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Content Assessment on Media Walking: the Role of Instagram in Shaping the Public Opinion During the Hamas- Israeli Conflict

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Dedication

To my parents, who have worked day and night to shape who I am today. To my brothers, who have supported me throughout my academic journey. To my grandfather, whose pieces of advice helped me during tough moments

I would like also to dedicate the present study to Mr. MESSAOUD ALLALI, who has provided me enormous support and help throughout my journey. Finally, I dedicate this research to my Palestinian colleagues, who have been deprived from achieving their academic endeavor.

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Abstract

The Hamas- Israeli conflict since Oct 7, 2023 has attracted the attention of the world leading to the formation of different perspectives due many parts to the media. The widely used social media platform, Instagram is used by people to be updated with recent events. Instagram is a platform that keeps getting updated with new features like algorithms. Therefore, how does Instagram participate in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli War? In light of this, the present work aims at investigating the eminence and efficiency of Instagram in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli War. In order to reach this aim, content analysis is adopted to analyse the collected qualitative data alongside the descriptive-analytical method. This study ultimately concludes that Instagram participates in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli war through providing a biased stand towards the Israeli side. That is done through different means, such as limiting the freedom of speech of pro- Palestinians, adopting algorithms that deprive pro- Palestinians from reaching the world and the presence of several aspects when covering events related to the war.

Keywords: HAMAS- ISRAELI WAR; INSTAGRAM; MEDIA; PRO- PALESTENIANS; PUBLIC OPINION.

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General Introduction

General Introduction

From the Cold War onwards, technology has been used as an effective political tool to impose different ideologies. One of the technologies used is media, which kept evolving over years starting from the traditional forms like print and radio to TV, internet and social media. One of the most influential tools in the contemporary age is Instagram. Instagram as a social media platform, has become an integral part of our lives and an influential source of information that covers different social events from different sources. In addition, the public opinion and attitude depends on news delivered on that platform especially during period of conflict. As a vivid example, the Hamas-Israeli conflict of 2023 can be taken to have a clear understanding.

While the dichotomy of media and public opinion has been extensively analysed by various scholars from different fields, some technological features of Instagram, such as algorithms and updates have been overlooked. During the Hamas- Israeli War, Instagram has been used as one of the sources for information about the war, making it an arena for sharing opinions about the conflict. Since the event is recent, how does Instagram participate in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli War? To answer this question, sub-questions are addressed:

1. To what extent are Instagram users able to express their opinions and share information about the war freely ?
2. How do Instagram algorithms participate in shaping the public opinion about the Hamas- Israeli War ?
3. Which features have accompanied news coverage about the Hamas- Israeli war ?

Besides exploring the role of Instagram in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli conflict, the present work will also focus on two main objectives. First, to demonstrate the extent Instagram users are free to express their view and share news. This objective involves describing the characteristics of Instagram and what Instagram users

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experience. Second, to explore the role of Instagram algorithms when it comes to forming opinions about the Hamas- Israeli conflict. By achieving these objectives it is possible to demonstrate how Instagram participates in shaping opinions during the Hamas- Israeli War.

The present study comes with the significance of filling the mentioned above gap by determining the role of Instagram in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli War. In addition, the nature of the applied research design provides readers with evidence and facts. Therefore, the findings can be adopted to solve real- world problems. Finally, it is possible that the present research paves the way for opening up new research areas, without forgetting that the findings contribute to the field of media effects.

When dealing with literature related to media and public opinion, mentioning Hassner's "Public Opinion, Media, Military, Politicians" (2002) is necessary. The research provides an insightful analysis of the role of media in relation to the public opinion and the US foreign policy. According to the researcher, media is an aspect that is widely acknowledged for public opinion expression and construction as well as determining and controlling the policy of the American government (23).

Kwon's *Political Use of Instagram: The Relationships between Motivations, Frequent Use, Incidental News Exposure and Online Political Participation* (2020), is a thesis that provides valuable insights on Instagram and opinions in relation to the political area. The researcher demonstrates that young people prefer being updated with current events; therefore they chose to use Instagram. The researcher adds that another reason behind selecting Instagram is the desire to express their political opinions and to receive political information (37).

Another notable contribution in the field of media and public opinion is offered by Güran and Özarslan in their (2022) research, "Framing theory in the age of social media." They argue by referring to the framing theory that social media platforms like Facebook and

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twitter co-operate to make the news reach the audience more rapidly, which also influence the production of the news. They further clarify that the actors are equipped with “more framing power” that allows them to influence the audience (450).

To expand on the literature review, Riyanto et al.’s article “The Role of Social Media in Building Public Opinion on the Covid-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on National Defense” (2023) delves into discussing how social media emerged and into defining the notion of public opinion. Moreover, they argue that social media can be regarded as a powerful mean to control people. Since they are part of people daily life, media have an effect on the cultural spheres particularly norms, modes and the way of living (135).

Furthermore, Ausat's *The Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Opinion and Its Influence on Economic Decision* (2023) is an article that analyses the role of Instagram in shaping the public opinion and its effects on economic decision making. According to the researcher, social media provide individuals with a virtual space where they can exchange information rapidly. In addition, media support the process of forming the public opinion’s complexity and diversity (39).

Instagram and public opinion have complex features. In order to have a clear understanding of Instagram and public opinion alongside their features, this dissertation relies on different theories. To break down the notion of Instagram and media several theories are used, such as the Agenda- Setting theory, Framing theory, Hegemony theory and Propaganda concept. In addition, some other theories are included in this dissertation to explain how public opinion is formed, namely The Rational Choice theory, Social Identity theory, Spiral of Silence theory and Cultivation theory. Also, Baudrillard’ Hyperreality concept is essential for explaining the difference between reality and media reality. Moreover, the Filter Bubble theory is included to demonstrate the role of algorithms in relation to the public opinion.

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To achieve the mentioned objectives, it is required to conduct an expository research design as it provides facts and a clear demonstration of the characteristics of Instagram and public opinion during the war. The qualitative data will be collected through a longitudinal observation, where we will observe the platform of Instagram from October 2023 till June 2024 to have all the necessary data for the present study. After collecting data, a descriptive-analytical method will be utilized for the purpose of describing the collected data, such as describing events and what Instagram users experience. Then, the research will delineate an in-depth analysis of primary sources such as news about the war by mainstream media and influential accounts in Instagram, as well as secondary sources like scholarly article that discusses the issue of algorithm and public opinion. The tool that will be used for analysing headlines of mainstream media to check the presence of bias is content analysis.

This dissertation consists of three chapters. The first chapter deals with numerous aspects related to media and social media, since Instagram is a social media platform. It defines the notion of media to have a clear understanding of the notion and explores how media evolved throughout history and how it is vital. Also, it discovers how media can be regarded as a powerful instrument by referring to different theories, namely the Agenda-Setting theory, Framing theory, Hegemony theory and Cultivation theory. The chapter also explores people behind media control. In addition, social media, as a type of media, is discussed alongside Instagram. It is necessary to discuss the Platform of Instagram and its features, since it is the framework of the study, which will make the process of comprehending the third chapter uncomplicated. Finally, the chapter explores different effects of media on different fields. In the second chapter, the focus is mainly on the notion of public opinion. That requires defining the term and discussing how the public opinion is formed. That requires discussing numerous theories, namely the Rational Choice theory, Social Identity theory, Spiral of Silence theory and Cultivation theory. Then factors behind the

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formation of public opinion are dealt with. Demonstrating how the public opinion can be powerful is essential for this study. This could be done by providing different events that took place due to the public opinion. Finally, the chapter engages in a comparison between reality and media reality. The comparison is accompanied with Baudrillard's concept of Hyperreality, in order to have a clear image. The third chapter explores the role of Instagram in shaping the public opinion by delving into many aspects. First, it is necessary to provide an overview about the Hamas- Israeli conflict. Then, it discovers the main influential Instagram accounts during the Hamas- Israeli Conflict. Then the chapter provides a demonstration of experience of some Instagram users during the war and the extent they are free to express their opinions. It provides a critical analysis of the platform's algorithms to identify their role in shaping public opinion about the war. In addition, identifying how information about the war are reported and the features that accompanied the reports is an essential element in the present research. Finally, the Hasbara project is a vital aspect that is discussed in the the present work which provides an explanation of the reason behind the applied restriction.

**Chapter One: The Extent of Which Media Influence
Our Life**

Introduction

Media have contributed to a major turning point in the human history, making it difficult for individuals to live without them. The term Media is the plural of medium, which refers to the means of communication with their different forms (“Media”). If someone is outside the house, he can easily check what is going on and connect with the world through newspaper. When he is at home, he can get updated through the TV and broadcasting channels. However, with the age of technological development, it has become easier to connect with the world, either being at home or outside. That keen connection with media stimulates in numerous effects.

It is possible to regard media as means of power. To make the image clear, various theories are discussed, such as Agenda-Setting theory, Framing theory and Hegemony theory. These theories demonstrate also people behind that power and who controls the media. This chapter sheds the light on one form of media, namely social media since it is common these days. Therefore, Instagram platform has been selected as the framework of this study. Media can be considered as a double-edged sword, since they have several effects on different aspects. Media with different forms are responsible for shaping people’s public opinion.

Media are necessary for humans’ lives. They are helpful in various domains. However, this chapter demonstrates the importance of media literacy, since media is controlled by the elites. The Audience may experience misinformation or disinformation and believe any provided information, since they may regard that information as valid. Critical thinking and skepticism towards any given information need to be developed, so that media can be exploited appropriately. This chapter provides an overview about media moving from conceptualising the term to highlighting their evolution throughout history, without neglecting their features and effects.

1. Defining Media

From the 1920s, the term Media began to be used. According to GDNet, the term Media is defined by the roles they perform in communities. They teach, provide information and keep the audience entertained through various programmes, such as news, drama and documentaries. People's lives and opinions are demonstrated publically thanks to Media. In addition, Media can also participate in shaping the public opinion and in paving the way for social transformations. People's lives can be impacted positively or negatively through media reports that highlight certain issues that are not treated and provide the subalterns with the chance to voice their concerns.

It is possible to find some conflicts between the government and media, since media play the role of surveyor. The performance of the government and those put in power can be found under surveillance of media to check the extent politicians adhere to the given promises. Media system is based on some aspects and principles, such as fairness, accuracy and diversity. However, the political spirit influences the adoption of these principles, which leads to polarization and restricting the process of transmitting information. In addition to the political interference, media system can also be influenced by media ownership. Media owned by private organisation do not function the same as those owned by the state.

1.1 The Evolution of Media

People did not have enough knowledge about the world, because they used to interact only with those close to them geographically in a face-to-face manner. Then, media started evolving through history. The first phase is known as the before print era. In the Medieval time, interaction took place through bishops and cardinals who used to take messages from the Vatican, Italy to the priest in Cathedrals. Then, the second phase emerged which is known as the print era. The emergence of printing press was the first independent news source from the church. Printed sources paved the way for significant social transformations, such as the

break up from Catholicism in England and the spread of Protestantism. Still, the process of making printed materials was slow and costly at the same time. Then, the third phase emerged, namely the electronic network era. Before that era, people used to communicate through letters and wait for long period for responds. Then, the first telegraph line was opened in 1866 from Baltimore, Maryland, to Washington, DC. Electronic devices kept evolving, which led to the emergence of TVs, Radios, Internet and Social Media which made the world more complex than it used to be (INTRODUCTION TO THE MEDIA).

1.2 Media as Means of Power

Media has been proved not to be only means of communication, but means of power. To prove this argument, scholars developed numerous theories that tackle this idea from different angles. First of all, the Agenda- Setting theory suggests that media shed the light on specific events by making it appear important. According to McCombs and Valenzuela, the Agenda-setting theory does not only take the attention of the audience towards specific events, but also affects the way they understand news. It is possible to define media as objects related to public problems (47). One may ask about people behind media agenda. Wanjohi states in relation to the researcher done by Walgrave and Aelst in 2006 that politicians are the one of the figures behind media agenda (04).

The second theory that regards media as means of power is the Framing theory. According to Chong and Druckman, Framing can be defined as “The process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (104).

The third theory that views media as a powerful tool is the Hegemony theory. According to Hyug, Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of Hegemony, through which he explains that the ruling elites impose themselves either through dominance or hegemony. Hyug explains in his book that dominance can be attained by force, however hegemony can

be attained through unconscious consent. Therefore, the ruling elites impose hegemony on ordinary people thanks to the unconscious consent given, due to the effects of media on ordinary people (127).

It possible to take the Propaganda concept in order to demonstrate how media can be powerful. From the nineteenth century onwards, the term propaganda began to be associated with the political sphere. The term propaganda can be defined as the spread of facts or information whether truthful or false. When the information are truthful media will highlight and select certain facts on the expense of other fact for certain reasons. The term Propaganda went through different stages. First, the term came to light first in the 17th century with the establishment of ongregatio de Propaganda Fide by the Roman Catholic Church. Second, the term started shifting from the religious the field to the political one with the emergence of the French Revolution. Third, the term began to be known more in the political domain by the mid-nineteenth century. Propaganda can be classified into three types, namely white, grey and black Propaganda. White propaganda refers to distributing facts based on true sources for the purpose of convincing the audience, but it contains bias. Grey propaganda does not have clear source and hides the originator. Black propaganda may refer to act of spreading misinformation to the audience who take it in as valid and truthful. The term may also refer to accrediting different source than the original one with the propaganda (Mull and Wallin 2-3).

1.2.1 Media Control

When treating the issue of media control, media ownership has to be discussed. Media can be owned either by the government or private sector. Media ownership is based on owning shares and these shareholders are either governments or families. Media ownership indicates signs of control and political influence. In addition, media ownership by the states is found more in poor countries. Therefore, when the state owns media, the freedom of press is restricted (Djankov et al. 373).

Freedom of press is not dependent only on whether the country is developed or not and whether media is owned by the state or private sector. Noam Chomsky explains that there are two types of democracy, the first one is when democracy is not found in a country by forbidding the public from intervening in the management of their affairs and restricting the flow of information and communication. The second type of democracy includes the public and allows them to manage their own affairs and provides free media. However, Chomsky argues that the first type of democracy has been applied since the seventeenth century, though people believed that they are living under the second type. Through the use of propaganda, people have been controlled by the elites. During the WWI, the American population stood firmly against the participation in the war, but the government established the Creel Commission that was responsible for propaganda. As a result, the public opinion transformed into demands for participating in the war (2-3). The population is regarded by the elites as nothing more than herds as Walter Lippmann states that “The public must be put in its place ... so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd” (155).

1.3 Defining Social Media

The creation of the internet in the 1960s made it possible for people to interact virtually. That interaction kept evolving through history, till it reached today’s form. Recently, social media platforms have become an integral part of post-modern men’s life. Social media can be defined as the “Colonisation” of the existing relationship between private interaction and the “traditional broadcast” (Miller et al. 9). In addition, Chen defines social media as “A collection of online systems that allow for the production, storage and distribution of user-generated content (UGC)” (74). He adds that social media allow people to interact as duo or groups virtually. There are various aspects that motivate people to use social media. The first reason is to stay sociable and be updated with what the friends are doing. There are other reasons, such as to be aware of the “current events”, “fill up spare time” and

“share the opinion.” Social media are regarded as the “source of content”, though the content is created by them (Bialy 73).

In addition, social media are not used only to spend free time, but for other purposes. Social media have become means for advertisement that are replacing Television advertisement, since people are spending more time on their phones. Smartphones users are becoming more dependent on their phones (Parasuraman et al.). Prominent social media accounts gain money from advertisement and the bigger the account is the bigger the brand advertised will be. According to Akram and Kumar, social media can help business owners to promote their products and flourish more than the rivals (349-350).

Social media can be regarded as a political arena. Now days, the political field is regarded as an integral part of social media, where politicians create accounts to share their opinions and views. Not only politicians, but also broadcasting channels have social media accounts to post about recent events. However, the integration of politics in social media may lead to polarization. The exposure to politicians in social media platforms may affect the users, therefore social media users need to be exposed to different valid sources for political information and news, because any one can post on social media about politics.

1.3.1 Social Media and Social Relationships

Social relationships have to be discussed, when treating the phenomena of social media and society. Media, especially social media, help people to stay in touch with each other and to create new relationships, which make the person feel good about him. Young people believe that it is better to have more friends on social media as he mentions “The more the better”. In addition, some people believe that social media or online friendship is purer than the offline one (Wang 115-118). Thus, people prefer interacting through social media than real life, which helps in creating pure relationships.

1.3.2 Instagram

When dealing with media and social media, Instagram has to be mentioned. Being the framework of this study, Instagram is a prominent social media platform that is being used now days. According to the platform's website, Instagram is a free application that allows its users to upload videos and pictures. In addition, Instagram is not used only for personal purposes these days, but also for business purposes. Companies use Instagram as an effective tool for advertisement, such as paying famous figures to post their products in their accounts.

1.3.2.1 Instagram Features

Instagram platform is based on multiple features. First of all, there is the post. The post can either be a photo that you can edit or a video. Also, story is a feature that is commonly used in Instagram that refers to others' or your content that could be posted temporarily for 24 hours. The only way to save the story forever is through Instagram highlight, which is series of previous stories found beneath the bio. In addition, feed is a feature that refers to content posted by people you follow. Reel is also a famous feature used by Instagram users, which refers to the video posted. Instagram page refers to the user's account, where they can manage their posts and account. Instagram live is also a common feature that makes real time broadcasting with the followers possible. This feature is effective for communication as it allows users to interact easily. When dealing with communication, direct messages feature has to be mentioned. Direct messages allow users to send and receive messages. If someone is not following you and sends you a message, it goes to the request section. There are also other features in Instagram, such as saving posts, sharing posts, using hashtags, turning off comments and hiding the counts of likes (Shroff et al. 10-12). Algorithm is also a vital feature of Instagram that should be mentioned. Algorithms refer to "A set of rules and calculations that platforms use to determine the content users see on their feeds" (Maryiam). According to Mosseri, Instagram does not use only one algorithm, but multiple ones responsible for different tasks. Algorithms have been adopted by Instagram in

early 2018. It is possible to define Instagram algorithms as “logical and systematic arrangement of big data” that aims at serving the platform’s users. When someone posts on the platform, the post will reach only 20% of the audience. Meaning that the more audience interact with post, including likes and comments, the more audience the content will reach (agung and darma 244).

1.4 Effects of Media on Society

Media as means of communication have different effects on society. The effects may reach different aspects of society, such as national identity, education, bullying and public image.

1.4.1 Media’s role in National Identity Consolidation

One of the effects that media has on society is strengthening the national identity of citizens. Media have positive effects on consolidating the national identity especially of those living in third world countries. It is vital to mention that after independence, third-world elites nationalized media systems, which led to the absence of competition and the control of news distribution. Thus, the national identity had been consolidated thanks to the nationalization (Gurevitch et al. 185).

1.4.2 Media Facilitating the Process of Education

Social media and education have become unseparated aspects recently. Students and teachers started using social media platforms, such as Instagram to interact with each other. It has become easy to enrich our knowledge through social media from field experts and teachers from any place without paying sometimes (Akram and Kumar 351). Teachers use also social media to promote themselves and their content, by demonstrating the way they teach and their previous students’ achievements for the purpose of convincing people.

1.4.3 Media being Simple Tools for Bullying

Media or social media interaction seems similar to real world interaction. It could be positive or negative interaction. Negative interaction may be a result of cyber bullying. According to Patchin, it is possible to define cyberbullying as the repeated act of harassing others through the use of technological tools. The center reported that more than 55% of students in their 2023 sample had to go through the experience of cyberbullying. Bullying through social media may seem easy for people, because they do it anonymously to avoid being caught.

1.4.4 The Influence of Media on Public Image

Social media can be a dangerous weapon that leads to destroying someone's image. This act resembles real world gossip, however it is more effective. Sometimes, it is possible to find some stories on social media about certain people including negative facts about them. When the target audience is not mature or conscious enough to check the validity of the information, a person's reputation may get destroyed easily. In addition, hackers can also leak personal information or images from a person's device, which can lead to a serious issue concerning the public image.

1.5 Effects of Media on Culture

Media have different effects on culture. Media effects can reach different aspects, such as breaking down traditional values, spreading and strengthening stereotypes, consolidating cultural hegemony and shaping norm.

1.5.1 Media Participation in Breaking Down Traditional Values

When treating the effects of media on culture, the first effect would be breaking the traditional values down. It is possible to say that media can lead to destroying the inherited values, by comparing developed countries with under developed ones (Gurevitch et al. 183-184). Development is mainly linked to industrialisation and consumerism culture and that culture has become common among people thanks to media campaigns. If we take 1960s

Britain as an illustration, new culture was emerging where nearly every house had washing machines, microwave oven and a refrigerator. That led women to integrate into society, since they had more free time. That stimulated the embarkment of Feminism and other new cultural aspects, such as the rock and roll music and the punk culture. During that era family structure began to change as well as gender roles.

1.5.2 The Role of media in Spreading and Stengthening Stereotypes

One of the prominent effects of media is their role in spreading and consolidating stereotypes. The term Stereotype refers to the overgeneralized image about certain group of people. The image's creation came as a result of real experience with that group of people or by learning it from other sources who may have the experience with that group of people. Most of the time that image is not valid, but created for certain purposes mainly political ones. Therefore, mass media are one of the effective tools used to create stereotypes. As an illustration, after the US 9/11 and 7/7 London bombing events, Muslims in the United States and Britain faced several challenges. Media played a major role in creating the image of Muslims being terrorists. After that, Muslims were associated with terrorism and bombing in the mind of people and started facing a huge wave of hatred.

1.5.3 Cultural Hegemony Consolidation by Media

Media can also lead to cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony is a concept coined by Marxist Antonio Gramsci, which refers to dominance of certain group on cultural aspects of life such as, beliefs and values. Gramsci uses this concept to criticise the Capitalist system and its effects (Rosamond). This concept could be discussed from two angles. The first angle is the practice of cultural hegemony on the colonised countries. The coloniser used to convince the colonised that the coloniser is superior and more developed to be easily controlled. The second angle of cultural hegemony discussion is globalisation. Capitalism

used media and Hollywood to spread certain cultural norms. Through media, the advertised products became a necessity and demands for such products increased.

1.5.4 Norms being Shaped by Media

When it comes to constructing norms, media play an effective role. Social media as a type of media participates in shaping the social norms of today's society. If we take an example, beauty standards are created based on the prominent figures that people are exposed to. According to Akram and Kumar, teenagers may have a wrong image of what true beauty is since they are exposed to perfect bodies on social media. The issue is that even the bodies are not real, as people may use Photoshop to change their body shape. That may lead teenagers to do plastic surgeries and cause them serious issues, such as Anorexia and Bulimia (353).

Conclusion

To conclude, media have shaped people's lives throughout history. It kept evolving into different forms moving from the traditional forms to the modern ones. These different forms of communication tools facilitated the distribution of information. People started having access to information instantly with less costs. With their development, media are powerful tool used by the elites in different areas, mainly in the political field. These days, Instagram, as social media platform, is one of the prominent forms of media that is used by people to connect with the world. The platform has various features that attract people to use it. Yet, media have different effects on society and culture that need to be highlighted. All in all, media have become an integral part of people's daily lives. Therefore, it is necessary to raise awareness about media literacy so that people will not be regarded as passive receivers of any given information, but skeptical audience that use the media rather than being used by media.

Chapter Two: Media Shaping the Attitudes of People

Introduction

One of the prominent phenomena is the public opinion. It is the collection of people views, beliefs and attitudes about certain subject discussed by group of people (Davison). Being constructed of two notions, public and opinion, it is possible to explain the public opinion formation based on four theories, namely Rational Choice theory, Social Identity theory, Spiral of Silence theory and Cultivation theory. The theoretical framework facilitates the process of understanding the concept of Public Opinion and its formation. In addition, there are numerous factors that lay behind the construction of the public opinion, such as personal factors, social factors, the flow of information factor, economic factors and political factors. Moreover, Public opinion can be considered as a powerful instrument that reaches different areas, including the fields of society, politics and economy. Furthermore, public opinion can be created based on a reality that does not exist, which stresses the importance of media literacy.

The concept of public opinion is complex. It is related to different fields of study. Through this chapter, it is possible to provide an analysis of the concept to facilitate the process of understanding the Public Opinion and the aspects that lay behind it.

2.1 Defining Public Opinion

One of the crucial concepts of social sciences is public opinion. The concept emerged during the Age of Enlightenment with its philosophical texts. The concept is also associated with various fields of study, such as sociology, psychology, political science and communicative research. The origin of the terms comes from the Latin word *opinio*, which its original meaning is still associated with today's meaning of the word. The word is used to differentiate between something that a person is not sure about with something he is sure about or between uncertainty and a fact (Price 1-6).

As it appears the concept 'public opinion' is constructed of two notions, namely public and opinion. According to Wilson, it is possible to regard the public notion as a legal concept related also to government, because the concept has evolved closely with the Democratic theory. If we separate the terms "public" and "opinion", opinion would have no political meaning. If we take the notion "public" from a sociological view, it would be possible to define it as community and their actions and to what extent they are controlled by the opinion. Based on Lippmann and Lowell, we can consider the public as those ready to adhere to "decisions of the majority". Through a sociological view, the public can be regarded as the ones who are able to affect the actions of the government (372-373). That leads to highlighting the extent the public participate in the government decisions. On the other hand, opinion can be regarded as an important aspect if it is associated with at least some freedom. It is possible to regard the "Will to power through ideas" as an alternative to opinion. Since the state needs to treat the public through "Wills" (375-376).

2.2 The Formation of the Public Opinion

Understanding the formation of the Public Opinion is an essential stage. It possible to break down the formation of the Public Opinion through numerous theories, namely the Rational Choice theory, Social Identity theory, Spiral of Silence theory and Cultivation theory.

2.2.1 Rational Choice Theory

It is possible to explain how the Public Opinion is formed in the light of the Rational Choice theory. The theory refers to the fact that actors select their actions or decide what to do based on some options. The actors are aware of the consequences of the chosen option therefore, they will select the option that serves their aims. Still, only some aims would be realizable due to the restriction that the actors face such as, time, income and budget. In addition, based on the theory, behavior is determined by preferences and restriction. That is to

say that we can explain transformations in behavior by transformations in preferences, restrictions in both (Green and Fox 54-55). To make the image clear, it is possible to link the Game theory with the Rational Choice theory. According to Green, the Game theory is based on the postulate of the information that is complete. That is to say, actors are aware of what they prefer and what other actor prefers (58). However, there are stages of hardships in selecting the tools (Riker 25). Therefore, it is possible to argue based on the theory that people formulate their opinions based on an analysis they make. They are aware of the consequences of holding an opinion and they hold it based on their preferences and aims. Individuals select the opinion that best serve them. To illustrate this, people may support a policy or an act to be passed because it serves their aims and preferences. That is how the Rational Choice theory is applied to demonstrate the formulation of the public opinion. Yet, the theory considers the individuals' interests as the primary cause behind the public opinion formation neglecting the role of other aspects like society.

2.2.2 Social Identity Theory

In addition to Rational Choice theory, it is possible to explain how Public Opinion is formed through the Social Identity theory. According to Islam, Social Identity theory emerged as result of Henri Tajfel works. Being regarded as a classic social psychological theory, it attempts to discuss the intergroup conflict as “a function of group-based self-definitions.” In addition, individuals' identities are defined in the light of social groups, which lead to self-identity being protected and strengthened. The construction of groups' identities includes both categorization of someone's “in-groups” regarding an “out-group”. That leads to viewing one's own group positively and in biased manner in relation to the out-group. Since self-definition is based on the group, comparison between groups would be based on emotions that resemble self/other comparison (1). Besides, social identity is a powerful aspect in the evolution of in-group bias and out-group conflict (Huddy 128). Therefore, it is possible to

claim that in order to have a positive social identity, one adheres to his/her in-group opinions to be accepted. Also, comparison may be done at the level of intergroup. That is to say, a group may compare themselves with an out-group or distinguish themselves from the out-group, because they adhere to contrary opinions. However, the social identity theory focuses mainly on social identities being behind the formation of public opinion.

2.2.3 Spiral of Silence Theory

Another theory that should be mentioned in addition to social identity theory is the Spiral of Silence theory. The demonstration of how the Public Opinion is formed may be possible through discussing the Spiral of Silence theory. According to Clemente and Roulet, the theory has been introduced by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann as an attempt to comprehend how conducts and expressions of individuals are formed to construct “homogenous” public opinion. The theory discusses how the public opinion is formed by demonstrating the way individuals’ desire to express their voice decreases when they consider themselves as being part of the minority. Since individuals are afraid of being in the minority, they have the tendency not to express their voices when they usually would. Therefore, a spiral will be created which strengthens the majority’s voice and prevents the minority from expressing their voice. As a result, a “macrophenomenon” will be created named Public Opinion (97).

Moreover, apprehension of social isolation leads individuals to supervise their milieu or the news media for signals about the majority status. Progressively, that process makes some “Positions heard and others unheard in spite of their actual distribution in a society” (Matthes 155). Based on the Spiral of Silence theory, it is possible to say that diversity of public discussions is neglected, since the opinion of the majority is dominant over the minority’s one. Also, one may say the media participate in creating the spiral by reporting only the heard majority and neglecting the subaltern minority. That leads to questioning the

validity of reporting the Public Opinion. Still, not all individuals submit to the majority's opinion and ideas. Some individuals feel at ease expressing their opinion freely.

2.2.4 Cultivation Theory

Not only Rational Choice theory, Social Identity theory and Spiral of silence theory explain how the public opinion is formed, but also the Cultivation theory. Cultivation theory According to Adams-Bass et al, The theory provides an insightful analysis that helps in understanding how the public opinion is formed. Cultivation theory suggests that the increased television exposure is connected with believing that the picture is representing reality. Also, it has been proved that numerous viewers of television adopt an image of the world that is negative than the real image of the world, which leads them to treat people surrounding them maliciously (369-370). In addition, the theory is concerned with how television participates in forming the audience's perception. If the audience watch television excessively, they will adopt beliefs that are aligned with the world as it is demonstrated on the television. If the world of the television presents a faithful representation of the real world, the television should have a decreased influence on perception. As an illustration, the world of television is usually more violent than the real world and violence is associated with particular groups (Shrum 1-2). That leads to creating stereotypes and consolidating them through exposure to repeated messages. Public Opinion formation may be dependent on media coverage, especially when the coverage is not diverse. However, the Cultivation theory focuses exclusively on television, since it was the prominent form of media at the time the theory emerged. Also, the theory depicts the television and media as an invincible potent instrument by generalising that all the audience are being influenced by the television, though there are individuals who constantly check the validity of the news.

Comprehending how the Public Opinion if formed is vital. This process is possible by discussing four essential theories that are called Rational Choice theory, Social Identity

theory, Spiral of Silence theory and Cultivation theory. Though the theories have some limitations individually, it is possible to have a clear understanding of how the Public Opinion is formed by combining the four theories together.

2.3 Factors Behind Public Opinion Construction

The Public Opinion is a complex concept that is connected with various fields. In addition to the previously discussed theories, there are multiple factors that lay behind the construction of the Public Opinion, such as personal factors, social factors, information factors, economic factors and political factors.

2.3.1 Personal Factors

One of the effective factors behind the construction of the Public Opinion is the personal factors. It is possible to break down the personal factors into sub factors, namely personal values, personal experiences and personal characteristics. According to Suo and Chen, People are varied and sophisticated, in any social system. Value orientation is a vital aspect in shaping the conduct in social systems. It refers to the inclination towards certain consequences for oneself and others (2). People's already acquired values and worldviews can have a substantial impact on how they understand information and construct opinion. Moreover, personal experiences influence also the formation of public opinion. The way people see the world may be shaped by their experiences, which can even lead to generalization. As an illustration, if someone goes through a negative experience with someone from another country, he will form a negative image and opinion about that country. Furthermore, individuals' personalities participate in the process of forming the public opinion. Individuals are different and each one has his own personality in terms of the way they think critically, the attempt to listen new information and the level of education. All of these aspects can influence the processes of forming an opinion and decision making.

Personality traits such as agreeableness and extraversion influence how people act when they make decisions (Suo and Chen 2).

2.3.2 Social Factors

Social factors play a significant role in shaping the public opinion. That includes individuals' sense of belonging, surroundings they trust and established norms. First of all, individuals' feeling of belonging to certain community may influence the way they interpret information and construct their opinions. Localised interactions between neighbors or friends are referred to as micro-level environmental impacts (Suo and Chen 2). Explained previously in the Social Identity theory, individuals may adhere to their in-group ideas and beliefs which influences the process of forming the public opinion. Also, individuals may trust some people blindly, which stimulates in them believing everything they say. That results in forming an opinion dependently especially when it is about subjects that the individuals are not familiar with. In addition, the established norms by the community may influence individuals' opinions. As explained in the Spiral of Silence theory, individuals may adopt the mainstream ideas of their group due to the fear of isolation and to avoid being considered in the minority group.

2.3.3 Information Factor

The flow of information is essential factor that influences the formation of the public opinion. First of all, individuals may decide to lean towards the news or information that align with their ideas. That is to say, they would accept any information that strengthens their ideas and reject the one that opposes his ideas. In addition, the way an issue or an event is covered influences people's opinions. To illustrate, media can make a problem seems less important, though it is more important than how it is covered. Moreover, the use of specific language can influence how the audience interpret the news. All in all, the flow of information is a complex aspect, but the previously explained theories related to media may make the image clear.

2.3.4 Economic Factors

Economy plays a significant role when it comes to shaping the public opinion. According to Suo and Chen, economy is considered as a macro-level environmental influence, which affects the conduct of people (2). Economy is one of the pillars of any nation; hence if a nation's economy is in a positive status, this will have a positive impact on individuals. Consequently, people would build a positive opinion mainly on the country policies.

2.3.5 Political Factors

The political arena is one of the prominent fields that have an influence on how individuals shape their opinions. Politicians use multiple instruments to have an effect on the individuals' opinions. That conduct usually takes place during the time of elections or wars. During The elections, some politicians rely on propaganda campaigns to gain the support of the public. In addition, media advertisements are also effective tools used by the politicians to attract voters as well as for attacking opponents and to promote their programs that would align with the public interests. Moreover, politicians use also emotional speech that may increase the sense of public nationalism, which is considered as an emotional control. Finally, they can create staged moments to create a positive image in the minds of the public.

All in all, the construction of the public opinion is based on numerous factors, namely personal factors, social factors, the flow of information factor, economic factors and political factors. This section in addition to the section before makes the process of understanding how the public opinion is formed less complex.

2.4 The Power of Public Opinion

It is possible to consider the Public opinion as a powerful instrument. Its effects contribute to reshaping numerous aspects of different fields. Public opinion influence is various and can reach society, politics and even economy.

2.4.1 Public Opinion Effects on Society

Society can be influenced by the public opinion. Public opinion is a tool that may lead to transforming social structure. According to Huddy, requests for collective acknowledgement and esteem are found at the core of new social movement (128). From 1950s to 1960s African-Americans embarked into a struggle of asking for equal rights (Zapata). The movement was triggered by racial segregation. In addition, public opinion leads to transforming social norms and gender roles. After the Women's Rights Movement of 1960s-70, women began having more access to jobs all over the United States (Burkett). That is to say, when a group of people agree upon an opinion or a belief, they will make social changes to fulfill those ideas. That facilitates the journey of individuals voicing their concerns.

2.4.2 Public Opinion Effects on Politics

Public Opinion may contribute to influencing the field of politics. The effects of Public Opinion on politics can be discussed from different angles. First, public opinion can lead to passing laws. When a group of people realise that a law may serve their interests or needs, they will collaborate synergistically to facilitate the process of legislation. As an illustration, after the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Acts was passed in response to the African-American demands, which marked the end of racial segregation (Zapata). Moreover, public opinion can also facilitate the process repealing laws. When a policy does not serve the needs and interests of the public, people will work together to repeal it. As an illustration, the series of Corn Laws restricted the import and export of grains in Britain. Hence, the common opinion was based on the need to repeal these laws for free trade which led people to work on the issue till the repeal of the law (Britannica). Furthermore, public opinion can lead to remove leaders or monarchs from power. The public check whether the elected politician adheres to his promised programme or not. Also, if the leader fails to rule,

he will be removed. We can take Louis XVI, king of France, who had been deprived of his status as a king and then executed, because he was incapable to rule France (Goodwin and Popkin).

2.4.3 Public Opinion Effects on Economy

The field of economy can also be affected by the Public Opinion. One of the major aspects that influence economy, which is resulting from the public opinion is boycotting. Boycotting or avoiding dealing with a company or brand can affect the company negatively which will be reflected on economy. One of the major events of boycotting in history is the Boston Tea Party. The fear from the possibility that reducing taxes will work, people who felt that they are American more than British dumped the tea loads of three ships (coming from British East India Company) overboard (Lloyd 48). Moreover, strikes are also one of the aspects influenced by the public opinion that affect economy. If workers agree upon one idea and share the same opinion about their unsatisfying working conditions, they will go on strikes which affect the industry and economy.

All in all, Public Opinion is a complex concept that affects different fields. It is possible to regard it as a powerful instrument, since there are numerous effects that lay behind it. These effects reach multiple areas, namely society, politics and economy.

2.5 Public Opinion Formation Based on Invalid Information

As explained in the previous sections, the Public Opinion gets influenced by numerous factors and affects different areas, which makes it considered a powerful tool. Still, the risk of constructing an opinion based on invalid information is possible. In the age of technological development and means of communication, spreading information has become quick and effortless, regardless of whether the provided information is true or not. Therefore, a comparison between reality and media reality should be necessary.

2.5.1 Reality Versus Media Reality

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Reality refers to the condition of things in their current state instead of being imagined (“REALITY: Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary”). Reality is complex, because each individual acquires subjective perception of the world based on personal experiences. Therefore, individuals interpret events that occur in the world differently. On the other hand, media reality refers to the reality created by media. According to Gurevitch et al, television emerged into a main provider of socially constructed reality defined as the image of what exists (254). According to Johnson, the impact of media is not always positive. Media can consolidate stereotypes and provide voters with misinformation about political candidates or public events. Advertisements of politics are usually created for the purpose of encouraging beliefs that are not true. They motivate individuals to view picture that do not exist and to interpret information in a lenient manner. Since the risk of getting influenced by media negatively is possible, it is vital to make people educated about both the positive and negative impact of media (982).

It is possible that media report some events that do not even exist in the real world, as they exist only in the media world. According to Carter, Jean Baudrillard is known for his critique of technology and media as he denies the existence of any realities behind them. In addition, differences between signifier and signified fell down, because signs do not allude to signified anymore. Baudrillard even denies the existence of the Gulf War of 1991 as he argues that the war was not real but an event of media. That claim led Baudrillard to experience toxic criticism (121-122). Therefore, it is possible claim that media make the audience believe that an event is occurring even though it is not taking a place. Since media are able to do such conduct, it is possible for media to convince individuals that an event is not happening even though it is taking place, which stresses again the importance of media literacy and skepticism in people’s daily life.

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All in all, the real world differs from the world of media. What individuals see in the media does not represent always reality. It is possible to say that media affect the audience perception to the extent that they believe a covered event that does not exist. The existence of skepticism in every person's mind is vital, so that viewing how the real world seems would be possible.

Conclusion

To conclude, understanding the concept of public opinion and the aspects related to it is important. Public opinion is linked to many fields, which contribute to shaping the way individuals view the world. By highlighting how the public opinion is formed and the factors behind its formation, in addition to stressing the power of public opinion and its effects, the process of understanding the concept of public opinion may be possible. The remaining issue concerning public opinion is the possibility of constructing an opinion based on nonexistent reality, since people may form an opinion based on media reality with extensive exposure to media and absence of media literacy.

Chapter Three: Exploring the Role of Instagram in Shaping the Public Opinion

Introduction

One of prominent dichotomies of modern age is media and public opinion. Media play a significant role in shaping the public opinion during different events, including war times. That could be found with the recent Hamas- Israeli conflict of 2023. The Hamas-Israeli War refers to the war between Hamas and Israel that started on October 7, 2023. It is named Hamas-Israeli War, because it started between Hamas and Israel then it included Palestinians as well. The public opinion differs on the Hamas- Israeli conflict, since people are exposed to evolving events that leads to changing individuals' opinions. To focus on a specific media platform, Instagram is selected to be the framework of this chapter to explore its role in shaping the public opinion during the war.

Through a longitudinal observation of eight months, data have been collected from Instagram. The collected data have been analysed through descriptive- analytical method and content analysis. By following the mentioned methodology, this chapter provides a comprehensive description and analysis of the role of Instagram during the Hamas- Israeli War when it comes to forming the public opinion. First, the chapter provides an overview about different opinions about the war and then it lists major influential Instagram accounts that play significant role during the war. Also, it demonstrates the extent Instagram users are free to express their opinions and share information about the war. In addition, it depicts how the platform's algorithms participate in shaping the public opinion about the conflict. Finally, the chapter provides several features that accompany the coverage of the Hamas- Israeli War.

3.1 The Hamas-Israeli Conflict

One of the prominent events of 2023 is the Hamas-Israeli Conflict. The conflict attracted the attention of world, leading to the creation of different perspectives. According to Britannica, Hamas-Israeli Conflict refers to a war that started on October 7, 2023 between Israel and the Palestinian Guerrillas, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Hamas

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refers to the assertive group that promotes Palestinian nationalism and Islamic principles in the West Bank, territory situated in the Northeast of Gaza Strip, that aim for the establishment of an Islamic nation. Hamas emerged in 1987 as a firm opposition to the secular method of Palestine Liberation Organization and the proposed idea of ceding any portion of Palestine. In order to have a clear understanding of the conflict happening between Hamas and Israel, a historical explanation is necessary.

The land of Palestine was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire until the fall of the empire. Then, Palestine became under the rule of the British Empire. On November 2, 1917 the Balfour Declaration demonstrated support of Britain in establishing a national home for the Jewish community in Palestine. Then, Britain withdrew its forces from the region and the state of Israel was established in 1948. The state was based on Arab Palestinians and Jews, which led to a huge displacement of Palestinians from their places. Most of them became refugees in the strip of Gaza. The creation of an Israeli state faced firm opposition by Arab nations, which led to the Arab- Israeli War 1948-49 and the Six-Day 1967 War that resulted in the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip by Israel. In 2007, Hamas became the De-facto ruler in the Strip of Gaza and the first conflict between Hamas and Israel was in 2008 when Israel launched air strikes and ground invasion leading to high cost of humans living in the strip of Gaza. In early 2022, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the new settled individuals launched series of attacks. As a response the Israeli Defense force responded harshly against the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and left Hamas, which decided not to intensify the conflict. In August 2023, law makers have been warned by senior military officials about Hezbollah's threat that may lead to a struggle in the northern borders of Israel.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an attack during the so-called Jewish holiday Shemini Atzeret. Since it was a holiday many of the Israel Defense Forces did not work that day and their attention was on northern border instead of the Strip of Gaza (south). The attack

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started around 06:30 in the morning. During twenty minutes Hamas launched no least than 2,200 missiles into Israel. The rockets were able to defeat the so-called system of defense against rockets, the Iron Dome. When the rockets were falling, no least than 1,500 soldiers from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad penetrated into Israel with the use of technology and weapons. At 8:23 the Israel Defense Forces declared status of alert for war and started preparing for additional troops. Two hours later, the Israel Defense Forces started striking Gaza Strip. On October 8, a state of war was declared in Israel. Then, water, fuel, electricity and food were cut off from reaching the area. Then Qatar became a prominent link between Hamas and Israel for negotiation during the first week of the war. That resulted in the release of some Israeli hostages. After three weeks of the war, more than 1,4 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip were removed from the areas they used to live in and the huge rates of deaths of Palestinians are still rising. hospitals were either destroyed or stopped working since there was no power, making it the bloodiest war for Palestinians, since the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 (Britannica).

3.2 Different Perspectives about the Conflict

Just like any event, the Hamas-Israeli war led to the emergence of two sides holding two different views about the war. The first party provided its support for Israel. For them, Israel has the right to defend itself and to respond to the attack of Hamas. That group view Hamas as a terrorist group even before the attack of October, 7. According to the ADL media and entertainment institute, Hamas has been labeled as an organisation of foreign terrorist by the United States since 1997. In addition, numerous countries, such as Australia, Canada, European Union, Japan and the United Kingdom regard Hamas a terrorist and an extremist group that aim for the elimination of the state of Israel.

The first party supported the actions of Hamas. That group called itself pro-Palestinians or pro-Hamas and the majority of the group were Arabs or Muslims. They

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believe that the attack of Hamas is justified and considered as only a response to the previous behavior of Israel from 1948, including displacement of Palestinians from their lands and murdering them. Later on, events developed rapidly, especially when Israel started a ground invasion into Gaza Strip and started destroying hospitals and buildings which led to the murder of large number of unarmed civilians, women and children. These actions were justified by that Israel is searching for Hamas, who allegedly are hidden in tunnels under hospitals and by the fact that Israel had already warned Palestinians to leave the area, though they do not have any place to go to. The unstopped series of striking and displacement of individuals led to shaping a new perspective of Pro-Palestine people who saw it as a contradiction of the Geneva Conventions. People started viewing the conduct of Israel as genocide and an ethnic cleansing that is more severe than the Holocaust. Therefore, the pro-Palestine individuals and countries started demanding for an immediate ceasefire either at the public level or at the level of United Nations.

All in all, the Hamas-Israeli conflict of October 7, 2023 attracted the attention of the world. Since there are two parts involved in the conflict, namely Hamas and Israel, two different points of view emerged. There is a group that supports Israel, considering it as the right of Israel to defend itself and regarding Hamas a terrorist group. Also, there is a group that supports Hamas regarding it a response to the past actions of Israel. Different opinions are expressed through the platform of Instagram.

3.3 Influential Instagram Accounts

Instagram, as a social media platform, is based on one of the prominent features which are personal accounts. Through these accounts, individuals, organizations, companies and even states express their opinion and share how they view reality. During the Hamas-Israeli conflict numerous Instagram accounts reported the war through their account as an attempt to voice their concerns. While observing the platform, a criterion was adopted for

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selecting the major account, which is taking the famous accounts that had major impact during the war. Among these accounts are Motaz Azaiza, Wael Al Dahdouh, Khaled Beydoun, Eye on Palestine, TRT World, BBC news, State of Israel, United with Israel and Hodaya Stark.

3.3.1 Motaz Azaiza

When speaking about the prominent accounts covering the war, Motaz Azaiza has to be mentioned. Azaiza is a Palestinian photojournalist who used to live in the Gaza Strip. His account has 18.1 million followers. He gained fame due to his efforts to cover daily events occurring in Gaza. On January 30, 2024 Azaiza got evacuated to Doha, Qatar.

3.3.2 Wael Al Dahdouh

In addition to Azaiza, Wael Al Dahdouh is also a prominent figure when it comes to covering the Hamas-Israeli conflict. Al Dahdluh is a Palestinian journalist and the chief of Al Jazeera office in Gaza. His account has 4.6 million followers. Many of his family members were murdered in the war. He even got attacked and injured due to an Israeli airstrike, but he quickly recovered and resumed covering the war taking place in Gaza.

3.3.3 Khaled Beydoun

Khaled Beydoun is also an important figure that should be mentioned. Khaled Beydoun is a law professor at the Arizona State University Sandra Day O'Conner Law College, an author and a public scholar. His account has 2.3 million followers through which he contributes by sharing daily events and by providing explanation about the war to those who are not familiar with the Hamas-Israeli conflict.

3.3.4 Eye on Palestine

One of the prominent accounts of Instagram, when it comes to covering what is taking place in Gaza, is Eye on Palestine account. The account has 11.8 million followers and

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provides daily insightful coverage of the events in an instant manner. Also, the account makes it possible for people to donate to people in Gaza by providing its bank account.

3.3.5 TRT World

TRT World is also a vital account that covers the Hamas-Israeli conflict. Turkish Radio and Television Corporation World is a Turkish public service broadcasting account that Broadcast in English. The account has 2.3 million followers and provides constant news about the war.

3.3.6 BBC News

In addition to TRT World, BBC News is also a significant Instagram account. British Broadcasting Corporation News is British public service. The account has 27.5 million followers and has been covering the events since the beginning of the conflict.

3.3.7 State of Israel

When dealing with the Israeli side, the State of Israel account has to be mentioned. The account has 1.4 million followers and is the official account of the Israeli State. The account shares what happens in Israel and the costs of Hamas attacks alongside condemning Hamas, which regards it as a terrorist group, for their conduct especially the act of taking the hostages and other actions with no proof.

3.3.8 United with Israel

Not only has the account of the State of Israel, but also United with Israel account covered the war from an Israeli lens. United with Israel is an Instagram account of 82.2 thousand followers that provides the followers with updates about the war. The account stands firmly with the Israelis and provides experiences of the released hostages.

3.3.9 Hodaya Stark

When discussing the pro-Israelis, Hodaya Stark has to be mentioned. Hodaya Stark is an account of a Zionist Jew and a wife of a soldier from the Israeli Defense Forces. The

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account has 13.5 thousand followers, which is used to support Israel and to share the account's owner point of view about the war.

All in all, Instagram has been used as a mean to cover the Hamas-Israeli Conflict from different perspectives. Many Instagram accounts share their view and information about the war, including Motaz Azaiza, Wael Al Dahdouh, Khaled Beydoun, Eye on Palestine, TRT World, BBC News, State of Israel, United with Israel and Hodaya Stark.

3.4 Freedom of Speech

Based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations 1948, it is the right of every individual to have the freedom of thought (Article 18). In addition, it is the right if everyone to have the freedom of expression and opinion, which includes the freedom of forming an opinion with the absence of interference and the freedom of searching, receiving and providing information regardless of the borders (Article 19). Moreover, in the 1st and 14th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, it is outlined that the freedom of speech refers to the right of individuals to convey information, ideas and opinions without being subjected to government limitations based on the content of their articulation (Britannica). The other point that should be mentioned is that Instagram is owned by Meta which is an American company. That may lead people to expect it to respect the established American law.

During the Hamas-Israeli conflict, Instagram is one of the prominent platforms that have been used as a medium to cover daily events of the war and to express different opinions about the conflict. After observing both accounts of those who support Israel and those who support Palestine (Hamas), some points need to be discussed. Major pro-Israeli accounts like State of Israel, United with Israel and Hodaya Stark have the freedom to express their opinions about the war and to explicitly criticise Hamas, Palestine and those who support them either individuals or countries. The major claims of the pro-Israelis are that Hamas is a

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terrorist group and if you support them or Palestine, you are considered as a terrorist. Another critique made by pro-Israelis is that standing with Palestine means you are standing against Israel and being anti-Semitic. In addition, they accuse Hamas for numerous acts with no evidence. With all of that Instagram does not apply any limitation to that party, allowing them to express their thought freely.

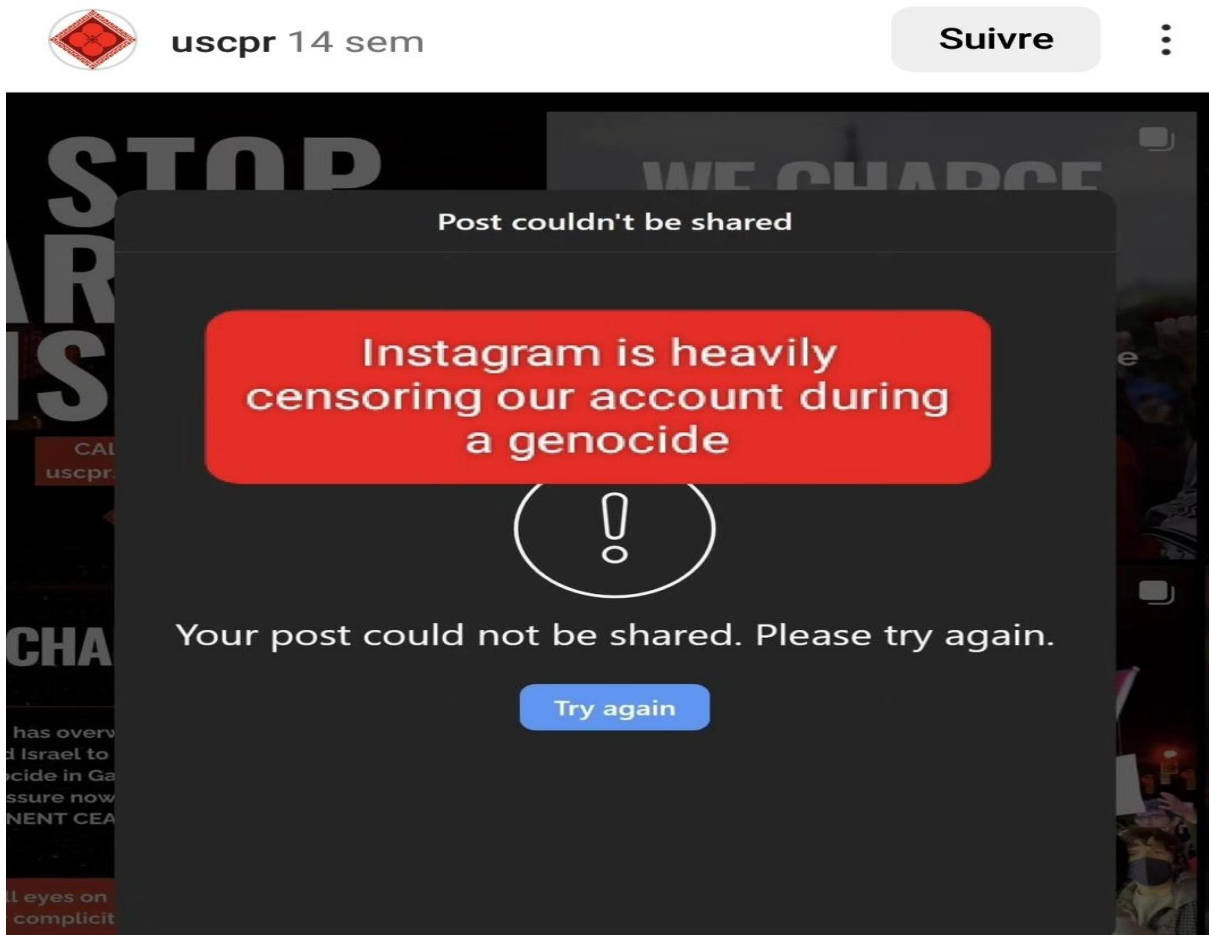
On the other hand, Pro- Palestinians use Instagram as a tool to voice their concerns. However, the Pro- Palestinians do not have the same experience as the Pro-Israelis. Limitation of freedom of speech is the term that can appropriately describe the pro- Palestinians experience with Instagram. According to Anastaplo, censorship involves modifying, suppressing and banning speech or writing that is considered as harmful for the overall society. Numerous accounts that support Palestine lost their accounts surprisingly. The accounts either got banned or suspended where their users lost access to them. Due to the fear of getting suspended, many accounts avoid posting or speaking about Palestine and Hamas. As an illustration, we can take Shaun King who is one of the major pro- Palestinians that got suspended, due to his supportive posts about Palestine. He was warned that if he posts from another account, it will get banned as well.



(Figure 1) ADC National [adcnational] “Shaun King’s account getting suspended by Instagram”.* Instagram, 25 Dec. 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/adcnational/p/C1QttCkge6F/>.

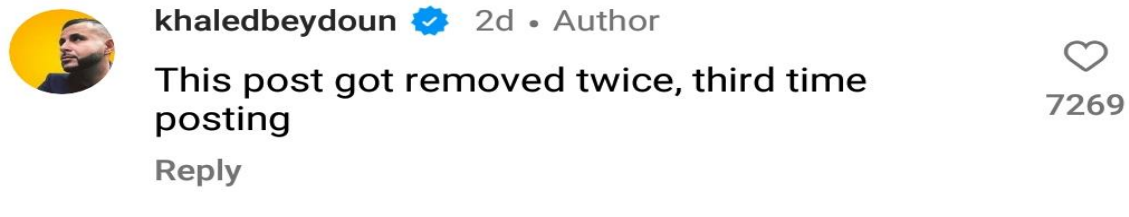
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In addition, Pro- Palestinians, or anyone who stands against the genocide taking place in Gaza, will get restricted for showing support towards Palestine. As an illustration, it is complicated for people to post an Instagram story that criticises Israel or a story that contains real image of victims, because it gets blurred. Also, posting a story that contains the Palestinian flag or anything related to Palestine is not an easy process, as the account user should try repetitively in order to post it. One of the major accounts that experienced content suppression is US Campaign for Palestinian Rights. Moreover, the events evolved and the attacks taking place in Gaza turned into genocide. Hence, a mass wave of demands for ceasefire along with criticism towards the Israeli Defense Forces emerged through the platform. Pro- Palestinian accounts attempted to post, but faced different issues. As an illustration, The US Campaign for Palestinian Rights account faced several issues when posting about genocide and asking for a ceasefire. The account posted a graphic that includes “See no genocide” which is about Biden administration getting to the court.



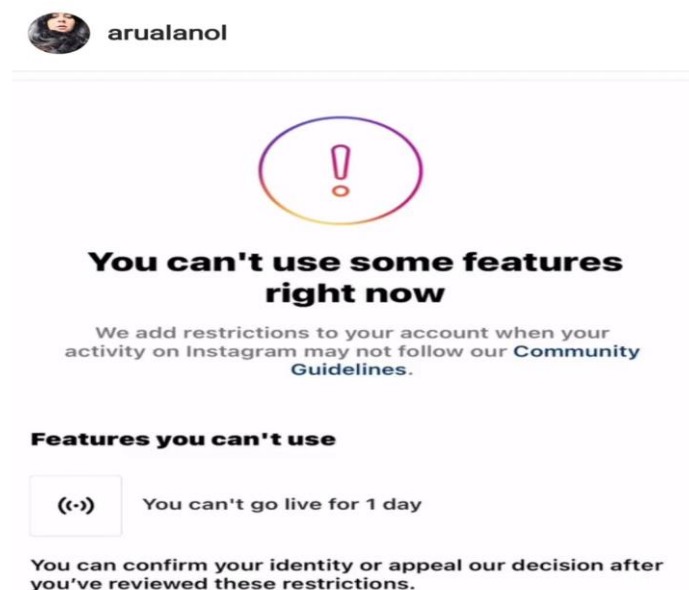
(Figure 2) US Campaign for Palestinian Rights [uscpr]. “USCPR’s post getting deleted by Instagram.”* Instagram, 28 Jan. 2023, https://www.instagram.com/uscpr/p/C2nyMH5AV5a/?ref=dJYsBkN5_rqzd&hl=af&img_index=1.

The account also posted a reel that contains demonstrators disrupting Biden’s morale booster party. The reel lost its audio, making it impossible to hear what demonstrators are saying. Moreover, Pro- Palestinian accounts like Kahled Beydoun experienced content removal. After posting anything related to Palestine or Gaza his posts would get deleted.



(Figure 3) Beydoun, Khaled [Khaledbeydoun] “Beydoun informing his followers that his post got removed twice.”* Instagram, 02 May. 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6cfhw4LW5m/>.

In addition, Instagram live (IG live) is a prominent feature for real live broadcast. However, pro- Palestinian accounts are restricted from using it. As an example, we can take Laura lona’s experience who got banned from going live.

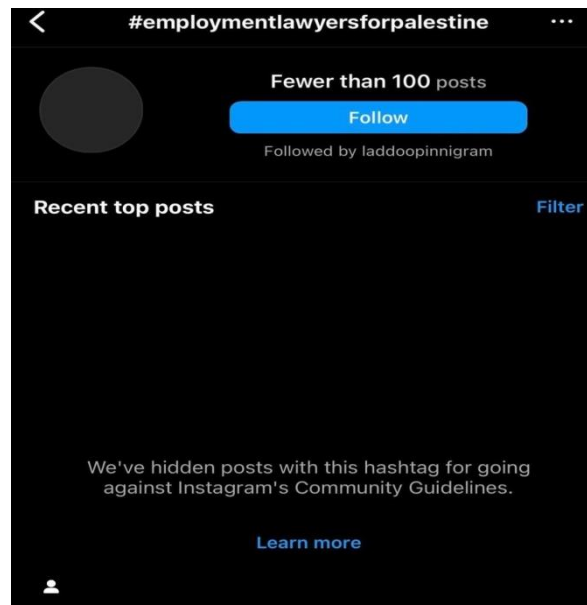


(Figure 4) Lona, Laura [Arualanol]. “Instagram restricting Arualanol from using the feature of IG Live”* Instagram, 27 Apr. 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6RickfOXJk/>.

Even hashtags got censored. Many Pro- Palestinian accounts posted using different hashtags including #employmenlawyersforpalestine (employment lawyers for Palestine). Posts

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with this hashtag, specifically, got hidden making it impossible for people to reach any post with that hashtag.



(Figure 5) ADC National [adcnational]. “Instagram removing any content that uses a hashtag that supports Palestinians.”* Instagram, Amer Zahr, 9 Jan. 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C13FHwArFYB/>.

It is possible to assume that freedom of speech could not be applied with Instagram platform when it comes to the Hamas-Israeli conflict and to criticising Israel or the Israeli Defense Forces. Even without addressing any criticism towards Israel and just by asking for the human rights of people of Gaza or by showing sympathy towards Palestinians, pro-Palestinians would get restricted. That is a direct violation of the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights of the United Nations as well as the first and fourteenth Amendment of the United States’ Constitution. Sharing opinions and facts with others is a vital aspect that may shape other individuals’ opinion or change their way of thinking by providing them with reality. However, restriction of freedom hinders pro- Palestinians from that aspect. The

restriction led many people to switch to other platforms like X platform to be able to express their thoughts freely. Others decided to stay on Instagram.

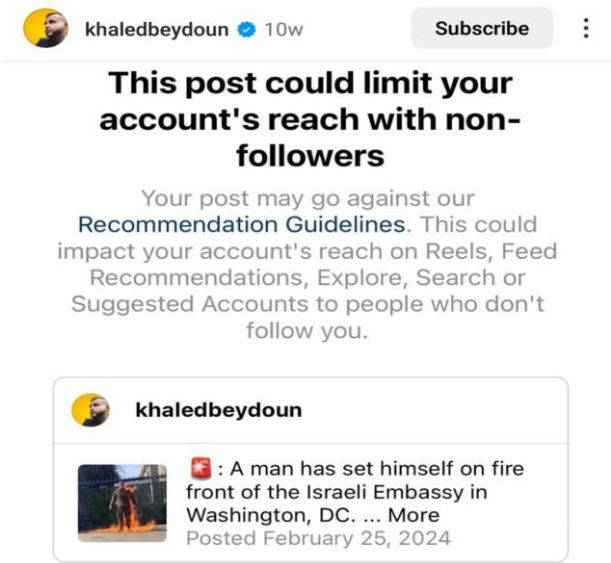
3.5 Algorithms' Role

Algorithms are one of the prominent features of social media. One should mention that after October 7, Instagram launched series of updates which led to the modification of the platform's system. Instagram algorithms are responsible for various aspects. First of all, algorithms are behind recommending content for users based on the users' preferences. The feed (main page), explore and reels (videos) depend mainly on the algorithms' system in order to reach the audience. Even when searching for an account the result depends on the algorithms. During the Hamas-Israeli War, Instagram algorithms play significant role.

After the series of updates that started from October 7th, it has been discovered that the platform's default setting has been modified. The latest update provides limitation of recommended content when it comes to topics related to law, elections and social subjects. That controls the platform's algorithms, which leads to silencing the pro- Palestinians voices during the ongoing Israeli behavior of genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. When checking the settings by going to the profile and the three lines in the corner we find by scrolling down the "content preferences" option. After clicking that option, we find "political content" where we can either let it off or turn on the "Don't limit political content". The update's impact is vivid as the pro- Palestinian content is not recommended by Instagram and when we search about a pro- Palestinian account, it does not show up. That affects those who have less knowledge about the war as well as those who already have false beliefs about the conflict, as they will be exposed to only one side which is the Israeli one. In addition, even if we are following an account of a pro- Palestinian, reaching his content is difficult, as his stories does not show up and his post and reels are not found in the feeds (main page). As an illustration, Kahled Beydoun posted a question to his followers where he asked them if they have noticed

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decline of Palestinian content and the majority of the followers’ responses were that they noticed a decline on their feed (main page) and that they do not find content directly from Palestinians. Keeping the same example of Khaled Beydoun, he posted a video of a man burning himself in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC as a way to show opposition to the genocide taking place in Gaza. Hence, Instagram explicitly informed him that his account may get limited in terms of reaching non-followers, that is to say the algorithms will not recommend his account to other users. Instagram explicitly demonstrating that anyone who supports Palestine or show a critique to the Israeli conduct would not be visible to the world.



(Figure 6) Beydoun, Khaled [Khaledbeydoun]. “Instagram limiting content from reaching non-followers.”* Instagram, 25 Feb. 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/khaledbeydoun/p/C3yRvsEgsB9/>.

Instagram algorithms play significant role during the war. The public opinion depends mainly on the algorithms. People who never heard of what is taking place in Gaza or have less knowledge about the war, cannot develop any further knowledge about the war. In

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addition to that group, people who already have a firm stand against Gaza due to stereotypes or exposure to misleading information cannot be exposed to information that contradicts their beliefs and opinions due to algorithms, which leads to filter bubbles. As explained by Dahlgren in the light of Pariser's arguments, websites and platforms depend on algorithms to track the user's activity in order to personalise content for him/her (17).

Furthermore, people tend to search for information that reinforce their already existing beliefs where social media use algorithm to attract more users by exposing them to information that strengthen their beliefs, as a result people become isolated from challenging ideas and kept in a filter bubble (15). Pariser defines filter bubble as a "Unique universe of information for each of us" (qtd. in Dahlgren 15). In the case of Hamas- Israeli conflict, Instagram Algorithms demonstrate two types of bias. The first type is the fact that they provide people who do not interact with the war information or only interact with the pro-Israeli news with the information that support their beliefs, to avoid them from exposure to any challenging ideas or facts leading to the creation of echo chambers. The user will not have the opportunity to be exposed to diverse information and decide later on which side he/she will be and form an opinion. On the other hand, we have the second type of bias where pro-Israeli accounts do not face any issues with the platform's algorithms, but pro-Palestinian accounts experience numerous difficulties to voice their concerns and demonstrate to the world what is taking place in Gaza. It is merely clear that Instagram is doing it explicitly by restricting pro-Palestinian accounts from being recommended to non-followers like the case of Khaled Beydoun and limiting the spread of pro-Palestinian posts to the followers where they do not reach the Palestinian content directly, but after searching for it.

Less knowledgeable people about the war are not only trapped in the filter bubble but also deprived from the opportunity to reach the Palestinian content leading them to shape an opinion and a distorted view of the world based on less exposure to diverse information and

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opinions. Also, when dealing with the field of politics, filter bubble can lead to polarization because of only exposure to people with similar beliefs limiting constructive discourse.

On the whole, Instagram algorithms play a significant role during the Hamas- Israeli conflict. The main role of algorithms is to recommend diverse content for the platform users. However, the platform's algorithms limit the Palestinian content to reach the users either to followers or non-followers, let alone the nature of the algorithms that leads to the creation of filter bubble which withholds people from being exposed to diverse information, ideas and beliefs.

3.6 Features that Accompany News Reports of the Conflict

During the Hamas-Israeli Conflict, several features accompanied news coverage, including misinformation and disinformation, use of visuals, modification of narratives and the use of specific language.

3.6.1 Misinformation and Disinformation

The terms misinformation and disinformation are mainly related to media and news. According to American Psychological Association, misinformation refers to the act of spreading "false" or "inaccurate" information. It differs from disinformation in the intent behind spreading such information, as disinformation refers to spreading wrong facts for the purpose of misleading the public. As any event, the Hamas- Israeli conflict attracted the attention of the public who seek information from different sources. People tend to seek information from reliable sources of information. However, even the CNN account fell in the trap of spreading misinformation. When the war started, the Israeli military started spreading disinformation. As an illustration, they started series of claims that is supported with no evidence about 40 babies being decapitated by Hamas on October 7. Media Outlets like CNN took such claim into consideration and reported it, even though Hamas did not decapitate any baby or toddler. Later on, the Israeli military Stated that they could not share any evidence

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minding that the information has already spread in Instagram and people started believing the news. Misinformation and disinformation has been used by Israel as a tool to justify the genocide taking place in Gaza.

3.6.2 Visuals Use

Sharing and posting either photos or videos are one of the prominent features of Instagram. Therefore, both of pro- Palestinians and pro-Israelis used that feature to depict what has been taking place. It is possible to consider the use of visuals a tool used for the purpose of convincing people to stand with a certain side. As an illustration, pro-Israelis posted several videos and photos regarding the attack conducted by Hamas on October the 7 to demonstrate its costs. Also, pro-Israelis had the tendency post videos that include the released hostages who tell their experiences and how they were treated by Hamas including crying scenes. On the other hand, pro- Palestinians tended to post pictures of destroyed Gaza and the living environment there to demonstrate the act of genocide where there is no power, food, water and shelter. They also tended to post videos that demonstrate live footage of Israel air striking hospitals and civilians. They also posted photos and started Instagram lives to demonstrate the massacres taking place that lead to the death of babies and women. Moreover, both sides tended to rely on posting caricatures to express what they feel and demonstrate to the world what is happening. After all of that, people who were not exposed to information about the conflict or had less knowledge about started forming an opinion and taking a firm stand with specific side, due to exposure to raw information about the war.

3.6.3 Narratives Modification

Narratives are the prominent aspect of covering any event. During the Hamas-Israeli conflict the narratives concerning any related aspect to the war witnessed some modifications. From October 7, mass demonstrations embarked in numerous countries such as the United Kingdom and United States. In the United Kingdom, many people went out to the streets to

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demonstrate. Later on, videos of two BBC news readers including Maryam Moshiri covering the demonstrations as “several demonstrations across Britain during which people voiced their backing for Hamas Which several countries, including the UK and US consider terrorist organisation”. However, in reality those demonstrations were to support Palestine. Later, videos of BBC apology spread across Instagram in which a news reader said on air that “we accept that this was poorly phrased and was a misleading description of the pro- Palestinian demonstrations.” Moreover, many university students in the United States started demonstrating inside the campus against genocide taking place in Gaza and to ask for permanent ceasefire in Gaza. Some videos started circulating in Instagram of some mainstream media changing the narratives. As an illustration, Fox News covered the demonstrations as “Anti- Israel protests turning violent.” The narratives here do not match with reality and it is considered a dangerous instrument that leads the public to form an opinion based on transformed reality created by notorious narratives.

3.6.4 Specific Language Use

Language is a vital aspect when it comes to reporting news. From the beginning of the Hamas- Israeli conflict, some mainstream media headlines about the conflict used different words to describe the events. That is noticeable after observing and analysing pictures of mainstream media like BBC that spread on Instagram. When reporting the news, the BBC reports “Local media reporting 150 Israelis killed” and “Palestinian officials say 198 dead.” It is important to note that those Israelis were “Killed” due to attack of Hamas and those Palestinians “died” due to the Israeli attack on Gaza. What should be mentioned is that “died” and “killed” do not convey the same message, even though they seem similar. Both of ‘to kill’ and ‘to die’ refer to the end of the act of living. While to kill refers to stop the life of someone, to die refers to the act of stopping living (The Difference between “Kill” and “Die”). The headlines convey that the life of the 150 Israelis has been ended by someone (mainly by

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Hamas) and 198 Palestinians stopped living without the interference of anyone. That is considered as biased coverage towards Israel and after reading the headlines, it possible that people may form an opinion that Palestinians stopped living without the interference of anyone (Israel), making language a powerful instrument used to report information about the war.



(Figure 7) Palestinian Reality [Palestinian__Realiity]. “BBC headlines using specific language.”* Instagram, 17 Jun. 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C8KPt1MqqEV/>.

All in all, many features accompanied the reports of the war news during the Hamas-Israeli. That includes misinformation and disinformation, use of visuals, narratives change and specific language use.

3.7 The Hasbara Project

It is possible to claim that the main reason behind those phenomena that feature the platform of Instagram, including restricting freedom of speech, algorithms limiting content recommendation and narratives modification is the Hasbara project. When explaining what Hasbara is, it is possible to say that:

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Hasbara links information warfare to the strategic efforts of the state to ... determine the way issues are defined by the media, the intelligentsia and social networks; establish the parameters of politically correct discourse; delegitimize both critics and their arguments; and shape the common understanding and interpretation of the results of international negotiations. Hasbara is multifaceted and well-adapted to the digital age. (Middle East Policy Council)

Moreover, over 8.000 requests from Israel were received by Meta and TikTok to remove content that has relation with the Hamas- Israeli conflict (Brewster). That provides a clear demonstration of how the Hasbara project works.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Hamas- Israeli conflict attracted the attention of the globe. The public opinion is directly influenced by the media. Instagram, as a social media platform, plays a significant role in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli conflict. After observing the platform for a period of eight months, various aspects came to light. That includes, an overview about different perspectives about the war, numerous Instagram accounts that have an influence on the public opinion, the extent the platform users are free to convey their thoughts about the war, the role of algorithms in shaping the public opinion and different aspects that accompanied the war coverage.

General Conclusion

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In conclusion, our exploration of Instagram and its features in relation to opinions about the Hamas- Israeli War by observing the platform for eight months utilizing several theories have revealed that the platform of Instagram participates in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli war in several ways. Chapter one provides an overview about media by defining it and demonstrating its importance. It also unveils the prominent features of Instagram and social media, since the focus is on them. By providing how media is powerful and who controls the media, in addition to demonstrating media effects on different areas, it is possible to highlight the importance of media literacy. Chapter two provides a comprehensive analysis of the notion “public opinion” moving from its definition to how it is formulated by referring to various theories. It demonstrates that public opinion is powerful and leads to transformation in different fields. Lastly, it is identified by referring to Baudrillard Hyperreality concept that reality and media reality are different and that media reality is able to affect individuals’ perceptions. Chapter three provides an overview about the Hamas- Israeli War starting from its roots to the latest events. It also identifies some major influential Instagram accounts during the war. In addition, our analysis of the collected data led us to identify the extent Instagram users are able to express their opinions and share information about the war freely. It is revealed that is if the user is a pro- Israeli, he/she will express their thoughts freely, however if the user is a pro- Palestinian, he/she would experience a restriction on the freedom of speech. This restriction is found as many forms, such as suspending accounts, deleting posts and inability to use certain features. In addition, algorithms role in relation to public opinion is found in the fact that algorithms keeps users in a bubble away from any challenging ideas. Also, algorithms explicitly deprive Pro-Palestinians from recommending their accounts and content to both the followers and non-followers which answers the question concerning the role of algorithms in shaping the public opinion during the war. The phenomena of restriction and algorithms have direct effect on the

General Conclusion

public opinion, because people with less knowledge or with false information about the war may form an opinion based on one party only since they exposed to one source. Lastly, it is identified that information related to the war are accompanied with several features, such as misinformation and disinformation, visuals use, narratives modification and the use of specific language to describe the events. All of these aspects affect the public opinion and may lead to formulate a biased view. Lastly, our analysis of the Hasbara projects explains why Instagram is showing a biased stand toward the Israeli side. After all, it is possible to assure that the role of Instagram in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli War is to provide a biased stand towards the Israeli side.

Overall, the present dissertation attempts to provide valuable contribution towards existing academic research on media effects and public opinion. We invite future scholars and experts in both fields who would like to expand their research to adopt similar methodologies to the present work and to explore other social media platforms similar to Instagram, such as Facebook which is under Meta Company. That all for the purpose of enriching our knowledge about media and public opinion as well as for highlighting the importance of media literacy, especially during times of wars.

There are some limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study is limited by the fact that the Hamas- Israeli War is recent and remains ongoing. Events keep developing, hence even after accomplishing this research, new events may appear that affect the public opinion. Secondly, the platform of Instagram keeps getting updated as it is demonstrated through the present study and new features of the platform may emerge with new updates in the future that may participate in shaping the public opinion about the Hamas- Israeli War. These limitations tresses the necessity of future research to build on this study and explore Instagram participation in shaping the public opinion during the Hamas- Israeli

General Conclusion

War. Despite these limitations, this research contributes to the ongoing academic research on media including its different forms and effects, mainly on the public opinion.

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الملخص

استحوذ الصراع بين حماس وإسرائيل منذ 7 أكتوبر 2023 على اهتمام العالم مما أدى إلى تكوين وجهات نظر مختلفة بسبب وسائل الإعلام في كثير من الأحيان. ويستخدم الناس منصة التواصل الاجتماعي المستخدمة على نطاق واسع، إنستغرام، ليطلعوا على آخر الأحداث و يعتبر إنستغرام منصة يتم تحديثها باستمرار بميزات جديدة مثل الخوارزميات لذلك، كيف يشارك إنستغرام في تشكيل الرأي العام خلال الحرب بين حماس وإسرائيل؟ في ضوء ذلك، يهدف هذا العمل إلى دراسة مدى بروز وفعالية إنستغرام في تشكيل الرأي العام خلال الحرب بين حماس وإسرائيل. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، تم اعتماد تحليل المضمون لتحليل البيانات الكيفية التي تم جمعها إلى جانب المنهج الوصفي التحليلي. وقد خلصت هذه الدراسة إلى أن إنستغرام يشارك في تشكيل الرأي العام خلال الحرب بين حماس وإسرائيل من خلال تقديم موقف منحاز للجانب الإسرائيلي. ويتم ذلك من خلال وسائل مختلفة، مثل الحد من حرية تعبير المؤيدين للفلسطينيين، واعتماد خوارزميات تحرم المؤيدين للفلسطينيين من الوصول إلى العالم، ووجود عدة ميزات عند تغطية الأحداث المتعلقة بالحرب.

كلمات مفتاحية: الحرب بين حماس وإسرائيل؛ إنستغرام؛ وسائل الإعلام؛ المؤيدون للفلسطينيين؛ الرأي العام.