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Media's Effect on College Student's Perception of the Israel-Hamas War

You have built your social media brick by brick. Every video, image, and comment you have ever liked goes into crafting your feed. You decide what you want to see more of. The media you watch is an echo chamber to reaffirm your beliefs and interests. This is the case for college students. Their views and opinions on most topics are already set by their family, personal experiences, and morals. It's tough to change someone's opinions, especially when the world is this divided. The polarization between wars, elections, reproductive rights, and so much more is increasingly prevalent. Mass media, largely social media, is responsible for building on college students' pre-existing beliefs causing them to engage in more active political behavior. This paper dissects how media affects college students' political involvement when it comes to militarized conflicts, specifically focusing on the ever-so-prevalent Israel-Hamas war. This document will cover the historical context of media's effects on wars, summarize the Israel-Hamas conflict, and compare/contrast the conflict between other wars. It will also cover how media affects the Israel-Hamas conflict through militarization, desensitization, public perception, and policy.

One of the earliest examples of media being used in tandem with social networks is the Afghanistan war. Afghanistan has a long history with media and censorship. Recently they began

to open up and allow broadcasts via social media. From 2001 and before, the Taliban had completely banned media in Afghanistan. They controlled the distribution of VHS tapes and CDs. Anyone who was caught with banned media would be publicly humiliated and tortured. It wasn't until after the United States intervened and the Taliban was labeled an insurgency that they started to use media for their advantage. Once the U.S. drove the Taliban out and they started to set up infrastructure, the Afghan people had access to the internet. By 2016 89% of Afghans had access to the internet via their mobile phone. This allowed the Taliban to spread information around much easier. They used messaging apps like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Viber. They also used Twitter to send videos and messages (Mehran). Whenever a conflict would conclude the Taliban would be able to share their twisted side of the story much faster than the coalition or Afghan government. By the time they could get a story together, the Taliban had already done the damage.

Through the use of mass media, the Taliban was able to reinforce the idea that they were an Afghan "national" group protecting Afghanistan from foreign invaders. This resonated well with the people. Once the US left Afghanistan, they took over and reinstated the media ban. However, with their learned knowledge from being an insurgent group, the government continued to use social media to legitimize their rule. The Taliban has increased their social media efforts since their recent takeover. They have been doing their best to paint the situation in Afghanistan as positive and not as bad as the West makes it out to seem. They produce more press releases than the Department of Defense and in more languages than them. They have hundreds of Taliban government officials on Twitter with over a million followers on their main page (Thorbecke). This is partly due to Twitter's very lax content moderation policy. They very much believe in the rights of the speaker over the listener.

Universities today are putting a lot of restrictions on gatherings for the Israel-Hamas war. Recently, an Instagram page for 140,000 people that supported Palestine was banned. One of the main contributors to the harsh restrictions is because of previous protests like the ones for the Afghan war. Protests would get out of hand and often students would attack Muslim students. There have been multiple personal statements of students sharing their experience with racism post-9/11. Also around this time, many colleges started selling information about foreign students to homeland security. There were even multiple reports of local police infiltrating Muslim Student Associations (Beck). Paranoia struck deep during that era of America and the media allowed the roots to take hold. The emergence of social media only fueled the fire more.

Likewise, in the Russia and Ukraine wars, media plays a pivotal role. Both sides either spread misinformation and propaganda, censor and control what content is shared, for real-time updates, or to shape public opinion. Both sides have leveraged traditional and social media to spread their narratives, with Russian state-controlled media portraying the conflict as a justified “special military operation” and Ukrainian media highlighting Russian aggression and the resilience of Ukrainian forces. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have been crucial for real-time updates, mobilizing international support, and documenting ground. However, these platforms have also been battlegrounds for disinformation and psychological warfare, with both sides attempting to influence morale and international perception. Despite censorship efforts, particularly in Russia, where independent media faces severe restrictions, the global reach of social media ensures that the conflict’s impact is felt worldwide. This shapes public opinion and influences policy decisions. The Georgetown Journal of International Affairs shares some ways each side uses media; “Russia has increasingly incorporated deepfakes and AI into its traditional disinformation campaigns against Ukraine.

Fabricated recordings of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky surrendering as well as Russian troops celebrating and talking about their victory plans have been published on Telegram — a popular messaging app where many Ukrainians get their daily news — spreading panic and damaging morale. Doctored images with fascist symbolism directed toward Ukrainians have also been used to show them as “unsympathetic victims” to dehumanize the enemy and justify aggression,” (Karalis 2024). The article also shares the two main ways Ukraine shares its information, “The first is through continued on-ground footage. Ukrainian stories involving the live footage of families being separated and civilians taking up arms have allowed the average user to connect and empathize with their struggle...The second instance primarily involves forming long-term bonds with an international audience across social media. Using short-form media platforms like TikTok to their advantage, Ukrainian content creators have been able to form parasocial bonds and raise awareness with their followers, to the point where supporting Ukraine becomes akin to supporting a friend,” (Karalis 2024). Because this war has become so publicized it alters individuals' perceptions of the conflict, as they get nonstop information from both sides. This has caused a sense of guilt for many individuals, especially the age group of 18-24, they are following the conflict closer than any other age group which leads them to raise awareness by sharing posts on the ongoing conflict. The constant flow of media and information displays how media can influence an individual based on preexisting beliefs.

The Israel-Hamas conflict is rooted in the broader Israeli-Palestinian struggle that dates back over a century. Tensions between Jewish and Arab populations in historic Palestine escalated with Jewish immigration in the late 19th century and intensified after the creation of Israel in 1948. Following Israel’s declaration of independence, war broke out with neighboring Arab states, leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. The 1967

Six-Day War saw Israel capture the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, territories Palestinians seek for a future state. However, Israel's continued control over these areas remains a core issue fueling the conflict.

Hamas, an Islamist militant group founded in 1987, opposes Israel's existence and has frequently engaged in violent attacks, including rocket fire from the Gaza Strip, which it controls. Israel's military responses have led to several wars, with significant civilian casualties, particularly in Gaza. Most recently, in October 2023, Hamas launched a large-scale surprise attack on Israel, prompting a full-scale war. Israeli airstrikes and discussions of a ground invasion are ongoing, with devastating impacts on both sides. The conflict remains deeply entrenched, driven by historical grievances, territorial disputes, and repeated cycles of violence.

Compared to older generations, college-aged-Generation Z (“Gen Z”) relies almost exclusively on digital platforms for their information. According to a Reuters Institute News Report study, in 2022, “39% of social natives (18-24s) across 12 markets now [use] social media as their main source of news,” (Eddy 2022). This statistics displays the potentially staggering influence of media on college student-aged individuals' ideologies as media is how they primarily obtain their information about world events. Consequently, increased access to and usage of media as the central form of news for college students has contributed to a “supply of political information [which] has never been higher,” (Andersen 2022). As a result, college students now have a heightened opportunity to engage, express themselves, and participate in political behavior. For example, Gen. Z leads in the number of signed online petitions with 44% (Newman 2024)—numbers declining significantly every generation thereafter. Moreover, outside of the internet, Gen. Z leads significantly in the number of lawful demonstrations with 18% compared to only 2-8% of the other generations (Newman 2024).

Similarly, on college campuses globally, students are making their dissatisfaction with the Israel-Hamas war known. Pro-Palestine protests have been a prominent part of campus life starting on October 7th, 2023—the official start of this war. Historically, this “wave of global student activism over Gaza” reflects the mobilization of college students during the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Choonara 2024), solidifying the Israel-Hamas war's extreme significance both domestically in the United States and globally. Domestically, Columbia University was the first college campus to lead student protests for Palestine and encampments on April 17th, 2023, followed by “almost 140 US campuses across 45 of 50 states”, and globally inspiring 34 other countries afterward (Choonara 2024). Overall, for all of Gen Z across the globe, the Israel-Hamas conflict has incited a historical, pivotal reaction that signifies the effect media can have on uniting the most outspoken age demographic (college students) to speak out against presumed injustice and war.

Misinformation has been running rampant in the Israel-Hamas war from either side. Misinformation is a weapon that can be used to great effect. The media is a breeding ground for it. Internet platforms are rapidly becoming the main source of news. Hardly any social media site is fact-checked and anyone can post something on the major platforms. Twitter (X) is one of the main sites to blame. Elon Musk's crackdown on misinformation has been virtually non-existent. Especially after he fired most of Twitter's moderation staff. Recently a video was shared claiming that Hamas militants had shot down an Israeli helicopter, but it was a clip from a video game. Another one depicted an Israeli missile strike claiming that it happened recently but happened months prior. A huge instance of misinformation was a video that was viewed over two million times claiming that Hamas had captured Israeli military officials. It was a video from a completely different country and war. Most of the videos come from an app called Telegram,

which thousands of Hamas militants use. Telegram has over 700 million users (Barrón-López and Norris). The spread of information is not only on the sites listed but also plagues hundreds of others. Many social media sites are exempt from dealing with known terrorist groups on their platform. It is usually up to the specific network's content policy.

Most social media websites are increasing their moderation staff and becoming more transparent to users. However, X (Twitter) has been experiencing a significant decline in factual information. The removal of the blue check has destroyed the idea of a verified account. Anyone can get a blue check if they pay 8\$ a month. X hasn't taken action against known terrorist groups on the site. Many Hamas members are allowed to post and spread misinformation on the site. This is very similar to what has happened in the Ukraine-Russia conflict as well as the Afghanistan War. A common issue in all these wars is the weaponization of the media by using misinformation (Ruberg). Professor Elise Labott was asked multiple questions about the Israel-Hamas war and what effects the media has had. She states that what people post on social media greatly influences how the public perceives conflicts. Frequently, news companies or independents will omit information to skew public opinion to one side (Minges). We saw this happen when the October 7th attacks occurred and now with the focus being on the civilians.

Students come to college with pre-existing attitudes shaped by their upbringing, education, and early media exposure. These attitudes can be reinforced or challenged by the media they consume during college. Due to the constant flow of content and information on this conflict from both sides, perceptions can be altered. According to NCBI, "Social media and other Internet platforms have been embraced by military organizations and terrorists for the same reasons as they have been engaged by other organizations, namely, their capacity to expand their reach and influence and their efficiency in the dissemination of propaganda [35]. Media coverage

can evoke attention and emotions and dramatize contents [36,37], with the exaggeration of factual content and elevated threat perception,” (Slone 2022). Within conflict, the use of media is extremely prominent. Terrorist groups utilize social media to appeal to the audiences' emotions and force them to feel as though they need to do something. The dramatization of events pulls viewers in and that leads them to continuously engage in that content. This is especially prominent in younger age groups as Pew Research describes, "Younger Americans have a more favorable opinion of the Palestinian people than the Israeli people. Six in ten adults under age 30 have a positive view of the Palestinian people, compared with 46% who see the Israeli people positively... Older Americans, by comparison, are more likely to sympathize with Israelis than Palestinians. For example, among people ages 65 and older, 47% say their sympathies lie entirely or mostly with the Israeli,” (Silver 2024). Younger Americans, including college students, are more likely to consume news and information through digital and social media platforms. These platforms often present diverse perspectives and can highlight different aspects of the Israel-Hamas conflict, potentially leading to more favorable views of Palestinians. The way the media frames the conflict can significantly influence perceptions. If media consumed by younger audiences emphasizes the humanitarian issues faced by Palestinians or portrays them in a sympathetic light, it can lead to more favorable opinions. Conversely, older Americans might rely more on traditional media sources that could frame the conflict differently, leading to greater sympathy for Israelis. Overall, public perception is shaped by a combination of media influence, political beliefs, and generational differences, leading to a complex and multifaceted view of the Israel-Hamas conflict.

The Israel-Hamas war has led to a significant level of desensitization in the media, as the relentless cycle of violence, suffering, and destruction is covered extensively. Over time,

audiences may become numb to graphic images and disturbing news reports due to the sheer volume and intensity of coverage. This effect is compounded by social media, where videos and photos of bombings, deaths, and injuries circulate constantly, often without context. The normalization of this content can diminish the emotional impact on viewers, making it harder for them to process the human toll of the conflict.

Additionally, the polarization of media outlets has contributed to desensitization. Many news sources focus heavily on their respective narratives, often downplaying the suffering of one side to highlight the other. This selective portrayal of events can cause viewers to see the conflict through a more detached or partisan lens, further distancing them from the realities of war. The repetitive and sensational nature of reporting can make audiences feel overwhelmed or fatigued, lessening their ability to engage meaningfully with the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

Historically, political entities have used media to distribute their ideas to a vast, global audience, for worse or for better, which could play a vital role in shaping policy. On the harmful end of media usage, one can look at ISIS's ability to utilize media to "recruit nearly 30,000 foreign fighters over eighty countries" (Zeitzoff 2017) through spreading propaganda and anti-west ideologies. Importantly, ISIS's rallying of support from international communities through media usage increased their number of military recruits which in turn could have framed the policies of both ISIS and its enemies to reflect these changing dynamics. In comparison, on both sides of the Israel-Hamas war propaganda techniques have been used to frame media consumers' ideologies of war proceedings. Like ISIS, Israel and Hamas have Tweeted in English to specifically target English-speaking demographics like the United States (Zeitzoff 2017). Such targeted, biased political agenda-setting through media outlets allowed the Israel-Hamas conflict to extend far beyond physical military action. For example, this war has been coined as a 'media

war'. Consequently, this rallying of international support has allowed Hamas "to compete with Israel's much larger budget" by rallying global support for their cause (Zeitzoff 2017). For example, according to a study by Humanz, since the official start of the war on October 7th, "7.39 billion posts with pro-Israel tags were published on Instagram and Tiktok . . . compared to 109.61 billion posts with pro-Palestine tags," (Kabir 2023). Therefore, the media could encourage Americans, especially free-thinking, outspoken college students, to pressure their lawmakers into establishing support for one side over another, especially if enough attention is pulled toward an issue of significance importance to global constituencies. Overall, even if the media may not directly determine policy decisions, it allows citizens' key issues to become visible to politicians and lawmakers (e.g. the Israel-Hamas war being a topic of debate in the 2024 United States presidential debate).

In conclusion, media significantly affects college students' beliefs by reinforcing or challenging their pre-existing attitudes, which overall influences individual political behavior and engagement. Historically, the media began to change the course of wars during the Afghanistan war. Contemporarily, the Israel-Hamas conflict has been extremely covered in the media, affecting public perceptions and foreign policy in the process. Overall, media coverage of wars can be used positively, by bringing awareness of hot-topic issues to politicians, or negatively, through political entities weaponizing misinformation.

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