Visual Narratives of Global Politics in the Digital Age: Introduction

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Abstract

Social media are inherently visual platforms. Everyday, billions of photographs, videos, cartoons, memes, gifs, and infographics are uploaded and shared for the world to see online. As a result, political actors such as diplomats, militaries, international organisations, terrorist groups, corporations, celebrities, diaspora, and members of the general public are now visual narrators of global politics. They tell stories about themselves, each other, and the rest of the world through the images they share on social media. Consequently, it is imperative that scholars of International Relations analyse visual narratives of global politics in the digital age. This article introduces the special issue on this topic by drawing together and advancing research on narratives, visual global politics, and digital media. In doing so we outline the conceptual underpinnings of, and rationale for, the special issue before introducing the contributions of each of the articles collected herein.

Key words: visual narratives, social media, aesthetic turn, visual politics, narrative

Introduction

At the end of June 2020, representatives from the United States and Russia met in Vienna to begin talks about the renewal of the New START nuclear arms control treaty that is set to expire in February 2021. Before the meeting started, the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control tweeted a photograph of Chinese flags positioned on the table alongside an empty chair. 'Vienna talks about to start. China is a no-show. Beijing still hiding behind #GreatWallofSecrecy on its crash nuclear build-up, and so many other things. We will proceed with #Russia, notwithstanding' he tweeted to his followers. Given that these were bilateral talks and China has no role in New START, former diplomats and other observers criticized the tweet, referring to it as 'a cheap stunt,' 'photo-op diplomacy,' and simply 'bad diplomacy.' Criticism aside, this tweet demonstrates the importance of visual narratives on digital media platforms in contemporary global politics.

Figure 1: @USArmsControl tweets about China during talks with Russia, June 2020.

The salience of images in the digital age can be observed here in three ways - concerning the contexts of production, circulation, and reception. First, the US delegation to Vienna spent time sourcing Chinese flags, taking them to the talks, hanging them on the table, and then photographing them to share on Twitter. Clearly, the production of visual media is something that those at the centre of global politics take seriously and invest time, money and resources into (Duncombe 2017: 551). Second, the tweet quickly provides a succinct story - that the Chinese are abdicating responsibility for their nuclear weapons and arms control - summed up by the image of Chinese flags and the empty chair. In this way, the photograph not only serves to capture attention and convey a message as people scroll through their twitter feeds, but it provides a claim to be 'an empirical truth through visual evidence' (Shim 2014: 26) even though it is staged. Third, the responses from other diplomats, Twitter users, and even the Chinese Director General of the Department of Arms Control who replied 'What an odd scene! Displaying Chinese National Flags on a negotiating table without China's consent! Good luck on the extension of the New START! Wonder how LOW you can go?' serve to highlight that audience interpretation and interaction matters. In the digital age, social media technologies have contributed to a radical transformation of the patterns of diplomatic communication (Bjola et al 2019), as well as reconfiguring political communication (Chadwick 2017), the global economy (Zuboff 2019), war and conflict (Kuntsman & Stein 2015), political protest (Tufecki 2017), popular culture (Shepherd and Hamilton 2016) and everyday life for billions of people across the planet (Highfield 2017).

The issues raised above are at the heart of this special issue, that through a collection of seven papers analyses visual narratives of global politics in the digital age. How do political actors narrate the world through visual images that they share online? How do other political actors and members of the public interpret and respond to these visual narratives? What is the political significance of these? And what effects do they have? These questions broadly link together the collected papers that focus on a variety of significant empirical case studies ranging from the propaganda of terrorist groups through to the popular culture representations of Hollywood characters.

This introduction to the special issue now sets out the conceptual underpinnings and rationale for the collected essays by providing context to the need to analyse visual narratives of global politics in the digital age. In doing so we draw together and build upon research on narratives, visual global politics, and digital media, before introducing each of the articles in the special issue.We argue that the competitive nature of the digital medium makes visual narratives the instrument of choice for political actors to capture the attention of online publics. Whether it is applied to public diplomacy or to digital propaganda, visual content helps maximize the reach and engagement of online messages, increases the visibility of certain topics while downplaying or discrediting others, and recasts the production, dissemination and consumption of political meaning. The visual power of digital images comes from their ability to connect with the online public through 'personal action frames' (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012) and project themselves into the symbolic universe of understandings, emotions and purposes that inform people's political behaviour. Therein lies a critical issue that the contributions to this special issue seek to explore: whether, and how, the influence of visual narratives is restricted to amplifying online engagement or if they expand beyond this and shape people's actions and behaviours offline. The answer to this question - which the papers explore in different ways - has deep implications for understanding the evolving patterns of political communication in the digital age as well as the effect that toxic visual narratives may have on the functioning of the public sphere in democratic societies.

Visual narratives and International Relations in the digital age

In 2001, a special issue of *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* on the topic of images, narratives and sounds in world politics helped to redefine the discipline of International Relations. Influential articles such as Roland Bleiker's 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory' (2001) drew together insights from feminist, poststructural, and postcolonial scholarship and recognised the significance of exploring 'different forms of insight into world politics, including those that emerge from images, narratives and sounds, such as literature, visual art, music, cinema and other sources that extend beyond 'high art' into popular culture' (Bleiker 2001: 510). This turn to aesthetics 'initiated an important process of broadening our understanding of world politics beyond a relatively narrow academic discipline that has come to entrench many of the political problems it seemingly seeks to address and solve' (Bleiker 2001: 510). Since then, research on images, narratives, and popular culture have opened up the discipline of International Relations and have provided insightful contributions to the study of the world around us (see for example Williams 2003; Weber 2008; Grayson et al 2009; Moore and Shepherd 2010; Hansen

2011; Heck and Schlag 2013; Miskimmon et al 2014; Dixit 2014; Caso and Hamilton 2015; Inayatullah and Dauphinee 2016; Hozić 2017; Bleiker 2018).

The recent publication of influential monographs (Harman 2019; Callahan 2020) and two special issues of this very journal on the topic of 'narrative power' (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019) and 'ontological insecurity' (Steele and Homolar 2019) are indicative of how established research on images and narratives is in contemporary International Relations. Other symposia, special issues and publications further emphasise this by drawing attention to how images and narratives are integral to important contemporary issues such as security, war, justice, migration, inequality, race, and gender to name a few (see Griffin 2019; Redwood and Wedderburn 2019; Galai 2019; Cooper-Cunningham 2020; Adler-Nissen et al 2020; Berents and Duncombe 2020; Crilley 2020). Yet, despite the significant research being done on images and narratives in IR, the two concepts are often focused on individually within the confines of scholarship on a 'visual turn' (Callahan 2015) and a 'narrative turn' (Wibben 2010; Oliviera 2020: 23) within IR. As Freistein and Gadinger have recently noted, 'not many have attempted to connect these different strands in conceptual and methodological terms' (2019: 218). This, then, is the first shared contribution that the papers collected herein make.

Despite drawing upon different theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches, the authors in this special issue share an interest in understanding how visual media are used to tell stories about the world and the actors, actions, places, and peoples in it. We understand visual narratives to be stories that are told through visual media such as photographs, films, memes, cartoons and so on, where such media are used to visually link together and give meaning to actors, their actions, intentions, and motivations as well as the events and places they are embroiled in. Understanding visual narratives requires analysing the content of visual media, their intertextuality with other linguistic, aural, and musical signifiers, alongside their 'explicit as well as implicit linkages to a larger political story' (Freistein and Gadinger 2019: 224-225). The papers in this special issue demonstrate the utility of analysing visual narratives and examining how visual media and narrative are often irrevocably interconnected.

The second core contribution of this special issue is to focus on the impact of social media on global politics. While Donald Trump's tweets may garner media and public attention on a daily basis, the majority of world leaders have some form of digital presence. According to one recent study, 98% of UN member states have an official social media presence 'with a combined audience of 620 million followers' (Twiplomacy 2020). At the same time, non-state actors have utilised social media to great effect. Violent groups such as ISIS have been reliant on social media for recruitment and for spreading propaganda and terror, as well as using social media in the very project of state, or caliphate, formation (Friis 2015). Social media is also used by radical far-right actors to promote racism, misogyny, and conspiracy theories that have resulted in acts of violence in places such as Charleston and Christchurch (Conway 2020), and social media is also integral to how people nowadays respond to terrorism through expressions of solidarity (Eroukhmanoff 2019). International organisations have been drawn to social media to rally global public support for policy such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, secure funding, and to disseminate a shared and coherent foreign policy - as in the case of NATO (Wright 2019). Diplomatic

institutions use social media to narrate global events, explain their countries' foreign policies, engage with a globally connected public sphere, and to challenge misinformation and propaganda (Bjola and Pamment 2018). Broadcasters and media institutions have also taken to social media to report the news as traditional print and television advertising revenues decline and audiences migrate online en masse (Crilley and Gillespie 2019). Further to this, international social justice movements such as #MeToo and BLack Lives Matter have been founded on social media before reverberating around the world (Carney 2016).

Ultimately, then, the rise of social media is having a profound impact on global politics. Despite this, their significance often remains overlooked by scholars of International Relations (Carpenter and Drezner 2010; Hamilton 2016; Jackson, 2019). This special issue remedies this, and places its attention on how visual narratives are produced and shared online by political actors, as well as how audiences engage with and interpret them on social media. Digital technologies have led to the erosion of the traditional, one-way broadcast media system, to one of multiplicity - a hybrid media system marked by many to many communication with more information than ever before circulating instantaneously around the globe (Chadwick 2017). In this system, social media collapse the distinctions between producers and audiences of media because 'social media platforms are reliant on the active participation of users in producing and sharing content' (Jackson et al 2020: 3). Alongside this, the general public and political actors now bypass traditional media gatekeepers such as newspapers and the press, and instead they use social media to communicate to their desired audiences (Jackson et al 2020: 3). Now, states, non-state actors, international institutions, social movements, and the 4.5 billion people who today have access to the internet are all visual narrators of global politics. The papers in this special issue go some way to demonstrate the importance of this through a focus on several significant case studies that each contribute to the study of global politics in the digital age.

From propaganda to popular culture: The cases & contributions of the special issue

The first paper 'Digital propaganda, counterpublics and the disruption of the public sphere: the Finnish approach to building digital resilience' by Corneliu Bjola and Krysianna Papadakis focuses on visual narratives and digital propaganda, and the effects they have on people's behavior offline. In asking 'what attributes help build the resilience of the public sphere to digital propaganda and why so?' (2019: 3) Bjola and Papadakis provide a framework for conceptualising the logic of digital propaganda and what may help contain its offline impact. This approach differentiates between the high level of diplomacy and political decision making and the everyday experiences of citizens who come across disinformation online. According to Bjola and Papadakis, 'the connection between the two spheres is enabled by the formation and political mobilization of 'unruly' counterpublics, that is of arenas of textual and visual contestation of politically marginalized groups promoting issues aligned with the disinformation agenda' (2019: 4). This approach is then focused on examples of disinformation in Finland, where interviews and content analysis are used to make sense of visual narratives of digital disinformation around issues such as the migrant crisis, the harassment of journalists and the rise of alternative media.

Charlie Winter's 'Framing war: visual propaganda, the Islamic State, and the battle for east Mosul' shares a similar focus on propaganda. Winter focuses on visual narratives produced by the Islamic State during the battle for the Mosul in Iraq. Foregrounded in the work of French theorist Jacques Ellul, Winter focuses on first, how visual narratives were produced and deployed by a range of media outlet associated with the Islamic State, before then examining 'the story that the Islamic State told' (2020: 2) through visual narratives. By conducting a detailed qualitative content analysis of over 1200 media products published by the Islamic State, Winter makes it clear that scholars and practitioners need to pay attention to visual narratives in the digital age. He concludes by noting that we need to 'keep up to speed with this potentially tectonic shift in the conflict landscape' (2020: 20).

The third paper in our special issue shifts away from visual narratives and propaganda to focus on popular culture. Here, Julian Schmid's '(Captain) America in crisis: popular digital culture and the negotiation of Americanness' argues that the contemporary crisis of American identity 'is being played out significantly in the digital space and is driven by many different political players, particularly those within the realm of popular culture' (2020: 3). By building upon prominent works on popular culture and world politics, Schmid focuses on the Marvel comic book and movie character Captain America who often features at the centre of online visual narratives of what it means to be American today. In doing so, Schmid demonstrates how visual narratives created by the general public on social media have significance for contemporary global politics, where the fictional characters and visual narratives we see on comic book pages, silver screens, and on our mobile phones can reveal important dynamics about national identity, history, and crises.

Next, Rhys Crilley and Precious Chatterje-Doody focus on visual narratives and their audience interpretation in 'Emotions and war on YouTube: affective investments in RT's visual narratives of the conflict in Syria'. Crilley and Chatterje-Doody develop a theory to explain how visual narratives have effects by invoking emotions in the audiences who view them (2020: 4) and then apply this to videos of the Syrian conflict published by the Russian state-funded international broadcaster RT on YouTube. They find that RT's visual narratives of the Syrian conflict resonate with audiences who express emotions such as 'anger towards US foreign policy in the Middle East; respect and gratitude for Russia and Putin; distrust of 'Western' institutions and openness to conspiracy theories; and finally, a feeling of support towards Russia's military masculinity' (2020:16-17). They study over 750 YouTube comments and conclude that when studying visual narratives of global politics in the digital age 'it is imperative that future studies account for the site of audiences and their affective investments in [them]' (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020: 17).

Carolijn van Noort's 'Strategic narratives, visuality and infrastructure in the digital age: the case of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative' follows with an examination of visual narratives of infrastructure where 'political actors utilize visual communication to enhance the appeal of their infrastructure vision and action plans and their identity among international audiences' (2020: 2). Van Noort begins by examining the ontological and methodological foundations of strategic narratives, visuality, and infrastructure, before drawing together these insights to advance how visual narratives can be studied in the digital age. By focusing on China's Maritime Silk Road

Initiative and official images published as part of the Belt and Road portal, she finds that China visually narrates infrastructure in ways that represent itself 'as a benevolent and a cooperative player on multiple levels, including the provincial, municipal, state, and the multilateral' (Van Noort 2020: 13) where President Xi Jinping embodies the vision of the Chinese state.

The penultimate paper in the special issue 'Visualising the foreign and the domestic in diaspora diplomacy: images and the online politics of recognition in #givingtoindia' is by Jen Dickinson. Here, Dickinson highlights how visual narratives online are central to reconfiguring relations between diaspora and foreign/domestic communities (2020: 2). In an analysis of visual narratives shared online by the India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians as part of fundraising efforts, Dickinson finds that 'digital mediums are empowering specific kinds of non-state actors to exert influence over the conduct of diplomacy, as online spaces increasingly blur the boundaries between foreign and domestic forms of statecraft' (2020: 3). Her analysis makes it evident that it is imperative to understand 'the role of the visual as a specific organizing technology of interaction and relate it to the question of how diplomatic relationships' (2020: 23) are being transformed through social media.

Our special issue concludes with a paper by Ben O'Loughlin and Alister Miskimmon on 'The visual politics of the 2015 Iran deal: narrative, image and verification' that explores how visual narratives were important during the creation of the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1. O'Loughlin and Miskimmon note that 'In the context of misinformation and a generalized frustration that digital and visual communication may be polarizing politics… communication can enable alignment and peace-making' (2020: 2). Through a mixed methods approach, they find that actors involved in negotiating the deal 'used social media to build a feeling of momentum' (2020: 3) and they conclude that visual narratives shared on social media help to explain how 'the US and Iran could trust each other just enough' (2020: 24) to negotiate a nuclear deal in 2015.

Together, these papers provide theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions that are of interest to any scholar or student of International Relations working on visual media, narratives, and digital technology. This special issue was born out of a workshop held at the University of Oxford in January 2017. Back then, Donald Trump was newly inaugurated, and his incessant tweets have provided headlines and background noise to a turbulent four years in global politics. Whilst Trump's tweets do of course matter, this special issue demonstrates that social media is important in ways that extend far beyond what the President says in 280 characters or less. The papers in this special issue show that social media, and the visual narratives of global politics nowadays shared online by myriad political actors have significance in a variety of contexts and cases. Conversations about visual media, narratives, and social media are in their ascendancy in International Relations, and we believe that this special issue provides a timely contribution to those debates. We hope that you enjoy reading the collected articles as much as we enjoyed working with the authors to bring them to publication.

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