

# Narrativas del conflicto en TikTok: comparación de las estrategias discursivas de la UE y China en el conflicto entre Israel y Hamás\*

## Narratives of Conflict on TikTok: Comparing the EU and China's Discursive Strategies in the Israel–Hamás Conflict

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**Resumen:** Este estudio compara las estrategias narrativas de dos medios internacionales con perfiles institucionales contrastantes: CGTN Europe, canal estatal vinculado al gobierno chino, Euronews, cadena paneuropea actualmente controlada por capital privado, con una línea editorial independiente. A partir de un enfoque mixto que combina análisis léxico mediante TF-IDF, agrupamiento temático con BERTopic y un análisis cualitativo de vídeos (análisis plano a plano), se identifican diferencias clave en la representación del conflicto Israel–Hamás en TikTok. CGTN Europe articula una narrativa con énfasis en los aspectos humanitarios del conflicto, destacando el impacto sobre la población civil en Gaza y la necesidad de un alto al fuego, en línea con las posiciones diplomáticas expresadas por el gobierno chino en foros internacionales. Euronews tiende a adoptar una estrategia discursiva diversa, centrada en la evolución de los acontecimientos y en una cobertura modular más que en la repetición emocional. Esta orientación responde a su vocación institucional de neutralidad informativa y pluralismo editorial. Al mismo tiempo, se observa la presencia de marcos securitarios, especialmente en contextos de conflicto, donde se enfatizan temas como la estabilidad institucional, el orden público o el derecho internacional. TikTok, con su lógica algorítmica y emocional, se configura, así como un espacio estratégico donde los actores mediáticos proyectan micro-narrativas adaptadas a la plataforma.

**Palabras clave:** tiktok; conflicto israel-hamás; estrategias discursivas; unión europea; china

**Abstract:** This study compares the narrative strategies of two international media outlets with contrasting institutional profiles: CGTN Europe, a state-run channel affiliated with the Chinese government, and Euronews, a pan-European broadcaster currently under private ownership, with an editorial line that remains independent. Based on a mixed-methods approach combining lexical analysis using TF-IDF, thematic clustering with BERTopic, and qualitative video analysis (including shot-by-shot examination), the study identifies key differences in the representation of the Israel–Hamas conflict on TikTok. CGTN Europe constructs a narrative that emphasizes the humanitarian dimension of the conflict, highlighting the impact on the civilian population in Gaza and advocating for a ceasefire, in alignment with the diplomatic positions expressed by the Chinese government in international forums. Euronews, by contrast, tends to adopt a more diverse discursive strategy, focused on the evolution of events and modular coverage rather than emotional repetition. This approach reflects its institutional commitment to editorial pluralism and informational neutrality. At the same time, securitization frames are also present, particularly in conflict-related contexts, where issues such as institutional stability, public order, and international law are emphasized. TikTok, with its algorithmic and emotionally driven logic, thus emerges as a strategic space in which media actors project micro-narratives adapted to the platform.

**Keywords:** tiktok; israel–hamas conflict; discursive strategies; european union; china

## INTRODUCTION

The Israel–Hamas conflict has once again become a major focus of international concern, revealing critical weaknesses in global security governance. It also underscores how different political actors frame violence, sovereignty, and legitimacy in asymmetrical ways. Since October 2023, the ongoing conflict in Gaza has resulted in a severe humanitarian situation, prompting varied responses from major international actors. The United States has maintained its close strategic alignment with Israel. In contrast, the European Union has struggled to adopt a unified stance, as member states remain divided between those defending Israel’s right to self-defense and those advocating for the protection of civilians and the upholding of international humanitarian law<sup>1</sup>. This division reflects the broader tension within the EU’s foreign policy identity, long debated within the framework of its normative

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqué, P., & Ricard, P. (2024). War in Gaza: The European Union’s Diplomatic Failure. *Le Monde*, 5 June 2024. [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/06/05/war-in-gaza-the-eu-s-diplomatic-failure\\_6673792\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/06/05/war-in-gaza-the-eu-s-diplomatic-failure_6673792_4.html)

aspirations<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, China has consistently called for an immediate ceasefire and a return to negotiations. Its stated position highlights principles of non-intervention and multilateralism, consistent with its broader diplomatic narrative of promoting dialogue and global stability<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, the Israel– Hamas conflict has become a struggle over narratives. Governments and media outlets are actively shaping how the conflict is perceived—a tendency clearly visible in both the European Union and China. While both the European Union and China present themselves as advocates for peace and humanitarian assistance, their messaging diverges in tone, emphasis, and underlying political logic. In the EU’s case, recent years have seen a shift toward a securitized, values-driven discourse—one shaped by concerns over external influence and the erosion of liberal democratic norms. This orientation surfaces not only in official policy but also in how the EU communicates during crises such as the Israel– Hamas conflict. EU-affiliated media often frame Hamas in delegitimizing terms, reinforcing a particular interpretation of the conflict. At the same time, EU institutions must balance divergent national positions, leading them to foreground references to international law, human rights, and democratic principles in their external messaging.

China’s messaging follows a different trajectory. Outlets such as CGTN Europe emphasize ending violence, respecting sovereignty, and pursuing negotiated outcomes. These narratives tend to avoid moral binaries and frame the conflict within a broader context of global instability. They also include implicit criticism of unilateral military interventions. Analysts suggest that China leverages the language of multilateralism and non-interference to position itself as a stabilizing actor. Yet many observers note a deliberate ambiguity in this approach—one that allows China to question Western liberal norms without articulating a clear alternative. The result is a form of pragmatic diplomacy that resists the securitized framing common in Western discourse, while still reflecting underlying geopolitical calculations.

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<sup>2</sup> Tocci, Nathalie (2007), “Profiling Normative Foreign Policy: The European Union and its Global Partners”, CEPS Working Document No. 279, disponible en SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1337974>.

<sup>3</sup> Abdel Ghafar, A., El Shehaby, H., & Rahman, O. H. (2024). *China’s approach to Palestine and Israel: Towards a greater role?* Middle East Council on Global Affairs. <https://mecouncil.org/publication/chinas-approach-to-palestine-and-israel-towards-a-greater-role/>

Digital platforms now play a major role in shaping how the conflict is understood. Among them, TikTok stands out as a particularly influential space where meaning, legitimacy, and affect are actively constructed. On platforms like TikTok, a range of actors deploy distinct strategies to shape public opinion. Rather than merely amplifying pre-existing political positions, the platform facilitates the creation of new narratives through short form, emotionally charged, and visually compelling content. Its design architecture—favoring speed, virality, and aesthetic immediacy—encourages the rapid circulation of messages that prioritize affective engagement over deliberative reflection.

As Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughl<sup>4</sup> explain, strategic narratives help actors shape international order. They do this by explaining the past, interpreting the present, and imagining the future. These narratives work on three levels: system narratives describe how the world is ordered; identity narratives define who the actors are; and issue narratives explain specific conflicts. In asymmetric conflicts like Israel–Hamas, where power is uneven, narratives play a central role. Who is the aggressor? Who is the victim? Who has moral authority? These are key questions. As Freedman<sup>5</sup> argues, modern wars are fought in public perception as much as on physical battlefields.

This study analyzes the discursive strategies employed by two international media outlets with contrasting institutional affiliations—CGTN Europe, a Chinese state-owned broadcaster, and Euronews, a pan-European media outlet that was originally supported by public broadcasters and is now privately owned, though still claiming editorial independence. This change in ownership structure may to some extent constrain its role as an institutional voice of the European Union. Nevertheless, Euronews remains one of the few multilinguals, pan-European media outlets with an editorial orientation broadly aligned with EU values, making it a relevant and valid subject of analysis for studying Europe’s narrative projection on digital platforms such as TikTok. CGTN Europe is part of China’s state-run media system. On TikTok, both channels use emotion, short storytelling, and platform-specific styles to influence international audiences. This study uses a mixed-method

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<sup>4</sup> Roselle, Laura, Miskimmon, Alister y O’Loughlin, Ben (2014), “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power”, *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(1), pp. 70–84.

<sup>5</sup> Freedman, Lawrence (2006), *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, London, IISS Adelphi Paper 379.

approach. It applies TF-IDF frequency analysis and BERTopic clustering to examine how these two broadcasters present competing narratives about the Israel– Hamas conflict. The goal is to explore how digital platforms contribute to the formation of narratives related to security and international order, and how these narratives may reflect broader geopolitical interests.

## **1. BLURRING BOUNDARIES: STRATEGIC NARRATIVES AND THE RISE OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY**

The evolution of diplomacy from elite-controlled, behind-closed-doors negotiations to a digitally mediated and publicly accessible space marks a foundational transformation in the global communication system. This shift is rooted in a long-standing institutional tradition, most notably the Westphalian system established by the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which enshrined the principle of state sovereignty. Within this framework, diplomatic authority was highly centralized in the hands of heads of state and professional diplomats, systematically excluding the public from participation. As Harold Nicolson famously observed, traditional diplomacy was the domain of a trained elite, operating in secrecy, and shielded from public scrutiny. This arrangement was deemed essential for safeguarding national interests and insulating foreign policy decisions from the volatility of public opinion<sup>6</sup>.

The legitimacy of such “closed-door diplomacy” was underpinned by Jean Bodin’s influential concept of sovereignty, whereby supreme authority rested with the state, and diplomatic functions were executed by representatives authorized by the sovereign<sup>7</sup>. In 17th-century France—often considered the prototype of modern diplomacy—foreign policy was crafted by centralized power and enacted by professionals drawn from the aristocracy. However, in the wake of World War I, growing global demands for openness and transparency began to challenge this model. As your source aptly notes, “since the First World War, diplomatic openness has become an irreversible historical trend,” signaling an institutional shift from elite monopoly toward enhanced public visibility.

Once a top-down tool of Cold War influence, public diplomacy has gradually transformed into an interactive, media-driven practice of global

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Nicolson (1963), *Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, Londres, p. 35

<sup>7</sup> Bodin, Jean (1577). *Les Six Livres de la République*. Paris: Jacques du Puys.

engagement. At its core, public diplomacy refers to the ways in which a state communicates with foreign publics to inform, influence, and build relationships that advance its foreign policy goals. Joseph Nye<sup>8</sup> who popularized the concept of soft power, underscores that public diplomacy is one of its primary vehicles, aiming to attract rather than coerce, and to shape preferences through appeal and credibility. Nye emphasizes that in a world saturated with information, the ability to frame issues and narrate compelling stories has become more influential than the mere possession of economic or military resources. Building upon this foundation, Nicholas J. Cull<sup>9</sup> offers a functionalist model of public diplomacy, identifying five key components: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. This model expands the scope of public diplomacy beyond message projection to include dialogue, mutual learning, and sustained relationship-building. Importantly, Cull insists that effective public diplomacy must be rooted in trust and long-term engagement, rather than short-term propaganda efforts aimed at manipulating perceptions.

Jan Melissen<sup>10</sup> adds a European perspective, arguing that public diplomacy is distinct from propaganda in its emphasis on transparency, mutuality, and the cultivation of credibility. According to Melissen, in an era of interconnectedness and media pluralism, public diplomacy must shift from one-way communication to more dialogical and participatory forms. This redefinition reflects broader transformations in international relations, where legitimacy is increasingly derived from public consent and soft forms of influence. Recent scholarship has further emphasized the impact of digital technologies on public diplomacy. Scholars such as Zaharna<sup>11</sup> and Bjola & Holmes<sup>12</sup> discuss the emergence of digital diplomacy, wherein states, international organizations, and even individual diplomats use social media platforms to engage in real-time

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<sup>8</sup> Nye, Joseph S. (2004), *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, PublicAffairs.

<sup>9</sup> Cull, Nicholas J. (2009), *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past*, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press

<sup>10</sup> Melissen, Jan (2005), *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>11</sup> Zaharna, Rhonda S. (2010), *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>12</sup> Bjola, Corneliu y Holmes, Marcus (2015), *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, London, Routledge.

public interaction. These digital environments demand new communicative competencies and recalibrate the balance of power between state and non-state actors. TikTok, for instance, constitutes a new frontier where traditional diplomatic voices must adapt to algorithmically driven and emotionally resonant modes of storytelling—collapsing the boundaries between public diplomacy and strategic narrative construction. Taken together, these perspectives underscore that public diplomacy is no longer a peripheral function of foreign policy but a central arena in the global contest for legitimacy, narrative authority, and soft power. It operates across cultural, informational, and symbolic registers, with its effectiveness increasingly dependent on the ability to build trust, articulate persuasive narratives, and navigate the shifting currents of attention within digital media ecosystems.

In the context of globalization, digitalization, and the acceleration of social mobilization, diplomacy has increasingly taken on the characteristics of public communication. Today, not only heads of state or foreign ministers wield communicative influence, but parliaments, media organizations, NGOs, and even ordinary citizens have emerged as legitimate participants in diplomatic discourse. This transformation is echoed in theoretical developments such as John McDonald and Louise Diamond's "multi-track diplomacy," which recognizes business, education, religion, and civil society as integral to contemporary diplomatic processes. Therefore, the modernization of diplomacy is not merely a technological upgrade in messaging tools—it represents a deeper structural transformation. It reflects a decentralization of power, a growing role for public opinion in shaping foreign strategy, and a future in which the core of diplomatic competition lies in the ability to craft credible national narratives and project them effectively in open, networked media environments.

This evolution also blurs the boundary between public diplomacy and political propaganda, especially in conflict settings where the struggle over narratives intensifies. While public diplomacy, as articulated by Jan Melissen<sup>13</sup>, is fundamentally dialogical—aiming to foster mutual understanding, cultural exchange, and the cultivation of credibility—political propaganda is oriented toward domination, seeking to impose a particular interpretation of reality while marginalizing dissent and

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<sup>13</sup> Melissen, *op. cit.*, p. 67

alternative voices. The difference lies not only in communicative intent but also in ethical framing and the openness of the communicative space. In wartime, however, these distinctions often collapse. The Israel-Hamas conflict vividly demonstrates how digital platforms like TikTok become arenas of symbolic warfare, where states and affiliated media outlets aggressively compete to define the moral, legal, and political meaning of the conflict. Strategic narratives are crafted not simply to inform, but to persuade, mobilize, and delegitimize the adversary—blurring the line between informative engagement and manipulative persuasion.

The affordances of digital platforms—speed, virality, and algorithmic amplification—tend to prioritize emotionally charged and polarizing content over reasoned deliberation. This creates fertile ground for propaganda tactics to thrive under the guise of diplomatic messaging. As Nicholas Cull<sup>14</sup> warns, the instrumentalization of public diplomacy for manipulative purposes risks eroding its credibility and undermining its long-term legitimacy. In the case of the Israel–Hamas conflict, one observes the circulation of fragmented yet impactful audiovisual content—ranging from state-sponsored productions to user-generated clips—all competing to shape public perceptions of legitimacy, victimhood, and culpability. These messages function not merely as descriptive accounts but as performative acts that mobilize emotion, reinforce geopolitical alliances, and potentially shape foreign policy agendas. In such mediated environments, the ethical boundaries of public diplomacy become increasingly porous, revealing a communicative space where persuasion and propaganda tend to converge.

## 2. TIKTOK AS A PLATFORM FOR NARRATIVE PROJECTION

In recent years, rather than functioning merely as tools of communication, digital platforms have become key sites of symbolic struggle. TikTok exemplifies a new form of narrative power: one that leverages algorithmic visibility, audiovisual immediacy, and affective appeal to intervene in public perception at scale. The Freedom on the Net 2024 report confirms a sustained erosion of global internet freedom for the fourteenth consecutive year, attributing this decline in part to the intensifying use of surveillance tools and digital control mechanisms by

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<sup>14</sup> Cull, Nicholas J. (2009), *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past*, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press.

authoritarian regimes. Long before this trend was fully acknowledged, a 2019 study by the Oxford Internet Institute had already identified organized social media manipulation in 70 countries—more than twice the number recorded just two years earlier—often involving direct participation from political parties or state agencies. What began as isolated tactics has since consolidated into a normalized infrastructure of computational propaganda. Within this architecture, platforms like TikTok are not mere conduits but active agents that shape the visibility, tone, and emotional resonance of political content, contributing to the reconfiguration of the digital public sphere<sup>15</sup>.

TikTok illustrates the shift of digital platforms from mere distribution channels to algorithmically driven environments that shape not just content delivery, but also its meaning and resonance. As narrative struggles increasingly play out in real time and across borders, understanding TikTok's role requires close attention to how its technical features and communicative norms condition the visibility, emotional resonance, and viral potential of political content. Unlike traditional media systems, TikTok's architecture amplifies affect and immediacy over deliberation—making it a fertile ground for the projection and contestation of strategic narratives in moments of geopolitical tension.

Recent scholarship has highlighted how TikTok's brevity-oriented format—combined with its integration of music, visual filters, and immediate interactivity—fosters a communicative environment in which virality often eclipses deliberation. These features have made the platform especially effective for reaching younger demographics, as seen in public health campaigns that leverage its audiovisual appeal to deliver targeted messages in accessible ways.<sup>16</sup> However, the same technical affordances have also facilitated the circulation of manipulative or misleading content. TikTok's emotionally charged and performative modes of engagement—shaped by aesthetic compression and algorithmic curation—amplify certain discourses regardless of their factual integrity.

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<sup>15</sup> Freedom House. (2024). *Freedom on the Net 2024: The struggle for trust online*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2024/struggle-trust-online>

<sup>16</sup> Zhou, Xiaoyan et al. (2021), "Public Health Communication on TikTok: A Content Analysis of COVID-19 Videos from Official Accounts", *Health Communication*, 36(13), pp. 1611–1620.

This amplification is far from neutral. TikTok's recommendation system systematically privileges emotionally intense and highly interactive content, reinforcing user preferences and fueling rapid cycles of engagement. Algorithms further reinforce this mechanism by privileging content that optimizes metrics such as likes, comments, and completion rates, without regard for the accuracy or veracity of the message. As Gillespie observes, content moderation on social platforms is not solely guided by technical or legal considerations, but also by the imperative to maintain reputational legitimacy in the eyes of governments and advertisers. Thus, the visibility of any given narrative increasingly depends less on its institutional credibility than on its capacity to thrive within the affect-driven architecture of the platform. In this sense, TikTok—and platforms like it—are no longer passive conduits of information; they have become active arenas where meaning is constructed, contested, and algorithmically curated.

Rather than operating solely through ideological content, strategic communication on TikTok increasingly relies on the platform's distinctive expressive capacities. What is conveyed often matters less than how it is made to feel. Through audiovisual techniques—such as pacing, framing, filters, soundtracks, and editing—narratives acquire an affective resonance that can subtly steer interpretation. Emotional appeal, rather than logical coherence or factual strength, becomes the decisive factor in audience engagement. This signals a fundamental shift: platforms like TikTok transform influence into a competition not only over messages, but over the aesthetic and emotional forms through which they are delivered. As a result, actors like China and the European Union are not merely advancing competing geopolitical visions—such as multipolarity versus liberal internationalism—but are doing so through divergent styles of digital storytelling, which differ in how they render suffering, urgency, and legitimacy visible.

Underlying this aesthetic contest is the growing scholarly recognition that digital platforms have become central infrastructures for geopolitical influence and narrative contestation. In today's media landscape, the construction and circulation of strategic narratives are shaped less by institutional gatekeeping than by algorithmic design, participatory infrastructures, and the logic of virality. TikTok's interface privileges visibility through emotional intensity and performance, amplifying certain

discourses while marginalizing others. As Lin and de Kloet<sup>17</sup> argue, the rise of TikTok signals a new phase in digital globalization—one that fuses aesthetic, algorithmic, and geopolitical dimensions. For state and affiliated actors, this means adapting their communicative practices to formats that align with the platform’s affect-driven architecture, embedding power into patterns of visibility and sensory appeal.

Despite the Chinese government’s official rhetoric promoting the principle of “cyber sovereignty,” its implementation of a so-called “Chinese-style cyber sovereignty” model is marked by a highly restrictive, state-centered approach to digital governance<sup>18</sup>. This model stands in sharp contrast to the open, transparent, and multi-stakeholder vision of the internet endorsed by the European Union, the United States, and their allies<sup>19</sup>. Like all major Chinese tech companies, ByteDance is subject to the oversight and legal obligations imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its associated regulatory frameworks. These include the Cybersecurity Law (2017), the Data Security Law (2021), and the National Intelligence Law (2017), which compel companies to cooperate with state authorities in matters deemed relevant to national security. As such, the boundary between private enterprise and state interest becomes blurred. Within China, platforms like Douyin serve as primary conduits for domestic propaganda, with nearly all central state media outlets maintaining official accounts aimed at shaping public discourse and reinforcing ideological cohesion. Conversely, TikTok—although branded as an international platform—functions as a vehicle for outward-facing strategic communication. As scholars have argued, TikTok has become “an unofficial extension of Chinese digital diplomacy,” especially in the context of rising geopolitical tensions<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Lin, J., & de Kloet, J. (2023). TikTok and the platformisation from China: Geopolitical anxieties, repetitive creativities, and future imaginaries. *Media, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231209203>

<sup>18</sup> Creemers, R. (2017). Cyber China: Upgrading propaganda, public opinion work and social management for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26(103), 85–100.

<sup>19</sup> Belfer Center. (2020). *Governing Cyberspace: State Control vs. The Multistakeholder Model*. [https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/governing-cyberspace-state-control-vs-multistakeholder-model?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/governing-cyberspace-state-control-vs-multistakeholder-model?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>20</sup> Fang, K., & Repnikova, M. (2022). Soft power with Chinese characteristics: The evolving role of state media. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 1585–1603;

A crucial component of China's evolving digital grand strategy is the *Digital Silk Road* (DSR), an initiative proposed under the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At its core, the DSR represents Beijing's ambition to become a global technological power by harnessing the potential of both existing and emerging technologies. This ambition has taken shape through a dual-pronged approach: strengthening domestic innovation while simultaneously expanding global dependence on Chinese technological infrastructure and services. The initial focus of the DSR has been on enhancing "digital connectivity" between China and participating BRI countries, especially through investments in telecommunications infrastructure, data centers, and satellite systems. As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in governance, commerce, and everyday life, countries integrating Chinese hardware, software, and digital services effectively enter China's techno-political orbit, thus reinforcing Beijing's transnational influence<sup>21</sup>.

From a discursive standpoint, the DSR draws on concepts that resonate strongly with many postcolonial and developing nations—especially the notion of "sovereignty." China's strategic rhetoric links digital development with sovereign empowerment, positioning its model as a corrective to Western-centric internet governance. This rearticulation of cyber-sovereignty, framed with "Chinese characteristics," is appealing precisely because it contrasts with the perceived asymmetries of the liberal international order. The DSR offers a persuasive long-term narrative of inclusive growth and cooperative connectivity, which no rival Western framework has yet matched in symbolic or infrastructural terms<sup>22</sup>. In practice, however, Chinese firms have succeeded in embedding their infrastructure and platforms across the region, extending the reach of China's soft power and weakening the West's technological dominance.

As geopolitical tensions intensify, state-affiliated media have turned to platforms like TikTok to engage in what scholars increasingly describe as "symbolic warfare" (*guerra simbólica*). Rather than relying on military means, this form of competition revolves around shaping narratives,

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Lin, J., & de Kloet, J. (2023). TikTok and the geopolitics of platform globalization. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(2), 312–328.

<sup>21</sup> Segal, A. (2021). China's 'Digital Silk Road' and the Global Governance of Cyberspace. *International Affairs*, 97(6), 1603–1622.

<sup>22</sup> Erie, M. S., & Streinz, T. (forthcoming). *The Beijing Effect: China's "Digital Silk Road" as Transnational Data Governance*. *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*.

steering public opinion, and influencing perceptions to gain global influence. The article “*TikTok, TikTok: La creación de narrativas transmedia en la confrontación sino-estadounidense*” identifies TikTok as a key battleground in the narrative confrontation between China and the United States, with both governments using the platform to project their respective visions of world order and political identity<sup>23</sup>.

At the same time, China’s strategic use of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare—commonly referred to as the “Three Warfares”—has been described by analysts as a comprehensive approach to influence both domestic and international audiences without direct military engagement. According to a report by the U.S. National Defense University, this strategy is not limited to the military domain but is executed across civilian, legal, and media sectors to shape global perceptions, discredit adversaries, and legitimize Chinese actions within international discourse. It emphasizes the manipulation of public opinion, the use of psychological tactics to undermine opponents’ resolve, and the employment of legal instruments to constrain adversaries’ behavior and build narratives of legitimacy in contested geopolitical arenas<sup>24</sup>. Russian state media have likewise utilized the TikTok platform to disseminate geopolitical narratives aligned with national interests, further highlighting the strategic value of digital platforms in the global public opinion landscape<sup>25</sup>.

### 3. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES ON TIKTOK: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CHINA IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Strategic communication, in its essence, is “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission”<sup>26</sup>, a definition that

<sup>23</sup> Mediaciones. (2021). TikTok, TikTok: La creación de narrativas transmedia en la confrontación sinoestadounidense. <https://mediacionescch.com/2021/03/tiktok-tiktok-la-creacion-de-narrativas-transmedia-en-la-confrontacion-sino-estadounidense-poder-y-dominio>

<sup>24</sup> U.S. National Defense University (2015). *An Introduction to Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare and Legal Warfare*. China Strategic Perspectives No. 13, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. N. (2019), *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

<sup>26</sup> Hallahan, Kirk et al. (2007), “Defining Strategic Communication”, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), pp. 3–35.

underscores its goal-oriented and deliberate nature. In the context of a contested infosphere—an environment saturated with competing narratives, disinformation, and influence operations—strategic communication becomes a critical tool for shaping perceptions. This is not merely about disseminating information, but about actively constructing meaning and managing how events, actors, and their intentions are understood by target audiences. The "contested" nature of this environment implies a continuous struggle for narrative dominance, where various entities, from state actors to non-state groups, vie to have their interpretation of reality prevail. As Walter Lippmann argued in his seminal work *Public Opinion*, individuals operate based on "pictures in their heads," which are often shaped by external information sources rather than direct experience. Strategic communicators aim to influence these "pictures," effectively managing perceptions to align with their objectives<sup>27</sup>.

The process of perception-shaping within this contested space draws heavily on theories of propaganda and influence. While propaganda has historically been associated with overt manipulation, as analyzed by scholars like Harold Lasswell in *Propaganda Technique in the World War*<sup>28</sup> or Jacques Ellul in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*<sup>29</sup>, its modern iterations within strategic communication are often more nuanced, focusing on framing and narrative construction. Entman's<sup>30</sup> concept of framing, already noted in this paper, is pivotal here, as it explains how selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text can promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. In a contested infosphere, where audiences are bombarded with information from myriad sources, the ability to frame issues effectively can determine which narratives gain traction and which fade into obscurity. Scot Macdonald, in *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*, further highlights how technology, including the alteration and rapid distribution of images, is used in modern propaganda and deception operations to shape these perceptions. Thus,

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<sup>27</sup> Lippmann, Walter (1922), *Public Opinion*, New York, Harcourt Brace

<sup>28</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, Londres, 1963, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> Ellul, Jacques (1965), *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, New York, Vintage Books.

<sup>30</sup> Entman, Robert M. (1993), "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), pp. 51–58.

strategic communication in a contested infosphere is an ongoing effort to navigate and influence the complex interplay of information, meaning, and audience interpretation to achieve specific strategic ends.

Strategic narratives, as defined by Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin<sup>31</sup>, do more than reflect foreign policy—they are the performative vessel through which states actively construct international order and influence other actors. By weaving coherent stories that span past, present, and future, states use these narratives to legitimize actions, justify interventions, and articulate broader visions of global governance. Such narratives operate through communicative practices that transcend simple information delivery; they engage audiences in symbolic contests over meaning and legitimacy, effectively making narrative a central stage for diplomacy.

Two prominent narrative strategies—humanitarian storytelling and securitization discourse—demonstrate framing’s power in international crisis communication. Según Saez y Bryant<sup>32</sup>, las “*historias humanitarias*” ayudan a transformar tragedias abstractas en relatos centrados en las personas, lo que moviliza apoyo para la intervención. Sin embargo, como advierten Beyer y Figenschou<sup>33</sup>, cuando se abusa del “human-interest frame”, el público puede experimentar fatiga narrativa, reduciendo su efectividad en contextos con alta saturación o polarización mediática.

On the other hand, securitization frames convert issues into existential threats. Drawing on the framework of securitization theory, Balzacq<sup>34</sup> illustrates how media operate not merely as passive channels but as transmission agencies that repeat threat discourse, emotionally reinforce urgency, and amplify official framings. This process enables public perception to shift—transforming controversial interventions into perceived necessities. In the European case, migration crises have been securitized to legitimize extraordinary policy measures such as border

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<sup>31</sup> Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A., & O’Loughlin, B. (2014). Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power. *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(1), 70–84.

<sup>32</sup> Saez, P., & Bryant, J. (2023). Understanding the role of narratives in humanitarian policy change. ODI Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper

<sup>33</sup> Beyer, A., & Figenschou, T. U. (2014). Human-Interest Fatigue: Audience Evaluations of a Massive Emotional Story. *International Journal of Communication*, 8, 1944–1963.

<sup>34</sup> Balzacq, T. (2011). *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*. Routledge.

fortifications and emergency legal regimes. Ultimately, the success of any strategic narrative depends on its resonance within specific socio-political and media contexts. Whether humanization or securitization proves more effective hinges on audience expectations, cultural sensitivities, and the platform logic shaping communicative reach. Thus, strategic communication today must be analyzed not only for its content, but for its form, medium, and affective strategy—a task that demands a contextualized, interdisciplinary, and critically reflexive approach.

In the context of the Israel– Hamas conflict, both CGTN Europe and Euronews engage in strategic communication that transcends simple information dissemination. Instead, these state-affiliated actors operationalize discursive strategies to construct and disseminate meanings aligned with their respective foreign policy identities. Drawing on Entman’s (1993) seminal theory of framing, the media narratives of CGTN Europe can be interpreted as a deliberate discursive effort to emphasize specific moral and humanitarian dimensions of the Gaza crisis. By focusing on high-definition footage of civilian suffering, particularly in Gaza, and pairing these visuals with subdued tones and melancholic soundtracks, CGTN Europe constructs a humanitarian frame that highlights human costs while eschewing direct condemnation of any actor.

The absence of overt political judgment or legalistic language allows these narratives to circulate in politically sensitive environments while still advancing China’s normative stance—one that emphasizes non-intervention, multilateralism, and global empathy. This reflects what Entman defines as problem definition and moral evaluation—two core elements of strategic framing that help audiences interpret complex geopolitical events. These framing choices also function across all three levels of strategic narrative as defined by Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin (2014). At the level of system narrative, CGTN Europe articulates a vision of a multipolar, morally guided international order, implicitly challenging Western-centric interpretations of global crises. The identity narrative casts China as a peace-oriented, empathetic global actor, while the issue narrative centers on the humanitarian consequences of the Israel– Hamas conflict, with an emphasis on the urgency of ceasefire and negotiation rather than military response.

Conversely, Euronews adheres to a more traditional journalistic discourse, characterized by editorial balance, source verification, and institutional neutrality. Its TikTok videos frequently include clips from official EU briefings, field reports, or map-based explanations, reinforcing

the EU's self-image as a rational and law-bound global actor. However, its issue narratives—although rooted in rule-of-law discourse and human rights—tend to be event-driven and fact-centered. This results in less emotionally evocative content, which may underperform on platforms such as TikTok that prioritize engagement through affective resonance. As Papacharissi (2015) notes, digital publics are increasingly organized not around shared ideologies, but around shared affective intensities, or what she terms “affective publics.” Euronews's system narrative reaffirms a liberal-institutionalist international order grounded in multilateralism, legality, and normative power. Its identity narrative portrays the EU as a defender of international law and human rights, while its issue narrative emphasizes accurate and timely coverage of violent escalations without resorting to emotionally polarizing frames.

The fundamental differences between China and the European Union in terms of political systems and media environments have led to divergent goals and strategies in their communication practices surrounding international issues. In China, the media ecosystem is characterized by a centralized structure of state control, where government supervision shapes both content moderation and algorithmic recommendation systems to reinforce the dominance of state-sanctioned narratives<sup>35</sup>. This governance model supports the construction of a strategic narrative framework aimed at regime stability, national image enhancement, and the global dissemination of a cohesive “China story.” By contrast, the EU operates within a more pluralistic media ecology. Despite rising concerns about information disorder and disinformation, its digital communication environment still maintains a relatively robust space for public debate and freedom of expression<sup>36</sup>.

China's approach to global narrative projection has been widely described in scholarly discourse as a strategy of *narrative sovereignty*—a term referring to the state's proactive efforts to shape and control representations of its identity, development model, and global role across both domestic and international information spheres. Although not officially codified in policy documents, the concept captures China's strategic emphasis on safeguarding ideological security, enhancing global

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<sup>35</sup> Zhao, Y. (2008). *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*. Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>36</sup> European Commission. (2020). *Proposal for a Regulation on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act)*.

influence, and resisting Western narrative hegemony. This strategy operates on two levels: domestically, it ensures unified coverage of major events by state media outlets such as Xinhua and CCTV, while leveraging platforms like Weibo and Douyin to cultivate “correct public opinion” and prevent the infiltration of Western values. Internationally, the strategy involves initiatives like *telling China’s story well*, implemented through foreign-language media (e.g., CGTN, *China Daily*) and global platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. These efforts seek to construct a favorable national image and build a China-centric global communication network to counterbalance Western discursive power<sup>37</sup>.

While the EU does not explicitly pursue a strategy of “narrative sovereignty,” it has developed a parallel framework centered on value projection, democratic legitimacy, and information security. This emerged after the 2015 Ukraine crisis, which galvanized EU-wide recognition of the threats posed by disinformation. In response, institutions such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) established the *East StratCom Task Force* and the *EUvsDisinfo* platform, thereby formally integrating strategic communication into foreign and security policy agendas<sup>38</sup>. The EU’s objectives extend beyond resilience to foreign interference, aiming also to promote European values—such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law—in external relations, including development aid, accession processes, and neighborhood policies<sup>39</sup>. As Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle argue, the EU seeks to assert its identity as a *normative power* through strategic narratives that frame issues, establish causal linkages, offer moral evaluations, and propose policy solutions<sup>40</sup>. Unlike China’s top-down, centralized approach to narrative control, the EU emphasizes institutional coordination and normative alignment to build cross-border discursive consensus.

This contrast illustrates the importance of context-sensitive analysis in digital discourse studies. Narratives do not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they are embedded within distinct sociotechnical infrastructures and policy frameworks. Whether in the form of China’s narrative sovereignty or the

<sup>37</sup> Brady, A.-M. (2008). *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>38</sup>EEAS (European External Action Service). (2018). *Action Plan Against Disinformation*.

<sup>39</sup> European Commission. (2020). Proposal for a Regulation on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act) and amending Directive 2000/31/EC

<sup>40</sup> Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Routledge.

EU's discourse on transparency and democratic resilience, these communication strategies must be situated within their respective media regimes and political cultures. Furthermore, the construction of frames—including their problem definitions, causal attributions, and alignment with national strategic objectives—reveals the increasing convergence between political communication and foreign policy.

#### 4. METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-method research design that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate the narrative strategies employed by CGTN Europe and Euronews on TikTok in their coverage of the Israel– Hamas conflict. The methodological framework consists of three core components: (1) lexical frequency analysis to identify salient terms and thematic emphases, (2) topic modeling using BERTopic to detect latent discursive structures, and (3) shot-by-shot qualitative analysis of six high-engagement videos—three from each broadcaster—to examine platform-specific audiovisual strategies. By integrating these complementary methods, the study captures both macro-level discursive patterns and micro-level stylistic choices, offering a comprehensive view of how affect, rhetoric, and platform aesthetics converge in the construction of strategic narratives on TikTok.

To implement this analytical framework, the dataset comprises videos published between October 1, 2023, and March 31, 2024, by the TikTok accounts of CGTN Europe and Euronews. This time frame was selected based on a purposive sampling strategy informed by key turning points in the Israel– Hamas conflict. To ensure thematic relevance, only videos whose titles or hashtags included one or more of the following keywords were included: "conflict", "war", "crisis", "airstrike", "ceasefire", "humanitarian", "hostages", "negotiations", "Israel", "Hamas", "Gaza", "Palestine", or "Palestinian". This keyword-based filtering process was chosen to target content explicitly situated within the security and humanitarian discourse surrounding the conflict.

Natural language processing techniques such as TF-IDF (Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency) and BERTopic offer substantial advantages for analyzing social media discourses, particularly in contexts characterized by high-volume, heterogeneous, and structurally fragmented

data<sup>41</sup>. TF-IDF excels at identifying salient topic-specific terms by highlighting words that appear frequently in individual texts but are relatively rare across the broader corpus. This allows researchers to isolate thematically significant keywords and detect emerging user concerns or platform-specific issue salience. In parallel, BERTopic—an unsupervised topic modeling method that combines pretrained language models like BERT with dimensionality reduction (UMAP) and density-based clustering (HDBSCAN)—can automatically identify latent topics, revealing shifts in narrative structures, discursive polarization, and evolving semantic tendencies over time.

The combined use of TF-IDF and BERTopic enables the construction of comparative narrative maps across platforms and timeframes, offering insight into the strategic deployment of discourse by various actors, including states, influencers, or media organizations. While these tools focus exclusively on textual data and therefore cannot account for multimodal elements such as visual aesthetics, audio cues, or pacing—particularly prominent on platforms like TikTok—text remains a central carrier of meaning. Captions, titles, hashtags, video descriptions, and user comments continue to play a crucial role in conveying affect, framing, and rhetorical cues. Consequently, this study emphasizes textual analysis not as a denial of multimodality, but as a methodologically robust and replicable strategy tailored to the available data, research objectives, and analytical scope. Future studies may incorporate multimodal approaches to complement this framework, but for the purposes of mapping discursive patterns and identifying narrative strategies at scale, text-based methodologies remain both justified and analytically powerful.

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Audio transcripts for all selected videos were initially produced using automated speech recognition systems and subsequently refined through manual corrections to ensure high accuracy. The final corpus comprises short-form video narratives converted into textual data, thereby enabling both computational and qualitative analyses. Preprocessing followed standard natural language processing (NLP) procedures. Texts were first converted to lowercase and cleaned by removing punctuation, emojis, and stop words—both generic and domain-specific. To preserve contextually significant references, custom dictionaries were developed to retain key geopolitical entities, terms of international law, and conflict-related expressions.

Once cleaned, the transcripts were tokenized into individual lexical units. A term frequency (TF) analysis was then conducted to identify the most prevalent words across both corpora. To illustrate lexical salience, word clouds and bar plots displaying the top 50 high-frequency terms were generated for each media outlet. To refine the analysis, term frequency–inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) scores were computed separately for each corpus. This allowed for the identification of words that are particularly distinctive to one broadcaster relative to the combined dataset, thus highlighting asymmetrical narrative emphases. For instance, if “Gaza” receives a higher TF-IDF score in CGTN Europe’s dataset and “Israel” in Euronews’s, it may point to differing discursive focal points.

To complement the large-scale textual analysis and deepen the understanding of narrative strategies, this study incorporates a qualitative layer through shot-by-shot analysis. While computational methods uncover macro-level discursive patterns, close reading at the micro level enables a more detailed examination of how strategic messaging is crafted through audiovisual form. In addition to the corpus-wide lexical and semantic analysis, the study conducts a shot-level qualitative examination of four representative TikTok videos—two from CGTN Europe and two from Euronews. These videos serve as illustrative examples of platform-optimized strategic narration. The method employed is a shot-by-shot breakdown, adapted from film and media analysis, which allows for a granular investigation of each video’s audiovisual grammar, revealing the logic of narrative construction and emotional appeal.

In sum, this study employs a mixed-method approach that integrates traditional lexical analysis with advanced topic modeling to investigate the contrasting narrative strategies of CGTN Europe and Euronews on TikTok, with a specific focus on their coverage of the Israel–Hamis conflict. By combining computational techniques with shot-level qualitative analysis, the research provides both macro-level insights into discursive patterns and micro-level observations of stylistic and affective choices. This dual-layered methodology facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how strategic narratives are constructed and disseminated within the platform’s emotionally charged and algorithm-driven ecosystem. Taken together, these methods offer a robust analytical framework for comparing how Chinese and European media actors adapt their messaging to resonate with TikTok’s communicative logic. The following section presents the key findings of this analysis, highlighting significant differences in framing strategies, thematic focus, and audiovisual rhetoric across the two broadcasters.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study has explored how two state-affiliated international media outlets—CGTN Europe and Euronews—construct distinct discursive representations of the Israel–Hamis conflict on the TikTok platform. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines lexical analysis (TF-IDF) with automated topic modeling (BERTopic), the research identifies divergent patterns in the narratives promoted by each channel, shaped by their respective political and strategic contexts. The findings suggest that CGTN Europe prioritizes a narrative centered on humanitarian suffering in Gaza, carefully avoiding securitized language and aligning with China’s traditional stance of non-intervention and multilateralism. In contrast, Euronews adopts a more securitized framing, frequently employing terms such as “terrorist” and highlighting Israel’s security concerns—an approach that reflects the European Union’s normative and political framework, particularly amid internal tensions over how to respond to the conflict.

The analysis of lexical frequencies and latent topics reveals that both outlets engage in more than just information dissemination: they construct strategic interpretive frameworks that shape public perception through emotionally charged and aesthetically calibrated audiovisual content designed for TikTok’s algorithmic environment. This form of “visual

micro-diplomacy” underscores how digital platforms have become new arenas for the projection of state narratives in the broader struggle for global legitimacy. From a wider perspective, this study demonstrates that media discourse on emerging platforms like TikTok must be analyzed not only through the lens of communication theory, but also through the lenses of power, legitimacy, and geopolitics. Conflict narratives are no longer the exclusive domain of traditional diplomatic actors—they circulate, hybridize, and compete in digital ecosystems where attention, emotion, and aesthetics profoundly influence message reception.

To deepen the lexical analysis of discursive divergence between CGTN Europe and Euronews, this study employed a comparative TF-IDF (Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency) visualization that highlights the top twenty most distinctive terms for each broadcaster. This computational technique not only reveals the most salient and outlet-specific keywords, but also provides insight into each channel’s framing priorities and editorial stance in their coverage of the Israel– Hamas conflict. By identifying terms that are both frequent and contextually weighted, the analysis uncovers how each outlet constructs its narrative emphasis and rhetorical focus within the TikTok environment.

As shown in Figure 1, CGTN Europe’s coverage places overwhelming lexical emphasis on terms such as “gaza” (TF-IDF = 1308.199) and “airstrike,” indicating a humanitarian-oriented narrative that centralizes the impact of the conflict on Palestinian civilians. The relatively lower ranking of “israel” and the near absence of securitized terms like “terrorist” further suggest a rhetoric calibrated to emphasize de-escalation and neutrality, consistent with China’s diplomatic positioning.

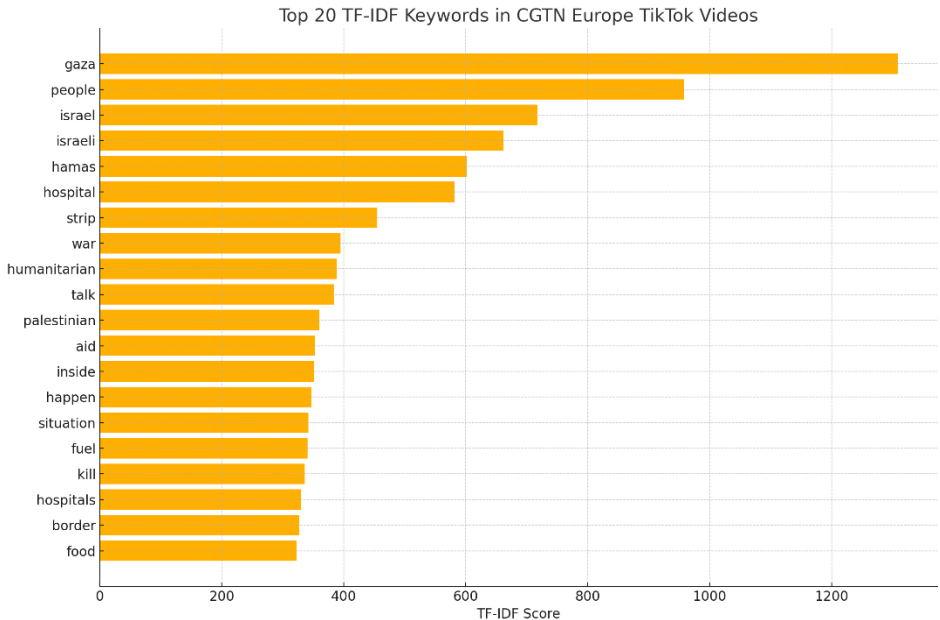


Figure 1. *CGTN Europe TF-IDF Bar Chart*  
(Source: Author's compilation based on TikTok dataset)

Figure 2 illustrates the top 20 TF-IDF-ranked keywords found in Euronews's TikTok coverage of the Israel–Hamas conflict. Unlike CGTN Europe's emphasis on humanitarian vocabulary, Euronews's lexical profile exhibits a more securitized and institutional tone. Terms such as "israel," "hamas," "war," "terrorist," and "kill" reflect a narrative that foregrounds geopolitical confrontation and conflict framing. The presence of words like "website," "account," "report," "claim," and "check" further indicates a fact-checking orientation consistent with Euronews's editorial alignment with the EU's principles of journalistic transparency and verification. Meanwhile, terms like "Ukraine" and "foreign" point to the framing of this conflict within an expanded international context, in line with the EU's communication strategy that connects regional crises to overarching concerns about global security.

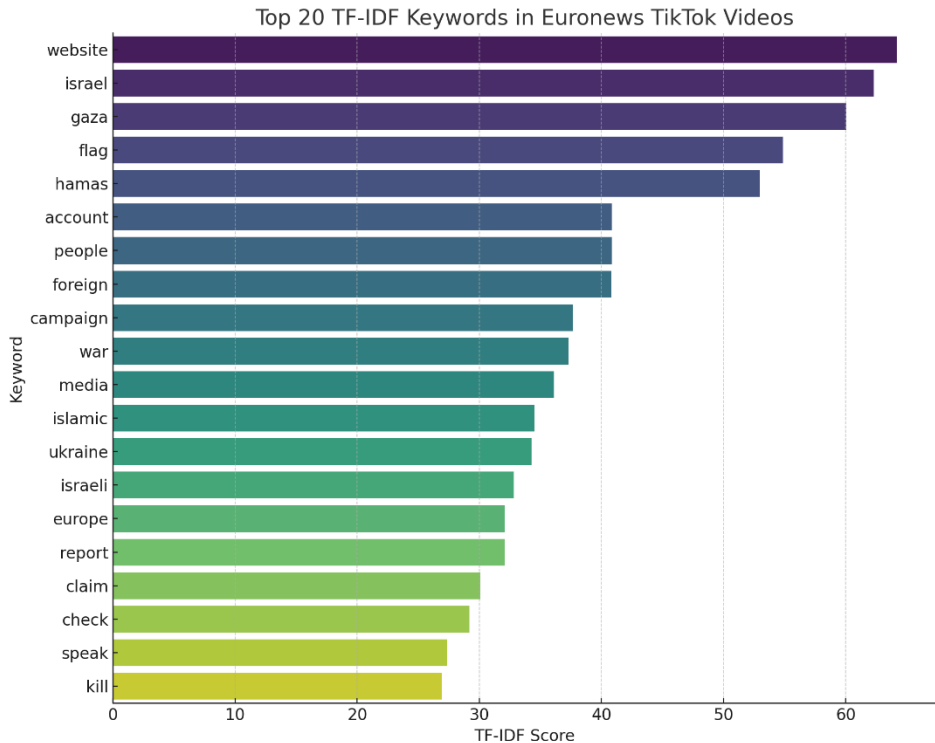


Figure 2. *Euronews TF-IDF Bar Chart*  
(Source: Author's compilation based on TikTok dataset)

Notably, the language used tends toward institutional and procedural terminology, such as “aid delivery,” “evacuation,” “cooperation,” or “ceasefire,” which construct a frame of calm urgency and bureaucratic competence. This contrasts with more emotively charged or moralizing vocabularies often found in Western or partisan narratives. By avoiding polarizing terms and privileging operational descriptors, CGTN Europe sustains an image of neutrality and compassion—subtly reinforcing China’s international posture as a non-aligned mediator committed to conflict de-escalation rather than ideological confrontation.

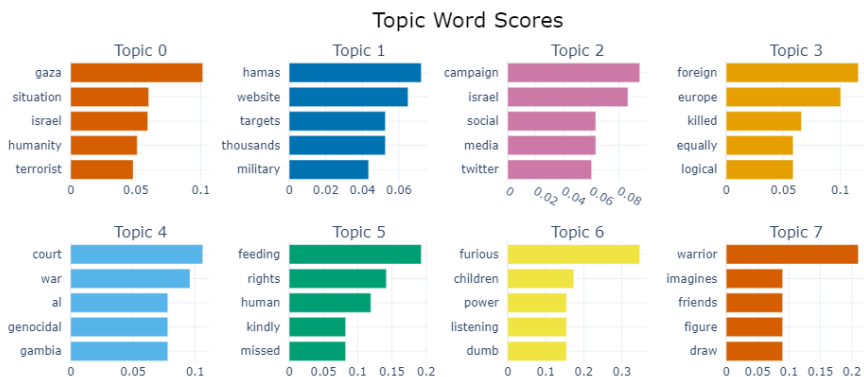
Figure 3 presents a word cloud visualization of the most frequently used lexical items in CGTN Europe’s TikTok coverage of the Israel–Hammas conflict. The central prominence of terms such as “gaza,” “people,” “hospital,” “israel,” “civilians,” “humanitarian,” and “aid” suggests a narrative framework that emphasizes the human cost of conflict and foregrounds civilian suffering. This pattern is consistent with CGTN’s





and *targets*, suggesting a frame of organized militancy and digital warfare. Topic 2 centers on *campaign, israel, social, media, and twitter*, highlighting the meta-narrative around information campaigns and platformed discourse. Topic 3 includes *foreign, europe, and killed*, reflecting institutional perspectives and broader geopolitical responses.

Other clusters indicate more emotive and socio-political orientations. For instance, Topic 5 (with keywords such as *feeding, rights, human*) and Topic 6 (*furious, children, power*) reflect civilian and affective dimensions of the war, whereas Topic 4, featuring *court, war, genocidal*, implies coverage aligned with international legal discourse. Topic 7, focused on *warrior, imagines, and friends*, seems to encapsulate metaphorical or narrative-driven framings, potentially associated with interpretive or symbolic language.



*Figure 5. Euronews Topic Word Scores*  
(Source: Author's compilation based on TikTok dataset)

This insight is corroborated by the hierarchical clustering shown in Figure 6, which delineates how closely the topics are nested within a broader narrative architecture. The dendrogram indicates three macro-level groupings: (1) conflict and humanitarian impact (Topics 0–1), (2) policy and geopolitical narratives (Topics 2–3), and (3) emotion, civilian vulnerability, and symbolic framings (Topics 4–7). The model thus reveals Euronews' narrative strategy as multi-pronged yet structured, combining fact-based reporting, European normative framing, and human-interest storytelling.

Taken together, the BERTopic clustering confirms the hypothesis that Euronews constructs a layered, multidimensional discourse that resonates with the EU's external communication paradigm. This paradigm emphasizes civilian protection, democratic values, and international legal norms, while also adapting to the affective and algorithmic logics of short-form digital platforms such as TikTok.

The semantic similarity matrix above visualizes the pairwise conceptual proximity among eight representative TikTok video captions published by Euronews.tv concerning the Israel– Hamas conflict. Each cell reflects the cosine similarity score between sentence embeddings, offering a quantitative metric for assessing the discursive alignment of video narratives. The matrix reveals an overall pattern of moderate to low semantic cohesion, with most similarity scores ranging between 0.3 and 0.6.

This indicates that Euronews adopts a diversified discursive strategy, prioritizing topical breadth over thematic redundancy. The relative sparsity of high-intensity color blocks suggests limited narrative repetition or emotional motif recycling. This aligns with Euronews's editorial ethos, which emphasizes journalistic neutrality, factual modularity, and event-driven reporting, rather than emotionally unifying frames. Notably, only a few dyads—such as *0\_gaza\_situation\_israel* and *1\_hamas\_website\_targets*—display stronger semantic alignment, indicating occasional convergence around geopolitical framing.

The semantic relationships among these clusters are further visualized in Figure 6, a similarity matrix that quantifies inter-topic proximity. Topics 0–3 form a relatively cohesive network, emphasizing institutional, humanitarian, and informational themes, whereas Topics 4–7 occupy more differentiated semantic spaces. This separation suggests an intentional editorial strategy of balancing structured geopolitical narratives with affect-laden storytelling.

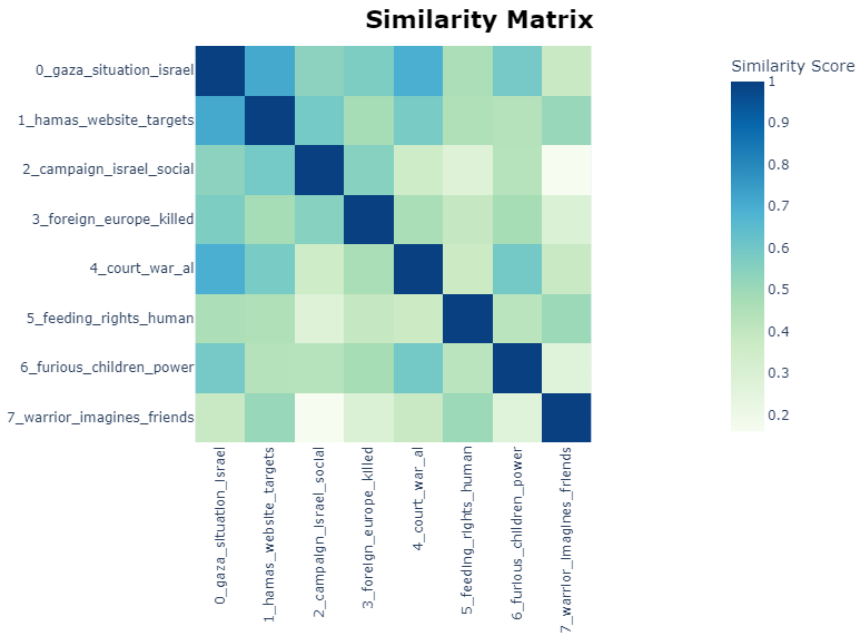
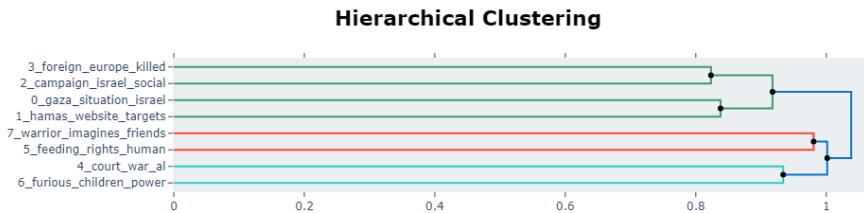


Figure 6. *Euronews Topic Similarity Matrix*  
(Source: Author’s compilation based on TikTok dataset)

The dendrogram above represents a hierarchical clustering analysis based on sentence embeddings of eight TikTok video captions published by *Euronews.tv* during the Israel– Hamas conflict. Using cosine distance as a similarity metric, the analysis reveals how these captions group together semantically, offering insight into the outlet’s underlying discursive organization strategy. Notably, three distinct patterns emerge. First, the overall structure demonstrates narrative fragmentation, with long branch lengths indicating that most captions are semantically dispersed. This dispersion supports the observation that Euronews employs an event-driven, topic-specific reporting approach rather than coalescing content around a cohesive strategic narrative. For example, captions such as “*foreign\_europe\_killed*,” “*campaign\_israel\_social*,” and “*gaza\_situation\_israel*” occupy distinct branches, reflecting discrete framings along geopolitical and humanitarian dimensions.

Second, the dendrogram reveals a thematic micro-cluster—highlighted in red—comprising the captions “*warrior\_imagines\_friends*,” “*feeding\_rights\_human*,” “*court\_war\_all*,” and “*furious\_children\_power*”.

This grouping suggests a shared affective and symbolic lexicon, potentially centered on civilian suffering, childhood, and human rights, and may indicate the presence of a latent humanitarian identity narrative despite Euronews’s general commitment to editorial neutrality. Third, the moderate centrality of Gaza-related frames, such as “gaza\_situation\_israel” and “hamas\_website\_targets,” suggests a cautious rhetorical strategy—one that steers clear of overt securitization while still engaging with the essential contours of the conflict. Taken together, the dendrogram provides empirical support for understanding how Euronews engages in a restrained yet discursively layered form of strategic communication on TikTok, balancing factual integrity with cautious narrative navigation in a contested digital space.



*Figure 7. Euronews Topic Hierarchical Clustering  
(Source: Author’s compilation based on TikTok dataset)*

To complement the lexical findings, this section presents the topic modeling results for CGTN Europe’s coverage of the Israel– Hamas conflict, based on 346 videos collected from its official TikTok account. As illustrated in Figure 8, the BERTopic model extracted 14 discrete thematic clusters, each characterized by a distinct constellation of keywords. Notably, Topic 2—centered on terms such as “gaza,” “israeli,” “khan,” and “city”—highlights a locational and geopolitical framing that situates the conflict within specific territorial markers. Meanwhile, Topic 3 combines humanitarian discourse (“ceasefire,” “humanitarian,” “palestinian”) with international diplomacy (“draft,” “china”), suggesting an alignment with China’s multilateral narrative.

Topic 5, foregrounding “hospital,” “patients,” and “doctors,” underscores the humanitarian angle that CGTN Europe repeatedly amplifies, while Topic 6 (“released,” “hostages,” “attack”) points to episodic framing of specific violent events. Other clusters—such as Topic

9 (energy crisis discourse: “fuel,” “food,” “electricity”) or Topic 8 (“children,” “civilians,” “population”)—indicate a consistent focus on civilian vulnerability.

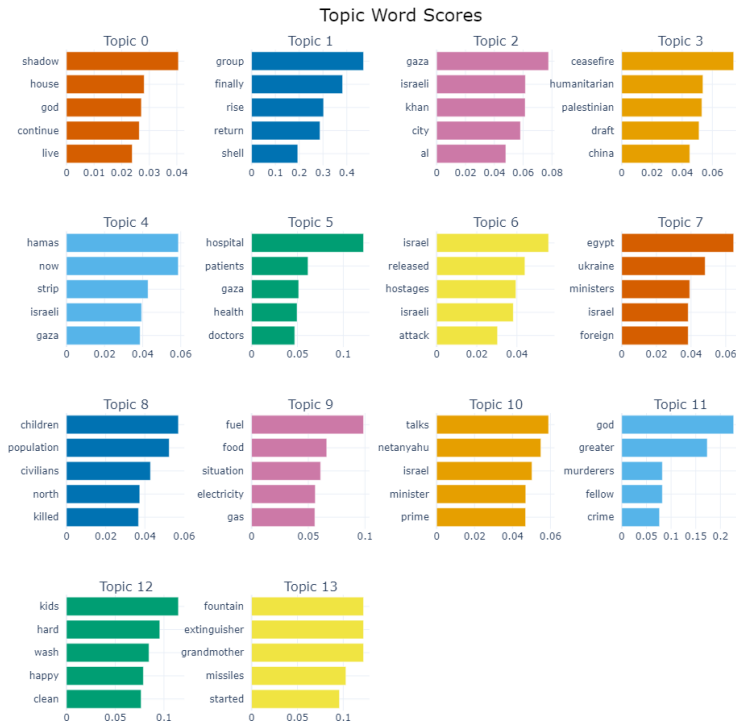


Figure 8. CGTN Europe Topic Word Scores  
(Source: Author’s compilation based on TikTok dataset)

Figure 9 presents a similarity matrix based on sentence embeddings from 14 TikTok video captions published by CGTN Europe during the Israel–Hamas conflict. The matrix visualizes the cosine similarity scores between each pair of captions, with darker blue tones indicating higher semantic proximity. Overall, the structure of the matrix reveals a dense cluster of interrelated captions, pointing to a relatively high degree of internal narrative coherence.

Unlike more fragmented approaches observed in other broadcasters such as Euronews, CGTN Europe appears to sustain a consistent thematic architecture, particularly around humanitarian discourse. Captions including “*ceasefire\_humanitarian\_parcel*,” “*hospital\_patients\_gaza*,”

and “fuel\_food\_situation” show significant mutual overlap, suggesting the use of repeated discursive motifs such as ceasefire appeals, aid logistics, and civilian suffering. This high degree of semantic alignment indicates a strategic effort to reinforce a humanitarian system narrative, thereby positioning China as a morally grounded and peace-seeking actor on the global stage.

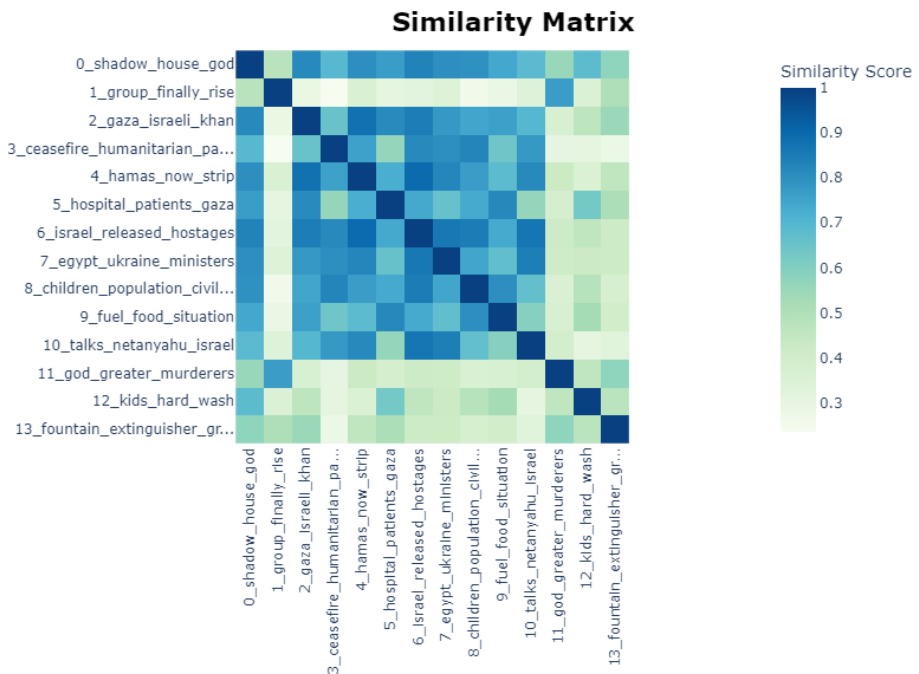
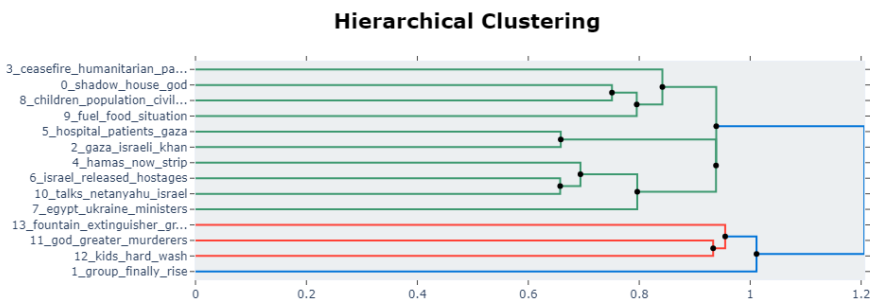


Figure 9. CGTN Europe Europe Topic Similarity Matrix (Source: Author’s compilation based on TikTok dataset)

Figure 10 presents a hierarchical clustering dendrogram based on sentence embeddings extracted from 14 CGTN Europe TikTok video captions related to the Israel– Hamas conflict. Using cosine distance as the similarity metric, this visual representation allows us to examine the semantic structure of CGTN’s narrative strategy. The dendrogram reveals a relatively compact clustering of captions dealing with humanitarian concerns, ceasefire appeals, and civilian suffering. For example, items such as “ceasefire\_humanitarian\_parcel,” “fuel\_food\_situation,”

“*hospital\_patients\_gaza*,” and “*children\_population\_civil*” form a tightly-knit semantic branch, indicating CGTN’s effort to develop a cohesive humanitarian narrative. This clustering reinforces the outlet’s system-level strategic narrative centered on multilateralism and moral responsibility and aligns with China’s broader foreign policy positioning as a non-interventionist.


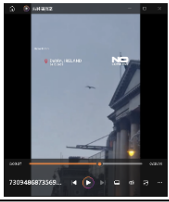
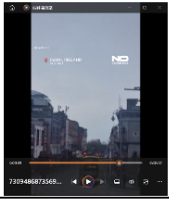
In contrast, a secondary cluster—highlighted in red—groups together the captions “*god\_greater\_murderers*,” “*kids\_hard\_wash*,” “*fountain\_extinguisher\_gr*,” and “*group\_finally\_rise*.” These items deviate from the dominant humanitarian register, possibly invoking religious, symbolic, or metaphorical language that reflects deeper ideological or cultural narratives. Their separation from the main cluster suggests a degree of discursive experimentation or divergence, potentially aimed at evoking emotional resonance or engaging more abstract interpretations of the conflict. Nevertheless, their late-stage convergence in the dendrogram indicates an overarching cohesion in CGTN’s messaging, where even seemingly distinct content is ultimately anchored to a shared communicative ethos. Overall, this analysis affirms that CGTN Europe employs a deliberate and layered discursive strategy—combining visual affect, humanitarian discourse, and narrative alignment—to achieve cognitive influence and affective engagement on digital platforms such as TikTok.



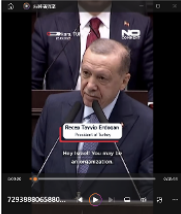
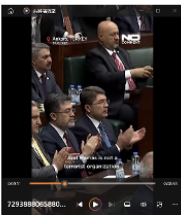


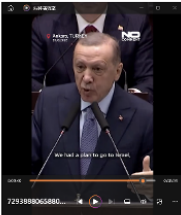
*Figure 10. CGTN Europe Topic Hierarchical Clustering  
(Source: Author’s compilation based on TikTok dataset)*

To deepen the multi-layered analysis and capture the nuances of strategic narration on TikTok, a qualitative exploration was conducted through a shot-by-shot reading of four selected videos—two from CGTN Europe and two from Euronews. This method, drawn from media and film studies, allows a detailed examination of audiovisual techniques that contribute to narrative construction beyond textual content. Rather than focusing solely on algorithmic prominence, the analysis concentrates on stylistic composition, symbolic framing, and emotional appeal to illustrate how each outlet leverages TikTok’s media affordances.

The Euronews videos exhibit a more fragmented but securitized aesthetic. The first clip juxtaposes scenes of urban unrest with archive footage of Israeli security forces, cut rapidly in sync with dramatic music. This editing choice constructs a sense of urgency and threat, directing attention toward the instability of the region. Text overlays like “terrorist attack” or “response operation” act as narrative anchors, situating the conflict within a vocabulary of security and defense. The second video highlights European institutional responses, including speeches from EU representatives and coverage of regional protests. The visuals shift swiftly between flags, tear gas scenes, and soundbites from officials, all reinforcing a framing of democratic order under siege. Compared to CGTN, Euronews’s pacing is faster, its tonal palette more vivid, and its narrative trajectory closely aligned with institutional authority and public order.





Scene	Content	Analysis	Music/Sound Effects	Duration
	Palestinian flags displayed outside a building in Ireland.	The diagonal composition breaks the usual visual balance, adding a sense of movement to the frame.	Car horn	0:00–0:00:03
	A bird slowly flies toward the building	The diagonal composition guides the viewer's gaze from one corner of the frame to the opposite corner.	Car horn	0:00:03–0:00:07
	A public bus slowly moves forward	The symmetrical composition reinforces visual stability, giving a sense of orderly daily routine.	Car horn	0:00:07–0:00:11

*Figure 11. Shot-by-Shot Analysis of the TikTok Video “Dublin City Council has voted to fly the flag of Palestine over the Irish capital’s City Hall” Published by Euronews*

Scene	Content	Analysis	Music/Sound Effects	Duration
	<p>Turkish President addresses the camera directly</p>	<p>Symmetrical composition creates a balanced and stable visual effect.</p>	<p>Speech</p>	<p>0:00–0:11</p>
	<p>Officials applaud the Turkish President</p>	<p>Scattered composition with people dispersed throughout the frame without a clear center.</p>	<p>Applause, off-screen narration</p>	<p>0:00:13–0:00:17</p>
	<p>Turkish President on stage continues speaking to the camera</p>	<p>Symmetrical composition places the subject at the center, flanked by evenly distributed elements.</p>	<p>Speech</p>	<p>0:00:17–0:00:25</p>
	<p>Officials look forward with stern expressions</p>	<p>Scattered composition of stern faces conveys a sense of severity and tension.</p>	<p>Off-screen narration</p>	<p>0:00:28–0:00:33</p>
	<p>Turkish President speaks at the podium</p>	<p>Medium shot clearly shows the subject's upper body gestures and expressions.</p>	<p>Speech</p>	<p>0:00:33–0:00:35</p>

*Figure 12. Shot-by-Shot Analysis of the TikTok Video “Turkish President Recep Tayyip Ergogan says ‘ Hamas is not a terrorist organization.....’t” Published by Euronews*

In contrast, the CGTN Europe videos reflect a consistent humanitarian and geopolitical framing that aligns with China’s self-presentation as a neutral yet engaged global actor. The first video opens with a slow zoom on destroyed urban infrastructure, immediately establishing a tone of devastation. This is followed by a montage of injured civilians, coordinated with a somber soundtrack and minimal narration, foregrounding the human cost of the conflict. The use of on-screen text in English further internationalizes the message. In the second CGTN video, the narrative centers on diplomatic efforts, visually reinforced by official footage from UN briefings and Chinese government statements. The visual rhythm is slower, favoring still shots and calm transitions, suggesting credibility and deliberation. Both videos employ soft filters and avoid confrontational visuals, which serves to reinforce the platform’s restrained, stability-focused discourse.

Scene <sup>↗</sup>	Content <sup>↗</sup>	Analysis <sup>↗</sup>	Music/Sound Effects <sup>↗</sup>	Duration (if available) <sup>↗</sup>
	An explosion occurs behind the CGTN field reporter <sup>↗</sup>	The diagonal composition places the reporter as the subject, with the explosion in the background along the diagonal line, clearly separating foreground and background. <sup>↗</sup>	Explosion sound <sup>↗</sup>	0:00:00-0:00:03 <sup>↗</sup>
	The anchor explains on screen that dozens of Palestinian militants were killed by Israeli forces <sup>↗</sup>	The diagonal composition breaks the static balance of the frame, directing the viewer's gaze to move along the diagonal within the image. <sup>↗</sup>	Anchor's narration <sup>↗</sup>	0:00:03-0:00:17 <sup>↗</sup>
	The female reporter explains on camera; an explosion suddenly occurs behind her, and she ducks in fear <sup>↗</sup>	The symmetrical mid-shot composition emphasizes the suddenness of the explosion, enhancing the dynamic feel of the frame. <sup>↗</sup>	Explosion sound <sup>↗</sup>	0:00:17-0:00:18 <sup>↗</sup>
	Explosion occurs in a distant building; the news ticker describes Hamas militants joining the battle inside Gaza <sup>↗</sup>	The diagonal composition gives the scene a sense of instability and tension. <sup>↗</sup>	Off-screen narration <sup>↗</sup>	0:00:18-0:00:20 <sup>↗</sup>

*Figure 13. Shot-by-Shot Analysis of the TikTok Video “Near miss. Al Jazeera reporter Youma Alsayed was narrowly missed by an Israeli missile” Published by CGTN Europe*

Scene	Content	Analysis	Music/ Sound Effects	Duration
	A man looks ahead in <b>horror</b> ; raging flames behind him	The shaky camera gradually moves from the man's facial expression to the background fire, guiding viewers' gaze.	Fearful shouts	0:00:00-0:00:02
	The crowd flees in terror	Wide-angle composition presents the fleeing crowd and allows a full display of the scene.	Fearful shouts	0:00:02-0:00:04
	A man rushes forward, facing a scene of devastation	The caption shows 'An Israeli airstrike hit a refugee camp in Jabalia, Gaza,' conveying the core message instantly.	Fearful shouts	0:00:04-0:00:06
	Civilians try to extinguish a burning car	The mid-shot provides a clearer understanding of the scene.	Fearful shouts	0:00:06-0:00:15
	Thick white smoke rises from a distant building	Aerial shot from above enhances the sense of tension.	Fearful shouts	0:00:15-0:00:31
	Caption shows dozens of Palestinians were injured	The shaky camera guides the viewers' eyes and enhances visual instability.	Fearful shouts	0:00:31-0:00:35
	The crowd carries the injured forward	Scatter composition is used to depict the scene of people moving forward with the wounded.	Fearful shouts, siren	0:00:35-0:00:40

*Figure 14. Shot-by-Shot Analysis of the TikTok Video “An Israeli airstrike hit the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza” Published by CGTN Europe*

These differences are not merely editorial preferences but tactical responses to the algorithmic and aesthetic affordances of TikTok. Quantitative platform data reinforce this distinction: as of May 10, 2025, CGTN Europe had accumulated approximately 14.4 million likes and 1.1 million followers, while Euronews had 1.3 million likes and only 12,240 followers. Within the sampled videos containing the study’s core keywords, CGTN Europe’s most-liked video—analyzed in Figure 13—garnered 305,700 likes, more than double Euronews’s highest-performing video (Figure 12), which received 152,900 likes. But the unilateral data released by the TikTok platform alone cannot fully determine which narrative strategy is more effective, as the effectiveness of a narrative depends on the audience’s cultural background and media environment.

These results reveal that CGTN Europe tends to emphasize humanitarian suffering, geopolitical moderation, and the structural dimensions of the conflict, echoing China’s international positioning as a neutral and stability-oriented actor. This aligns with earlier TF-IDF findings and affirms the channel’s rhetorical pattern: foregrounding Gaza’s civilian impact while de-emphasizing moral binaries. While CGTN Europe constructs a cohesive humanitarian narrative underpinned by emotional consistency and visual empathy, Euronews mobilizes a more pluralistic approach, balancing institutional credibility with episodic urgency.

In contrast, as a media outlet, Euronews frequently cites statements from EU officials, Israeli authorities, or the United States, functioning as a discursive mediator of institutional security concerns. The dominant frames in its coverage revolve around existential threats to Israel, the stability of European societies—especially in the context of antisemitism or terrorism—and the preservation of democratic values. Terms such as “terrorist attack,” “Islamist armed group,” “massacre,” and “legitimate military response” help construct Hamas as an irrational and illegitimate actor. Through this framing, the conflict is portrayed not only as a regional crisis but also as a threat to European security, thereby legitimizing military actions and enhanced border control.

While securitized vocabulary is dominant in Euronews's captions, semantic and clustering analyses suggest that its narrative strategy is not monolithic. Instead, it reflects a discursively layered and restrained communicative style that balances factual modularity with symbolic affect. The dendrogram reveals a fragmented structure: long branches indicate semantic dispersion, reinforcing the interpretation that Euronews pursues an event-driven, topic-specific approach rather than a unified strategic narrative. Captions such as *foreign\_europe\_killed*, *campaign\_israel\_social*, and *gaza\_situation\_israel* occupy distinct semantic paths, representing different framing logics. Additionally, a thematic micro-cluster of emotionally charged captions—centered on civilians, children, and human rights—suggests a latent humanitarian identity narrative beneath the surface of editorial neutrality.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has shown that CGTN Europe and Euronews.tv adopt divergent, yet platform-aware, discursive strategies in their TikTok coverage of the Israel–Hamas conflict—strategies that reflect their respective geopolitical affiliations and institutional mandates. The platform's structural bias toward brevity, affective engagement, and visual saturation necessitates a recalibration of traditional journalistic and diplomatic conventions. Both broadcasters engage with this challenge in distinct ways: CGTN integrates geopolitical messaging within emotionally resonant frames, while Euronews maintains adherence to journalistic rigor, even when it risks algorithmic invisibility. This juxtaposition illustrates the broader communicative paradox facing state-affiliated media: how to preserve narrative credibility while remaining algorithmically competitive.

Topic modeling via BERTopic further highlights this narrative divergence. Euronews constructs a multilayered and thematically diverse narrative architecture, balancing institutional authority, human-interest reporting, and geopolitical commentary. CGTN Europe, meanwhile, favors a cohesive humanitarian discourse, marked by lexical repetition and high semantic similarity across captions. This consistency suggests an intentional framing strategy designed to portray China as a morally responsive yet geopolitically restrained actor. Importantly, both outlets

tailor their narratives to TikTok's platform logic—favoring brevity, visual resonance, and emotional immediacy—thus translating traditional strategic messaging into platform-native formats.

The platform architecture of TikTok—defined by gamified swipe mechanics, sensory immediacy, and brevity—favors spectacle over substance, emotional impact over deliberative nuance, and visual rhythm over analytical depth. This structural logic presents a fundamental communicative paradox for public broadcasters such as CGTN Europe and Euronews.tv. On the one hand, these institutions are committed to maintaining credibility, journalistic professionalism, and diplomatic restraint; on the other, they must compete within an attention economy that rewards affective intensity, aesthetic novelty, and algorithmic visibility.

This tension between visibility and credibility compels state-affiliated media to recalibrate their discursive strategies. CGTN Europe, for instance, employs high-definition visuals, melancholic soundtracks, and emotionally resonant narrative pacing—not as arbitrary aesthetic choices, but as deliberate adaptations to TikTok's expressive grammar. Through such strategies, CGTN embeds geopolitical messaging within emotionally acceptable frames, thereby softening ideological positions through visual empathy. In contrast, Euronews.tv adheres more strictly to conventional journalistic norms, prioritizing factual verification, institutional voice-overs, and event-focused reporting. However, such fidelity to fact often clashes with TikTok's algorithmic logic, which amplifies content based not on accuracy but on its capacity to elicit strong emotional reactions within the first few seconds. A close reading of how these broadcasters produce and structure their videos—what is shown, what is omitted, how images are framed and paced—reveals that visual rhetoric has become a central battleground in international communication. In an ecosystem where narrative attention is algorithmically curated, the ability to aestheticize empathy, stylize suffering, and visualize moral positioning constitutes a new form of symbolic capital.

While this study provides valuable insights into how state-affiliated media channels construct divergent discursive framings of the Israel– Hamas conflict on TikTok, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study adopts a comparative framework centered on state-affiliated media, which, while analytically precise, inherently limits the generalizability of its findings. The broader TikTok ecosystem is populated not only by institutional broadcasters but also by a multitude of non-state actors—ranging from citizen voices and independent journalists

to diasporic communities, influencers, and algorithmically generated content. These decentralized and participatory contributors play a critical role in shaping digital discourse around global conflicts. The absence of such voices in the current analysis constitutes a notable limitation. Future research could explore this dimension by incorporating user-generated content, analyzing community-driven hashtags, or examining patterns of audience interaction (likes, shares, comments) to assess how grassroots publics reinforce, resist, or reinterpret official narratives. This direction could form the basis of a dedicated follow-up study.

Second, Euronews, originally supported by a consortium of European public broadcasters, has undergone changes in ownership and funding structure over the past decade, including a shift toward private investment. At the same time, it is important to note that the European Union is a multilayered political entity composed of member states with differing historical relationships to the Israel–Palestine conflict, variable media ecosystems, and distinct foreign policy preferences. Therefore, relying on a single media outlet, even one with supranational scope, inevitably introduces a degree of institutional simplification, which may obscure intra-European discursive contestation. To address this limitation, future research could incorporate additional outlets to capture a broader spectrum of European perspectives and assess variation across national lines.

Third, the study draws exclusively on spoken-word transcriptions generated via automatic speech recognition (ASR). While this approach enables scalable analysis of audiovisual data, it is inherently subject to transcription inaccuracies, especially when dealing with background noise, overlapping speech, non-native accents, or multi-language usage. This limitation is particularly salient in a platform like TikTok, where sound design and music frequently overlap with verbal narration. Moreover, a subset of 107 CGTN Europe videos in the dataset could not be transcribed due to the absence or unintelligibility of speech. These videos—often consisting of text overlays, music, or chaotic warzone sounds—may carry substantial narrative weight through visual semiotics alone. Future studies could employ optical character recognition (OCR) on video subtitles or screen text to complement audio-based analysis and expand coverage.

Lastly, while TF-IDF and BERTopic modeling offer useful tools for identifying lexical and thematic patterns, they are limited in their ability to capture deeper rhetorical strategies, framing mechanisms, or affective tonalities. Strategic narratives are not reducible to keywords or topic

clusters; they also operate through silences, visual editing, emotional pacing, and cross-platform coordination—elements that exceed the current study's computational scope. A promising avenue for future inquiry would be to combine multimodal discourse analysis with platform ethnography, thereby unpacking how affective publics are mobilized across language, image, and algorithmic affordance.

Lastly, the study adopts a comparative lens grounded in state-affiliated media channels, which provides analytical clarity but may limit generalizability. The broader TikTok ecosystem is populated by non-state influencers, diasporic voices, citizen journalists, and automated content, all of which contribute to the formation of global discursive fields. As such, the current study speaks more directly to top-down geopolitical narrative projection, rather than bottom-up or participatory narrative construction.

This top-down orientation is consistent with broader patterns in China's external communication strategy. As the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2024) notes, Beijing maintains a strategic posture of neutrality and non-interference, leveraging its economic presence while avoiding entanglement in regional conflicts. At the same time, Beijing has increasingly sought to use political and military developments in the region to win favour in the Global South by criticising US and Western approaches—despite its preferred neutral position. These dual tendencies are reflected in CGTN Europe's TikTok content: while the outlet adopts a restrained and humanitarian tone, this rhetorical moderation operates within a broader diplomatic choreography designed to portray China as a credible, empathetic, and system-challenging global actor. This finding supports the view that TikTok functions not only as a space for viral content, but also as a channel through which geopolitical actors convert strategic narratives into emotionally resonant micro-content. Future research could build on this approach by including independent creators or cross-analyzing user engagement indicators (likes, comments, shares) to assess how these narratives resonate with wider digital audiences.

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