

Marek GÓRKA 

Politechnika Koszalińska

marek\_gorka@wp.pl

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS THE DIMENSION OF CONTEMPORARY WAR

### ANALYSIS OF THE CONFLICT IN THE GAZA STRIP AFTER OCTOBER 7, 2023

#### ABSTRACT

Conflict in the Middle East, after October 7, 2023, has generated an unprecedented amount of visual material in cyberspace. The current war demonstrates how both sides of the conflict and their supporters share a common interest in presenting graphic content to elicit outrage or gain sympathy for their cause. This is understandable, but at the same time, it is important to reveal the true atrocities of the war, including those related to Hamas's actions on October 7 and the effects of the bombing of the Gaza Strip by Israeli forces. The problem arises when these materials are widely used, leading to a kind of race for increasingly drastic images. Videos and photos enable us to visualise topics that would otherwise be difficult to present. However, the challenge arises when it becomes almost impossible to distinguish between real and fake images.

**Keywords:** social media, disinformation, information warfare, Middle East conflict, digital communication, cybersecurity

## INTRODUCTION

The paper examines influence operations as a political tool. While it is not unique or new to say that states seek to influence the political development of other states through the use of various tools,<sup>1</sup> it is worth noting that the current arsenal of influence is much broader and more complicated due to the use of digital tools.<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons is the economic factor, as the costs of production and operation of conventional weapons are high compared to the costs of conducting cyber operations such as disruptions in communication or disinformation.<sup>3</sup> The second important reason for using these types of information activities is the difficulty in assigning responsibility for the incident to a specific entity. Moreover, despite existing suspicions, there is no possibility in international law to draw consequences against the perpetrators of such incidents.<sup>4</sup> Both factors provide a strong incentive to engage in influence operations.

Social media has revolutionised the production, distribution and reception of content, going hand in hand with the evolution of audience behaviour. It has transformed the traditional model of journalism and influenced the dynamics of political competition.<sup>5</sup> The imposition of a certain way of perceiving reality is also visible in narratives

<sup>1</sup> Y. Bu, J. Parkinson, P. Thaichon, "Influencer Marketing: Sponsorship Disclosure and Value Co-Creation Behaviour," *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, vol. 40, no. 7 (2022), pp. 854-870; L.-E.C. Ferm, P. Thaichon, "Value Co-Creation and Social Media: Investigating Antecedents and Influencing Factors in the U.S. Retail Banking Industry," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, vol. 61 (2021), pp. 114-135; X. Lin, P.R. Spence, K.A. Lachlan, "Social media and Credibility Indicators: The Effect of Influence Cues," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 63 (2016), pp. 264-271; B. Marr, "How Much Data Do We Create Every Day? The Mind-Blowing Stats Everyone Should Read," *Bernard Marr & Co*, 2022, at <https://bernardmarr.com/how-much-data-do-we-create-every-day-the-mind-blowing-stats-everyone-should-read>, 2 July 2023; A.H. Zadeh, M. Zolfagharian, C.F. Hofacker, "Customer-Customer Value Co-Creation in Social Media: Conceptualization and Antecedents," *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2019), pp. 283-302; E. Mayerhöffer, A. Heft, "Between Journalistic and Movement Logic: Disentangling Referencing Practices of Right-Wing Alternative Online News Media," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 8 (2022), pp. 1409-1430.

<sup>2</sup> X. Lin, P.R. Spence, "Others Share This Message, So We Can Trust It? An Examination of Bandwagon Cues on Organizational Trust in Risk," *Information Processing & Management*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2019), pp. 1559-1564; S. McKay, Ch. Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 3 (2021), pp. 703-717; S. Waisbord, "The Elective Affinity between Post-Truth Communication and Populist Politics," *Communication Research and Practice*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 17-34.

<sup>3</sup> J. Almäng, "War, Vagueness and Hybrid War," *Defence Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2019), pp. 189-204.

<sup>4</sup> J. Schroefl, S.J. Kaufman, "Hybrid Actors, Tactical Variety: Rethinking Asymmetric and Hybrid War," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 37, no. 10 (2014), pp. 862-880.

<sup>5</sup> C. Bockstette, "Jihadist Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques," *Marshall Center*, 20 December 2018, at <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/jihadist-terrorist-use-strategic-communication-management-techniques-0>, 29 May 2023; D. Freelon, C. Wells, "Disinformation as Political Communication," *Political Communication*, vol. 37,

about armed conflicts. Therefore, it is worth considering whether and how these platforms are becoming a new tool to support the war effort.

The second motivation for analysing this topic is to explore whether the ongoing armed conflict between Israel and Hamas is fuelling warfare in cyberspace or, perhaps, if the opposite is true. For example, Hamas's attack on Israel could have led to an intensification of activities in the online sphere. However, it is important to note that Hamas's aggression on October 7 was also supported by actions in cyberspace. As will be demonstrated later in the analysis, the concept of separate areas of competition is no longer valid, given the interpenetration and close connection of physical and virtual spaces.

Analysing contemporary armed conflicts in the age of social media is a significant challenge as it requires an understanding of the nature of information warfare – the course of which changes almost every hour. This raises the following research questions: what elements make the current conflict different from previous ones? Are we observing something qualitatively new, especially in the information space, or is it merely another iteration of previously studied phenomena?

In order to analyse the narratives of both sides of the conflict, content published on social media such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube was tracked. The article employs a vast amount of data analysis, including posts that dominated public discourse in the initial phase of the conflict between Israel and Hamas after October 7, 2023. The research method used in this study is content analysis, which refers to posts on various social media platforms. A key element of this method is the selection and classification of content identified as disinformation ("fake news") and its subsequent verification by news outlets. This process aims to describe the ways in which the parties to the conflict use social media to legitimise their actions and spread disinformation, as well as the impact of these actions on public perception.

After reviewing dozens of daily recordings on all the mentioned platforms, the question arises regarding the possibility of a full recording of all recordings. Therefore, the research challenge is to select specific content from – among the many – available video materials, numbered in thousands, not all of which may be accessible to the researcher. When analysing the most important and widely propagated narratives, it was found that one in four accounts on major social media platforms was likely fake. In the first days of the war, accounts were observed that could publish 700 posts in two days and generate hundreds of thousands of views.<sup>6</sup>

Considering these premises and the study's objectives, the analysis was based on content previously selected and classified as fake news that was published on leading

---

no. 2 (2020), pp. 145-156; S. Livingstone, "The Participation Paradigm in Audience Research," *The Communication Review*, vol. 16, no. 1-2 (2013), pp. 21-30; P. Masip, C. Ruiz-Caballero, J. Suau, "Active Audiences and Social Discussion on the Digital Public Sphere: Review Article," *Profesional de la información*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2019), pp. 1-41.

<sup>6</sup> "Israel-Hamas War Misinformation Is Everywhere: Here Are the Facts," *AP News*, 14 November 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-fact-check-e829d1dddc2dad0f5f99cf62ef353ad>, 29 January 2024.

social networks. The procedure involves the analysis of content recorded directly by the researcher in the first two months of the conflict, which was then verified by news outlets as “fake news” in the following months. The project implemented, therefore, seeks to carry out a credible content classification to describe the disinformation process in the case of the war in Gaza after October 7, 2023.

The analysis of the cases presented in the paper aims to show how the parties to the conflict use social media to legitimise their actions. This study continues previous work on the communication strategies of political actors in the era of digital globalisation, focusing on how political actors use the “hybrid media system” to create confusion and amplify distrust in the media. These activities aim to persuade citizens to adopt certain opinions or to reinforce their existing beliefs.<sup>7</sup> The aim is also to identify the main content published on digital platforms to understand the actions of the antagonistic parties in the context of the war. The article focuses primarily on the characterisation of visual disinformation, including photographs, video recordings and its impact on public perception. This study seeks to present the characteristics of disinformation and its dissemination in the context of the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

## SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY IN THE FACE OF CONFLICT

Platforms like Meta, YouTube and X theoretically prohibit openly expressing support for terrorist organisations or other dangerous groups. However, some individuals celebrate or express support for particular causes, which creates a significant challenge for tech companies. Two examples illustrate this complexity.<sup>8</sup> In one scenario, users may feel that their content has been wrongfully removed, raising questions about the fairness of such actions. They argue that discussing organisations like Hamas is crucial to free speech and that removing content can be seen as limiting discussion of controversial topics. Another example is the situation in 2021, when an event involving an Israeli incursion into a mosque was discussed on Instagram, Facebook and Meta, using the name Al-Aqsa for the temple. However, the term “Al-Aqsa” is also used by the Al-Aqsa Brigades – an organisation considered a dangerous group,<sup>9</sup> which has resulted in a general word filter being used in this case. The use of this tool, which dates back to the global war on terror, had unintended consequences nearly three decades later.

<sup>7</sup> A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, Oxford 2013, p. 36; Jr. E.C. Tandoc, Z.W. Lim, R. Ling, “Defining ‘Fake News’: A Typology of Scholarly Definitions,” *Digital Journalism*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2018), pp. 137-153; C. Wardle, “Fake News: It’s Complicated,” *Medium*, 16 February 2017, at <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79>, 29 January 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Th. Brewster, “Israel Has Asked Meta And TikTok To Remove 8,000 Posts Related To Hamas War,” *Forbes*, 14 November 2023, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2023/11/13/meta-and-tiktok-told-to-remove-8000-pro-hamas-posts-by-israel/>, 29 January 2024.

<sup>9</sup> J. Aliyev, “Social Media Companies Delete Posts Related to Jerusalem,” *AA*, 8 May 2021, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/social-media-companies-delete-posts-related-to-jerusalem/2233279>, 22 November 2023.

In the first weeks of the war, more than 450 people from the Palestinian community were arrested or interrogated for posting against the war or showing solidarity with Gazans on social media or WhatsApp groups. Moreover, these individuals were prosecuted for using quotes from the Qur'an or for writing messages such as "*Good morning, beautiful morning on October 7*" without realising what had happened that day.<sup>10</sup> These arrests targeted students, especially women, as well as lecturers, doctors, medical staff, journalists and human rights defenders. Israeli police released footage of the arrests, often recorded in their bedrooms, and then posted photos of them handcuffed with an Israeli flag in the background, suggesting they had already been charged. At the beginning of the war, more than 160 arrests were recorded. The police charged them with over 90 counts, citing anti-terrorism law.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, platforms may be required to adhere to certain security standards such as banning discussion of dangerous organisations or the promotion of terrorism-related content. This approach is designed to protect users from potential threats and prevent the spread of content that violates Community Guidelines.

However, the issues of political expression are much more complex in the context of social media. The matter becomes even more complicated given the existence of a broad pro-Palestinian diaspora and activist groups supporting Palestinians in many countries. Each of these groups seeks to express its support for the people of the Gaza Strip while avoiding praise for Hamas's terrorist activities.

Finding a balance between intervention and freedom of expression will be a major challenge for social media, especially in times of armed conflict. They must balance fighting disinformation with allowing users who are not well acquainted with the conflict to express their opinions. This is also illustrated by the frequently used phrase "from the river to the sea". Facebook and Instagram permit the use of this phrase, which – for some – represents a call for the liberation of Palestine, while for others it is an anti-Semitic slogan that implies a call for the end of the existence of the State of Israel. It is probably one of the most commonly used phrases during the current conflict.<sup>12</sup> However, regardless of the extent of censorship, it is impossible to fully control the vast amount of content published every day – especially during conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook," *Human Rights Watch*, 21 December 2023, at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metass-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>, 29 January 2024.

<sup>11</sup> "Civil Society Organisations Call for Tech Companies to Respect Palestinian Digital Rights in Times of Crisis," *Association for Progressive Communications*, 13 October 2023, at <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/civil-society-organisations-call-tech-companies-respect-palestinian-digital-rights-times-crisis>, 29 January 2024.

<sup>12</sup> B. Pietsch, "From the River to the Sea: Why a Palestinian Rallying Cry Ignites Dispute," *The Washington Post*, 14 November 2023, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/14/river-sea-free-palestine-meaning/>, 21 January 2024.

<sup>13</sup> R. Luscombe, "Meta Censors Pro-Palestinian Views on a Global Scale, Report Claims," *The Guardian*, 21 December 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/dec/21/meta-face-book-instagram-pro-palestine-censorship-human-rights-watch-report>, 21 January 2024.

Every time there is a major global event with wide-ranging effects that impacts the entire world, there is a wave of disinformation on the internet. Instagram, TikTok, X and other platforms are becoming arenas for political struggle, especially in the context of promoting narratives. Being able to evaluate social media content and put it in context is now more important than ever. Social media has become an integral part of the war arsenal, and the conflict in Gaza is prompting both sides to use these platforms to gain the upper hand, deny events, shift responsibility for tragedies onto the opponent and clearly indicate who the aggressor is.

Although it is a truism, it is worth emphasising that fake news is dangerous – especially on X (formerly Twitter), which has been an important source of news for the world for over a decade. Policymakers announced their decisions here and reviewers provided updates, building a sense of trust. The platform allowed access to real-time information and promoted posts by fact-checking journalists. However, nowadays, it is possible to buy verification, which allows the platform to promote anything that is posted, regardless of its veracity. Additionally, Elon Musk's lay-offs of most of the fact-checking staff have caused false information to spread out of control. In an era where access to information is crucial, this is especially dangerous – particularly in times of war, where false images can build narratives, fuel passions and mislead.

One reason for the rise in misinformation following Elon Musk's takeover of the platform is that users can now be paid based on the number of interactions generated by their posts. This creates a financial incentive to post controversial content, even if it is false. The algorithm on X promotes disinformation about the Israel-Hamas war, favouring posts from accounts that pay for the blue-check service, regardless of their owners. Under this system, accounts can receive payments, motivating them to create posts that are likely to elicit strong reactions and go viral. In the first month of the conflict, X claims to have identified and removed hundreds of Hamas-related accounts.<sup>14</sup>

Meta, the owner of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, announced that almost 800,000 shocking pieces of content in Hebrew and Arabic were removed in the first three days of the attack. This figure is significantly higher than the "tens of thousands" of pieces of content that, according to X's representatives, have been removed. Meta also stated that it has established a special operations centre with a team of experts.<sup>15</sup>

TikTok also plays an important role in building a narrative. This platform, widely used by teenagers and children, has a special obligation to protect its users under the Digital Services Act (DSA). Moderating TikTok can be particularly difficult because the platform relies primarily on video rather than subtitles and keywords. This makes it challenging to search for harmful content. To identify and remove dangerous

<sup>14</sup> J. Menn, "As False War Information Spreads on X, Musk Promotes Unvetted Accounts," *The Washington Post*, 8 October 2023, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/08/israel-hamas-disinfo-musk-twitter-x/>, 18 January 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Ch. McGreal, "The Language Being Used to Describe Palestinians Is Genocidal," *The Guardian*, 16 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/16/the-language-being-used-to-describe-palestinians-is-genocidal>, 18 January 2024.

recordings, one first needs to find them. Videos without subtitles or descriptions can easily escape moderators' attention.

Disinformation can spread around the world in seconds, which makes it mandatory for social media platforms to proactively remove false information. Therefore, the European Union's reaction to disinformation on platform X is understandable. Under the DSA, Commissioner Thierry Breton called on Elon Musk to immediately stop the spread of fake content on X, threatening consequences if he did not act. The European Commission has given 24 hours to remove propaganda content, disinformation posts and fake accounts associated with Hamas. This is the first serious test for the DSA, which obliges internet giants to combat harmful content under the threat of high fines for negligence.<sup>16</sup> As the violence in Israel and Gaza continued, the prevalence of 'fake news' on social media also increased. The EU has called on big tech companies to act urgently. In a letter on October 11, 2023 to Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, the EU Commissioner for Internal Market (Thierry Breton) urged the platform to curb disinformation more effectively by threatening sanctions.<sup>17</sup>

In response to the EU's warning about disinformation, X's board announced the reinforcement of the team responsible for social notes. Representatives of the platform emphasised that in crisis situations, its unique purpose in handling public conversations, sharing information and the free exchange of views is crucial.<sup>18</sup> X relies heavily on user-generated moderation called 'community notes', but increasing cases of misinformation demonstrate that this is not sufficient. Warnings for conflict-related content appear, on average, five hours after publication, while posts can spread globally in a matter of minutes. As a result, the damage is often already done before the warning is issued.

## ISRAELI HASBARA VS. PALESTINIAN NARRATIVE

The conflict in the Middle East has a long history. However, in recent years, a new dividing line has emerged. Social media has changed the nature of centuries-old conflicts, taking the clash between nations to a new level. Most people who follow today's events primarily use smartphones. For many individuals around the world, social media is their first source of information. Fake news and photos are spreading rapidly on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and X. The power and speed with

<sup>16</sup> M. Scott, "The EU's Online Content Rulebook Isn't Ready for Primetime," *Politico*, 14 February 2024, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-digital-services-act-dsa-thierry-breton/>, 16 February 2024.

<sup>17</sup> C. Burdeau, "EU Demands Musk Delete Harmful Content on Israel-Hamas War or Face Punishment," *Courthouse News Service*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.courthousenews.com/eu-demands-musk-delete-harmful-content-on-israel-hamas-war-or-face-punishment/>, 10 February 2024.

<sup>18</sup> L. O'Carroll, "EU Warns Elon Musk Over 'disinformation' on X about Hamas Attack," *The Guardian*, 11 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/10/eu-warns-elon-musk-over-disinformation-about-hamas-attack-on-x>, 18 January 2024.

which content is generated are unprecedented.<sup>19</sup> For some political decision-makers, it is a weapon used to wage war. One of the first times the power of social media was mobilised was during the events of the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009, followed by the historic protests of the so-called “Arab Spring”, which began in Tunisia and then spread to Egypt and further throughout the entire region.<sup>20</sup> As a result, social media has become an essential element of the military arsenal in real armed conflicts. Interestingly, this type of warfare is characterised by increasing professionalisation, especially in the field of visualisation and propaganda.<sup>21</sup> In the Gaza war, Israel is using social media to gain an information advantage, deny accusations of attacks on civilians and portray Hamas as the aggressor. Hamas, on the other hand, uses tragic images of civilian casualties to convince international opinion that Israel is a ruthless aggressor devoid of humanity.

The videos shared by Israeli soldiers seem more polished and attempt to fit in with viral trends. Meanwhile, footage from Gaza bloggers and pro-Palestine users appears to elicit a more positive response among younger audiences. Both parties claim that their content is not sponsored; however, questions arise as to whether the Israeli government or Hamas is involved in promoting these unofficial materials. Professional content for Israel, including videos about hostages, has a significant reach on X, a popular platform among politicians and journalists. In contrast, clips of freed Palestinians are more popular on TikTok than on X. Analysis of data from X shows that posts shared by the official account of the State of Israel reached more than 40 million views between November 16 and 21, compared to 200,000 views for the official account of the Palestine mission to the United Nations.<sup>22</sup>

Both sides created an avalanche of competing claims and alleged successes on the battlefield. When this content reaches international news agencies, Israeli videos are typically treated as reliable sources of information, while Hamas content, due to its status as a terrorist organisation, is flagged as propaganda. Israel, facing a constant threat and having experienced previous armed conflicts, has extensive experience in conducting information warfare, supported by a team of specialised spokespeople. Additionally, it has a military unit specialising in psychological warfare, which provides the country with an advantage on social media. Israel also has dozens of media outlets compared to one Hamas-controlled Arab news network, Al-Quds. Israel’s narrative is presented as the only legitimate and credible voice, reinforcing the country’s image as the only democracy in the Middle East. Israel influences public policy not only through the mass media, but also through the funding of research centres, NGOs and lobbying

---

<sup>19</sup> L.Y. Hunter, “Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy: How Different Types of Social Media Usage Affect Democracy Cross-Nationally,” *Democratization*, vol. 30, no. 6 (2023), pp. 1040-1072.

<sup>20</sup> Th. Tudoroiu, “Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring,” *New Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2014), pp. 346-365.

<sup>21</sup> S. Jamil, “Postulating the Post-Arab Spring Dynamics of Social Media & Digital Journalism in the Middle East,” *Digital Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 7 (2022), pp. 1257-1261.

<sup>22</sup> J. Donovan, “Misinformation Is Warfare,” *Time*, 13 October 2023, at <https://time.com/6323387/misinformation-israel-hamas-war-essay/>, 29 December 2023.



firms. Meanwhile, Palestinian voices are often portrayed as violent, anti-Semitic and unreliable.<sup>23</sup>

An example of manipulation on the Israeli side is (for example) the video in which an Israeli military official claimed that the army had found a list of Hamas operators. However, a close look at the words written on the piece of paper revealed that the list was merely a calendar with the days of the week written in Arabic. To distract from criticism in the face of growing outrage, the Israeli army later blamed a translation error.<sup>24</sup> This is part of the State of Israel's strategy, which is to use disinformation and lies to take control of the narrative.

This Israeli practice of shaping the narrative is known as *Hasbara*, the Hebrew word for explaining, and refers to Israel's public diplomacy programme dedicated to shaping public opinion, cleaning up its image and suppressing any negative commentary. It is particularly important in the context of the ongoing criticism that Israeli policymakers face for the occupation of Palestine and the decades-long subjugation of the Palestinians. The main idea of *Hasbara* is to portray Israel as a victim and discredit the Palestinians and their struggle for freedom, creating doubts about the human rights violations that Israel seeks to deny. An illustration of this is Israel's response to the assassination of Muhammad al-Dura, who has become a symbol of the Second Intifada. The event, which took place on September 28, 2000, sparked worldwide opposition and criticism of the Jewish state. Although Israeli forces initially admitted to the killing, they later withdrew their testimony on the principle that: "*If you can't convince them, at least let's confuse them.*" A similar scenario emerged when journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was killed in 2022 while she was supposed to show the world the dangers that Palestinians face during the Israeli occupation, with the international community condemning the killing.<sup>25</sup> The Israeli authorities once again resorted to *Hasbara* to counter the growing anti-Israel sentiment. The then Prime Minister of Israel, Naftali Bennett, initially blamed the Palestinians for the shooting, but later the Israeli military stated that it was impossible to clearly determine the source of the shots. However, an independent investigation by the United Nations Commission on Palestine found that Israeli forces used weapons without justification.<sup>26</sup>

In both cases, the Israeli authorities, supported by pro-government media and pro-Israel commentators, pushed a narrative aimed at exonerating Israel from any guilt and

<sup>23</sup> E. Cortellesa, V. Bergengruen, "Inside the Israel-Hamas Information War," *Time*, 22 December 2023, at <https://time.com/6549544/israel-and-hamas-the-media-war/>, 29 December 2023.

<sup>24</sup> M. Spring, "Slick Videos or More 'Authentic' Content? The Israel-Gaza Battles Raging on TikTok and X," *BBC*, 26 November 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-67497299>, 29 December 2023.

<sup>25</sup> K. Ahmed, L. McMullan, E. Morresi, G. Blight, H. Fischer, "The Killing of Shireen Abu Akleh: What One Morning in the West Bank Reveals about the Occupation," *The Guardian*, 21 March 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2023/mar/21/the-killing-of-shireen-abu-akleh-what-one-morning-in-the-west-bank-reveals-about-the-occupation>, 19 October 2023.

<sup>26</sup> G. Hadari, A. Turgeman, "Public Diplomacy in Army Boots: The Chronic Failure of Israel's *Hasbara*," *Israel Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2018), pp. 482-499.

denying its role in the two killings. The goal was to portray Israel as a victim by manipulating the facts and discrediting eyewitness testimonies and reports holding the state responsible for these crimes. As a result of such a media strategy, Israel also avoids participating in dialogue that could undermine the facts it presents. In the context of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *Hasbara* is primarily propaganda, directed mainly at the West, playing a key role in shaping Israel's global image. *Hasbara* is not limited to activities in the international media. Israeli universities, research centres and NGOs such as Hasbara Fellowships and Birthright Israel, regularly offer hundreds of students and influencers from around the world funded visits to Israel. The purpose of these visits is to equip participants with experiences and tools that will empower them to become advocates and leaders in support of Israel upon their return to their communities and campuses.<sup>27</sup>

For Tel Aviv, the digital landscape has become another battleground. In response to the Palestinian narrative and any anti-Israel content, Israel has created blogs and maintains an active presence on platforms like X to quickly spread information and set the tone for global events. Since 2010, Israeli authorities have invested millions of dollars in social media in an effort to improve the country's image. Recently, the state spent \$26 million to fund activities to promote the legitimacy of the war in Gaza. Israel has an army of volunteers who work 24/7, responding to any anti-Israel content on various platforms, such as X, YouTube, blogs and Flickr albums, in Arabic, Russian, French and English. In the first two weeks after October 7, Israeli authorities released more than 75 different ads on X and YouTube in an effort to garner support for the ongoing attack on besieged Gaza.<sup>28</sup>

Even Israeli celebrities are involved in this message. Actress and former Israeli soldier Gal Gadot organised exclusive screenings of the film *Bearing Witness* in the US – a propaganda film produced by the spokesperson unit of the Israeli armed forces. The goal was to win sympathy for Israel among the Hollywood elite.<sup>29</sup> In conclusion, Israel seeks to portray itself as both a paradise on earth and a sacrifice deserving of the world's compassion and support. However, it must not be forgotten that Palestinian journalists in Gaza are reporting on the atrocities and violence of the Israeli armed forces on an ongoing basis. As a result, global support for the Palestinians is growing day by day, both on the streets and online. The competition for favour and support is becoming increasingly difficult for Israel, especially as its military continues to bomb residential buildings, hospitals and places of worship, killing thousands of innocent civilians.

<sup>27</sup> M. Aouragh, "Hasbara 2.0: Israel's Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age," *Middle East Critique*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2016), pp. 271-297.

<sup>28</sup> M. Callahan, "Misinformation and Disinformation—What They Mean for the Israel-Hamas War," *The Brink*, 23 October 2023, at <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2023/israel-hamas-war-misinformation/>, 19 November 2023.

<sup>29</sup> J. Rottenberg, "Inside the Museum of Tolerance's Screening of Hamas Attack Footage," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 November 2023, at <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-11-08/israel-hamas-oct-7-terror-attack-footage-museum-of-tolerance-bearing-witness>, 15 November 2023.

Israeli propaganda aimed at justifying the war against the Palestinians in Gaza began to be met with ridicule on social media after the first two weeks of the conflict. This occurred following a series of controversial videos and statements that began to circulate online. After the brutal Israeli raid on the Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza, many people did not believe the claims that the Hamas command centre was located beneath the hospital. Social media users were quick to pick up on inaccuracies in the Israeli military's narrative, leading to a viral trend on TikTok in which creators parodied videos showing alleged evidence of Hamas's presence. When users began to scoff at Israeli claims, such as the alleged discovery of a training camp in a children's room in Gaza or the infamous calendar on the wall of Al-Shifa that supposedly listed the names of Hamas operatives, Israel's information policy suffered serious damage to its image.<sup>30</sup> So, it turns out that propaganda that may once have been accepted is now being challenged by tech-savvy youth using social media as their primary source of information. Young people are increasingly in favour of Palestine, and the data confirms this. The *#FreePalestine* hashtag on TikTok has 25.5 billion views, while *#StandWithIsrael* has only 440.4 million.<sup>31</sup>

Social media users also share screenshots of controversial statements made by Israeli officials that were posted online and later deleted to draw attention to Israel's brutal attacks on Gaza. Israel has attempted to improve its reputation by emailing influencers and media personalities, offering to pay them for their public support. However, the cost of propaganda is rising, especially as Israel reportedly spent more than \$7 million on YouTube ads in the month following the Hamas attack. In November 2023, it was reported that U.S. business elites were being recruited to fund the *Facts for Peace* media campaign to enhance Israel's image and denounce Hamas. According to press reports, Google CEO Eric Schmidt, Dell CEO Michael Dell and financier Michael Milken were to be acquired, for example.<sup>32</sup> Despite the financial resources devoted to Israeli lobbying, these efforts may actually further damage Israel's credibility and widen the gap between older and younger generations. Meanwhile, videos from Palestinian journalists and Gaza activists continue to portray the reality of life under siege and bombing by Israel.

However, the most convincing argument in favour of the Palestinians in Gaza is not Hamas, but the influence that Gaza journalists have. Their work is gaining global popularity and going viral, which significantly affects the perception of the situation. This is the main reason why Israel is experiencing a defeat in the battle for the hearts

<sup>30</sup> "Digital Battlegrounds: How Social Media Shapes the Israel-Palestine Narrative," *DiEM25*, 11 December 2023, at <https://diem25.org/digital-battlegrounds-how-social-media-shapes-the-israel-palestine-narrative/>, 15 December 2023.

<sup>31</sup> D. Adib, "Amid Israel-Hamas Conflict, 'Information War' Plays Out on Social Media, Experts Say," *ABC News*, 24 November 2023, at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/social-media-information-war-israel-hamas-conflict/story?id=104845039>, 19 December 2023.

<sup>32</sup> F. Visser, "Viral Campaign Attacking Pro-Palestine Movement Points to Gaps in Meta Rules," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 24 November 2023, at <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2023-11-24/viral-campaign-attacking-pro-palestine-movement-points-to-gaps-in-meta-rules/>, 19 December 2023.

and minds of the public. Scenes from Gaza, such as the bombing of the Jabaliya refugee camp, where the Israeli army was aware of the presence of about 400 civilians, including hostages, are putting enormous pressure on Israel.<sup>33</sup> Such news, reported by global and regional television stations and newspapers in other parts of the world, especially in South Asia, India, China and Latin America, is more common and convincing to local audiences than the Israeli narrative. In the Arab world, the fighting Palestinian is seen as a hero and a symbol of hope for the end of the occupation, which makes this message resonate more strongly with the emotions and beliefs of the viewers.

Videos posted by Hamas are shared by its supporters and associates on Telegram and other platforms, from where they are then sent to Arab news agencies. For the Arab world, Hamas is becoming a collective voice of resistance onto which viewers can project their own desires and expectations. Hamas is also adapting to the modern era of digital journalism by combining nationalism, Islamic commitments, revolutionary ethos and charisma. Many of these messages are not directed at the West, but at Arabs and Muslims who identify with the idea of resistance. Videos from the tunnels are widely available on sites such as YouTube and are also active on X. Pro-Hamas accounts identified in the first two months of the conflict after October 7 were extremely well coordinated. It should also be noted that they did not appear soon after this date.<sup>34</sup> Traces of activity could be noticed, such as creating accounts, logging in or publishing perfunctory comments, which suggests that these activities had been ongoing for over a year. In other words, such observations may lead to the conclusion that the Palestinian side was developing its logistics and digital capabilities long before October 7.

A second important aspect of Hamas's communications is how much content from their Telegram channels seeps into other platforms, making it difficult to track the sources and scale of that material. Despite numerous attempts by Apple and Google to block specific information, this content is still available and is likely to remain visible on other platforms. It can be assumed that Hamas was preparing for such an eventuality by launching its own applications, which allow for the further spread of disinformation. The significant amount of this content makes it difficult to keep up with, which outweighs verification efforts.

For many Palestinians, social media may be the only tool to tell their stories, especially when traditional media does not present their perspective. The international community follows Gazans online, where they share information about daily raids and the difficulties in obtaining water and food during the conflict. At the same time, the Palestinian side also uses propaganda. In the case of Hamas, the message is two-fold: on one hand, it defends itself against accusations regarding the actions of October 7, and on the other hand, it legitimises its resistance to the occupation and

<sup>33</sup> M. Scott, "Does Social Media Favor Palestine over Israel?," *Politico*, 14 December 2023, at <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/digital-bridge/does-social-media-favor-palestine-over-israel/>, 19 December 2023.

<sup>34</sup> S.A. Thompson, M. Isaac, "Hamas Is Barred from Social Media. Its Messages Are Still Spreading," *The New York Times*, 18 October 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/technology/hamas-social-media-accounts.html>, 22 December 2023.

neo-colonialism in Palestine. This message strongly resonates in the Arab world and Palestinian society.

On October 7, Hamas terrorists used cameras and mobile phones to post videos of their atrocities on TikTok and Facebook. Their goal was to provoke as much as possible and demonstrate that they had no limits in causing shock around the world, which is the essence of terror. When Israel launched a military campaign against Hamas, thousands of Palestinian civilians were killed. At that time, the public perception of the conflict changed quite quickly.<sup>35</sup> Photos of victims in Gaza dominated social media, causing shock and leading to hundreds of outraged comments, further increasing their reach. Hamas uses similar tactics, albeit in a different order. First, it uses force and terror. Then, it dramatises the suffering of its own population by cynically using it to change the perception of international opinion.

## EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

The specificity of this information conflict is that it takes time to verify reports, but due to the dynamic development of events, this time is often lacking. A good example is the explosion at the Al-Ahli hospital, where – to this day – there are no clear findings about what exactly happened. However, there is so much conflicting information circulating that the whole situation becomes even more confusing.<sup>36</sup> Assigning responsibility for tragic events takes time, as it involves conducting a digital investigation that includes acquiring, reviewing, verifying and analysing the recordings. Identifying disinformation becomes even more difficult when there are several official narratives about the same event.<sup>37</sup> To attract attention, both sides of the conflict reach for the most brutal images, trying to arouse viewers' sympathy and convince them of their version of events. An example of this is the false narrative of 40 infants killed, which was initially spread by Israeli accounts. The shocking images of young children who had been beheaded, accompanying the scenes of soldiers crying and comforting each other after supposedly finding the bodies, were intended to portray the Palestinians as violent and fierce attackers. This is one of many examples of manipulation aimed at demonising the opponent.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> M. Hossain, "Is Israel Losing the Media War?," *The Business Standard*, 18 November 2023, at <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/israel-losing-media-war-741426>, 27 February 2024.

<sup>36</sup> S. Bond, "Fake Accounts, Old Videos and Rumors Fuel Chaos around Gaza Hospital Explosion," *NPR*, 19 October 2023, at <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/19/1207173798/fake-accounts-old-videos-and-rumors-fuel-chaos-around-gaza-hospital-explosion>, 2 December 2023.

<sup>37</sup> M. Ganguly, E. Graham-Harrison, J. Burke, E. Morresi, A. Kirk, L. Swan, "Al-Ahli Arab Hospital: Piecing Together What Happened as Israel Insists Militant Rocket to Blame," *The Guardian*, 18 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/18/al-ahli-arab-hospital-piecing-together-what-happened-as-israel-insists-militant-rocket-to-blame>, 2 December 2023.

<sup>38</sup> K. Tenbarge, M. Chan, "Unverified Reports of '40 Babies Beheaded' in Israel-Hamas War Inflamm Social Media," *NBC News*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/unverified-allegations-beheaded-babies-israel-hamas-war-inflamm-social-media-rcna119902>, 12 December 2023.

When Al Jazeera's Palestinian-American journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh, was killed, Israeli authorities immediately released information suggesting that she had allegedly been shot dead by Palestinian armed men. There were even recordings on the internet purporting to show the location where these armed men were said to be. However, investigations by journalists and human rights organisations revealed that the location shown in the footage provided by the Israeli side was far from the actual site where Shireen was shot. Later, Israeli authorities changed the narrative, suggesting that she may have been the victim of crossfire. Eventually, a version was presented stating that her death was accidental and could have been caused by an Israeli soldier.<sup>39</sup> Israelis tend to avoid admitting to committing crimes, which leads to doubts among audiences about whether an event occurred and who is responsible. A similar approach was taken in the case of the attack on the Al-Ahli al-Arabi hospital, where it was unclear whether it was Israel or Islamic Jihad that had carried out the bombing. There is also confusion regarding which online sources can be trusted and which are unreliable. On platform X, there are accounts that spread disinformation according to specific ideological lines. While some accounts conduct investigations and may deny or confirm the truthfulness of information, they may also disseminate misinformation themselves. This makes it difficult for the average recipient to distinguish truth from falsehood.<sup>40</sup> For example, Israeli army officials claim that Hamas militants are hiding command centres under hospitals in the Gaza Strip. As evidence, a video was released that allegedly depicts what took place in the basement under the hospital. However, Hamas officials and hospital staff deny the existence of such centres. They accuse Israel of deliberately attacking hospitals and committing genocide in Gaza.<sup>41</sup> For social media users, both narratives are difficult to verify from the outside, but they are still widely spread.

Photos and videos quickly go viral, meaning they are being shared intensely and widely on social media. An example is a TikTok video showing paragliders crossing the border. It turned out that these images were recorded much earlier in Egypt. In the first few days, this video was shared over 900,000 times.<sup>42</sup> Another video shows a salvo of rockets being fired. On social media, it was suggested that these were Hamas rockets aimed at Tel Aviv. However, it later emerged that the video was old and originates from Syria, not Gaza. Another video that sparked controversy was a picture of famous footballer Cristiano Ronaldo holding the Palestinian flag to imply his solidarity with

<sup>39</sup> T. Bateman, "Shireen Abu Aqla: Israel Says 'High Probability' Soldier Killed Reporter," *BBC*, 5 September 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62793579>, 12 December 2023.

<sup>40</sup> "Misinformation about the Israel-Hamas War Is Flooding Social Media: Here Are the Facts," *AP News*, 30 October 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-misinformation-fact-ch>, 10 December 2023.

<sup>41</sup> J. Federman, "Israel Reveals Signs of Hamas Activity at Shifa, But a Promised Command Center Remains Elusive," *AP News*, 23 November 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-gaza-shifa-hospitals-a017ba154c816c8d565393917dadd9ee>, 18 December 2023.

<sup>42</sup> R. Kennedy, *Israel-Hamas war: Fact-checking online misinformation*, "Reuters" 12 X 2023, [online:] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/fact-checking-online-misinformation-israel-hamas-conflict-2023-10-09/>, 18 December 2023.

Palestine. In fact, the video features not Ronaldo, but Moroccan footballer Jawad El Yamik, and it is from the 2022 World Cup.<sup>43</sup>

The information war has been supported, consciously or not, by journalists, media agencies and politicians. An example is the October 10 report that Hamas militants allegedly killed and beheaded 40 infants. This information was provided by an Israeli journalist from the I-24 agency. These reports were widely promoted on platform X by many people, including well-known figures and journalists such as American commentator Ben Shapiro and *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling. Hours later, the Israeli army told multiple news agencies, including Anadolu and Sky News, that there was no confirmed information about 40 dead babies in *kibbutzim* in Kafar Azar.<sup>44</sup> Despite the lack of confirmed evidence of these killings, leading news agencies in the UK and US published front-page articles about the alleged massacre. Even US President Joe Biden stated at a press conference that he had seen photos of children with their heads cut off.<sup>45</sup>

Further unconfirmed reports relate to the capture of a German-Israeli woman, Shania Luke. On October 9, it was reported that Luke had been killed after being identified in a video circulating on social media in which she was lying face down in a Hamas vehicle. The next day, however, *Newsweek* reported that Luke's mother had received evidence from Palestinian sources confirming that her daughter was alive and had been left outside a hospital in Gaza. Her mother appealed to the German government for help in getting her daughter back.<sup>46</sup>

A third rumour circulating on the internet was that Hamas militants had imprisoned Israeli children in cages in Gaza. A video, showing the children behind bars, has been shared multiple times on platform X and promoted by far-right groups in the UK and elsewhere. However, France 24 later confirmed that the video was published four days before the Hamas attack, and the location of the film was not determined.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> A. Fichera, R. Rabin, A. Lajka, "False Claims around Israel Attacks Include Recycled Videos and a Game Clip," *The New York Times*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/israel-attacks-video-disinformation.html>, 18 December 2023.

<sup>44</sup> M. Solmaz, E. Calli, "Despite Refutations from Israeli Military, Headlines That Hamas 'Beheaded Babies' Persist," *AA*, 11 October 2023, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/despite-refutations-from-israeli-military-headlines-that-hamas-beheaded-babies-persist/3016167>, 12 December 2023.

<sup>45</sup> J. Scahill, "Joe Biden Keeps Repeating His False Claim That He Saw Pictures of Beheaded Babies," *The Intercept*, 14 December 2023, at <https://theintercept.com/2023/12/14/israel-biden-beheaded-babies-false/>, 22 December 2023.

<sup>46</sup> L. Callaghan, "Both Sides in Israel-Gaza Conflict Are Waging a Disinformation War," *The Times*, 5 November 2023, at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/both-sides-israel-gaza-hamas-waging-parallel-disinformation-war-mzt85zzkz>, 20 December 2023.

<sup>47</sup> C. Marchant de Abreu, No, This Video Does Not Show Israeli Children Held Hostage by Hamas in Cages," *France 24*, 10 October 2023, at <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20231010-this-video-does-not-show-israeli-children-held-hostage-by-hamas-in-cages>, 20 December 2023.

The strategic use of fake news by politicians and the media is designed to exaggerate or selectively portray war crimes to shock public opinion. An example of this phenomenon is a video posted on TikTok that shows fire in an urban area and purports to depict Israeli attacks on Gaza. The video gained 2.9 million likes and more than 59.6 million views, and many other accounts reshared it. However, this video was already circulating on the internet before Saturday's attack. Other similar footage revealed that the scene was filmed in Algeria during a celebration of the CR Belouizdad football team. Moreover, another video that purportedly depicted a Hamas militant shooting down an Israeli war helicopter in Gaza turned out to be a computer-generated scene from the computer game *Arm of Three*.<sup>48</sup>

It is worth taking a look at the posts that have gained the most attention. An example is a TikTok video showing a fire in an urban area. Those who shared it claimed that it depicted attacks on Gaza, while others suggested that it was an Israeli landscape after a Hamas attack. The video gained 2.9 million likes and more than 59.6 million views, and many accounts shared it. However, this video was circulating on the internet well before the October 7 attack. Other similar videos reveal that the scene was actually filmed in Algeria during celebrations related to the CR Belouizdad football team.<sup>49</sup> Another post on X allegedly shows a Hamas militant with a kidnapped Israeli girl. This video was widely shared and gained millions of views. However, Sky News' data and technical investigation team discovered that the video was originally published in September, meaning it has no connection to current events. Since then, X has posted a note below the post explaining that the video is not related to the conflict.<sup>50</sup> A similar logic was used in the case of the video, which is supposed to be proof that Hamas captured Israeli generals. The video, published on platform X, was viewed by almost 2 million people. However, the message of the video is misleading – in fact, it is an old video showing the detention of the leader of the separatist movement in Azerbaijan.<sup>51</sup>

"A picture says a thousand words" refers not only to videos, but also to widely distributed photos. An example is a photograph showing a man carrying five children, emerging from the rubble of a building. This photo has been shared tens of thousands of times on platform X. At first glance, it appears to depict a tragic landscape from the

<sup>48</sup> T. Hsu, S. Frenkel, "From Opposite Sides of War, a Hunt for Elusive Facts," *The New York Times*, 25 January 2024, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/business/media/misinformation-fact-checking-israel-hamas.html>, 20 February 2024.

<sup>49</sup> B. Cole, "Israel's Failure to Anticipate Hamas Assault Fuels Conspiracy Theories," *Newsweek*, 9 October 2023, at <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-gaza-palestinian-militants-1833070>, 20 October 2024.

<sup>50</sup> V. Elms, "Israel-Hamas War: Fireworks Displays and Computer Games among Fake Conflict Videos Viewed Millions of Times on Social Media," *Sky News*, 12 October 2023, at <https://news.sky.com/story/israel-hamas-war-fireworks-displays-and-computer-games-among-fake-conflict-videos-being-viewed-millions-of-times-on-social-media-12983266>, 20 October 2023.

<sup>51</sup> M. Cerullo, "Misleading Videos Alleging to Show Israel-Hamas Conflict Circulate on X," *CBS News*, 9 October 2023, at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/misleading-videos-showing-conflict-in-israel-circulate-on-x/>, 20 October 2023.



Gaza Strip, where Israeli troops bombed buildings during the ongoing conflict. According to Palestinian sources, more than 13,000 people, including women and children, were killed as a result of these actions. However, on closer inspection of the photo, some abnormalities are noticeable. For example, a man's right arm is unnaturally high and the limbs protruding from under it look as if they are growing out of his sweater. The hands of the two boys, which are wrapped around the man's neck, merge together, and several hands and feet are missing or have excess fingers. This photo is not authentic – it was created using artificial intelligence.<sup>52</sup> AI-generated images like this are a new tool for spreading misinformation and fake news. They are often distributed to evoke specific emotions. In the context of Israel's war in the Gaza Strip, these images are used to highlight the suffering of both sides of the conflict or to arouse patriotic feelings. For example, a photo showing soldiers waving Israeli flags against the backdrop of destroyed buildings may suggest that Israel has taken control of a new settlement in the Gaza Strip. However, the flag in the photo is waving unnaturally, the street is too clean and the rubble looks uniform. The destroyed buildings appear to be identical and regularly spaced, indicating image manipulation.<sup>53</sup>

AI-generated imagery is more up to date than ever and plays a key role in demonstrations around the world. The emotions it evokes can lead to outrage and, in some cases, riots and attacks on Jewish institutions. Supporters of both sides of the conflict are taking to the streets, and social media is becoming a place where the divisions between supporters of the Palestinians and Israel are deepening. False information and manipulation in this propaganda war make facts irrelevant. It is enough to arouse doubts and emotions that are consistent with already existing prejudices in order to effectively influence public opinion. In the multitude of content and sources, people find it difficult to verify information, which only exacerbates the problem.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that the information war is based not only on the creation of new content, but also on the recycling of materials from 2013 and 2016. Some accounts that had been inactive for a year and a half began posting content again after October 7, indicating a well-organised and planned information operation. In the days that followed, a huge amount of content surfaced, making it difficult for researchers and casual observers alike to keep track of the information. This wave of content, often containing misinformation, was linked to audience biases, confirming their existing opinions. In such an environment, false information easily goes viral while the real facts are blurred.

<sup>52</sup> D. Klepper, "Fake Babies, Real Horror: Deepfakes from the Gaza War Increase Fears about AI's Power to Mislead," *AP News*, 28 November 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/artificial-intelligence-hamas-israel-misinformation-ai-gaza-a1bb303b637fbb99c3aa1e000db47>, 12 December 2023.

<sup>53</sup> D. Klepper, Fake Babies, Real Horror: False AI-Generated Images of the War in Gaza Spark Alarm," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 November 2023, at <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-11-29/israel-hamas-war-artificial-intelligence-deepfakes-disinformation>, 12 December 2023.

An analysis of the cases from the first month of the conflict reveals four main factors of modern information warfare. First, the attitude of the warring parties towards social media has changed. This is no longer one of the first social media wars; entire social groups from both sides of the conflict are now more accustomed to using social media as a source of information. At the same time, these groups have become more wary of this media, likely due to previous experiences with disinformation. The difference lies in how false information affects public opinion, which has changed compared to earlier models. Digital communication is now used less to gain new followers and more as a tool to fuel polarisation and reinforce prejudice. In this way, it reinforces existing social divisions and radicalises positions.

The second difference from social media is that users absorb the rules and logic of these platforms. A key factor in these principles is quick reactions and commitment. Policymakers also begin to react immediately to events on social networks, often according to specific patterns of engagement. In some cases, they fuel anger or rush to conclusions instead of taking time to reflect.

The third visible feature of social media is that it is no longer conducive to the development of public debate. Instead, these platforms encourage emotional reactions and fuel anger at the expense of truthful information. Telegram is completely unmoderated, while Meta and TikTok have issues with moderation transparency. They rely heavily on AI to moderate content, but these activities are opaque – which is not conducive to user trust.

The fourth visible element is the images of the October 2023 attacks, which are particularly shocking. In the previous stages of the conflict, the international community had become accustomed to images of violence against Palestinians in Gaza, which were a constant feature of the conflict. However, the images appearing after October 7 were shocking and unprecedented, as international audiences had not been exposed to violence against Israeli civilians before, at least since the Second Intifada.

Another novelty in this war is the way of accessing graphic content and images and their use by all parties to the conflict. For example, the Israeli government has widely shared edited footage of the massacres, which were initially recorded by Hamas's dashcams or GoPro cameras and generated by artificial intelligence. Although there is a vast amount of content and its volume is growing exponentially, the problem lies in the difficulty of distinguishing real information from that processed from captured photos and individual frames of films, which are adapted to existing or planned narratives.

The battle for public opinion is more intense than ever. Both sides of the conflict are trying to convey their version of events, but the information war is uneven. Israel has sophisticated media tools, and international news agencies often treat its position uncritically. Still, Hamas is effectively building a narrative that, while marginalised by the Western media, holds influence in the Arab world and among people in the southern hemisphere. Israel fears that international opinion may turn against it and is trying to portray the events of October 7 as a story of atrocities. A great deal of violent content on the web contains misinformation and hate speech. Modern warfare involves

a battle for public opinion, and disinformation undermines public trust – which can affect public safety. The conflict between Israel and Hamas shows that the information provided by social media cannot be trusted uncritically.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adib D., “Amid Israel-Hamas Conflict, ‘Information War’ Plays Out on Social Media, Experts Say,” *ABC News*, 24 November 2023, at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/social-media-information-war-israel-hamas-conflict/story?id=104845039>.
- Ahmed K., McMullan L., Morresi E., Blight G., Fischer H., “The Killing of Shireen Abu Akleh: What One Morning in the West Bank Reveals about the Occupation,” *The Guardian*, 21 March 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2023/mar/21/the-killing-of-shireen-abu-akleh-what-one-morning-in-the-west-bank-reveals-about-the-occupation>.
- Aliyev J., “Social Media Companies Delete Posts Related to Jerusalem,” *AA*, 8 May 2021, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/social-media-companies-delete-posts-related-to-jerusalem/2233279>.
- Almäng J., “War, Vagueness and Hybrid War,” *Defence Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2019), pp. 189-204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2019.1597631>.
- Aouragh M., “Hasbara 2.0: Israel’s Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age,” *Middle East Critique*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2016), pp. 271-297, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2016.1179432>.
- Bateman T., “Shireen Abu Aqla: Israel Says ‘High Probability’ Soldier Killed Reporter,” *BBC*, 5 September 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62793579>.
- Bockstette C., “Jihadist Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques,” *Marshall Center*, 20 December 2018, at <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/jihadist-terrorist-use-strategic-communication-management-techniques-0>.
- Bond S., “Fake Accounts, Old Videos and Rumors Fuel Chaos around Gaza Hospital Explosion,” *NPR*, 19 October 2023, at <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/19/1207173798/fake-accounts-old-videos-and-rumors-fuel-chaos-around-gaza-hospital-explosion>.
- Brewster Th., “Israel Has Asked Meta And TikTok To Remove 8,000 Posts Related To Hamas War,” *Forbes*, 14 November 2023, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2023/11/13/meta-and-tiktok-told-to-remove-8000-pro-hamas-posts-by-israel/>.
- Bu Y., Parkinson J., Thaichon P., “Influencer Marketing: Sponsorship Disclosure and Value Co-Creation Behaviour,” *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, vol. 40, no. 7 (2022), pp. 854-870, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2021-0310>.
- Burdeau C., “EU Demands Musk Delete Harmful Content on Israel-Hamas War or Face Punishment,” *Courthouse News Service*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.courthousenews.com/eu-demands-musk-delete-harmful-content-on-israel-hamas-war-or-face-punishment/>.
- Callaghan L., “Both Sides in Israel-Gaza Conflict Are Waging a Disinformation War,” *The Times*, 5 November 2023, at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/both-sides-israel-gaza-hamas-waging-parallel-disinformation-war-mzt85zzkz>.

- Callahan M., "Misinformation and Disinformation—What They Mean for the Israel-Hamas War," *The Brink*, 23 October 2023, at <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2023/israel-hamas-war-misinformation/>.
- Cerullo M., "Misleading Videos Alleging to Show Israel-Hamas Conflict Circulate on X," *CBS News*, 9 October 2023, at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/misleading-videos-showing-conflict-in-israel-circulate-on-x/>.
- Chadwick A., *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*, Oxford 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199759477.001.0001>.
- "Civil Society Organisations Call for Tech Companies to Respect Palestinian Digital Rights in Times of Crisis," *Association for Progressive Communications*, 13 October 2023, at <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/civil-society-organisations-call-tech-companies-respect-palestinian-digital-rights-times-crisis>.
- Cole B., "Israel's Failure to Anticipate Hamas Assault Fuels Conspiracy Theories," *Newsweek*, 9 October 2023, at <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-gaza-palestinian-militants-1833070>.
- Cortellessa E., Bergengruen V., "Inside the Israel-Hamas Information War," *Time*, 22 December 2023, at <https://time.com/6549544/israel-and-hamas-the-media-war/>.
- "Digital Battlegrounds: How Social Media Shapes the Israel-Palestine Narrative," *DiEM25*, 11 December 2023, at <https://diem25.org/digital-battlegrounds-how-social-media-shapes-the-israel-palestine-narrative/>.
- Donovan J., "Misinformation Is Warfare," *Time*, 13 October 2023, at <https://time.com/6323387/misinformation-israel-hamas-war-essay/>.
- Elms V., "Israel-Hamas War: Fireworks Displays and Computer Games among Fake Conflict Videos Viewed Millions of Times on Social Media," *Sky News*, 12 October 2023, at <https://news.sky.com/story/israel-hamas-war-fireworks-displays-and-computer-games-among-fake-conflict-videos-being-viewed-millions-of-times-on-social-media-12983266>.
- Federman J., "Israel Reveals Signs of Hamas Activity at Shifa, But a Promised Command Center Remains Elusive," *AP News*, 23 November 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-gaza-shifa-hospitals-a017ba154c816c8d565393917dadd9ee>.
- Ferm L.-E.C., Thaichon P., "Value Co-Creation and Social Media: Investigating Antecedents and Influencing Factors in the U.S. Retail Banking Industry," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, vol. 61 (2021), pp. 114-135, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102548>.
- Fichera A., Rabin R., Lajka A., "False Claims around Israel Attacks Include Recycled Videos and a Game Clip," *The New York Times*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/article/israel-attacks-video-disinformation.html>.
- Freelon D., Wells C., "Disinformation as Political Communication," *Political Communication*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2020), pp. 145-156.
- Ganguly M., Graham-Harrison E., Burke J., Morresi E., Kirk A., Swan L., "Al-Ahli Arab Hospital: Piecing Together What Happened as Israel Insists Militant Rocket to Blame," *The Guardian*, 18 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/18/al-ahli-arab-hospital-piecing-together-what-happened-as-israel-insists-militant-rocket-to-blame>.
- Hadari G., Turgeman A., "Public Diplomacy in Army Boots: The Chronic Failure of Israel's Hasbara," *Israel Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2018), pp. 482-499.

- Hossain M., "Is Israel Losing the Media War?," *The Business Standard*, 18 November 2023, at <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/israel-losing-media-war-741426>.
- Hsu T., Frenkel S., "From Opposite Sides of War, a Hunt for Elusive Facts," *The New York Times*, 25 January 2024, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/business/media/misinformation-fact-checking-israel-hamas.html>.
- Hunter L.Y., "Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy: How Different Types of Social Media Usage Affect Democracy Cross-Nationally," *Democratization*, vol. 30, no. 6 (2023), pp. 1040-1072, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2208355>.
- "Israel-Hamas War Misinformation Is Everywhere: Here Are the Facts," *AP News*, 14 November 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-fact-check-e829d1ddcc2dad0f5f99cf62ef353ad>.
- Jamil S., "Postulating the Post-Arab Spring Dynamics of Social Media & Digital Journalism in the Middle East," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 7 (2022), pp. 1257-1261.
- Kennedy R., "Israel-Hamas War: Fact-Checking Online Misinformation," *Reuters*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/fact-checking-online-misinformation-israel-hamas-conflict-2023-10-09/>.
- Klepper D., "Fake Babies, Real Horror: Deepfakes from the Gaza War Increase Fears about AI's Power to Mislead," *AP News*, 28 November 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/artificial-intelligence-hamas-israel-misinformation-ai-gaza-a1bb303b637fbbb9cbc3aa1e000db47>.
- Klepper D., "Fake Babies, Real Horror: False AI-Generated Images of the War in Gaza Spark Alarm," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 November 2023, at <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-11-29/israel-hamas-war-artificial-intelligence-deepfakes-disinformation>.
- Lin X., Spence P.R., "Others Share This Message, So We Can Trust It? An Examination of Bandwagon Cues on Organizational Trust in Risk," *Information Processing & Management*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2019), pp. 1559-1564.
- Lin X., Spence P.R., Lachlan K.A., "Social media and Credibility Indicators: The Effect of Influence Cues," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 63 (2016), pp. 264-271, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.002>.
- Livingstone S., "The Participation Paradigm in Audience Research," *The Communication Review*, vol. 16, no. 1-2 (2013), pp. 21-30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2013.757174>.
- Luscombe R., "Meta Censors Pro-Palestinian Views on a Global Scale, Report Claims," *The Guardian*, 21 December 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/dec/21/meta-facebook-instagram-pro-palestine-censorship-human-rights-watch-report>.
- Marchant de Abreu C., "No, This Video Does Not Show Israeli Children Held Hostage by Hamas in Cages," *France 24*, 10 October 2023, at <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20231010-this-video-does-not-show-israeli-children-held-hostage-by-hamas-in-cages>.
- Marr B., "How Much Data Do We Create Every Day? The Mind-Blowing Stats Everyone Should Read," *Bernard Marr & Co*, 2022, at <https://www.atlasofdigitalarchitecture.com/how-much-data-do-we-create-every-day-the-mind-blowing-stats-everyone-should-read/>.
- Masip P., Ruiz-Caballero C., Suau J., "Active Audiences and Social Discussion on the Digital Public Sphere: Review Article," *Profesional de la información*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2019), pp. 1-41, <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2019.mar.04>.

- Mayerhöffer E., Heft A., "Between Journalistic and Movement Logic: Disentangling Referencing Practices of Right-Wing Alternative Online News Media," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 8 (2022), pp. 1409-1430, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1974915>.
- McGreal Ch., „The Language Being Used to Describe Palestinians Is Genocidal,” *The Guardian*, 16 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/16/the-language-being-used-to-describe-palestinians-is-genocidal>.
- McKay S., Tenove Ch., "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 3 (2021), pp. 703-717, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920938143>.
- Menn J., "As False War Information Spreads on X, Musk Promotes Unvetted Accounts," *The Washington Post*, 8 October 2023, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/08/israel-hamas-disinfo-musk-twitter-x/>.
- "Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook," *Human Rights Watch*, 21 December 2023, at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metass-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>.
- "Misinformation about the Israel-Hamas War Is Flooding Social Media: Here Are the Facts," *AP News*, 30 October 2023, at <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-misinformation-fact-ch>.
- O'Carroll L., "EU Warns Elon Musk Over 'disinformation' on X about Hamas Attack," *The Guardian*, 11 October 2023, at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/10/eu-warns-elon-musk-over-disinformation-about-hamas-attack-on-x>.
- Pietsch B., "‘From the River to the Sea’: Why a Palestinian Rallying Cry Ignites Dispute," *The Washington Post*, 14 November 2023, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/14/river-sea-free-palestine-meaning/>.
- Rottenberg J., "Inside the Museum of Tolerance's Screening of Hamas Attack Footage," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 November 2023, at <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-11-08/israel-hamas-oct-7-terror-attack-footage-museum-of-tolerance-bearing-witness>.
- Scahill J., "Joe Biden Keeps Repeating His False Claim That He Saw Pictures of Beheaded Babies," *The Intercept*, 14 December 2023, at <https://theintercept.com/2023/12/14/israel-biden-beheaded-babies-false/>.
- Schroeff J., Kaufman S.J., "Hybrid Actors, Tactical Variety: Rethinking Asymmetric and Hybrid War," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 37, no. 10 (2014), pp. 862-880, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.941435>.
- Scott M., "Does Social Media Favor Palestine over Israel?," *Politico*, 14 December 2023, at <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/digital-bridge/does-social-media-favor-palestine-over-israel/>.
- Scott M., "The EU's Online Content Rulebook Isn't Ready for Primetime," *Politico*, 14 February 2024, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-digital-services-act-dsa-thierry-breton/>.
- Solmaz M., Calli E., "Despite Refutations from Israeli Military, Headlines That Hamas 'Beheaded Babies' Persist," *AA*, 11 October 2023, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/despite-refutations-from-israeli-military-headlines-that-hamas-beheaded-babies-persist/3016167>.
- Spring M., "Slick Videos or More 'Authentic' Content? The Israel-Gaza Battles Raging on TikTok and X," *BBC*, 26 November 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-67497299>.

- Tandoc Jr. E.C., Lim Z.W., Ling R., "Defining 'Fake News': A Typology of Scholarly Definitions," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2018), pp. 137-153.
- Tenbarge K., Chan M., "Unverified Reports of '40 Babies Beheaded' in Israel-Hamas War Inflamm Social Media," *NBC News*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/unverified-allegations-beheaded-babies-israel-hamas-war-inflamm-social-rcna119902>.
- Thompson S.A., Isaac M., "Hamas Is Barred from Social Media. Its Messages Are Still Spreading," *The New York Times*, 18 October 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/technology/hamas-social-media-accounts.html>.
- Tudoroiu Th., "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring," *New Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2014), pp. 346-365, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2014.913841>.
- Visser F., "Viral Campaign Attacking Pro-Palestine Movement Points to Gaps in Meta Rules," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 24 November 2023, at <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2023-11-24/viral-campaign-attacking-pro-palestine-movement-points-to-gaps-in-meta-rules/>.
- Waisbord S., "The Elective Affinity between Post-Truth Communication and Populist Politics," *Communication Research and Practice*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 17-34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2018.1428928>.
- Wardle C., "Fake News: It's Complicated," *Medium*, 16 February 2017, at <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79>.
- Zadeh A.H., Zolfagharian M., Hofacker C.F., "Customer-Customer Value Co-Creation in Social Media: Conceptualization and Antecedents," *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2019), pp. 283-302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2017.1344289>.

---

**Marek GÓRKA** – professor of Koszalin University of Technology, political scientist. Graduate of the University of Nicholas Copernicus in Toruń. Assistant professor at the Faculty of Humanities at the Koszalin University of Technology. Author of works on the activities of Israeli and Polish intelligence services, cyber threats and cyberbullying among children and adolescents. Researcher of intimate literature and carnival culture. Research interests: security policy, cyber security, terrorism, intelligence and counter-intelligence services, sociology of the Internet, electoral competition, charismatic leadership, carnivalesque of public life.