

The Role of Social Media in Shaping Narratives and Perceptions in the Israeli-Gaza Conflict that Escalated on October 2023.

Princewilliams Odera Oguejiofor

Department of Political Science,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka,
Anambra State, Nigeria.
po.oguejiofor@unizik.edu.ng

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8008-4467>

Abstract: *The role of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions during international conflicts has become increasingly significant in the digital age. This article critically examines this phenomenon through the lens of the escalating Israeli-Gaza conflict since October 2023. Utilizing theoretical frameworks such as agenda-setting theory and framing theory, the article explores how social media platforms enable the rapid dissemination of information, multimedia content, and user-generated narratives, thereby influencing public discourse surrounding the conflict. The analysis delves into the dynamics of misinformation and disinformation on social media, underscoring their potential to distort perceptions and polarise viewpoints. Case studies illustrate how both Israeli and Palestinian actors strategically leverage social media to amplify their narratives, garner support, and counter opposing perspectives. The findings highlight social media's transformative impact on conflict narratives but also the profound challenges posed by the spread of misinformation and lack of robust fact-checking mechanisms. Recommendations include promoting media literacy, strengthening fact-checking efforts, fostering dialogue, encouraging responsible social media use, supporting independent journalism, and facilitating cross-sector collaboration.*

Keywords: Social Media, Israeli-Gaza Conflict, International Conflicts, Hamas.

Introduction

Social media are those web-based applications and platforms that allow users to generate, share, and engage with content, as well as participate in social networking. It includes a broad spectrum of websites and applications that enable communication, collaboration, and the spread of information among individuals, groups, and organisations. These platforms are engineered to cultivate virtual communities and networks where users can interact, articulate their thoughts, and share ideas, viewpoints, and experiences. The evolution of social media platforms has been swift, with constant introductions of new features and functionalities. Notable examples of these platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Reddit, among others. Each of these platforms is designed to cater to specific user needs and preferences, while also adapting to emerging trends and advancements in technology.

In the current digital age, social media platforms have become powerful tools for shaping narratives and perceptions during international conflicts. The commonness of social media has transformed the way information is spread, consumed, and interpreted, particularly in the context of ongoing geopolitical tensions (Bunse, 2021; Brooks, 2022). The Israeli-Gaza conflict, which escalated in October 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2023), serves as a compelling case study to examine the role of social media in influencing narratives and perceptions surrounding international disputes.

The conflict has resulted in significant casualties, with the latest death toll standing at 32,943 Palestinians and 1,139 people killed in Israel since October 7. The conflict has also seen extensive damage to infrastructure in Gaza, with more than half of Gaza's homes destroyed or damaged (Al Jazeera, 2023).

The Israeli-Gaza conflict is a longstanding and complex issue, characterised by deep-rooted historical, political, and religious underpinnings (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). The conflict has been marked by cycles of violence, cease-fires, and attempts at peace negotiations, with both sides presenting divergent narratives and perspectives. In this volatile context, social media has become a battleground for shaping public opinion, disseminating information (and misinformation), and rallying support for various causes (Bunse, 2021; Brooks, 2022).

Moreover, social media platforms have been used for digital diplomacy, where state and non-state actors engage in public communication and advocacy efforts to shape the international narrative of the conflict (Manor and Segev, 2020; The Washington Post, 2023; The Diplomat, 2023). For example, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and Hamas in previous altercations have both used X (formerly Twitter) to communicate their positions and actions to international audiences during periods of military escalation (BBC News, 2012; The Guardian, 2012).

This article critically analyses the role of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions during the Israeli-Gaza conflict since October 2023. By examining theoretical frameworks, the dynamics of misinformation and disinformation, and specific case studies, this research seeks to shed light on the intricate interplay between social media, conflict narratives, and public perceptions.

Theoretical Framework

The role of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions during international conflicts is a complex and multifaceted issue. To understand the role of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions during international conflicts, it is essential to establish a theoretical foundation. This study is anchored on the agenda-setting theory and framing theory.

Agenda-Setting Theory, as proposed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, posits that mass media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion by influencing the salience of certain issues and topics (Mass Communication Talk, 2012). This theory is particularly germane in the context of the Israeli-Gaza conflict, where social media platforms have been instrumental in amplifying specific narratives and perspectives.

Social media has emerged as a potent tool for agenda setting in conflicts such as the Israeli-Gaza conflict. Research indicates that social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, have been leveraged by various actors to underscore or downplay certain aspects of the conflict (Prevail Partners, 2023; The New Humanitarian, 2024; Shehata, 2024; Zellmi, 2023; The Loop, 2023). Palestinian activists have utilised social media to challenge the dominant Israeli narrative and draw attention to issues such as human rights violations and the plight of civilians in Gaza (Aouragh, 2016).

Moreover, social media has facilitated the rapid dissemination of information, both accurate and inaccurate, during periods of heightened tensions or military escalations. A study by Kuntsman and Stein (2015) analysed how social media platforms were used to spread propaganda and misinformation during the 2014 Gaza war, thereby shaping public perception of the conflict.

It is crucial to note that agenda setting through social media is a complex process influenced by various factors, including the algorithms used by platforms, the reach and influence of different actors, and the ability of users to critically evaluate and verify information (Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang, and Bae, 2014; Luo, Burley, Moe, and Sui, 2019). However, there is a burgeoning body of evidence suggesting that social media has played a significant role in shaping public discourse and perception surrounding the Israeli-Gaza conflict (Prevail Partners, 2023; The New Humanitarian, 2024; Shehata, 2024; Zellmi, 2023; The Loop, 2023).

Framing Theory: The influence of social media on the Israeli-Gaza conflict extends beyond agenda-setting. It also plays a role in framing, which involves selecting and highlighting certain aspects of a perceived reality to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution. Erving Goffman's seminal work, "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience" (1974), provides a foundational understanding of how individuals and groups navigate and interpret their social realities. Goffman's theory posits that the 'frames' through which we perceive events are not merely passive windows but active constructs that shape our perception, cognition, and communication (Goffman, 1974).

In the digital age, social media platforms have become a fertile ground for framing processes, particularly in the context of protracted conflicts such as the Israeli-Gaza situation. These platforms enable various actors to craft and disseminate their preferred narratives, effectively setting the tone for how events are understood globally. For instance, during the recent escalations in the Israeli-Gaza conflict, social media has been instrumental in highlighting the humanitarian plight, with images and stories from Gaza reaching a worldwide audience, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (DiEM25, Communications 2023).

The power of social media in framing the conflict is multifaceted. On one hand, it democratizes information dissemination, allowing marginalised voices to be heard. On the other hand, it also serves as a battleground for competing narratives, where the framing of events can be strategically employed to garner international support, influence public opinion, and even sway political decisions (The Nation, 2021).

The framing of the Israeli-Gaza conflict on social media has shown a marked shift from traditional media coverage. Where mainstream outlets might offer a sanitised or one-dimensional portrayal, social media presents a more visceral and immediate depiction of the realities on the ground. This has led to a broader public understanding of the complexities and human cost of the conflict, challenging established narratives and prompting calls for change (The Nation, 2021).

However, the framing effect is not without its pitfalls. The same platforms that empower can also mislead. The rapid spread of misinformation and the lack of rigorous fact-checking mechanisms inherent in social media can distort public perception and exacerbate tensions (The Conversation, 2023). Thus, while social media frames can mobilise support and foster solidarity, they can also perpetuate biases and hinder conflict resolution efforts.

Goffman's Framing Theory underscores the transformative impact of social media on contemporary conflict narratives. As these digital platforms continue to shape the discourse, it is imperative for researchers, policymakers, and the public to critically engage with these frames, discerning between authentic representations and manipulative constructions. The challenge lies in leveraging the potential of social media to foster a more informed and empathetic global community, while mitigating the risks posed by its unregulated nature.

Features of the Social Media as an Influential Tool in International Conflicts

The advent of social media has revolutionised the way information is disseminated and narratives are shaped, particularly in the context of international conflicts. Social media has become a critical platform for influencing perceptions during international conflicts. Several key aspects of social media contribute to its influential role:

1. **Rapid Information Dissemination:** Social media platforms facilitate the instantaneous sharing of information, images, and videos related to conflicts. This instantaneous sharing of information, images, and videos related to conflicts allows narratives to spread quickly, reaching global audiences and shaping perceptions as events unfold (Rojecki and Meraz, 2016). For instance, during the Arab Spring, social media played a pivotal role in disseminating information about the protests and government responses, thereby shaping global perceptions of the events (Howard et al., 2011).
2. **Multimedia Content:** Social media platforms support various forms of multimedia content, including text, images, videos, and live streams. The ability of social media platforms to support various forms of multimedia content, including text, images, videos, and live streams, adds a new dimension to conflict narratives. This multimedia nature facilitates the creation and propagation of compelling narratives that resonate with audiences on emotional and visual levels (Hootsuite, 2024). For example, the use of images and videos during the Black Lives Matter movement amplified the narrative and elicited strong emotional responses from audiences worldwide.
3. **User-Generated Content:** Social media empowers individuals, organizations, and governments to create and share content directly with their audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. This democratization of information flow allows for diverse narratives to emerge and compete for public attention (Hootsuite, 2024). For instance, during the 2019 Hong Kong protests, user-generated content played a crucial role in disseminating information about the protests and police responses, thereby shaping global perceptions of the events.
4. **Network Effects:** The interconnected nature of social media platforms amplifies the reach and impact of narratives. Content can rapidly spread through sharing, retweeting, and reposting, potentially influencing public opinion and shaping perceptions on a global scale (Iansiti, 2020). For example, the #MeToo movement spread rapidly on social media, leading to a global conversation about sexual harassment and assault.
5. **Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles:** Social media algorithms and user preferences can create echo chambers and filter bubbles, where individuals are primarily exposed to narratives that align with their existing beliefs and perspectives. This phenomenon can reinforce existing biases and polarise perceptions surrounding conflicts (Arguedas, Robertson, Fletcher, and Nielsen, 2022). For instance, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media platforms were believed to have contributed to political polarization.

Social media plays a critical role in shaping narratives and perceptions during international conflicts. Its ability to facilitate rapid information dissemination, leverage multimedia content, enable user-generated narratives, amplify through network effects, and contribute to the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles underscores its potential influence. However, it also raises important questions about the accuracy of information, the risk of misinformation, and the potential for manipulation, underscoring the need for media literacy and critical engagement with social media content.

Misinformation and Disinformation in Conflict Narratives

As social media platforms have become influential in shaping narratives and perceptions, the spread of misinformation and disinformation has emerged as a significant challenge during international conflicts. It is essential to explain and distinguish between these two concepts:

1. **Misinformation:** This refers to false or inaccurate information that is shared without the intent to deceive or cause harm. Misinformation can arise from honest mistakes, misunderstandings, or the rapid spread of unverified information (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation about the virus and its treatment proliferated on social media platforms, leading to confusion and panic (Ceylan, 2023).

2. **Disinformation:** On the other hand, disinformation involves the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or misleading information with the intention to deceive or cause harm. Disinformation campaigns are often orchestrated by state actors, non-state actors, or individuals with specific agendas or motives (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). For example, during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, disinformation campaigns on social media platforms were believed to have contributed to political polarization (Stanford News, 2022).

Both misinformation and disinformation can profoundly impact conflict narratives and public perceptions. They can fuel polarization, escalate tensions, undermine trust in reliable sources, and distort the understanding of complex issues (Tandoc, Lim, and Ling, 2018). Social media platforms, with their ability to rapidly disseminate information and leverage multimedia content, can inadvertently amplify the spread of misinformation and disinformation, making it challenging to distinguish fact from fiction (Brookings, 2018).

Addressing misinformation and disinformation requires a multifaceted approach involving fact-checking initiatives, media literacy education, and collaboration between social media platforms, governments, and civil society organizations (Brennen, Simon, Howard, and Nielsen, 2020). For instance, Facebook has implemented measures to combat misinformation, including reducing the distribution of misinformation, removing false information, informing people with additional context, and improving the quality of information on Facebook (Brookings, 2018).

Failure to combat these challenges effectively can undermine the integrity of narratives surrounding international conflicts and hinder efforts towards conflict resolution and peacebuilding. For example, misinformation and disinformation can increase people's exposure to risk and vulnerabilities, potentially leaving the needs of people affected by armed conflict or other violence unmet (International Committee of The Red Cross, 2023).

Social Media and the Israeli-Gaza Conflict

The Israeli-Gaza conflict, which escalated in October 2023, offers a compelling case study to examine the role of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions during international conflicts. Both sides have employed sophisticated social media strategies, leveraging multimedia content, influencers, and targeted messaging to shape perceptions and rally support. However, the spread of misinformation and disinformation has also been a significant challenge, with allegations of propaganda, false narratives, and manipulated content surfacing on both sides (AP News, 2023; Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2023).

Israeli Narratives on Social Media:

The Israeli government and its supporters have strategically utilised social media platforms to shape international perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This digital strategy primarily emphasises Israel's right to self-defence, the threat posed by militant groups such as Hamas, and the necessity of security measures. This narrative often emphasises several key points:

1. **Israel's Right to Self-Defence:** The Israeli government frequently underscores its right to self-defence, a principle recognised under international law (Jurist 2023). This narrative is particularly prominent in the context of threats posed by militant groups such as Hamas. The European Union, for instance, has affirmed Israel's right to self-defence within the framework of humanitarian and international law (Times of Israel, 2023a).

2. **Threat Posed by Hamas:** The threat posed by Hamas, a Palestinian Islamist political organization and militant group, is another recurring theme in Israeli narratives on social media. Hamas's cyber strategy and operations, for instance, have been identified as posing real and ongoing cyber threats, prioritizing espionage and information operations (Atlantic Council, 2023). Moreover, the RAND Corporation (2023) has highlighted the significant shift in the terrorist threat matrix due to the activities of Hamas.

3. **Need for Security Measures:** The Israeli government often highlights the necessity of security measures to protect its citizens. For example, in response to the threats posed by Hamas, Israel announced the completion of an enhanced security barrier around the Gaza Strip designed to prevent militants from infiltrating the country (AP News, 2023). However, these security measures have also been a subject of criticism and condemnation by the United Nations General Assembly (Times of Israel, 2023b).

4. **Humanizing Israeli Perspectives:** Social media platforms have been instrumental in humanizing Israeli perspectives and garnering international sympathy. Personal stories and visuals of Israeli civilians affected by rocket attacks are frequently shared on these platforms. For instance, during the Hamas incursion in October 2023, at least 40 people were killed and 779 were wounded in Israel (CNN, 2023). These personal narratives serve to highlight the human cost of the conflict on the Israeli side.

The Israeli government has been particularly active in disseminating its narrative on social media platforms. For instance, during periods of heightened conflict, the Israeli government has launched extensive social media campaigns targeting key Western countries to garner support for its military responses against Hamas (Politico, 2023). These campaigns often feature graphic videos

and images depicting the impact of militant violence on Israeli civilians, thereby humanizing the Israeli perspective and eliciting international sympathy (Forbes Israel, 2021).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has thus become a digital battleground, with both sides using social media to shape public opinion and garner support. This has led to an intensification of the conflict online, revealing key insights for digital activists (DiEM25, 2023). However, the use of social media in this context has also raised concerns about the spread of misinformation and extremism.

It is obvious from the foregoing that the Israeli government and its supporters have effectively leveraged social media to advance their narratives and shape international perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the use of social media in this context is a double-edged sword, with the potential to both inform and misinform, unite and divide. As the conflict continues to play out both on the ground and online, the role of social media in shaping its trajectory will undoubtedly remain a critical area of focus.

Palestinian Narratives on Social Media:

On the other hand, Palestinian activists, journalists, and civilians have used social media to counter Israeli narratives and amplify their perspectives on the conflict. Narratives often highlight the disproportionate impact of Israeli military actions on Palestinian civilians, alleged human rights violations, and the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories. Social media has played a crucial role in disseminating visuals and eyewitness accounts from within Gaza, challenging mainstream media narratives and garnering international support for the Palestinian cause.

Social media has played a pivotal role in disseminating visuals and eyewitness accounts from within Gaza, thereby challenging mainstream media narratives and garnering international support for the Palestinian cause (Mohammed, 2024). Palestinian activists, journalists, and civilians have effectively utilised social media platforms to counter Israeli narratives and amplify their perspectives on the conflict. These narratives often underscore the disproportionate impact of Israeli military actions on Palestinian civilians, alleged human rights violations, and the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories.

It is noteworthy that the Israeli-Gaza conflict underscores the complex interplay between social media, narratives, and perceptions in international conflicts. The ability to shape narratives and influence public opinion has become a critical aspect of social media, especially in the context of international conflicts. However, the spread of misinformation and disinformation poses significant challenges, underscoring the need for critical engagement with social media content and robust fact-checking mechanisms. This highlights the importance of digital literacy and the need for more comprehensive efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation in the digital age. The ongoing conflict serves as a stark reminder of the power of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions, and the urgent need for mechanisms to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of information disseminated through these platforms.

Misinformation and Disinformation in the Israeli-Gaza Conflict

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas has been accompanied by a deluge of visual content on social media, making it challenging for global observers to discern authentic footage from misleading representations. Numerous authentic images and narratives have surfaced, yet they are often entangled with deceptive content. For instance, there have been unfounded assertions regarding the abduction of a senior Israeli officer, a fabricated BBC News report, and the circulation of outdated clips of Russian President Vladimir Putin with erroneous English subtitles (Associate Press, 2023).

A report by Associate Press (2023) reveals the following:

1. **Contrasting Videos:** In a post that went viral on X, a juxtaposition of two videos suggests a Palestinian blogger recovered miraculously from injuries within a day. However, the individuals in the videos are distinct, and the hospital footage predates the current conflict.
2. **Misattributed Military Presence:** In a post shared on X with the caption “HAPPENING NOW: Thousands of U.S. Marines Just Landed in Israel WW3 HIGH ALERT”, a video allegedly depicting U.S. Marines landing in Israel is actually from 2022, showing U.S. Army personnel arriving in Romania.
3. **Misconstrued Symbolism:** on Facebook, a user posted “The Black Flag has been raised over Razavi Shrine in Mashhad, Khorasan province, Iran, this is a call for war or vengeance.” But the fact is that the black flag hoisted at the Imam Reza shrine in Iran is not a call to arms but a symbol of mourning for lives lost in Gaza, bearing a Quranic verse offering solace.
4. **Misrepresented Speech:** A video that was shared on Instagram and TikTok, where one post garnered more than 223,000 likes, purported to show Kim Jong Un blaming President Joe Biden for the conflict is from 2020, with the current version featuring incorrect English captions. The video is old and the captions obviously do not match the speech in the video. The video and images are actually from an unrelated event in October 2020 celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Korean Workers Party

5. Fabricated Military Statement: A fabricated screenshot claiming to be from the Israeli military's Facebook page was shared on X, admitting to bombing a hospital in Gaza.
6. Outdated Political Statement: One user posted a video of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar on X with the caption "Qatar is threatening to create a global gas shortage in support of Palestine," the caption continued with, "If the bombing of Gaza doesn't stop, we will stop gas supply of the world." But the fact is that the Emir didn't make such a statement in the video, and the video is from 2017 and unrelated to current events in Gaza.
7. Falsified News Report: A clip claiming to be a BBC News report about Ukraine providing weapons to Hamas turned out to be a fabrication.
8. Misinterpreted Parachuting Event: Footage of parachuters landing in Cairo has been misattributed to Hamas militants in Israel by posts on X.
9. Altered Putin Videos: Videos of Vladimir Putin have been miscaptioned in English to falsely suggest he commented on the Israel-Hamas conflict.

The report emphasizes the importance of critical evaluation of social media content, especially during times of conflict.

Conclusion

The role of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions during international conflicts is undeniable. The Israeli-Gaza conflict, which escalated in October 7, 2023, serves as a poignant case study, highlighting the intricate dynamics at play. Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for disseminating information, framing narratives, and influencing public opinion on a global scale. Their ability to facilitate rapid information sharing, leverage multimedia content, and enable user-generated narratives has redefined the way conflicts are perceived and understood. However, the spread of misinformation and disinformation on these platforms poses significant challenges, threatening to distort the understanding of complex issues and fuel polarization.

The Israeli-Gaza conflict exemplifies how both sides have leveraged social media to amplify their respective narratives, counter opposing perspectives, and rally support. Israeli narratives often emphasise self-defence and security concerns, while Palestinian narratives highlight alleged human rights violations and the impacts of occupation. These divergent narratives compete for dominance on social media, shaping perceptions and influencing public opinion on a global scale. As social media continues to evolve and shape the information landscape, it is essential to recognise its profound impact on narratives and perceptions during international conflicts. By critically examining its role, addressing its challenges, and leveraging its potential for positive change, we can work towards a more informed and nuanced understanding of complex geopolitical issues, ultimately contributing to more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis and findings presented in this article, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The promotion of media literacy and critical thinking skills: Initiatives that educate individuals on how to critically evaluate information sources, identify misinformation and disinformation, and develop media literacy skills should be pursued in various schools. These efforts should target diverse audiences, including students, journalists, policymakers, and the general public.
2. The strengthening of fact-checking and content moderation efforts: Social media platforms should collaborate with independent fact-checking organizations, journalists, and experts to enhance their content moderation efforts. This can involve developing robust systems to flag and address misinformation and disinformation, as well as promoting credible sources of information.
3. The Fostering of dialogue and counter polarization: Efforts should be made to create platforms and spaces for constructive dialogue between conflicting narratives. This can involve facilitating discussions, amplifying voices that promote understanding and empathy, and countering the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles.
4. The Encouragement of responsible social media use: Governments, civil society organizations, and educational institutions should promote responsible and ethical social media use, emphasizing the importance of verifying information, respecting diverse perspectives, and avoiding the spread of harmful content.
5. Support for independent journalism and credible information sources: Initiatives that strengthen independent and credible journalism, as well as reliable information sources, should be supported. This can involve private funding, training, and promoting access to accurate and balanced reporting on international conflicts.
6. Collaboration across sectors: Addressing the challenges posed by social media in shaping conflict narratives requires collaboration between various stakeholders, including social media platforms, governments, civil society organizations, academia, and international bodies. By working together, comprehensive strategies and solutions can be developed and implemented effectively.

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