



Analyzing the Impact of Social Media on Public Perception of the Israeli-Hamas Conflict

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Abstract

The Israeli-Hamas conflict has been an ongoing and highly contentious issue, both regionally and globally, with significant consequences for the perception and understanding of the conflict's complexities. This study examined the impact of social media on public perceptions and attitudes towards the Israeli-Hamas conflict. The study adopted the Framing theory as a theoretical framework, and secondary data was sourced from Textbooks, journal articles newspapers, and magazines, the data collected were analyzed with content analysis. The findings indicated that information disseminated through social media channels influences the perception of the Israeli-Hamas conflict among the general public. The study concluded that Social media had a profound impact on public perception of the Israeli-Hamas conflict by amplifying diverse voices, the formation of echo chambers, and the rampant spread of misinformation, arousing emotional responses and the influence of user-generated content all contributed to polarized and biased viewpoints. The study, therefore, recommended that; to foster a more informed public perception, individuals must critically evaluate the content they engage with on social media platforms and seek out diverse perspectives and reliable sources of information. Additionally, platforms should implement policies meant to curtail the spread of misinformation and promote productive and balanced discussions.

Keywords: Information Dissemination, Israeli-Hamas conflict, Political Communication, Public Perception, Social Media, User-Generated Content

1 Introduction:

In recent years, social media platforms have become powerful tools for shaping public opinion and influencing global narratives. Particularly during contentious conflicts, such as the Israeli-Hamas conflict, social media's influence on public perception and discourse has become increasingly significant. This paper examined the impact of social media on the public perception of the Israeli-Hamas conflict, highlighting the consequences of this digital information age.

The Israeli-Hamas conflict, also known as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a long-standing territorial and political dispute between Israel and the Palestinian people. Spanning several decades, the conflict has been marked by violence, mutual distrust, and multiple attempts at negotiation and peace agreements (Li, & Xu, 2017).

One of the key aspects of social media's impact on public perception is the amplification of voices. Previously, mainstream media outlets had a monopoly on reporting and shaping the narrative of the conflict. However, social media has provided a platform for individuals directly affected by the conflict, activists, and organizations to share their stories and perspectives. This has given voice to those who may have been marginalized or underrepresented in traditional media, allowing for a more diverse and nuanced understanding of the conflict. Moreover, social media allows for the rapid and global spread of information, enabling individuals to stay informed in real time. This has led to a more immediate and continuous understanding of the conflict, with users being updated on the latest developments, news, and images related to the conflict. It has allowed individuals from all over the world to access information and engage in discussions, shaping their perception of the conflict and influencing public opinion.

Social media has also had an emotional impact on public perception, the widespread sharing of images, videos, and personal stories of individuals affected by the conflict has evoked strong emotional responses from users. Harrowing images of civilian casualties, particularly children, have garnered significant attention and generated empathy, influencing how the conflict is viewed and driving public support for one side or the other. However, this increased emotional connection can sometimes overshadow a comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical complexities and historical context of the conflict. Misinformation and propaganda also spread rapidly on social media, which can further distort public perception and reinforce preexisting biases.

2. Literature Review

There have been several empirical studies carried out in the subject area, for instance; In a study, Zeitzoff (2018) examined how International Public Support via media influences conflict dynamics. Employing disaggregated data set drawn from social media sources to interrogate the behavior of Israel and Hamas during the 2012 Gaza conflict, utilizing Bayesian structural vector autoregression to measure how Israel's and Hama's actions correspond to the shifts in International Public Support. The result indicated that shifts in public support decrease conflict intensity, specifically for Israel. In another study, Ukka and Kombate (2019) examined the media effect on media limited effect theory, and the media non-limited effect theory to understand its impact on political will through media into conflict management in the Israel and Palestine conflict. Employing a survey technique and convenient sampling method; the findings revealed that the theory's limited effect of media is proved. Media is swayed by political leaders in the briefings in times of conflict. Contrary to these views Zahoor (2021) investigated the dynamic pattern of traditional media's coverage of the long-standing conflict in the wake of new communication technologies through the analysis of existing literature. The findings indicated that traditional news organizations have adopted social networking platforms as a business model to cover the Palestine-Israel conflict.

However, Dajani (2017) examined the role of media in shaping public perception of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, particularly comparing the coverage in the United States and Arab media channels the findings on framing of the conflict suggested that: media outlets regularly frame conflicts in a way that influences public perceptions. Through careful selection of headlines, subjective reporting, and selection of images, the media can shape how the conflict is perceived; on the influence on public opinion. The finding revealed that media coverage influences public opinion by shaping attitudes, beliefs, and emotions surrounding the conflict; on the role of social media. The findings revealed that the rise of social media has further intensified the impact of the media on public perception of the Israeli-Hamas conflict. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), El-Richani and Stremlau (2015). Investigated how

the U.S. media outlets framed the 2014 Gaza war and its impacts on the Public Perception of the conflict. The findings indicated that the U.S. media outlets had the intention to frame the conflict as a conflict between two sides instead of a conflict with different Perspectives. Furthermore, they concentrated on violence and military actions rather than the major political issues and historical contests, again, there was a lack of nuanced view of the conflict with less focus and emphasis on the human cost of the conflict. In another study, Ben-David and Fernandez (2016) analyzed the ways that overt hate speech and covert discriminatory practices were disseminated on Facebook despite its official policy prohibition of hate speech. They contend that hate speech and discriminatory practices are both explained by users' motivations and actions but by a network of connectivity between the platform's policy, its technological accessibility, and the communicative ability of operators. Similarly, Zahor (2021) examined the changing pattern of traditional media's reporting of longstanding conflict in the era of new communication technologies through the evaluation of extant works. The Findings revealed that traditional news organizations have adopted social networking platforms as a business model to report the Palestine-Israeli conflict. It further revealed that the traditional news channels employ the new media because of its cheapness and quick outreach to the populace

In another study, Lariscy, (2017) utilizing a survey experiment examined the impact of visual media framing on public perception of conflict, specifically the way that the visuals are employed to Frame the narratives and influence/control public opinion. The findings revealed that the use of visual framing can create a significant impact on public perceptions of the Israel-Palestine conflict. It further revealed that visuals that present the conflict as black and white with clear 'good guy and bad guy' have the probability of escalating the violence. On the contrary, the visual that represents the conflict as more complicated and nuanced can progress to more inclusive and well-informed perceptions. However, Zeitzoff (2017) investigated the role of social media in conflict using four interrelation points as a theoretical framework. The findings revealed that social media does not only serve as a source of information but also changes the data available to the conflict actors, thus, molding the conflict itself.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted the Framing theory as the theoretical framework of analysis. The theory examined how media outlets select, highlight, and present certain aspects of an issue, manipulating how the public perceives and understands that issue. Entman's article on framing theory (1993:52) provides a comprehensive and widely cited theoretical framework for understanding how media frames shape public perception. The central idea proposed by Entman is that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more outstanding in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation".

Applying framing theory to the Israeli-Hamas conflict, media channels have the power to frame the conflict in various ways, accentuating certain aspects while moderating others, and thereby persuading the public's perception and understanding of the situation. Media framing comprises using exact language, imagery, and narrative methods to present the conflict from a particular viewpoint or to induce emotional responses from the audience. For instance, media channels may structure the conflict by emphasizing the acts of violence committed by one side while disregarding the underlying historical context or political factors. This framing can shape the public's perception of the conflict, possibly leading to biased attitudes and limited understanding among the audience. Framing theory also contemplates the role of media gatekeepers, who make decisions about which information to include or omit from news coverage. These gatekeepers can shape public perception through their choices, determining what aspects of the conflict are highlighted or ignored, ultimately influencing the audiences' understanding and beliefs about the Israeli-Hamas conflict.

3. Materials and Method: The study relied on secondary qualitative data from textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, American University websites, and magazines. Data generated were analyzed with Content analysis.

4. Results and Discussion:

The study found that media coverage significantly impacts public perception of the Israeli-Hamas conflict. U.S. media, in particular, often aligns with Israeli and American government narratives, while international media tends to emphasize the humanitarian impact on Palestinian civilians. The language used in media coverage also plays a

critical role, with terms like "apartheid" and "genocide" being largely absent from U.S. media, despite their use by international human rights organizations.

Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter have also significantly shaped public perception. The rapid spread of information, combined with the barriers to fact-checking and the presence of misinformation, has led to a fragmented and polarized understanding of the conflict. This has been particularly evident among younger generations, who increasingly turn to social media for news.

The Impact of Media Perception on the Israeli-Hamas Conflict

The media play a significant role in the way the masses perceive the world around them and how they infer important international events including conflict and war (Minges, 2023). According to Prof. Elise Labott as cited in (Minges, 2023) since the Hamas tragic attack on Israel, on October 7, 2023, the media has been agog, with headlines for several weeks and the media still cover personal stories about individual hostages. However, the attacks and Hama's character as a terrorist group have been hidden by the reporting of Palestinian fatalities suffered in Gaza. The conflict has been disastrous and cruel to everyone but the US media underreported it, since they are crisis-oriented and reported the war play-by-play as contrary to presenting a clearer and wider image of the impact of the conflict (Minges, 2023).

American reportage of the military operation tends toward Israeli and American government storylines, sometimes to the detriment of efficaciously representing Palestinian perceptions. They report the figure of Palestinian casualties with a caveat that the figure comes from the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza, to place doubt on its legitimacy. However, several news outlets initially accused Israel for the explosion at Gaza's Al-Ahli hospital on October 17, 2023. This perception swiftly changed their minds, when Israel and the US blamed an errant Palestinian rockets even though tiny evidence was tendered to the media. They left the audience with the notion that the conflict was highly complicated and cumbersome to comprehend.

Another argument is the language employed in the US media. 'Words' like ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and genocide despite being defined by International Human Rights Organizations, are not included in their frontline media since they are words defined by International Law and owing to their political volatility. Furthermore, there is an absence of condemnation of the deaths of journalists mostly from the Israeli retaliatory strikes; these actions have drawn criticism from about 750 journalists from different news organizations, comprising Los Angeles Times Reuters, the Boston Globe, and Washington Post C+C signing an open letter condemning Israeli's killing of reporters in Gaza and disparaging the war coverage in Western media. The signatories contend that the use of exact words such as apartheid and ethnic cleansing to portray Israeli's treatment of Palestinians emphasizes the double standard in reporting Labott cited in (Minges, 2023).

The International media channels regularly provided more variation of perspectives, often emphasizing the humanitarian impacts on the Palestinian citizens. These channels show a greater ability to use the terms that the US media avoid using and are more direct in criticizing Israel's actions and policies. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) for instance, has been sternly criticized for being perceived as anti-Israeli bias, including describing Hamas as Militants as against terrorists and interviewing and hosting guests who applaud Hamas's attacks. This generally and often time essential terminology in international coverage portrays a minor conservative approach to conflict in American media. Some of the US media channels' choice of stories to cover in conflict and what videos and photos to present in their coverage influence public opinion. Framing, selection of stories, and the use of visual media, and news channels have intensified some aspects of the conflict. The coverage can frame the history of the conflict, by choosing some stories and photos/images over others, the media can influence the audience positively or negatively by the way the audience views the stories and images presented. For instance, the coverage of the October 7 attack generated a lot of sympathy for Israelis, the present emphasis on the Palestinian civilian casualties and rapid humanitarian crisis in Gaza has generated strong sympathy from the public, including calls for more humanitarian aid and a ceasefire. Again, what the media decides not to report can be more impact than what it reports. Excluding some events or perspectives and facts can twist public understanding of the conflict and lead to a narrowed view (one-sided view). This supposed bias can diminish public trust in media channels. This will invariably impact the public intake of news and the credibility of its sources.

Furthermore, the Israel-Hamas conflict has generated a lot of attention from social media users like Tik-Tok, Instagram, and Twitter who were posting and making videos about their perception of the conflict. Media channels have disseminated a lot of contents and these include breaking news updates and how the social media is influencing how the public perceives the conflict. Social media has greatly swayed public views on the Israel-Hamas conflict, influencing both their views and comprehension. This involves a combination of content creation, the barriers of misinformation, and changing generational perceptions. Again, there is also a decrease trust in the mainstream news channels; compelling people to seek alternative sources and social media for information. The outcomes have been fragmented and falsely polarized knowledge of the conflict is manipulated/impacted by both the platform, they accessed and the content the people consume.

In recent times there have been changes in how young Americans viewed Israel and how the situation of Palestinian civilians is been showcased in social media. Social media is very critical to youths' news and platforms, for instance, TikTok shows content to users based on their interests, which can embellish the existing perceptions. The flooding of information including misinformation, on platforms such as further makes it cumbersome/complicated for users to separate the truth from the Imaginary. This is further compounded by the dynamism in platforms and moderation policies. Social media has been a fertile ground for disseminating false information regarding conflict. Most times individuals post and circulate information and stories about conflict they know much about, false and misinformation is capable of truncating or jeopardizing the present situation (relating), worsening the political and social gaps. This is intensified by the vulnerable nature of social media content and its inability to fact-check promptly. Some of the unverified graphic images and videos are widely displayed on social media platforms leading to confusion and dissemination of hatred. Some of the media experts in Aljazeera accused Western coverage of Israel's war on Gaza as bias; experts and journalists who spoke to Aljazeera said the systematic bias in support of Israel is “damaging” the authenticity of the frontlines news agencies in the minds of Arabs and others.

One Sided Account

On that tragic day of the 7th October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched a horrific attack on the military posts and communities in Southern Israel, killing over 1,400 Israelis and holding more than 200 hostages captive in Gaza; on that same day the Israeli retaliated by bombarding Gaza killing more than 8,000 people of which about 40 percent were children. This bombardment was catastrophic, destroying health facilities in Gaza, it also disconnected fuel, water, and food supplies. An action that may likely incur sanctions under international humanitarian law. The Western newspapers reported in detail the pains of Israeli families, while Israel did not grant foreign journalists access to Gaza consistently under-reporting the critical assessment of the story. The coverage of Israel is not always the same as that of Gaza. (El-Khodary, 2023). El-Khodary in an interview with Aljazeera (2023) was of the view that the Western media, reported Hamas as a terrorist group while they are reporting the actions of Israelis as self-defense. Mounzer (2023) a Lebanese writer and critic told Aljazeera in an interview that all these unsubstantiated claims like Hamas fighters raping hundreds of Israeli women an attempt to gather public support for Israel's military brutality, all in the name of retaliatory attacks. However, BBC has used words like massacre, slaughter, and atrocities when describing Israel's bombardment (Aboualouf, 2023). Some of the journalists on the Western channels may tend to report the actual story but they are constrained for fear of losing their jobs if they speak against their network (Pro-Israel bias) (Maghribi, 2023). According to Maghribi, journalists who have not been reporting on the conflict have been relieved of their jobs, for actions that show empathy with the rich in Gaza. A case in point was Michael Eisen a Jewish journalist who lost his job for capturing a headline on X (formerly Twitter) from the US news website. Furthermore, when referring to the explosion at the al-Ahil hospital in Gaza City that killed hundreds of Palestinian civilians, most media channels are wary to emphasize that the cause of the blast is uncertain. But most of the mainstream media are quick to flash headlines of unverified reports of Hamas decapitating babies (The New Humanitarian, 2023).

Furthermore, social media has contributed to the polarization of public opinion. Users tend to follow and engage with like-minded individuals or communities, forming echo chambers where opposing viewpoints are rarely encountered or challenged. This can lead to the reinforcement of existing biases, hinder constructive dialogue, and deepen divisions in public opinion. For instance, a study by Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernandez (2016) demonstrated that social media networks, such as Twitter, contributed to the spread of misinformation during the 2014 Israeli-Hamas conflict. False narratives

and manipulated images circulated rapidly and shaped public perceptions based on incorrect information.

Also, social media platform amplifies Emotional Messaging: Advocacy groups and individuals intensify emotional messages relating to the Israeli-Hamas conflict through social media platforms. This practice can arouse strong emotional responses from users and influence public perception.

Key Findings:

The study revealed that social media significantly influenced public perception of the Israeli-Hamas conflict. The rapid dissemination of information, the amplification of diverse voices, and the creation of echo chambers all contribute to polarized and biased viewpoints. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and emotionally charged content on social media platforms intensifies these effects, leading to heightened emotional responses and a distorted understanding of the conflict.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Social media has a profound impact on public perception of the Israeli-Hamas conflict by amplifying diverse voices, providing immediate access to information, evoking emotional responses, and facilitating activism. However, it also contributes to polarization, the spread of disinformation, and the formation of echo chambers, which pose challenges to objective understanding and constructive dialogue.

To foster a more informed public perception, individuals must critically evaluate the content they engage with on social media and seek out diverse perspectives and reliable sources of information. Additionally, social media platforms should implement policies aimed at curbing the spread of misinformation and promoting balanced discussions.

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