the transport secretary also walked along the entire route in an attempt to reinforce the label of ‘effective consultation process’ as quoted in the news article below.

*“Mr. Hammond is expected to tell MPs that he has “recognized the local impact” of the original plans after walking part of the route and meeting many concerned locals.”* (Quoted from the news article ‘High speed line noise will affect 50000 people’ dated 18 December 2010)

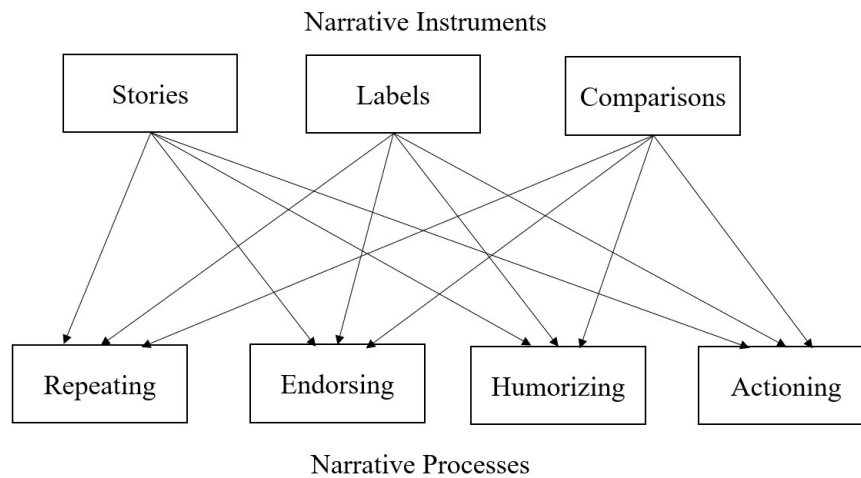
Grayson (1997) claim that narratives help us understand events. We extend this by highlighting that both narratives and events are interrelated as events from the case study of the HS2

megaproject were instrumental in mobilizing narratives. Putting a discourse into action can embed the narrative in the mind of the community. As Weick (1988) notes, actions test provisional understanding generated through prior sensemaking and thereby strengthen existing narratives. Other representative instances and proof quotes that can be categorized as actioning are recorded in Table 7.

**Table 7: Proof quotes for actioning**

<b>Instances</b>	<b>Proof quotes</b>
Events that focus on positives of the project and not the negative features	“These events are not a consultation because they do not present any of the negative features” (Quoted from the news article ‘HS2 high speed rail consultant sacked after cretin row caught on video’ dated 13 June 2011)
Using examples to show sound of trains	So, what might life be like in a post-HS2 Buckinghamshire? We found out when we met *** [name of person]. Shortly after calling on him, an unbearable din filled his lounge. Four minutes later it happened again, then again after another four-minute interval. The awful noise was coming from a CD. It was, in fact, a recording of the sound a high-speed train makes (Quoted from the news article ‘Home-owners booted make room rail link Buckinghamshire’ dated 13 Nov 2011)
Use examples to show sound of train	“The Department for Transport has hired engineering firm *** [name of firm] to demonstrate the noise to concerned members of the public. A simulation of the train's noise when it passes through various points can be heard through headphones at a series of roadshows” (Quoted from the news article ‘How loud will the new high-speed train be?’ dated 28 Feb 2011)

The narrative instruments and processes observed from the case study of the HS2 project are depicted in Figure 4.



**Figure 4:** Instruments and processes for mobilizing narratives from the HS2 project

The narrative processes mobilize and bring people together. As seen from the case, the stories, labels, and comparisons were individually or together repeated, endorsed, made attractive, and actionized for building the narrative. Together, the narrative instruments and processes can help megaprojects mobilize a narrative that can potentially help in managing external stakeholder such as gaining their acceptance and legitimacy.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

This research has implications for research and practice in the external stakeholder management of megaprojects. Megaprojects across the world affect numerous external stakeholders as they create economic, political and environmental disruptions in the society (Sturup, 2009). The vocal among these stakeholders’ campaign against the project and try to achieve their vested interests through the project and thereby change many features of the project (Flyvbjerg, 1998). The most affected stakeholder may not necessarily be the most vocal (Van Marrewijk et al., 2008) and hence the activities of the vocal few can result in the project not

delivering on its intended benefits. Using an instrumental perspective of stakeholder management, we argue that megaproject narratives can be employed to manage external stakeholders. The discourses for stakeholder management from an instrumental perspective have a strategic intent with a focus on achieving an organization's corporate objectives (Zakhem, 2007). This research highlights the instruments, processes and medium project's use to manage external stakeholders.

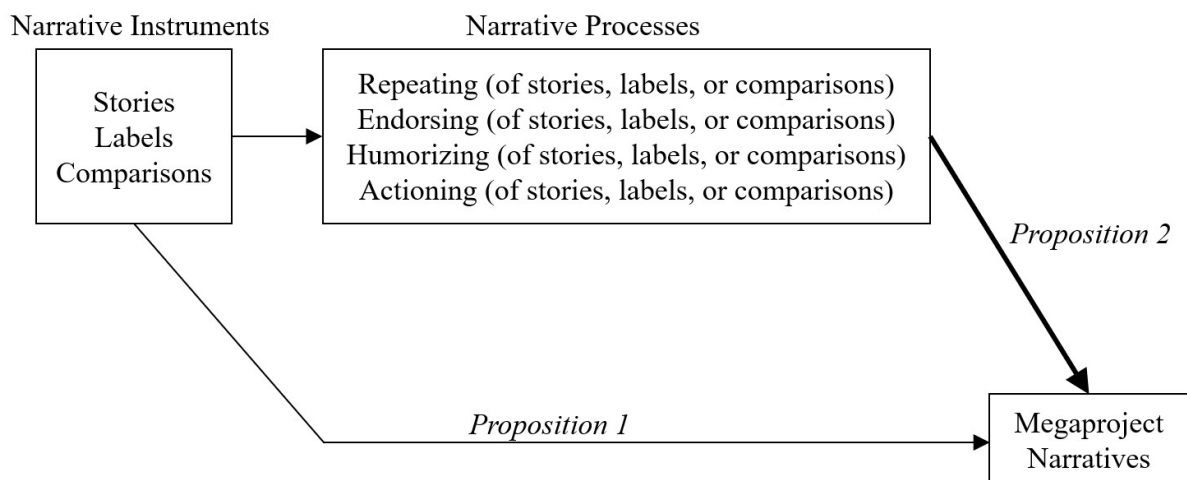
Research on narratives has emphasized the role of narrative tools or instruments such as stories (Boje, 2008) and labels (Granqvist et al., 2013) which can neutralize the rumor mill and create a compelling new future (Denning, 2005). By using the case study of the HS2 megaproject, this research highlights how stories, labels and comparisons are used as narrative instruments to create a project narrative. As contributions to the project management literature, we highlight how stories can create a shared vision of the project, labels can create a project identity, and comparisons can create a perception of justice. In this research we did not separate the use of these instruments by the promoters and protesters as our objective was to explore the use of narrative instruments. Future research can explore the use of these instruments by promoters and protesters separately and understand the interactions among their use.

The narrative literature also highlights how processes, such as repeating narratives can perform functions that stabilize or control the narrative (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Our empirical findings highlight how along with repeating, other processes such as endorsing, humorizing and actioning can help stabilize the narrative. We also contribute to theory by highlighting that all the narrative instruments such as stories, labels, and comparisons are repeated, endorsed, humorized and actioned upon. The interaction between narrative instruments and processes, as shown in Figure 5, helps us understand how narratives are mobilized in practice. It should be noted that the model



created does not differentiate between the order of use of narrative instruments such as stories, labels, and comparisons, nor the narrative instruments such as repeating, endorsing, humorizing and actioning. Rather, the model only shows how a project narrative is created by different cycles of narrative instruments and processes. Future research can explore the role of counternarratives (Andrews, 2002) or rhetorical contestations (Sorsa & Vaara, 2020) in the interaction between narrative instruments and processes.

We highlight news media as a medium for instrumental stakeholder management. To be resilient to interest groups, it is important that projects have a good reputation and media image right from its start (Olander & Landin, 2008) and hence building a favorable narrative for the project in the media is essential.



**Figure 5:** Interaction between instruments and processes to mobilize project narratives

Figure 5 shows the interactions between instruments and processes in the form of two propositions.

Proposition 1: Narrative instruments such as stories, labels and comparisons can create megaproject narratives.

Proposition 2: Narratives processes such as repeating, endorsing, humorizing and actioning of stories, labels, and comparisons can create stronger megaproject narratives.

We call on future studies to quantitatively explore the effectiveness of these instruments and processes towards achieving the project organization's objectives. Practically, this research highlights the different ways in which narratives can be mobilized to improve external stakeholder's acceptance towards a proposed project or program. Even though we considered the pool of all instruments and processes and did not differentiate between their use by promoters or protesters, the findings have implications towards improving stakeholder acceptance through narratives. As stories can help create a shared vision of the project, the project team can bring about stories and personal experiences of people who have benefited or are projected to benefit from the proposed megaproject. Such empathetic and real-life stories can be shared on social media, advertisements, and project websites. As labels can help create a project identity, the project team can create and use labels such as 'largest consultation' or 'reliable service.' Adding to these, labels against the resistance group of the project can bring down their legitimacy and arguments. As comparisons can affect the perception of justice for the community, it is important that the project team study the management of project affected stakeholders in other projects and propagate the considerate practices adopted in their own project. As noted above the resistance groups too leverage stories, labels, and comparisons to create their favorable narrative. Hence it is important that these narrative instruments used by the project team are stabilized through repeating, endorsing, humorizing and actioning. All the narrative instruments can be repeated in news media,

social media, and other outlets by the project team. The project team should also reach out to leaders, celebrities, and other people with referent power to endorse the different narrative instruments. Humorizing and actioning of the narrative instruments can also help stabilize the project narratives. Recently, the project management literature has stressed the importance of marketing (Turner et al., 2019) and branding (Ninan et al., 2019) in project settings. The practice of marketing and branding strategies are prevalent in other sectors and project settings can adopt these to create and maintain a stable narrative. Such stable narrative can help projects subtly create a 'reservoir of support' (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017) and thereby resistant the negative press and protests that seek to topple the project.

## **CONCLUSION**

Past research has found that the strategic front-end of projects is fundamental for understanding stakeholder dynamics, commitments and actions (Aaltonen et al., 2015; Gil & Pinto, 2018). In our paper we focus on the strategic front-end of the HS2 megaproject in the UK. We argue that, building a narrative upfront is essential for the successful delivery of projects from an external stakeholder management perspective. The early stages of the megaproject are the most critical and turbulent phase (Levitt & Scott, 2017) as narratives are shaped and attributes acquired here are retained in later stages (Gioia et al., 2013). The purpose of our paper is to demonstrate narrative instruments and processes that potentially help in managing stakeholders. Throughout the project life cycle there is an ongoing flow of narratives mobilized by external stakeholders who are for and against the project. We record the use of discourses such as stories, labels, and comparisons from the case study of the HS2 megaproject. It is seen that these discourses undergo multiple

processes such as repeating, endorsing, humorizing and actioning to mobilize and bring people together.

The research makes multiple contributions to project management theory. First, narrative processes stabilize narrative instruments and both these are important in mobilizing a narrative. Second, while existing literature talks about stories being repeated in organizations, we highlight that labels, and comparisons are also repeated along with stories. Third, we explore the role of ‘numbers’ and ‘adjectives’ as labels as they trigger assumptions of the topic in discussion and reinforces systems of meanings thereby extending the current knowledge of labels as ‘nouns’ that are used to name a topic or issue. Fourth, we record how comparisons with other projects are used outside project settings to create a perception of justice and fairness for external stakeholders. Finally, we highlight humorizing, such as exaggerating and being sarcastic, as a great way to send ideas across and as very influential in creating a narrative of the megaproject.

The study also makes contributions to megaproject practice and research methodology. To megaproject practice, since narratives are essential for the success of a project, we explore the dynamics of mobilizing a narrative. It was seen that multiple instruments and associated processes are central for mobilizing narratives of the megaproject. These narratives help shape the vision of the megaproject, the identity of the megaproject or the perception of justice for the community regarding the megaproject. We also provide empirical evidence showing both promoters and protesters attempting to shape the megaproject narrative according to their vested interests. To research methodology, we highlight news media articles as battle grounds where organizations with different interests, mindsets and rationale battle to create a narrative favorable to their agenda in the project setting. Data from the news media articles afford multiple directions for the study of

megaprojects such as the stakeholders' perception of issues relating to the megaproject, how stakeholder concerns get mobilized, how megaprojects communicate, the power of the media, and even the role of media in decision making.

There are some limitations in this study which offers multiple avenues for future research. One limitation of this study is the length of the stories. The stories in this study are quotations and are between one and three sentences long in contrast to Feldman's (2004) recommendation of stories ranging from five sentences to one and a half pages. Regarding the structure of the stories, Gabriel (2000) notes that stories have a beginning and end and are held together by action that is entertaining for audiences. Since our stories are reported in news articles, the well-known parts of the story, i.e., the project acquiring land and the inconveniences caused to landowners, may be edited out in the news articles to be succinct in reporting. However, the news articles report the entertaining part of the stories, and these are considered in our analysis as stories, as they disrupt an initial state of equilibrium (Franzosi, 1998). The entertaining action part of stories is most important as they reveal hidden aspects of the situation and brings forth a new predicament which calls for thought and action (Ricoeur, 1983). Since the beginning and end are well known to the readers of the news articles, we do not think their absence and subsequent short length of the stories will affect the narrative effect of the stories. Another limitation of this study is that we do not differentiate between promoter and protester narrative and just sought to study the instruments and processes employed in mobilizing a narrative. Future research can longitudinally explore how these instruments and processes are employed differently by the promoters and protesters and how they interact dynamically in the process of the narrative as it evolves along the lifecycle of the project. The effects of the narrative instruments and processes on the management of external stakeholders can also be explored through a longitudinal study. Additionally, different

stakeholders can have contrasting versions of the same event (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007) and future research can explore how different stakeholders attempt to use different instruments and processes for each major event in the context of megaprojects. It was seen that each narrative instrument such as labels, comparisons, and stories were contested, which by itself is a broad topic that can be taken up and studied at depth in the future. This study is limited to the use of news articles only. It would be also valuable to study how stories, labels, comparisons regarding the megaproject are repeated, supported and actioned upon in different channels such as TV, social media, community meetings, etc. and study how these instruments and processes vary in these channels. It is through the continuous interaction of narratives at multiple levels and mediums that the meaning is constructed, and a shared vision is achieved.

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