

The Gaza War Coverage: The Role of Social Media vs. Mainstream Media

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The Gaza war which erupted in October 2023 has been a focal point of global attention, due to the significant humanitarian toll, extensive damage and high number of casualties (London et al., 2024). According to a UNICEF (2024) report, tens of thousands have been killed during Israel's war on Gaza, including more than 15,000 children, many more have been seriously injured or are missing under the rubble and hundreds of thousands have been displaced, seeking refuge in unhygienic overcrowded shelters and temporary accommodation. The economic toll has been equally substantial, with economic losses reaching billions of dollars, further crippling the already struggling Gaza economy (Khalidi & Iwidat, 2024).

The gravity and scale of this humanitarian disaster requires a closer look at its coverage in international media outlets, with a special focus on how it has been covered in mainstream media outlets, particularly mainstream Western media as compared to social media platforms. This article looks at the most important characteristics of each.

Mainstream Western Media Coverage: Gaps and Constraints

The coverage of the Gaza war in mainstream media has been problematic. This has been especially the case in mainstream Western media. Fahmy et al. (2024) argue that "individual, media routines, organizational, social institutional and social systems level factors" have been affecting the journalistic coverage of the war and the depth and richness of the narratives

by journalists who have had first-hand experiences (p. 174). This is mainly because when mainstream media tries to provide the public with the necessary information about the war, they often face numerous obstacles, including political barriers, ideological challenges and logistical constraints (Fahmy et al., 2024).

Mainstream Western media, therefore, has been criticized for failing to report on the Gaza crisis accurately, fairly and comprehensively (Khamis, 2023). This has been attributed to a number of factors, including the one-sided biased coverage of this crisis, which mostly prioritized the Israeli narrative over the Palestinian narrative, especially when relying on official reports from the Israeli side, without an opportunity to conduct the necessary fact-checking (Youmans, 2024).

Other interrelated criticisms of this coverage include the lack of sufficient historical contextualization of this complex and long-lasting conflict which extended over several decades, and the lack of sufficient humanization of the Palestinian victims, through either ignoring or downplaying the gravity of their day-to-day humanitarian suffering (Khamis, 2023).

The reasons behind these gaps and defects in mainstream Western media coverage could be attributed to numerous factors, including limited access by international journalists to the war in Gaza, due to political restrictions from the Israeli side and safety concerns for journalists, which further restricts comprehensive reporting (CPJ, 2023, 2024; Palmer, 2022). This has led many international media outlets to frequently rely on official governmental statements and embedded journalism which limit the diversity of perspectives and the depth and nuance of news coverage.

Moreover, the complexities of the Gaza crisis which is intertwined with many regional and international geopolitical interests over many years has been mischaracterized and reduced to an "Israel-Hamas conflict" in numerous mainstream Western media outlets, thus

exacerbating the reductionism and decontextualization of this war's media coverage (Khamis, 2023). Johnson (2023) indicated that CNN, MSNBC and FOX News provided skewed reports of the first months of the Gaza war. Perez Castro (2024) indicated that most of the news reports about the Gaza war which appeared in print media, including major newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*, favoured the Israeli side, exhibited consistent bias against the Palestinians and paid little attention to their daily suffering.

The inadequate contextual examination of the conflict's political and historical factors has been another significant gap in Western media coverage

William Youmans (2024) posted on Twitter and Facebook that "news outlets have consistently prioritized Israeli lives over Palestinian ones, adopting Israeli framing and narratives even when they fail to stand up to scrutiny" (Youmans, 2024). This pattern of coverage often results in a narrative shaped by those in power, which sidelines marginalized voices, thus exacerbating their marginalization.

Overall, coverage by Western media, especially American media, of the Gaza war has revealed several gaps, particularly when it comes to addressing human suffering, amplifying Palestinian voices, providing the necessary historical context and prioritizing the humanization of victims. These shortcomings have led to a skewed public perception of this war which lacks an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the complexity and severity of this war.

One of the most significant gaps in Western media coverage has been the underreporting of Palestinian civilian casualties (Zghoul, 2022). While casualty figures are often mentioned, they are frequently presented in ways that obscure the accurate scale of human suffering. News reports tend to focus more on military statistics, rather than personal stories of loss, suffering and resilience (Fahmy, 2024; Khamis, 2023; Peterson, 2024). This lack of in-depth storytelling fails to convey the profound human cost of this conflict, leav-

ing audiences with an inaccurate, incomplete or distorted understanding of this crisis and its magnitude. Western media, especially American media, have also been criticized for not adequately representing Palestinian perspectives and not adequately including Palestinian voices. Badran (2024) opines that the voices of those living in Gaza are often overshadowed by official narratives, limiting the public's exposure to the diverse personal experiences and day-to-day lives of Palestinian communities. This absence of local voices obscures the agency, individualism and resistance of the Palestinian people, thus misrepresenting them as either passive victims or, worse, violent villains, rather than normal human beings with legitimate grievances, suffering, hopes and aspirations. The imbalance in storytelling is another area where Western media often fall short. There has been a detected tendency to focus more on Israeli experiences, thus providing more emotional depth and relatability to Israeli narratives, while Palestinian lives have not been given the same attention, depth or details (Buheji, 2024). This disparity in media coverage patterns and styles dehumanizes the Palestinians, reducing them to mere statistics rather than individuals with rich and complex lives. The absence of stories that highlight their daily struggles, hopes, and resilience further entrenches stereotypes, hinders empathy and contributes to misrepresentation.

The inadequate contextual examination of the conflict's political and historical factors has been another significant gap in Western media coverage. The lengthy history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the occupation and its consequences, is often left out of news reports about the Gaza war (Perez Castro, 2024). Without this necessary background information, viewers are left with a cursory understanding of this crisis which lacks the needed in-depth comprehension of the underlying factors behind the unfolding power struggles.

The dominant Western media narrative's lack of complexity falls short of questioning established presumptions and prejudices. Headlines and pictures significantly shape public perception of ongoing events (Mehmella, 2024). The selected imagery used by Western media usually conceals the true scope of damage and carnage in the Gaza war. Biased headlines often downplay the suffering of Palestinians, or even justify acts of violence against them, without offering much-needed nuance and context (Kozman,

2023; Sheets, 2024). This selective presentation frequently influences the audiences' perceptions of this war, which often align more closely with the official Israeli narrative, rather than the complex, and often devastating, realities on the ground in Gaza.

Social Media Coverage of the Gaza War: The Alternative Narrative

In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful force in shaping the narrative around global conflicts, including the Gaza war. Social media platforms have become indispensable instruments for providing alternative narratives, through filling the gaps and addressing the voids in mainstream media coverage (Kok-eyo, 2023). Social media has transformed how conflicts are reported and perceived, playing a significant role in the coverage of the Gaza war (Avelar, 2024). Social media sites, such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, have given voice to everyday people on the ground, through personal stories, images and real-time updates. Viral postings and hashtags, such as #freepalestine and #Gazaunderattack, have increased awareness and spurred conversations across geographical borders (Shestakov, 2022), and sometimes across ideological boundaries too.

Social media sites, like Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook, offer lively first-hand reports from those on the ground and enable them to provide real-time updates. Citizen journalism makes diverse viewpoints possible by presenting stories that may not be found in traditional media. This democratization of information enables ordinary citizens and everyday people to impart their knowledge and share their perspectives with a wide global audience (George, 2024; Schmitt et al., 2024).

Apart from democratizing information, social media offers a range of perspectives while decentralizing the information flow. Social media offers several forums used by activists, journalists and the public to draw attention to topics like human rights abuses and humanitarian concerns which are frequently ignored by mainstream media (Awwad & Toyama, 2024). The diversity of viewpoints online enables a more comprehensive understanding of conflicts and disputes.

Therefore, social media has significantly influenced how the public views and shares stories about the Gaza war. For example, Georgios et al. (2023) state "social media influences the way Americans, especially young Americans, perceive the conflict. Younger audiences get more of their news from social media - particularly TikTok and Instagram - than from traditional media, such as newspapers and television." Multimedia materials, viral posts and hashtags affect how viewers perceive events. Users may interact directly with the shared content online, thanks to the participatory nature of social media, which promotes better engagement and interactivity. Online campaigns boosting awareness and encouraging worldwide action, such as signing petitions and fundraising, are more accessible via social media. International attention and solidarity have been mobilized using audiovisuals and hashtags, such as #GazaUnderAttack (Manor & Crilley, 2018). These platforms provide younger audiences access to the latest information and updates on the situation in Gaza and facilitate organizing grassroots initiatives which seek to galvanize momentum and shape international public opinion.

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Additionally, online networking and community building are essential for generating the money needed to support charitable causes. Crowdfunding initiatives and donation drives, like "eSims for Gaza,"¹ rapidly gain traction and help supply essential resources to impacted Gazan communities, enabling them to remain connected to the outside world. Facebook, for instance, promotes conversation and community building through pages and groups devoted to the Gaza war. These forums facilitate in-depth discussions, the sharing of resources and coordinated acts of activism, all of which increase group participation and international solidarity (Al Attar & Brik, 2024).

¹ <https://gazaesims.com/>.

Newer social media platforms, especially Instagram and Twitter, which appeal to an even younger audience than Facebook, have played another equally important role, which is day-to-day documentation. Taking into account the “seeing is believing,” communication principle, these platforms provide unique opportunities for the whole world to see the images and hear the voices of ordinary Palestinians who have been telling their stories and sharing their narratives in their own words via these platforms.

One good example is how *Rose* and *@ajplus* on Tik-Tok use their platforms to provide live reports on events in Gaza. Another example is *Arab&Gaza* and *e7saswafa*, who use their Instagram platforms to report on the war-related events and casualties on both sides. These social media platforms enable people to see what is happening beyond what the public receives from broadcast media.

The Limitations of Social Media Coverage: The Double-Edged Sword

While social media has offered excellent opportunities for alternative narratives on the Gaza war to be heard and provided much needed platforms to galvanize international solidarity and provide support for the people of Gaza, we have to be mindful of some of its drawbacks and limitations. For example, Israeli viewpoints were mentioned on aired television nearly three times as frequently as Palestinian ones and almost twice as much on internet news. In contextualizing this, a dearth of context is seen in 76% of internet stories that refer to the conflict as an “Israel-Hamas war,” with just 24% mentioning “Palestine/Palestinian” (CfMM report “Media Bias: Gaza 2023-24”). However, social media spaces such as Snapchat and Twitter were platforms where Palestinian opinions were made evident.

One of these limitations is increased polarization, since social media platforms could help create echo chambers, whereby users are only exposed to information and opinions which reinforce their already held beliefs, rather than challenging them through constructive critical dialogue (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2009). For example, Chalise (2024) states that there have been several echo chambers created through Meta and social media groups where people constantly scroll through feelings on the Gaza war. Chalise (2024) states “Despite efforts of platforms like

Meta to curb political content generally, frustration and sympathy for both sides of Israel’s War on Gaza continues to run deep among users” (n.d.).

Additionally, the fast dissemination of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda poses another serious challenge, which requires online users to master critical media literacy skills (Chen et al., 2024). This is one of the cons of citizen journalism, whereby the accuracy and authentication of the shared information doesn’t match the speed through which it spreads online. For example, with the presence of AI in our era, there have been a lot of deepfakes and misleading information about the Gaza war, which increases people’s fear of AI’s power to misinform the public. Moreover, social media usage in crisis areas and war zones poses moral questions about security and privacy. For example, if sensitive information is made public, it may put those on the ground at risk. One good example is when the International Committee of the Red Cross sent out a press release to debunk harmful and false information that went viral about their work in both Israel and Palestine (ICRC, 2023). The press release explained that false information could cause harm to their organization and their personnel who are working within the war zone on the ground trying to help affected individuals. Rodman (2023) states that for audiences to utilize these sites sensibly, they need to balance the demand for knowledge with safety concerns.

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Therefore, it is safe to say that social media serves as a double-edged sword in the coverage of the Gaza war, which offers unique coverage opportunities, while at the same time posing serious challenges simultaneously. However, despite the limitations, such as the rapid spread of information, which opens the door for misinformation and poses verification issues, social media remains essential for raising awareness, enhancing

mobilization and solidarity and influencing mainstream media coverage, highlighting its indispensable role in modern journalism. Social media platforms offer real-time updates, provide platforms for diverse perspectives and offer an opportunity for eyewitness accounts that fill gaps in mainstream media coverage.

By doing so, these platforms amplify voices which are often unheard or neglected in traditional mainstream media, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of current events. This is certainly true in the case of the Gaza war and its many implications.

Concluding Remarks

The gaps in the coverage of the Gaza war by Western media significantly impact public opinion about this heated issue and shape the conversations around it. They contribute to a one-dimensional narrative that reinforces misconceptions and biases by underrepresenting Palestinian perspectives, leaving out essential historical and cultural contexts, and neglecting to humanize those most affected.

The failure of many Western mainstream media outlets to provide inclusive reporting which highlights a range of diverse viewpoints and gives a much-needed thorough context to better understand the ongoing Gaza war makes these media part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

A more empathetic, deep and nuanced coverage of the Gaza war could help promote knowledgeable discourse and better understanding, which could lead to more successful responses to ongoing conflicts and struggles and, eventually, contribute to peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

The existing gaps in mainstream Western media's coverage of this crisis highlight the significance of social media platforms, such as Instagram and Tik-Tok, which became crucial in complementing mainstream media, through filling information gaps and providing a more comprehensive, nuanced, and immediate coverage of this conflict, through the voices of those who are most affected by it.

However, despite the fact that social media has played a significant role in the Gaza war coverage, due to the reasons outlined above, it has certainly served as a double-edged sword (Avelar, 2024), taking into account its discussed limitations, such as the spread of misinformation and disinformation, se-

curity and privacy threats, and lack of sufficient verification, among others.

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This compels us to understand more deeply and analyse the complexities of social media's complex and multifaceted roles in conflict reporting and war coverage which is crucial for navigating its varied impacts on public perception and engagement during challenging times. It also highlights the importance of mastering media literacy skills to maximize the benefits of social media platforms, while minimizing any potential harm, during times of war and conflict.

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