
Social Media communication practices at war: A tactics comparative analysis between the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Social Media has ingrained itself into daily life by enabling connections and providing a range of viewpoints on world affairs. Additionally, Social Media platforms are said to be crucial in influencing public opinion regarding conflicts due to their ability to mould and sway public opinion. In light of current events surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since October 7, 2023, this article focuses on how platforms like X/Twitter and TikTok have impacted public perceptions. Further, based on the literature references, we qualitatively examine the dissemination of fake news and the conduct of propaganda, which are tactics frequently employed strategically to advance particular narratives and political agendas. A detailed analysis of how the Israeli government and Hamas utilize Social Media to influence public opinion demonstrates the broader influence of disinformation on global politics. Lastly, a comparison between the aforementioned practices and those used in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is also provided.

Keywords:

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Russian-Ukrainian War; Social Media; Fake News; Propaganda.

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1. Introduction

For decades, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been an issue widely discussed and contentious topic. The conflict dates back to 1947 when the United Nations adopted Resolution 181, also known as the Partition Plan, whose goal was the division of the British Mandate of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Fighting continued throughout the years, and in 2007, the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, took over the Gaza Strip after defeating Fatah, a long-dominant faction within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Since then, tensions seem to have increased in the region, reaching particularly high levels in 2021, to finally peak on October 7th, 2023 ([Council on Foreign Relations 2023](#)). In the past decades, it has been evident that since the beginning of the conflict, traditional media have played a significant role in the way information is disseminated, as well as in the way public opinion perceives the conflict.

The use of Social Media in order to project one's narratives and agenda and/or to promote propaganda that benefits one side over the other is not something new. Since the 2008 Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it has been evident that they have revolutionized the process of transmitting information. In the conflicts that followed, in 2014, 2018, and 2021, the literature indicates that they have played a significant role and have been used extensively.

No matter the conflict they were used in, on the one hand, they have facilitated communication between the elites, including diplomatic discourse, tactical communication by leaders, rebel groups, and military commanders. Moreover, Social Media are also being used by the elites in order to regulate the behavior of the masses, as well as to shape public opinion through the promotion of a narrative that best fits a certain agenda ([Zeitsoff 2017](#)). On the other hand, a large percentage of information shared online is biased, misleading, or even completely fake. This information can be shared both by actors whose main goal is to inflict harm, dissent, and doubt, and to increase the levels of polarization, but also by unaware users of the Internet, who tend to share and internalize information without cross-checking with reliable sources ([Hristakieva, et al. 2022](#)). This is a fact that seems to be taking place in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It has been proven that some news sources, or certain Social Media accounts, have been promoting information that is considered fake, in order to promote a certain agenda that favors one of the two sides. During the past months, many media sources claimed to show the atrocities that were committed by one of the two main actors in the conflict, which were later debunked and proven to be fake. Moreover, both the Israeli government and Hamas have been promoting their own narratives through Social Media. Both the spread of fake news and propaganda and the weaponization of Social Media by either side have proven to be effective tools to influence public opinion.

In this paper, a literature review analysis of the weaponization of Social Media by either side is attempted, as there is strong evidence that they have influenced the crisis in many aspects in an unprecedented way. Moreover, in an attempt to provide a better overview of this context, a comparative analysis with Social Media tactics in the Russo-Ukrainian war is presented. For a better conceptual escalation, the use of Social Media in previous conflicts in the region under investigation is first highlighted.

2. Literature Review and Methodology

The role of Social Media in previous conflicts in the Middle East has been investigated using diverse approaches, in an effort to highlight its use as both a communication tool as well as a strategic instrument in information warfare. For instance, Seo (2014) used Social Media and online social networking to analyse photographs shared on Twitter by the Israel Defence Forces and Hamas' Al Qassam Brigades during the 2012 Israeli-Hamas conflict in an effort to comprehend elements of visual propaganda. In order to find themes and frames that stood out in the 243 Twitter photos that the two sides shared over the course of two months, he conducted content analysis, discovering that the most common themes in the photos uploaded by Israel were resistance and unity, while the most common themes in the photos uploaded by Hamas were resistance and civilian casualties (Seo 2014). Zhang (2018) investigated the goals of Hamas at various points in the psychological battle between the two sides in the two-month Israel-Gaza conflict in 2014. The study used grounded theory to examine the themes of Hamas's political marketing by choosing texts and images from two Arabic Social Media accounts affiliated with Hamas. By comparing events on the timeline, the study was able to track the themes' changes over time and frequency (Zhang 2018).

Moving to the present day, where the role of Social Media has been upgraded, there have been many scientific attempts to analyse their contribution, using several research methods over different media datasets. Ezeabasili and Amaefuna (2024) used content analysis to investigate how Social Media affects public attitudes and perceptions on the Israeli-Hamas conflict. The Framing theory was used as the theoretical framework for the study, while textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, and magazines were the sources of secondary data. According to the study's findings, Social Media significantly influenced how the public perceived the Israeli-Hamas conflict by amplifying a variety of voices, creating echo chambers, spreading false information widely, evoking strong emotions, and influencing user-generated content, all of which led to polarized and biased opinions (Ezeabasili and Amaefuna 2024). Bartal (2023) claimed that supporters of Hamas presented the conflict against Israel as a religious war with an anti-Semitic attitude (Bartal 2023). Granger (2024) investigated media content by analysing 310 videos from various large news

outlets and 3338 articles from Al Jazeera to demonstrate how media coverage of the conflict has evolved and how they affected user sentiments (Granger 2024). Similarly, Zawawi et al. (2024) utilized a qualitative descriptive research method, in order to comprehensively depict the framing processes employed by Al-Jazeera and BBC in reporting on the Hamas-Israel conflict and showed that variations in the framing of reporting on the conflict can have an impact on regional diplomacy and peace initiatives as well as international support for either of the parties (Zawawi, et al. 2024). Yıldırım and Şahin (2024) also investigated the extent to which media organizations affect the flow of information from an information warfare perspective (Yıldırım and Şahin 2024).

The abovementioned research emphasizes the multifaceted role of Social Media in contemporary conflicts and its ability to influence public opinion, political narrative, and diplomatic engagements. Nevertheless, there still exists a gap when it comes to how Social Media can be weaponized across different geopolitical contexts, which this study aims to address.

In order to provide a multifaceted overview of how both Hamas and the Israeli government utilize Social Media to influence public opinion and global politics, based on a literature review, this study adheres to PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). The systematic review method guarantees a methodical and transparent evaluation of scientific papers on the subject.

The academic articles, reports, media analyses, and newspaper articles used in this paper were sourced from databases such as Google Scholar and newspapers like the BBC and Al Jazeera. The selection criteria included peer-reviewed papers that were published within the last decade that explicitly analyse Social Media's role in modern warfare, prioritizing the information warfare and digital propaganda in the Israeli-Hamas and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts. It is also important to note that, besides the data sources mentioned before, this paper also used data from the profiles of these groups on social media, on platforms such as X, TikTok, and Facebook, in an effort to identify the strategies used by each side as a means to affect public sentiments. A content analysis was also conducted in an effort to identify recurring themes and strategies across different conflicts in the region. Lastly, the findings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were contrasted with the practices applied in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in an attempt to conceptually highlight the contemporary weaponization of Social Media in modern warfare, considering factors such as state or non-state actors or how public sentiment can be manipulated in different geopolitical conflicts.

Through this methodological framework, this paper aims to underline how the weaponization of Social Media in the modern era can alter public opinion on international conflicts, as well as the trust in the legitimacy of news one can access online.

3. Social Media Tactics

3.1. *The Israeli government side*

The Israeli government often employs Social Media as part of its broader “hasbara” efforts (Hebrew word for “to explain”), also known as Israeli digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy, in general, refers to the way information and communication technologies (ICTs) have impacted how diplomacy is being practiced today, from emails to smartphones and social networking sites. Social Media, in particular, has facilitated the communication and influence that Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) could exert on audiences’ perceptions in a direct and easy manner, without cost. Social Media is also considered to be one of digital diplomacy’s most important tools, given the fact that it aids a two-way engagement and dialogue with foreign audiences. In the past few years, and especially since 2016, Israel has been one of the most active countries when it comes to using digital diplomacy, especially when it comes to its foreign affairs in the Middle East region ([Shalash 2023](#)).

Israel’s digital diplomacy affects the way it projects itself on an international level. It involves certain practices and strategies, often considered to be conflicting, intended to boost Israel’s reputation while also garnering support from all around the world. Since the Second Intifada, Israel’s international image has shifted significantly. Due to the critique that the country faced, a more serious diplomatic effort was needed, leading to the professionalization and intensification of Israel’s “hasbara” by forming an informal Ministry of Hasbara, as part of the Foreign Ministry, in 2013. It is also important to note how hasbara narratives that are meant to increase pro-Israeli frameworks are similar to the general journalistic language. Through the years, this general language that has been constructed has also affected the way that both Israel and Palestine are being portrayed and perceived ([Aouragh 2016](#)).

Since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7th, 2023, the Israeli government, besides conventional types of warfare, has also been extensively using Social Media. The Israeli government, along with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), has been posting daily on various platforms such as X, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. Through Social Media, the Israeli government is trying to promote its agenda, shape public opinion, and gain the sympathy of international actors, as well as of simple internet users. In order to achieve that, they have been posting content that includes, amongst other things, calls for the return of the hostages that are being held by Hamas back to their homes, heartfelt videos, and infographics to raise awareness about the situation all over the world, using hashtags like #BringThemHomeNow and #LetThemGoNow. The IDF has used Social Media to provide real-time updates on military operations, including its raid on the al-Shifa hospital on November 15, 2023. Posts from official IDF accounts sought to justify the operation by alleging that the hospital was being used as a Hamas military base, although these claims remain contested ([IDF 2023b](#)). Moreover, the Israeli government has participated in a direct rhetorical attack against Hamas, characterizing the leadership as extremist

(Israel 2023a), claiming that Hamas does not care about Israeli or Palestinian lives, while also comparing them with the jihadist group ISIS (Israel 2023b).

Another strategy that is being used by the IDF is publicizing its humanitarian efforts, which include the aid shipments that have been allowed into Gaza, claiming in many of these posts that they are at war with Hamas and not with the people in Gaza (IDF 2023a). Last but not least, the Israeli government has been utilizing Social Media in order to shape public opinion by promoting dozens of ads that include brutal images of the violence that is taking place in Israel. The ads have spread on platforms such as X and YouTube and are aimed at adults over the age of 25 in Western cities like Brussels, Paris, Munich, and The Hague. In these paid videos and images, Hamas is linked once again with the Islamic State, while there are also many gruesome images to show the atrocities committed (Martin, Goujard, and Fuchs 2023). On certain occasions, ads including disturbing footage like rocket attacks, fiery explosions, and masked gunmen were included in children's video games. Since the October 7th attack, the Israeli government is said to have spent more than \$1.5 million on internet ads, claiming that the reason behind this act is that people need to know about the massacre that is taking place in Israel. Although the Israeli Foreign Ministry claims that these ads were supposed to be blocked for people under the age of 18, many children around the world in places like Britain, France, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, have come across a gruesome ad that reads "We will make sure that those who harm us pay a heavy price", while also including disturbing images on supposedly family-friendly games like "Angry Birds", "Subway Surfers" and "Solitaire: Card Game 2023" (Satter, et al. 2023).

Another strategy that has been widely used by the Israeli government in the past few years is using Social Media as a means to communicate with the Arab population, both in Palestine and in the rest of the Arabic-speaking countries. During the Arab Spring, the interest of the Arabic population in the use of the Internet increased significantly since it provided an alternative place where people had the opportunity to freely express themselves, in contrast to traditional media, where mostly the regimes were conventionally represented. In 2010, a special channel addressed to the Arabic population was launched by the Israeli MFA within its Digital Diplomacy Department. As a result, several Arab speaking accounts were launched on Social Media, some of which still operate today (Shalash 2023). For example, the Facebook page "Israel speaks Arabic" currently has more than 3 million followers, posting daily, multiple times a day. The content that this page contains includes: promoting the actions that the IDF and the Israeli government take in order to defeat Hamas, highlighting the violence that has been committed by Hamas, while also appealing for the return of Israeli hostages (Isra'il tatakallam bil 'arabiyya 2024). Similarly, this page is also available on the platform X; it includes the same content that is being posted on Facebook, is called "Israel in Arabic", and it has more than 500 thousand followers (Isra'il bil 'arabiyya 2024). The Israeli Defence Forces Spokespersons' Unit is heavily engaged

in carrying out the goals of this diplomacy, particularly during times of conflict. The head of the Arab Media Department of the Israeli Defence Force, Avichay Adraee, for example, uses his X account, in which he uses the Arabic language, with more than 550 thousand followers, to support the Israeli army's operations, while also promoting the army's commitment to human values (Adraee 2024). This account has also utilized religion and Qur'anic verses in a strategic manner, specifically during religious holidays or religious instances in general, like the month of Ramadan (Shalash 2023).

The members behind these channels are most times fluent in the Arabic language because they themselves have an Arabic heritage. Some of these teams' members have migrated to Israel from Arab countries like Yemen, Iraq, or Syria, which is why the digital diplomacy team that focuses on approaching the Arab speaking population has a deep knowledge and understanding of Arabic traditions, customs, and preferences. When it comes to the main goals of these channels, they include portraying a positive image of Israel, promoting the country's democratic and peaceful values, the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as the moral and human values. In these accounts, the scientific, technological, and medical capabilities of Israel are also often highlighted. Through this initiative, the Israeli government tried to achieve a dialogue with the Arab population and promote to them the policies of Israel. However, these accounts also use Social Media in order to spread content that attacks and slanders the Palestinians, mostly during times of conflict. Nevertheless, these Social Media outlets are considered to be a secret diplomatic weapon that could facilitate relations with the Arab world, which is the reason why more and more Israeli institutions and official figures have adopted this strategy and have developed an active interaction with the Arab audiences, through which they have the opportunity to promote a positive narrative about Israel (Shalash 2023).

3.2. The Hamas side

During the past few years, especially during conflicts, Hamas has extensively used Social Media in different ways. Seo (2014) argues that during the 2012 conflict, Hamas' Twitter account @AlQassamBrigades, which is now deactivated, for the most part contained posts that portrayed graphic images of human suffering, including infants or children. In a sample of 171 images posted by Hamas during this conflict, 42.1% of these posts refer to civilian casualties. The reason why there was a notably higher percentage of posts about civilian victims by Hamas could have resulted either from the fact that the biggest portion of casualties during the conflict were Palestinians, or from the fact that Hamas in general has been using Social Media to portray Palestinians as victims and Israelis as the aggressors (Seo 2014). Generally, Hamas' strategy is widely based on portraying Israel as an oppressive occupier that harms the Palestinian population through its military operations and policies. A large amount of the content that Hamas has posted includes Israel's policies and operations in Gaza, the occupation of the West Bank, as well as other operations in the region (Byman and McCaleb 2023).

Other prominent issues portrayed on Hamas' Twitter account included the need for resistance, as well as the need for unity, the casualties of Hamas' soldiers, and images of the destruction caused by Israeli forces. In many cases, the images posted by Hamas resort to emotional propaganda so as to maximize the effects of the message they are trying to convey. During the 2012 conflict, 53.8% of the images shared on the Al Qassam Brigades Twitter account included the emotional factor. For example, images of crying parents in front of children killed by Israeli airstrikes are often shared through Social Media. There was also a significant use of calls to action, urging users to share certain posts in order to spread their messages and reach a wider audience (Seo 2014). Hamas urges its audience to witness Israel's aggression and the suffering it has caused to the Palestinians, prompting the users to denounce Israel and show their support for Hamas' cause. Sometimes, the Hamas accounts used English and Hebrew, besides Arabic, in order to reach a wider audience that is not only confined to the Arabic-speaking population, but also to the rest of the world. In Hamas' online presence, the group's history, teachings, and missions were widely highlighted, especially on their websites, where they posted biographies of important figures like Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, they tribute suicide bombers and people that died for the Palestinian cause, while others also posted their "living wills" on the Internet (Byman and McCaleb 2023).

Lastly, Social Media has also been used operationally by Hamas, albeit on a small scale. Hamas launched what is now known as Operation Broken Heart, where they posed as attractive young women on platforms like Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, attempting to use dating apps as a way to make Israeli soldiers download spyware on their phones (Byman and McCaleb 2023).

Hamas is currently being barred from most Social Media platforms. Online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have banned any account linked to terrorist organizations, Hamas included, as well as posts that appear sympathetic to Hamas' cause, due to the fact that these posts are against their content policies about extremism (Thompson and Isaac 2023). However, for a while, Hamas' officials found a safe haven in the app Telegram, while many Hamas-affiliated accounts posted regularly on X, both platforms characterized by their minimum or non-existent content moderation policies. In the wake of the October 7th attack, Social Media has been flooded by violent and graphic videos and images of Hamas' initial attack against Israel (Frenkel and Myers 2023). Other posts shared on Telegram include Hamas stirring up anti-Israeli sentiments, as was seen after an attack on a hospital in Gaza, where pictures of people and kids severely injured surfaced, while officials traded blame. Hamas took it to Social Media to accuse the Israeli government and to motivate its supporters to act against the "enemy" (Harwell and Dwoskin 2023).

In an effort to humanize its fighters, Hamas also used Telegram to post videos where fighters tried to comfort Israeli children. In one video, a Hamas fighter is seen holding a crying baby, pressed on his shoulder, the same shoulder on which he is

carrying his Kalashnikov, and patting it on the back, whereas another fighter was depicted bandaging the foot of an injured Israeli toddler, then proceeds to put the boy on his lap while simultaneously moving another crying baby back and forth in a stroller (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023). Another video that went viral portrayed twenty-one-year-old Israeli hostage Mia Schem, who was shown saying that she was given medical care by Hamas soldiers, for an injury that she suffered on her hand, stating that everything is fine and she just wants to get back home to her parents (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023). It is important to note that in most of these videos, Hamas fighters have their faces blurred off and their voices distorted. These videos were widely viewed and applauded by Palestinians and Arabs, with some of these videos reaching more than one million views and getting comments like: “the morals of the fighters of the Islamic resistance” (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023).

Other videos that were posted on Telegram right after the October 7th attack, portrayed burning cars in Israeli towns or young Israeli men with their arms tied behind their backs. “This picture is your picture, this might is your might, this flood is your flood, and this blessed action is for all of you!”, said a news anchor addressing Palestinians around the world, followed by a recorded message from Saleh al-Arouri, deputy chief of Hamas’s political bureau, urging Palestinians to resist the Israeli settlers in the West Bank and the soldiers protecting them, confirming that a big objective for Hamas is to spark a broader objective among Palestinians (Kirkpatrick and Rasgon 2023).

The abovementioned lead to the conclusion that Hamas is using Social Media for specific reasons, which include: increasing support, inciting anger against Israel in neighbouring nations, justifying the violence that is being used by their militia, and creating a sense of compassion for the situation that Gaza is faced with (Harwell and Dvoskin 2023). However, as the war went on, platforms grew more wary of the content that was being posted by the organization. On the one hand, by October 12th, X took action against content posted by Hamas-affiliated accounts, which led to the removal of thousands of profiles and the labelling of many posts as harmful (Dugar and Abinaya 2023). Telegram on the other hand, which has been the tool mostly used by Hamas to promote its agenda, with some of the accounts reaching thousands of followers, has restricted access to many Hamas-related accounts, including that of the armed wing of the organization al-Qassam Brigades and Gaza Now, a channel that was responsible for informing people about the events that took place in Gaza in real time (Hale 2023).

4. Fake news in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Regarding fake news in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the main issue is the repurposing and recontextualizing of videos and images to depict something completely different. A video has been reported that claims to depict a Hamas fighter shooting down an Israeli helicopter is actually a clip from a video game called

“Arma 3”. A video supposedly showing an Israeli woman being attacked in Gaza was actually filmed in Guatemala in 2015 (Bond 2023). In many cases, various accounts, some using pseudonyms, others posing as news agencies, have misused images or inaccurate geographic locations in order to provide a fake portrayal of what is currently going on either in Israel or in Gaza (Chin-Rothman 2023). A study that was conducted by Cyabra, an Israel-based company that focuses on analysing Social Media, showed that one in five accounts that have participated in conversations about the conflict since October 7th are fake. On platforms like TikTok and X, approximately 40.000 accounts turned out to be fake and some of them spread misleading content in order to show their support for Hamas (Spring 2023). These fake profiles are used to manipulate public opinion by intervening in political discussions online, which can lead to public behaviours and attitudes being influenced (Luo, et al. 2023).

Besides individuals, government agents have also been accused of spreading fake news since the beginning of the conflict. Russia, Iran, and China have been carrying out disinformation campaigns in order to harm Israel’s reputation and enhance that of Hamas. On one occasion, Russia and Iran spread the information claiming that Israel bombed the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza and that the United States provided the bomb used to demolish it.

In the case of Iran, while official sources have denied any involvement in the attack of October 7th, multiple Iranian state-affiliated accounts have fit the attack into the narrative of the “Resistance Axis”, in which Iran and other Muslim countries are situated against Israel and the United States. Different Social Media accounts, mainly on X, connected with Khamenei, promote an agenda that is highly critical of the West’s involvement in the crisis, while also highlighting the suffering that the Palestinians are facing by Israeli forces. Moreover, on various Iranian state-affiliated accounts, violent content and graphic images have been posted in order to highlight the brutality of the Israeli troops and to augment support for the Palestinian cause. Unverified content and disinformation have also been distributed by Iranian state-affiliated accounts, with one such example being a video supposedly captured by CNN of the Hamas attack, where a user inserted a fake audio in order to give the impression that it was staged (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023).

Russian state-affiliated accounts have also exploited the Hamas attack against Israel, as well as Israel’s response, in order to further the Russian geopolitical agenda and to promote already existing anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Accusations made by Russian officials that the West is responsible for the escalation of violence between the two sides, have been reinforced by Russian diplomatic accounts on Facebook and X. When it comes to fake news, Russian state media and diplomatic accounts, have also alleged that Ukraine supplied Hamas with weapons previously supplied by Western nations, in an effort to defend against Russia (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023). To this day, however, there has been no hard evidence to link Hamas’ military weaponry to Ukraine, with Ukrainian officials dismissing the

possibility that Hamas' fighters have been able to get hold of the country's weapons. Based on these allegations, Ukraine's military intelligence agency took it to their official Facebook page, in order to accuse Russia of preparing a disinformation campaign against them ([Khatsenkova 2023](#)).

A rise in anti-Israeli sentiment has also been observed on China's highly censored internet, especially after the country's decision not to blame Hamas for the October 7th attack, responsible for starting the war. Different Social Media platforms have seen varying levels of criticism of both Israel's use of violence and the apparent indifference on the part of the US to Israel's aggression ([Wakabayashi, May and Fu 2023](#)). On Facebook, on the one hand, an attitude of neutrality was predominantly maintained by Chinese state media profiles, as well as profiles of Chinese diplomats, while the decision to de-escalate the crisis was strongly supported. On X, on the other hand, profiles of Chinese journalists and politicians participated in discussions that mainly criticized Western politicians and Western media for maintaining double standards, with the Israeli response to the October 7th attack also being significantly criticized. A key argument discussed in Chinese Social Media profiles concerned the extensive promotion of Israeli victims' stories and the lack of Palestinian voices and experiences in media coverage ([Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023](#)). Disinformation has proliferated in Chinese Social Media, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Doyin. Content from Western Social Media platforms, such as Telegram and X, which include false information, videos, and images that, although reflecting something completely different, have been used in a conflict-related manner, have been translated and shared hundreds of times on Chinese Social Media ([Xing 2023](#)).

5. Social Media Tactics Comparative analysis: Israeli-Palestinian conflict vs Russo-Ukrainian war

To better understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role of Social Media and propaganda in shaping the crisis, a comparative analysis with the corresponding war between Russia and Ukraine is presented. Despite their differences regarding their historical and geopolitical basis, these two conflicts show remarkable similarities in the use of Social Media and the dissemination of fake news and propaganda, offering valuable comparative observations.

Similar to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Russia-Ukraine war has also been widely affected by social media. In fact, it is regarded as the first full-blown "Social Media war". Because of the wide digital transformation and the fact that it explores uncharted areas on a technological level, it is also considered to be the first full-blown cyber war and the first hacker war, where both state and non-state actors are attacking the information infrastructures of the fighters ([Ciuriak 2022](#)). Social Media has been extensively used by both sides as a means to portray their own versions of the existing situation and to promote different narratives regarding the causes, the consequences, and the potential continuation of the war. Platforms like

Facebook, X, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram have been used in order to upload information by government officials, individual citizens, and state agencies. Right before the declaration of a full-scale invasion by Russian President Vladimir Putin, intelligence on Russian troops' border movements and military plans were leaked on Social Media platforms. Moreover, Ukrainian citizens have also been using Social Media and specially designed apps as a means to inform their army about Russian movements. Lastly, footage of military aggression in occupied territories, as captured by smartphones, can spread more easily through Social Media and can even be used as evidence in international courts (Karalis 2024). While the exact amount of content uploaded on these platforms is difficult to measure, it is undeniable that the overall number has been very significant, given the fact that in just the first week of the war, videos posted on TikTok with the hashtags #Russia and #Ukraine amassed 37.2 billion and 8.5 billion views, respectively (Perez and Nair 2022).

Generally, the narratives that have been portrayed both by Russia and by Ukraine are completely different. The war in Ukraine, according to the Russian government, is considered to be a "special military operation", a necessary defensive measure against NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe. Putin has also promoted the narrative that this military campaign is necessary, in order to "de-nazify" Ukraine and to stop a supposed genocide that the Ukrainian government is conducting against Russian speakers (Perez and Nair 2022).

When it comes to disinformation, the Russian government has been accused many times in the past of using this tactic as a means to fulfil certain objectives and to promote a particular narrative that serves the country's interests, the most well-known accusations being the Russian government's involvement in both Brexit in 2016 and the 2020 US elections. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, the Kremlin and its allies, in an attempt to shift the blame from Moscow and undermine support for Ukraine, have been spreading false narratives through propaganda, fake Social Media accounts and bots, forged documents, and manipulated content (Bond 2023). Russia regards Social Media as a different channel for creating the "fog of war", in order to sow doubt on what is seen and documented on Social Media, about the wrongdoings and the crimes committed by Russia (e.g., the atrocities in Bucha) (Ciuriak 2022). It should also be noted that Russian disinformation tactics are not always committed to consistency and often promote contradicting narratives. This tactic ultimately leads to confusion and ambiguity, eroding trust in trustworthy news sources and deepening the fog of war in an effort to hide the truth.

Internally, Russia paid significant attention to controlling domestic audiences by restricting access to information that could undermine or go against the government's narratives. Early in the conflict, a law was signed making it illegal to use the term "war" in Social Media about it, in news articles and/or in broadcasts, claiming that it was a "special military operation", while people promoting "fake news" about the conflict, about the Russian government or the Russian military in general, could face

up to 15 years in prison (Troianovski and Safronova 2022). Additionally, in March 2022, Roskomnadzor, a Russian federal executive agency responsible for monitoring Russian mass media, blocked access to Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, accusing Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, of being an “extremist organization” (Freedom House 2024).

Since the beginning of the war, the Kremlin has been aiming to weaken the morale of Ukrainian audiences and undermine their will to fight on Social Media. Some of the tactics used included posting deepfake videos of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fleeing the country and urging Ukrainian troops to surrender, forging documents about Ukrainian officials in order to damage their reputation, along with fake marketplaces on the dark web claiming that Ukraine resold Western weapons for profit (Messieh 2023). The largest known influence operation was also launched on TikTok by Russia, in an effort to spread rumours about Ukrainian political corruption. Following Russia’s invasion in February 2022, a number of European countries were exposed to false accusations, created by thousands of fake accounts, claiming that high-ranking Ukrainian officials and their families have purchased expensive cars and houses abroad (Robinson, Robinson and Sardarizadeh 2023).

Ukraine, in contrast, uses Social Media platforms as a means of raising public awareness globally. Since the first days of the conflict, both the Ukrainian government and ordinary citizens have been posting content on Social Media, sometimes harsh and raw, of everyday life after the Russian attack. Through Social Media, the Ukrainian government showcases the country’s resolve and resilience in the face of Russian attacks, presenting Ukraine as courageous and united in its fight for freedom. A post on Ukraine’s official X page, on the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, argued that only through unity can Russian aggression be countered, as “there are no walls that do not fall” (Ukraine 2024a). Another post on TikTok emphasizes the Ukrainian word “Volia”, meaning freedom and will, as a key term that motivates the Ukrainian cause (Ukraine 2024b). Equally important is the promotion of Ukraine’s heritage, both natural and cultural, which is evident in the posting of content relating to the country’s customs (Ukraine 2024c), its environment, and the attractions it offers, as well as the achievements of its citizens. Lastly, the importance of highlighting and showcasing the brutalities committed by the Russian army is also promoted in the different Social Media platforms of the Ukrainian government, and especially on that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (@mfa_ukraine on Instagram).

Similar to Russia, there have been several instances where pro-Ukrainian profiles on Social Media spread fake news and propaganda, most of which quickly went viral. For example, on TikTok, a video clip titled “Ghost of Kyiv”, which claimed to depict a fighter pilot shooting down Russian jets, received millions of views. In reality, the content was taken from a video game called D.C.S. World, whose shaky, blurry visuals might easily pass for real footage. People shared the video and other similarly mislabelled recordings despite the fact that they were fake. A video featuring Russian

paratroopers was actually taken back in 2016. Another one depicts a power facility being struck by lightning, not by a military assault. Finally, a clip of airplanes vs artillery was computer-rendered in 2021 ([Chayka 2022](#)).

Overall, there has been a significant amount of fake news and propaganda coming from both sides. Researchers claim that within 40 minutes of signing up on TikTok, users are directed to false information about the Russian-Ukrainian war. Since the beginning of the conflict 310,000 pieces of content were removed from X due to the content being deceptive, misleading, or providing inaccurate context, 70,000 pieces of content were removed from YouTube, mainly because they referred to Russia's invasion as a "liberating mission", which violates the platforms' major violent events policy and 41,191 pieces of content were removed from TikTok for violation of the harmful misinformation policy. Moreover, 100,000 fake Social Media accounts run by Russian bot farms were shut down by the Ukrainian government, while 240 sites of Russia-Ukraine disinformation were identified in different languages: English (108), French (42), German (21), Italian (27), and other (42) ([Perez and Nair 2022](#)).

When it comes to public opinion, a study conducted by University of Cambridge showed that by the eve of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the percentage of Westerners who had a favourable opinion of Russia had already dropped from two out of five (39%) to less than a quarter (23%) and is currently only one out of eight (12%). Meanwhile, there has been a sharp decline in public support for Russia from once-friendly European nations like Greece (69% to 30%), Hungary (45% to 25%), and Italy (38% to 14%). However, Russia is still seen favourably in developing nations. This comprises 68% of responders in Francophone Africa, 62% in Southeast Asia, and 75% in South Asia. In fact, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, India, and Vietnam all maintain favourable public perceptions of Russia in spite of the 2022 invasion ([Lewsey 2022](#)).

To sum up, both the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war highlight the significant role of Social Media during international crises and how they can affect public opinion, even though they manifest in a different manner. In both of these cases, there has been a widespread information warfare, where both state and non-state actors actively use Social Media platforms like TikTok and X, in an effort to promote their interests and their own narratives, which in turn could lead to the spread of propaganda and fake news. One could also argue that the governments involved are using Social Media in a similar way, trying to gain sympathy from all around the world and reach international audiences, or showcase the atrocities and crimes committed by the opposing side. In most of these cases, users come across emotionally charged imagery and language to humanize one side and dehumanize the opposition, while Social Media algorithms amplify this content.

Another important development that both of these cases have in common is the rise of citizen journalism, where civilians have been documenting content of the conflicts in real time and sharing it across different Social Media platforms, using hashtags

such as #StandWithUkraine or #FreePalestine. Tsakiris (2022) claims that soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, this conflict started being referred to as the first “TikTok war”, given the degree to which Ukrainian citizens were posting their experiences of the war on various platforms like TikTok, X, Facebook, etc. On certain occasions, even before media outlets arrived, civilians had already reported the view from the ground on millions of people on the internet, in a very moving and successful manner (Tsakiris 2022). Similarly, Palestinian people have used Social Media in an effort to show the world the view from the ground, especially during times of a complete internet blackout in the Gaza Strip, imposed by the Israeli government. Regular citizens, namely those with a smartphone and an eSIM internet connectivity, stepped in by recording and uploading images and videos of the current situation that would otherwise remain unknown to the rest of the world (Al-Hajj 2024). Through these efforts, attention from all over the world is garnered, international solidarity movements are created and mobilized, while stories that would otherwise go undetected gain the visibility they deserve.

There are, however, some important differences. One of the most evident ones is the way in which each side tries to gain sympathy from users. For example, Palestinian content often emphasizes civilian suffering, while Ukrainian media highlights resistance and leadership. More specifically, a study conducted by Amer (2023), focusing on tweets posted on Palestine Info Center’s account (@palinfoen), showed that the majority of these posts focused on “Israeli attacks”, covering a range of topics pertaining to Israeli aggression. Another important category was that of “Palestinian issues”, which focuses on internal Palestinian issues, resistance actions, and Hamas statements. Amongst the most frequently used words on those tweets were terms such as “Israeli”, “Palestinians”, and “Jerusalem” (Amer 2023). In order to keep people engaged with their cause, Ukraine tries to showcase the human side of the war, even after years of the original attack in February 2022. Karalis (2024) claims that the first method to achieve this is through continuous footage captured on the ground, while the second method is creating enduring relationships with a global audience via social media. Perez & Nair (2022) also claim that Ukraine has publicly embraced social media as a means to reach a wider audience and rally support for its resistance initiatives.

When it comes to disinformation, it is argued that Western platforms have acted against Russian disinformation, while less moderation was observed on content about the Israel-Palestine conflict. According to Human Rights Watch (2022), social media and messaging services have taken a number of actions since February 2022, as a reaction to the conflict in Ukraine. The majority of these actions have been directed at combating damaging disinformation, labelling or blocking state-sponsored or state-affiliated media, or implementing additional safety precautions. Some of these measures are only applicable within the EU, while others are applicable worldwide, and some are specific to Russia or Ukraine (Human Rights Watch 2022). Pierri et al. (2023) found that, as a consequence of the policies implemented by social media

platforms, there was a significant drop in Russian disinformation and propaganda online. The study also showed that posts including links to Russian propaganda sites and other dubious sources are generally more likely to be deleted than posts that are merely random. However, just 8–15% of Facebook posts and tweets that were linked to Russian propaganda and unreliable news websites were taken down, indicating that misinformation did not entirely vanish from these platforms (Pierri, et al. 2023). Moreover, while platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok have banned Hamas accounts on paper, in reality, they have had difficulties managing real-time crises. These platforms often rely on automatic systems in order to flag hazardous terms or phrases, considering the vast amount of content that is posted online daily, possibly tens of millions of posts every day. Nevertheless, existing algorithms are infamously flawed; they do not have a human comprehension of the subtleties, cultural contexts, and meanings associated with word associations or patterns, which in turn leads to a significant drop in recognizing and removing possibly harmful content (Chin-Rothmann 2023). More specifically, claims that social media platforms, such as Meta, are unable to moderate content in Hebrew, due to the “absence of translation” and the lack of human reviewers with an expertise on the Hebrew language (Paul 2024), as well as the cases of online censorship of Palestinian voices, as was documented by events such as content removal, suspension or deletion of accounts and/or inability to interact with content (Carbonaro 2023), show that despite the efforts to prevent and monitor misinformation during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by social media platforms, these efforts tend to fall short.

Lastly, it is important to note that the Russia-Ukraine war features a more centralized state propaganda effort, because of the fact that Russia is using methods such as troll farms and censorship to promote its own narrative both internally and externally, something that is not evident by the other side (Silverman and Kao 2022). Despite these differences, however, both conflicts showcase how Social Media can shape narratives, intensify global engagement, and, in turn, influence public opinion on these crises.

6. Discussion, limitations, and suggestions for further research

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict develops, the impact of Social Media and propaganda on shaping public opinion cannot be overlooked. In the wake of the conflict, platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok were flooded with fake news, manipulated images, repurposed content, and graphic videos, posted by either side or by third parties, in an effort to advance certain narratives.

The Israeli government has been using Social Media as a means to highlight security threats, justify its military actions, and gain solidarity and support from people all around the world. Similarly, Hamas, despite platform restrictions, managed, briefly, to utilize Social Media to show the opposing side's aggression and to gain sympathy

regarding the Palestinian cause. The aim of both sides, however, is to attract support on an international level, justify their actions, discredit their opponent, and generate solidarity or outrage among audiences worldwide.

In addition to state actors, ordinary users, often unintentionally, have shared misinformation without verifying its credibility. Foreign governments, including those of Iran, Russia, and China, have also exploited the conflict to spread disinformation that supports their strategic interests and challenges Western influence in the region. The algorithmic structure of Social Media and its tendency to prioritize engagement over accuracy lead to inflammatory content being pushed to the forefront, amplifying extremist views. This, in turn, has contributed to the rise of both antisemitic and Islamophobic sentiments all around the world. The effects of this polarization are not only limited to the digital world, but they have also manifested in real life through offline violence, protests, or even hate crimes.

The comparative analysis of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Russia-Ukraine war reveals significant parallels in the strategic use of Social Media to promote propaganda, construct national narratives, and influence both domestic and international audiences. Despite differing geopolitical histories, both conflicts are marked by the rapid dissemination of misinformation, fake news, and emotionally charged content, often designed to evoke strong reactions, polarize global discourse, and obscure objective understanding. In both cases, state and non-state actors leverage digital platforms not only to present their side of the story but also to undermine their opponents through the spread of unverified or deliberately distorted information. This creates a complex media environment in which discerning truth from falsehood becomes increasingly challenging for the average user, further deepening political and ideological divides.

Despite the lack of precise literature clearly documenting the exact extent to which fake news and propaganda have influenced public opinion on the Israel-Palestine conflict, the preceding analysis suggests that their influence is likely to be proven critical. Existing research suggests that the dissemination of misinformation and propaganda material can have a significant impact on shaping public opinion, indicating the need for further qualitative or quantitative research in this area. At the same time, the frequency and intensity with which this false information is shared on Social Media platforms, possibly decisively changing the views of many users, especially those of young people, raises the need for developing AI algorithms in order to control the information disseminated online, especially by popular Social Media platforms like X, Facebook, and TikTok. This also constitutes a broad research field for further investigations.

This analysis is constrained by the limited availability of real-time, peer-reviewed studies that directly measure the influence of misinformation on public opinion during the current phase of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Much of the current

evidence is derived from journalistic sources, NGO reports, and early-stage research. Additionally, the complex political sensitivities surrounding the conflict can affect access to accurate data, while platform transparency around moderation efforts remains inconsistent. Further qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of disinformation, particularly across different demographics and geographic regions.

Future research should aim to empirically assess the specific impact of misinformation and propaganda related to the Israel-Palestine conflict on public opinion across different populations. This includes comparative studies that examine how misinformation affects attitudes toward the conflict among users from various political, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. There is also a pressing need for interdisciplinary research that explores the psychological mechanisms behind the spread and reception of fake news, particularly on emotionally charged topics such as war and human rights. Moreover, future investigations should evaluate the effectiveness of existing moderation strategies implemented by major platforms like X, Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram. Developing and testing advanced content moderation tools, potentially driven by AI, can help address the rapid spread of harmful or misleading narratives. Such tools should be transparent, adaptable across languages and cultural contexts, and guided by international ethical standards. Without a clearer understanding of how misinformation shapes beliefs and behaviours, efforts to combat digital propaganda will remain reactive and insufficient.

In conclusion, the Israel-Palestine conflict is clear proof that, while Social Media can serve as a powerful instrument for information-sharing, awareness-building, and digital solidarity, it can also function as a weapon for spreading propaganda and harmful stereotypes and inciting division. The ease with which misleading content can be created and circulated highlights the urgent need for content moderation, transparent algorithmic governance, and public education initiatives aimed at improving media literacy. Without such safeguards, the manipulation of digital information will continue to distort public understanding, inflame tensions, and obstruct efforts toward meaningful dialogue and peacebuilding.

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