CTRL + power: the (geo)politics of digital authoritarianism

2024 Report

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PANEL 1

Bad news: assessing and countering disinformation

Russia's opponents'. The document emphasizes that 'Comprehensive deterrence of unfriendly countries must be carried out through offensive information campaigns', which must cover 'military-political, trade-economic, information, psychological, value, and other spheres' as well as 'new major themes in foreign policy activities' such as 'the fight against neocolonialism', the promotion of 'traditional spiritual and moral values' and support to 'states and interstate associations inclined towards constructing interaction with Russia'.

As hinted above and emphasized by Conoscenti, 'We should be aware that disinformation efforts are not limited to any single technology or digital platform. China and Russia are adopting a comprehensive 360° approach'. Our focus, therefore, should be on processes and methods, rather than on specific tools or technologies. And this is Conoscenti's main argument: 'Tools and technologies are merely the finger pointing to the moon; it is the process and the methodology that matter'. For example, in 2018 John Kelly and Camille François discovered that:

> Instead of trying to force their messages into the mainstream, these adversaries target polarized communities and 'embed' fake accounts within them. The false personas engage with real people in those communities to build credibility. Once their influence has been established, they can introduce new viewpoints and amplify divisive and inflammatory narratives that are already circulating. It's the digital equivalent of moving to an isolated and tight-knit community, *using its own language quirks and catering to its obsessions*, running for mayor, and then using that position to influence national politics. [emphasis added]

Thus, Conoscenti clarifies, from a linguistic perspective the key elements that apply across platforms are audience architecture, language engineering, the already-mentioned language of the neighbourhood, and the larger ecosystem, which is itself based on the regularities of the language. From this, it follows that:

> If we want to counter disinformation, we need to understand both the language of our opponents and our own. We need to find ways to produce a language that resonates with the narratives we want to promote. We must counter their narrative while at the same time establishing our own.

The point is that neither NATO nor the EU has a specific strategic communication strategy and they are thus followers rather than trendsetters in this important arena. Furthermore, the former does not yet have a 'NATO-agreed' definition of 'strategic communication'. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes actively work on this important element of today's FIMI.

Shifting the focus from verbal to visual communication, **Massimiliano Fusari** discusses the role played by visual media in today's communication processes by applying storytelling techniques specifically to international politics.

'The present is visual', argues Fusari:

> as today 90%+ of all data on the internet is visual, in one form or another. Yet, communication has always been visual, and surely will continue to be so.

> Visual communication is, and has always been, key to strategize effective and impactful messages across all sectors of societies and cultures. And now, to an unparalleled level, to fight the war of perceptions, and hence of nudging the hearts and minds, of international audiences on political issues.

When thinking about international relations, consider, for example, the following picture of King Charles III at COP28 in Dubai (see ***Image 1)***.

It was King Charles' first international appearance as king, and he is wearing his formal attire, with a tie and a pochette. The imagery on these accessories, however, presents a less conventional choice, as Fusari points out:

> it is a Greek flag endlessly multiplied on both accessories, which has been widely interpreted as an implicit sign of support for Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis over the recent quarrel he had with his UK counterpart for the return of the Parthenon marbles from the British Museum. To deplore his PM's attitude of refusing even to meet to discuss the matter, King Charles stated his position *clearly* yet *silently*, and managed to do so without any chance of being accused of interfering with the internal affairs of his government: it was his *implicit* way to *explicitly* communicate a *strategic* message.

'Storytelling', Fusari explains, 'aims to align *projected* messages with *perceived* messages by *strategically* using the right combination of "format" and "content"'. As the example above illustrates, visuals can be a formidable storytelling device for communicating intended messages, at both personal and social levels.

Building on this insight, Fusari delves into a case study to flesh out the role of visual storytelling in international relations. The case is that of the website saturday-october-seven.com, which was devised by its author(s) to denounce the attacks perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October 2023.

Image 1
King Charles III at COP28

Source: COP28/Christophe Viseux/Flickr

Bracketing out any discussion or judgement of the events, to focus instead on the way in which the author(s) of the website have communicated their message, Fusari highlights how, already on the home page, there are some key details to focus on.

The first element that appears on the home page is a trigger warning: 'This website contains extremely difficult to watch content from the terrible massacre carried out by Hamas on the seventh of October' (see ***Image 2***). As Fusari explains:

> the warning is written in English, and this element leads us to speculate that the website is meant primarily for an English-speaking, and arguably international, audience. As there is no option to choose the website language, which is a rather common practice in international communication, we could easily assume that the intended policy of dissemination, either by conscious decision or language limitations, is indeed to target an English-speaking international audience.

Addressing such a (politically) heated and (emotionally) sensitive topic cannot be done without explicitly stating that this contribution does not – in any way – form any part of the discussion of the military confrontation, as it aims to discuss solely the policy of communication of one of the actors without taking sides in any way. In addition, the images of these dramatic events are here presented as public documentation that is widely available in a multiplicity of media formats, but might, still, because of their content, hurt personal and/or public sensibilities.

The website domain was registered (as per the internet provider GoDaddy) on 19 October, twelve days after the events in question. As Fusari points out:

> many alternative domain names were then and are still available almost a year later, and different options could have been chosen at that time, including, for instance, 'october-seven'. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that including 'Saturday', the holy day for Jews, might be intended as a conscious and explicit reminder of the un-holiness dimension of the perpetrated attack.

This consideration is indirectly reinforced by the heading 'HAMAS MASSACRE' being consistently repeated and capitalized across all pages and sections of the website, which, combined with the dedicated email address provided (hamasmassacre@gmail.com), 'explicitly restates the gravity of the attack'. Finally, Fusari notes:

> all the materials on the website were uploaded on the very same day of the website purchase, with no changes since, which dramatically limits its appearance results on Google searches, as content updates are a key metric for positioning on the top of Google's search engine.

Unsurprisingly, there are several different websites dedicated to the events that occurred on 7 October, each using different frameworks and approaches to storytelling, with varying communication strategies and dedicated supporting materials. In the case of saturday-october-seven.com, Fusari briefly addresses some basic concerns about the visual, with explicit reference to the design of the user interface (UI), or, in simpler terms, the look of the website.

Image 2
Trigger warning as users access the saturday-october-seven.com website.

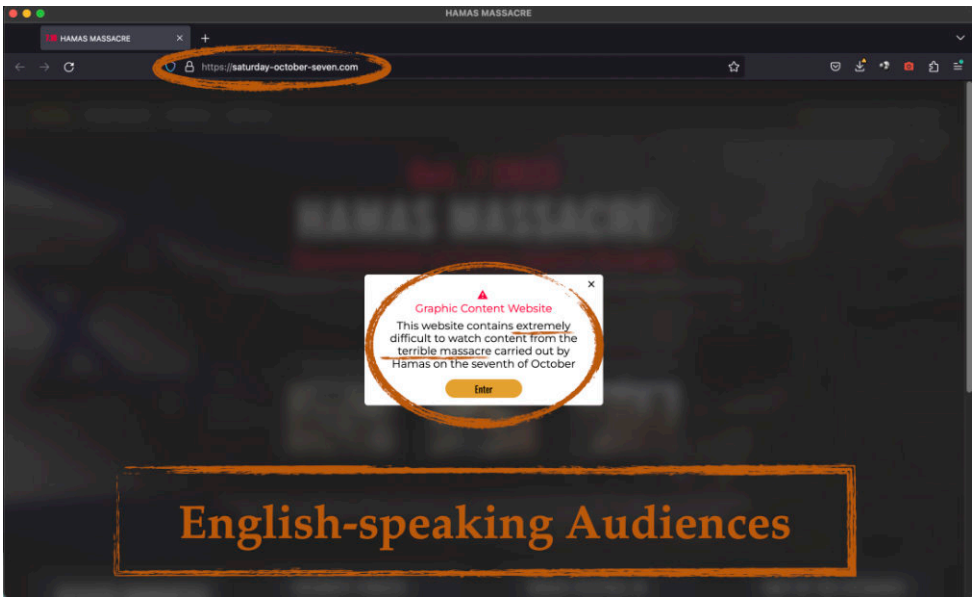


Image 3
Homepage of the saturday-october-seven.com website

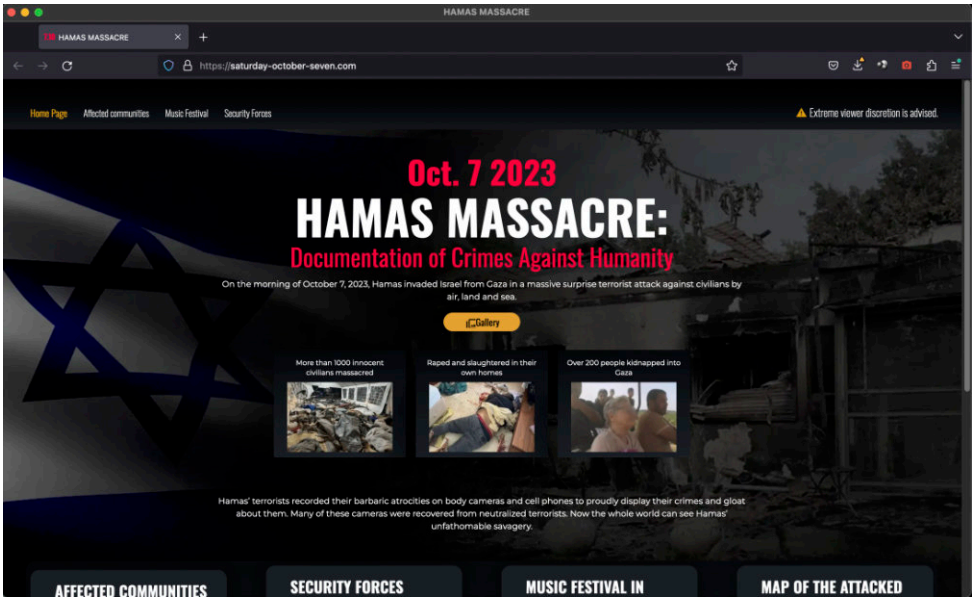
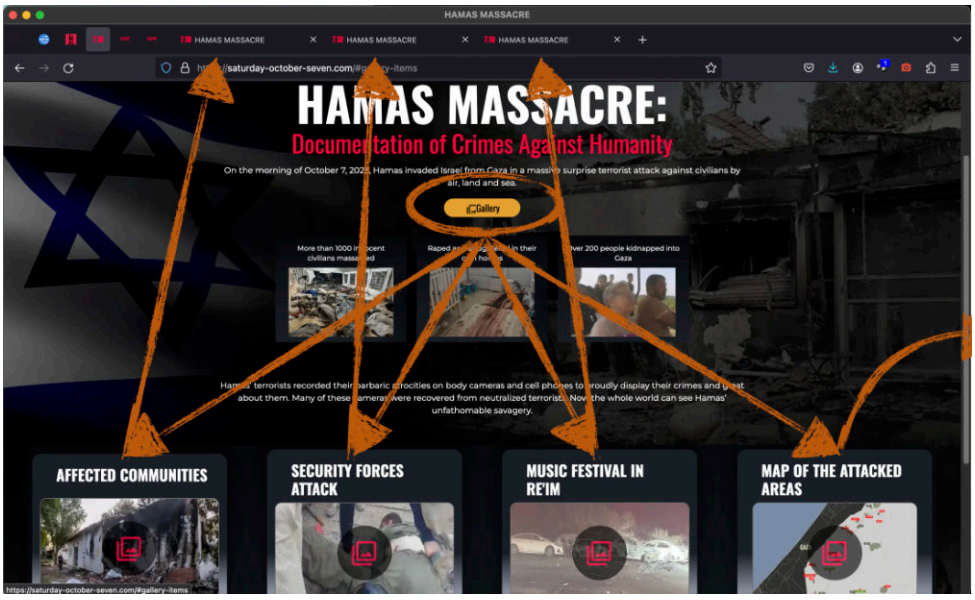


Image 4
Homepage and galleries of the saturday-october-seven.com website.



As shown in the image above, 'HAMAS MASSACRE' is at the centre of the page to explicitly state the 'mission' the website has taken on: that is, to collect 'Documentation of Crimes against Humanity' (see ***Image 3***). In the background there are two images: on the left an Israeli flag, on the right a picture that *may* show the outcome of one of the attacks. 'Arguably', Fusari comments, 'the visual connection is there to produce a [perception of] cause–effect relation with an explicitly stated agency, Hamas'. Next, between two short blurbs, a line of accusations presents a brief summary of the impact of the attack, in three points: 'More than 1000 innocent civilians massacred', 'Raped and slaughtered in their own homes', 'Over 200 people kidnapped into Gaza'. Scrolling down the page, there is a more detailed articulation of the impact of the events by reference to four thematic galleries: 'AFFECTED COMMUNITIES', 'SECURITY FORCES ATTACK', 'MUSIC FESTIVAL IN RE'IM', and 'MAP OF THE ATTACKED AREAS' (see ***Image 4***).

These galleries represent 'storytelling categories used to lead the understanding of the events' and, once they are opened, 'the same title for each section is repeated: "HAMAS MASSACRE"'. As Fusari argues, 'this feature tends to be counterproductive when aiming to maximize communication impact, as it overall limits the user experience' (UX). This, Fusari says,

> 'might be because of any of these possibilities: either the website owner(s) might wish to restate their intended accusation over and over, or, possibly, the details of the UX, as a communication policy, might have been of secondary relevance to them in comparison to the gravity of the materials shared. Finally, a third option might be that the owner(s) might not have known how to diversify the heading structure.

Moreover, as Fusari points out, there is a discrepancy in the website's UX: the first three thematic galleries are dedicated photo galleries, but the fourth – a map – is shown as an overlaid single image and is not listed in the menu at the top left. Fusari interprets these inconsistencies with the possibility that the website might not have been professionally designed. Another possible reason, he adds, is that:

> the focus of the website might have been to favour 'content' over 'form', assessing the former as strong enough to overlook the latter. Yet effective storytelling is that which produces an impact, and it delivers it by combining content with form in an intentional and finalized, and hence strategic, manner.

As Fusari argues,

> visualization is information: the form you use to show something surely impacts, and oftentimes informs, its reception. For instance, whispering or screaming (as a strategy of communication) the same message produces rather different outcomes, and yet the right form depends on a variety of factors, including whether we actually wanted that message to be heard (intentionality). Raw messages communicate too, but they are not storytelling as they are not defined by strategy or intentionality. For instance, the same scream might come out your mouth because of a hammer mis-targeting your finger as you try to fix a nail on the wall, or as an intended call for help. One is intentional, the other is not. One is part of a strategy, the other is not.

Indeed, Fusari clarifies:

> whereas anything has the potential to communicate, what explicitly differentiates storytelling from messages is its intentionality to use the 'form' component (one of the strategic aspects) to its full potential. We are aware that any unequivocal differentiation of storytelling from messages would benefit from a more articulated review. For the present context, let's agree that visual storytelling refers to a visual message which has been intentionally enhanced with an intended communication strategy that takes full advantage of the specificities of its media form.

According to Fusari, on the saturday-october-seven.com website, various storytelling techniques could have been used to shape the visual messages more thoroughly and impactfully. Yet:

> the overall impression is that images were dumped into the website without any criteria or strategy of communication. For whatever reason – rage, desperation, or simply inability, or disinterest in the form's potentiality – images are presented as 'raw content' with the implication that audiences should make sense of them by themselves. Arguably, images were perceived as 'self-sustaining' their messages (the massacre by Hamas) as truly effective communication content, without requiring any further support by 'form'.

The picture below, for example, could convey different messages by providing different captions and tags (see ***Image 5***). Per se:

> the image looks very much like a dramatic car accident that we could witness on any road everywhere. By providing verbal support in the form of a caption, or a tag, the visual content could have been better intended, and more effectively communicated.

Indeed, to reiterate the point raised above, raw messages are part of communication and surely communicate. Yet, images seldom, if ever, have an *objective* value in and of themselves: their meaning is contextualized. 'One tactic of contextualization', Fusari continues:

> is indeed verbal support, in the form of a caption or a tag. Yet there is another tactic that might be even more impactful because it works in an implicit, rather than explicit (like a caption), manner, and this is sequencing images strategically.

For example, when accessing one of the thematic galleries on the saturday-october-seven.com website, the user is exposed to a wall of distressing images with no detectable order:

> How would, or could, or indeed should the user read and make sense of these images? What is their starting point? What is their line of development? How does their number and grid of presentation influence the user's ability to read, understand, and finally appreciate their intended communication?

Image 5
One of the images featured in the saturday-october-seven.com website.

In asking this, Fusari stresses once again that 'form' is 'content': 'the former without the latter underperforms its duties – and this is why storytelling should be conceived as the strategic combination of the two (content with form) to produce an impact.' Indeed, in the case of the saturday-october-seven.com website:

> by strategically ordering visual content and providing a revealing index to such order, the author(s) of the website could have led audiences to make sense of the presented materials in a way – hopefully – as close as possible to the way that was intended. Or, said otherwise, purposeful and strategic editing can help align projection with perception.

For example, Fusari goes on to explain:

> combining the two images below [see ***Image 6***] in the same frame strategically highlighted the before-and-after of the events of 7 October, capturing the cruelty and horror of the attacks by leading to an implicit identification of the five dead bodies in the bags as the five smiling people on the top left, and, eventually, as a family, which would add another layer of impactful emotions.

Importantly, all the above considerations merely scratch the surface of the extremely rich possibilities for communication that visual media offer: 'By its own nature, visual communication endlessly articulates multiple and coexistent messages that visual storytelling fights to manage and articulate with intentionality by strategically engaging the form component.' Eventually, Fusari admits:

> my line of reasoning might prove to be nothing more than mere speculations, as whatever I might have seen (and hence interpreted) in those images and the website structure might actually prove to be nothing more than my own analytical journey of interpretations. After all, this is not so uncommon, precisely because of the dramatic volatility of *visual* meaning-making processes and the complexities of the human being.

Image 6
A combination of two images featured in the saturday-october-seven.com website

In such a context, Fusari's explicit aim is to warn of the intricacies of the relations among the sender(s) and the receiver(s) of either intended or unintended messages because of the virtually infinite possibilities of interpretation(s) and reading(s) of the same communication materials. Fusari closes by adding that:

> these complexities must be acknowledged and critically addressed, as even being aware of these dynamics, in itself, already represents already a basic level of visual competency, which remains key to today's communication processes, whatever its formats. Unfortunately, when looking at images, nothing is ever for sure. Hence, visual storytelling is that set of dedicated tools required to channel the multifaceted explosions of meanings that images produce as messages by using intentionality and strategy to make projected messages one with perceived ones.

Following through with a more institutional focus, **Matthew Heneghan** sheds light on processes and patterns of disinformation in Central Asia between the geopolitical shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. He begins by emphasizing the importance of recognizing that the diffusion of norms and ideas concerning disinformation, and how it should be addressed by governments, varies significantly outside the transatlantic region.

Central Asia is one of the most rapidly growing regions in terms of internet penetration and digitalization strategies, which are primarily driven by state actors with marginal input from the private sector. In the five Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – up to 95% of daily internet traffic passes through Russian servers, while Russian state media broadcast across the region as per intergovernmental agreements stemming from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) era in the 1990s. Local media outlets across Central Asia, though they are not under the direct jurisdiction of Russia's regulatory bodies, have experienced pressure from Russian state regulatory bodies to sanitize and even censor materials they broadcast. The

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