

POLITICAL FAKE NEWS FUELING ISRAEL AND HAMAS WAR, 2023: FOURTH GENERATION WARFARE IN INDIA

TENDRAL RAJAGOPAL
Anna University (India)
rajagopaltendral@gmail.com

VELAYUTHAM CHANDRASHEKARAN
Anna University (India)
cvtrainer@gmail.com

Abstract: In the wake of the incursion by Hamas militants into Israel in the early hours of 7 October, a deluge of disinformation in the form of videos and photographs purporting to depict the conflict has inundated various social media platforms, thereby creating a significant challenge for global observers attempting to differentiate between actual occurrences and fictionalised representations. Fake news often appeals to emotions and instincts. During periods of war, strife and disagreement, it is common for misinformation and counterfeit news to circulate with great speed and ease, prompted by escalated sentiments and a lack of certainty. Journalists, governmental bodies, individuals, and organisations circulated inaccurate and misleading information for various reasons, including spreading propaganda, manipulating public opinion, or provoking discord. The paper aims to study the impact of fake news and deepfakes during the Israel and Hamas conflict in 2023 and discuss India's stance in the ongoing war. The paper aims to analyse the reason behind misinformation in the ongoing war, understand how media literacy can help debunk fake news and learn techniques to approach online misinformation during a conflict. The researchers have adopted framing analysis and thematic analysis to identify and analyse the fake news identified by two fact-checkers in India. Digital media literacy is an effective solution to fight against misinformation, especially during a global crisis.

Keywords: Israel-Hamas conflict, fake news, media literacy, fourth-generation warfare, India.

INTRODUCTION

*In my memory, I've never seen
so much false content circulating.
Be it images, videos, or statements*

Quevrain (2023)

On the Jewish sabbath day, that is, 7 October 2023, during the festival of Sukkot, and following the Yom Kippur War anniversary, Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups conducted a coordinated attack on multiple border areas of Israel, launching a massive air assault with thousands of rockets into towns such as Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Tel Aviv. Israel and Palestine, two Middle Eastern countries, have been locked in a prolonged conflict for over seven decades, characterised by violence against civilians (Wirajaya 2020). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is undoubtedly an existential conflict between two nations and groups who assert their rights to the same territory for a national homeland and political state. Recognising that this conflict goes beyond mere territorial power and encompasses national identity and existence is crucial. The Israeli army has also been accused of targeting journalists, like Al Jazeera's Gaza bureau chief, Wael Dahdouh, whose wife, son, daughter and grandson were all killed by an Israeli air raid. At least 39 journalists, mostly Palestinian, have been killed since the war started on October 7, says the Committee to Protect Journalists (Hawaleshka 2023). Misinformation concerning the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict is prospering on various social media platforms, wherein distorted video recordings, misleading translations, and unabashed fabrications frequently overshadow authentic reporting on the conflict. In recent times, users have disseminated unfounded assertions suggesting that individuals referred to as "crisis actors" are orchestrating scenes of devastation (Press 2023).

As the battles on the ground have intensified, a parallel "battle of truth" has unfolded in the digital realm (Al-Kbat 2023). The dis- and misinformation disseminated via social media platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter, perplexes our comprehension of ongoing events (Wirtschafte 2023). At the strategic level, however, the conflict revolves

around the notion of perception, as it entails constructing a narrative that depicts one party as the victim and the other as the aggressor. Looking at the events leading up to the invasion of Gaza, it becomes apparent that falsehoods, inaccuracies, and deliberately misleading information will play a key and continuing role in this fight (Helmus, Marcellino 2023). Misinformation regarding the war between Israel and Hamas is prevalent on social media. However, what truly distinguishes itself in this chaotic online environment is that many accounts promoting these inaccurate storylines originate primarily from India (Khatsenkova 2023). With the widespread use of social media, governments are increasingly involved in low-level information warfare using cyber troops. Cyber troops are defined as government or political actors who manipulate public opinion online; they are primarily used in social media and the internet to conduct their operations, utilising techniques such as impersonation, bots, and growth hacking. Israel also has its own cyber troop operations, employing tactics to promote pro-government narratives and suppress opposition. This is an active form of warfare that individuals may unknowingly participate in (Donovan 2023). Powerful media organisations often attempt to define the parameters of debates and frameworks. They significantly influence how millions worldwide perceive critical issues; the dominance of frameworks imposed by different power centres requires a “collective and cohesive strategy, especially in times of crisis” (Ali 2023).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF INDIA-PALESTINE-ISRAEL RELATIONS

India’s engagement and participation in the intricate and multifaceted Israeli-Palestinian conflict have undergone a remarkable transformation and evolution since the early twentieth century, a change that has been significantly influenced by the nation’s foreign policy priorities and the broader geopolitical considerations that have emerged over time. From the early 1920s leading up to January 1992, the leadership of India’s nationalist movement adopted a distinctly pro-Arab stance, which was of paramount importance for safeguarding



its national interests within the Middle Eastern context and was clearly manifested through a committed pro-Palestinian foreign policy approach. This pro-Palestinian stance included the formal recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the “sole and legitimate” representative of the Palestinian people, thereby enhancing political ties and fostering interactions that were deemed beneficial for both parties involved. It is particularly noteworthy that India distinguished itself as one of the first countries globally to officially recognize the “State of Palestine” in November 1988, an action that further solidified its unwavering support for the political rights of Palestinians and their aspirations toward achieving statehood. A crucial and pivotal shift in India’s policy occurred in January 1992 when the nation announced its decision to normalize relations with Israel, a move that marked a significant departure from its previous zero-sum approach to the conflict. This strategic decision facilitated the opening of diplomatic missions and led to an increase in cooperative efforts across various sectors, while still ensuring that India maintained its support for the rights of the Palestinian people. The post-Cold War era served as a catalyst for India to carefully reassess and reevaluate its foreign policy, recognizing the essential need to engage constructively with both Israelis and Palestinians to foster an environment conducive to peace and stability within the region. Consequently, India’s historical context and its evolving role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict illustrate a complex interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic diplomacy, as it strives to balance its pro-Arab legacy against the pressing realities of contemporary international relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is a phenomenon wherein individuals exhibit a pre-disposition to favour, construe, or recollect information in a manner that substantiates their pre-existing convictions or suppositions. It is a cognitive partiality that shapes how people acquire and construe information. The researcher posits that individuals are vulnerable to this type



of information due to the fundamental cognitive processes that underlie their thinking. We possess our own beliefs and are inclined to seek validation for these beliefs. Consequently, we actively pursue information that aligns with our pre-existing convictions and dismisses any information that contradicts them. People hold certain opinions and experience intense emotional reactions, particularly in response to the ongoing crisis. Thus, individuals are inclined to seek affirmation for their existing beliefs. Consequently, the inclination to actively seek information confirming our preconceived notions is exceedingly prevalent in this particular context (Wirtschafte 2023).

India's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict has evolved significantly over the decades, marked by a complex interplay of diplomatic recognition and support for Palestinian rights. Initially, India recognized Israel in 1950, but this did not lead to substantial engagement due to its pro-Arab stance, which was critical for its interests in the Middle East. A pivotal shift occurred on 29 January, 1992, when India normalized relations with Israel, allowing for enhanced political, economic, cultural, and security cooperation. This normalization was strategically important as it enabled India to engage with both Israel and the Palestinians, reflecting a nuanced approach to the conflict. India's commitment to Palestinian rights has remained steadfast, as evidenced by its ongoing support for the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state. This support is rooted in India's recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the "sole and legitimate" representative of the Palestinians, which has facilitated stronger political ties with Palestinian leadership. Despite its growing relations with Israel, India has maintained its core pre-1992 positions regarding Palestinian rights, exemplified by the establishment of a diplomatic mission in Gaza following the Oslo agreement in 1993. Thus, India's diplomatic strategy reflects a balancing act, seeking to foster bilateral relations with Israel while advocating for Palestinian political rights, thereby positioning itself as a key player in the Arab-Israeli conflict.



METHODOLOGY

The researchers have implemented framing analysis (Inductive frames) and thematic analysis as the fundamental research methodologies of this study. Through framing analysis, they have employed inductive analysis to generate new frames. By employing framing analysis and thematic analysis research methodologies, the researchers can delve into the research problems more profoundly and comprehensively. This approach enables them to dissect the intricacies of the research problems and analyse them from multiple perspectives. Framing analysis examines how information is conveyed, focusing on the deliberate emphasis or highlighting of certain aspects of a topic while others may be downplayed or omitted. Under framing analysis, inductive frames are used in this study. Inductive frames emerge from the data during the research process and are the frameworks that naturally come into existence. These frames differ from deductive frames, which are predetermined based on existing theories or hypotheses. Instead, inductive frames develop organically from data analysis without predetermined categories or structures. The researchers have chosen inductive framing for the study, as it allows them to explore the data with an open mind, avoiding imposing preconceived notions or categories onto the data, permitting it to speak for itself. It also minimises researcher bias and fosters objectivity in understanding the research problem. Parallely, Thematic analysis involves recognising, studying, and documenting patterns (themes) within the data. The information in this research paper is derived from fact-checkers, official statements, media-reported articles, and other publicly available information as of 14 December, 2023. Hence, thematic analysis of the information was very suitable for categorising the study's findings systematically.

SAMPLING

The researchers examined a total of 100 articles derived from two fact-checkers of India: *Alt News* and *DFRAC* fact-checker (Digital Forensics, Research and Analytics Center). Among these articles, a notable majority of 50 were sourced

from *Alt* fact-checkers, while the remaining 50 originated from *DFRAC* fact-checkers. These articles collectively exposed false claims, misleading content, misinformation, and disinformation disseminated in the ongoing Israel and Hamas war in 2023. Given that fact-checking websites serve as the primary source of information for individuals seeking the truth amidst an ocean of fake news, especially during times of war, conflicts and crises, the researcher has carefully analysed the title, content, tone and overall article writing style to strengthen the study's credibility. The study's time frame is from 7 October 2023 to 12 December 2023.

KEY FINDINGS: INDUCED FRAMES

Unrelated false link frame

The frame of the unrelated false link is specifically designed to bring attention to the fabricated news stories that the fact-checkers have identified. These stories, although completely unrelated to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, have been deceitfully connected to the war to promote a detrimental narrative against Palestine. The author's perceptive observation reveals that the majority of these falsely linked articles specifically target Palestinian citizens, with the explicit intention of associating unrelated and outdated war and other videos with the ongoing conflict. The fake news articles in question predominantly depict Palestine in an unfavourable light, actively attempting to generate animosity and provoke religious and communal violence within the minds of the readers. Mallick from *Quint WebQoof* said that visuals from different countries were being misrepresented as from the conflict. It is hard to get reliable information because of the strong division. Visuals from other countries are being presented as from the conflict, so fact-checkers and journalists from those countries are assisting in understanding the context behind the viral claims (Sodhi 2023).



Out-of-context frame

The frame “Out of context” specifically focuses on the discussion surrounding fabricated news articles containing pictures and videos. These pictures and videos have been shared in a manner that distorts their original meaning, which is a cause for concern. The caption and accompanying text with the images and videos are crucial in misleading the audience. They are deliberately crafted to promote and reinforce a specific narrative, further adding to the concern. This intentional manipulation of information is carried out to influence the reader’s perspective and shape their understanding of the war. The sheer force of this campaign of out-of-context false information significantly influenced how the events were reported in the established media, resulting in contradictory narratives that had a detrimental impact on the public’s comprehension of the Gaza conflict (Al-Kbat 2023).

False claim frame

The False claim frame specifically addresses news articles that contain false claims and statements, which can be quite detrimental to the public’s understanding of the truth. These fabricated news articles frequently contain statements or claims that appear to be made by prominent individuals, yet they are completely fictional and have never been spoken by them. This type of fake news aims to captivate readers by leveraging the influence and recognition of famous personalities, effectively conveying certain ideologies through their supposed words. The consequences of such misinformation are twofold. Firstly, it can profoundly impact society, particularly individuals lacking sufficient media literacy, who might readily accept false information as truth. Secondly, it also tarnishes the reputation and credibility of the individuals whose names are used in these false claims. It is essential to recognise that this deception is akin to deepfake technology. However, instead of manipulating videos or images, it manipulates the essence of statements that were never spoken.

Old video getting viral now frame

This particular frame specifically centres its attention on the pressing issue of fake news, which encompasses a multitude of outdated videos and images that are currently circulating at an unprecedented rate, capturing the attention of the masses despite their unrelated connection to the ongoing Israel and Hamas conflict. It is incredibly unsettling to witness the resurfacing of these archaic war-related visuals, as they are being misleadingly portrayed as recent events, thus potentially altering the perception of reality for countless individuals. These deceptive videos and images predominantly portray instances of the Israel and Palestine war from the past, strategically aiming to emphasise and magnify the alleged cruelty of Hamas, ultimately providing a seemingly justifiable explanation for Israel's current military actions against Palestine. This also explains the underlying motives behind such widespread dissemination and the deliberate manipulation of information. Online, it was already difficult to navigate through the overwhelming amount of false information, reused footage from previous wars, pictures from video games, and conflicting accounts to ascertain the true events taking place on the field is a great concern (Goudarzi 2023).

Faking death frame

Despite its relatively small number of articles, this particular frame is undeniably captivating as it sheds light on the sinister tactics of fake news disseminators. These tactics involve creating a negative plot that Palestine citizens are fabricating deaths and bolstering the impact of the war through the clever use of makeup and counterfeit images of deceased individuals. Old video falsely shared with claims that Palestinians were faking death, a clip from an ad film shooting posted as a visual from the Israel-Palestine conflict, and BTS footage of an awareness video falsely shared as "Palestinians faking injuries" (Sodhi 2023). The images and videos utilised in these deceitful narratives are extracted from sources such as film and short film

shooting clips, videos, or even Halloween parties held in various countries. This deliberate ploy serves a dual purpose: firstly, it perpetuates the false notion that Palestine is resorting to fake deaths to amplify the impact of the conflict, and secondly, it cunningly diverts the attention of readers away from the genuine images and videos showcasing the immense suffering endured by the victim. These types of fake news are effective in cultivating propaganda, insinuating that any news pertaining to Palestine's plight is inherently suspect-worthy and potentially counterfeit. It is as if the Palestinians themselves are going to such lengths to fabricate their suffering merely to garner support and sympathy from other nations. Consequently, this calculated scheme aims to undermine the credibility of Palestinian citizens, all while indirectly bolstering Israel's relentless war against Palestine. "Israel regularly attempts to cast doubt on the number of Palestinians killed in Gaza without providing any proof" (Hawaleshka 2023). "In recent times, users have disseminated unfounded assertions suggesting that individuals referred to as 'crisis actors' are orchestrating scenes of devastation" (Press 2023).

Deepfakes frame

The frame of deepfake discussed in this paper pertains to the realm of artificial intelligence, where AI-generated and morphed forms of misinformation and disinformation are deliberately fabricated to deceive the individuals who consume such content. Deepfake refers to manipulated media content created using artificial intelligence. This technology allows for the creation of highly realistic and convincing fake videos, images, and audio, which can be used to spread false information and deceive people. It is crucial to note that the deepfakes disseminated during the ongoing war have specifically targeted the citizens residing in Palestine while simultaneously bolstering support for Israel. The subjects of these deepfakes predominantly revolve around renowned personalities and celebrities, individuals whose fame and prominence have been exploited to disseminate messages of hostility towards Palestine, which further divide communities and perpetuate conflict and violence. The



intention behind these deepfakes is to create a false perception of global support for Israel and to undermine the suffering of the Palestinian citizens. Deepfake images of such as the wailing infants offered photographic “evidence” that was quickly held up as proof. This type of disinformation is designed to force a reader to engage with the deepfake to manipulate public sentiment. Photographer Hosam Katan expressed,

I have previously encountered instances where my photographs and videos have been employed beyond their original context; the dissemination of fabricated videos or images may ultimately have the opposite effect, losing the credibility of the main story (Dwoskin 2023).

Misinformation spread by journalist frame

Many misinformation has been relentlessly propagated by influential Indian journalists such as Suresh Chavhanke from *Sudharashan News* and Abhishek Upadhyay. Furthermore, it is disheartening to note that even Indian politicians, including the prominent Right-wing UP spokesperson Prashant Umrao, Vivek Pandey, Piyush Mishra, and Diksha Chaudhary, have also been active participants in spreading misinformation related to the ongoing conflict. It is deeply concerning that even individuals such as the Israeli author and founder of Behold Israel and Amir Tsarfati have amplified baseless claims against Palestine on his Telegram channel. Moreover, it is truly disconcerting that Mario Nawfal, the host of The Roundtable Show, has chosen to share these misleading images and make negative assertions against Palestine. This deplorable situation is further compounded by Aditya Raj Kaul, the executive editor of the TV9 network, Israeli journalist Noam Amir, and activist Yoseph Haddad, who have all contributed to disseminating this false information online through their X social media accounts. Israel’s hard-right government is facing a significant credibility problem. It has made false statements, such as the claim that Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh was killed in Palestinian crossfire in 2022, when in fact it was later revealed that an Israeli soldier likely shot her. Moreover, during the war in



Gaza, the Israeli government has been actively spreading disinformation, including the fabrication of stories like Hamas beheading babies, which even reached the White House. This false narrative originated from an i24 reporter who quoted a single Israeli soldier claiming to have witnessed decapitated babies, a statement that was eagerly endorsed by the Israeli prime minister's spokesperson, Tal Heinrich. However, the following day, when it became clear that there was absolutely no evidence to support these claims, the White House was forced to retract President Biden's comment (Hawaleshka 2023). When a social media user with only a few followers disseminates misleading information, it is a different situation. However, when a prominent personality does it, it greatly influences the viewpoint of the masses globally. The same problem regarding the extent of influence also applies to other players, including the mainstream media (Goudarzi 2023).

DATA ANALYSIS OBTAINED FROM THE FACT-CHECKER'S FAKE NEWS ARTICLES ANALYSIS

An inductive methodological approach is employed for the comprehensive execution of the 'qualitative reflexive' thematic analysis, it is designed to derive meaning from qualitative data. The results obtained from the survey were systematically coded and organized in order to create coherent and meaningful themes that reflect the underlying patterns within the data. A structured and systematic six-stage coding framework was rigorously adhered to throughout this process, as delineated by the authoritative guidelines established by Braun and Clarke in the year 2006. The initial step in this intricate process involved the thorough transcription of the survey data, accompanied by an intensive familiarization with the data set to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its nuances and intricacies. In the second step, the focus shifted towards the identification of initial codes, which played a pivotal role in representing the key components and essential aspects of the collected data in a manner that would facilitate further analysis. During the third step of this systematic approach, the



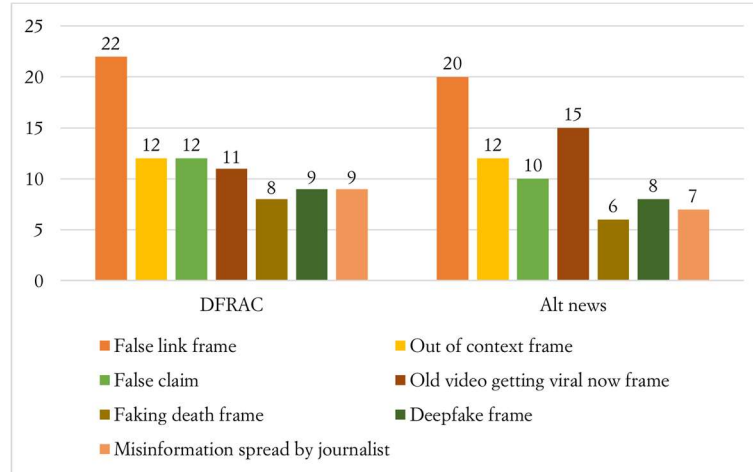


Fig. 1. *Induced frames.*

initial codes that had been generated were thoughtfully categorized into potential themes that could serve as focal points for in-depth analysis and interpretation. The fourth step entailed a reassessment of these potential themes, which was crucial for the process of finalizing the themes that would ultimately guide the analysis. In the fifth step, the process consisted of a careful definition, naming, and subsequent organization of the identified themes, ensuring that each theme was articulated with clarity and precision to reflect its significance within the context of the study. Lastly, the sixth step encompassed the comprehensive task of writing the manuscript, which synthesized the findings and insights gained from the thematic analysis into a coherent and scholarly document.

From the findings of the comprehensive analysis conducted on the fact-checked news articles extracted from both fact-checking websites, *DFRAC* fact-checkers and the *Alt News*. The researchers have induced a total of 7 distinct frames. The first frame, known as the “false link frame,” is characterised by news articles that are deceitfully linked to the ongoing Israel and Hamas war. Many of these articles target Palestinian citizens and show them in a bad light. They connect unrelated and

outdated videos and pictures to the ongoing conflict. They aim to incite communal violence and disharmony among readers. Upon careful examination, out of the 100 news articles scrutinised from the *DFRAC* fact-checkers and *Alt* fact-checkers websites, 22 news articles from *DFRAC* and 20 from *Alt News* fell under the false link frame category. The next frame, “Out of context frame”, was observed in 12 out of the 50 news articles on the *DFRAC* fact-checkers website and the same in 12 out of 50 in the *Alt News* fact-checking. The frame “out of context” focuses on fabricated news with misleading captions, accompanied by text to promote a specific narrative. The third frame, the “False claim frame,” sheds light on fake news claims that harm public perception. This frame includes false statements from famous personalities, and it aims to persuade readers using famous names by making statements and claims that they have never mentioned. After analysis, it was discovered that the *DFRAC* fact-checkers contained 12 news articles falling under this frame, while *Alt News* featured 10 news articles of a similar nature. The fourth frame is the “Old video getting viral now frame” it was found that the *DFRAC* fact-checkers comprised 11 news articles out of 50, and *Alt News* had 15 such news articles, which comes under this frame. This frame focuses on the problem of fake news, showing old videos and images that are misleadingly presented as recent events in the Israel and Hamas conflict. It is unsettling and could alter people’s perception of reality. The fifth frame, the “Faking death frame”, was identified in 8 news articles in *DFRAC* fact-checkers and 6 news articles in *Alt News* website. This frame exposes the negative plot, claiming that the Palestinian citizens are faking deaths using makeup and counterfeit images to exaggerate the humanitarian loss caused by the war. These types of fake news divert attention from the real suffering of the people. The sixth frame, “Deepfake frame”, was identified in 9 news articles in *DFRAC* fact-checkers and in 8 news articles in *Alt News* fact-checkers. These convincing fakes spread falsehoods, manipulate public sentiment and deceive people. Deepfakes specifically targeted Palestinians and carried a tone of pro-Israel narrative. The last frame is “Misinformation spread by journalist frame”, 9 news articles from *DFRAC* fact-checkers and 7 news articles from *Alt*



News covered this frame. Influential Indian and Israeli journalists, politicians and news outlets have spread misinformation to intentionally deceive people by altering their perception of the war and needle their ideologies among their target audience through the dissemination of fake news.

INDIA'S STANCE DURING THE WAR

Support ratio 5:1 – India's balancing act

In response to Al Jazeera's request for a comprehensive analysis, Narrative Research Lab, located in New Delhi, scrutinised the trending hashtags and phrases circulating on the prominent social media platform X within the borders of India. Their objective was to gain a deeper understanding of the matter in which political narratives pertaining to the war were being shaped and moulded. One particular expression stood out among the myriad phrases and hashtags: "We Indians". Although partially propelled by the ongoing Cricket World Cup, this phrase also reverberated due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Sarabjot Singh, co-founder of the Narrative Research Lab, posited that "We Indians" frequently serves as a rallying cry to ignite a sense of nationalist pride within the Indian populace. With this valuable keyword, Singh's co-founder, Sundeep Narwani, harnessed the power of artificial intelligence to analyse a staggering total of 4,316 tweets, of which 2,200 tweets contain poignant reflections on the Israel-Hamas war. Astonishingly, over 1,250 of these tweets conveyed unequivocal support for Israel, while a mere 250 tweets expressed solidarity with Palestine, thus revealing a disproportionate five-to-one ratio in favour of Israel. In a valiant endeavour to gauge the overall sentiment prevalent on social media, the lab also embarked upon an analysis of two distinct hashtags: #IstandwithIsrael and #IsraelPalestineWar. While the former was employed globally, the lab's astute researchers discovered a "significant" number of Indian accounts employing this hashtag (Bahree 2023). What truly caught the attention amidst this cacophony was the realisation that individuals from India generated and disseminated

An analysis of fake news originated or spread by users in India on the Israel-Gaza war.

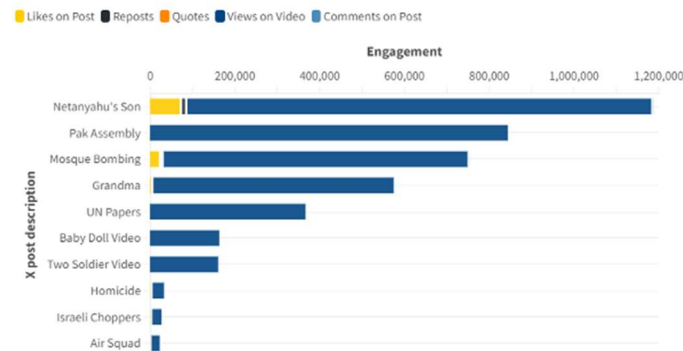


Fig. 2. Top 10 fake news posts on X in India related to the Israel-Gaza war.
Source: X, archive.org, Narrative Research Lab.

a significant portion of this content. Experts assert that the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas has bestowed an unprecedented level of influence upon social media accounts in India – both those with substantial followings and those with more modest ones – enabling them to ride the crest of anti-Muslim sentiment and fervent pro-Israel sentiment. Several verified accounts in India have led the alleged disinformation campaign against the Palestinians (Sodhi 2023). Cyber troops in India employed various strategies, tools, and tactics to disseminate false information and control online political discussions. False information originates from unreliable news sources or fake social media accounts, but it is also widespread in India, coming from mainstream media, politicians, and official election campaigns (Smith, Bradshaw 2019).

Islamophobic narrative

“People often fail to fact-check information and tend to use any piece of information to justify the attacks on Palestinian civilians” (Hourany 2023). The burgeoning endorsement for Israel in India aligns harmoniously with the surge of anti-Muslim, anti-minority politics epitomised by the BJP. The concept of Israel as

a nation where Jews are esteemed as first-rate citizens while others are deemed secondary holds a captivating allure for BJP advocates, who yearn for Hindus to be treated in a similar fashion within India. They aspire for India to evolve into a majoritarian democracy akin to Israel while also sharing the sentiments of Israeli Jews who regard Palestinians as inferior beings. The Indian media fervently advocated for the annihilation of Gaza and prophesying its imminent demise. Manifesting support for Palestine is now being equated with endorsing terrorism. In India, one can face the prospect of being arrested or incarcerated for espousing solidarity with Palestine (Apoorvanand 2023).

Alt News and *Boom*, two prominent fact-checking organisations in India dedicated to verifying information on the internet, observed a substantial influx of disinformation specifically aimed at Palestine. This disinformation was disseminated through various Indian social media accounts and encompassed fabricated narratives concerning atrocities supposedly committed by Palestinians and Hamas. Astonishingly, these false stories were shared millions of times, effectively reaching a wide audience. It is deeply troubling to note that many of these accounts not only exploited the ongoing conflict in Palestine but also utilised this platform as an opportunity to perpetuate an Islamophobic narrative. This narrative, which has unfortunately become relatively common in India since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) assumed power, has been an instrument to demonise the Muslim population within the country. Additionally, it came to light that groups affiliated with the BJP, particularly on the popular social media platform Facebook, actively propagated the notion that Hamas posed a similar Muslim threat to India as experienced in the contentious, majority-Muslim region of Kashmir. This highly problematic assertion resulted in a sweeping generalisation, categorising all Palestinians as jihadis. Such a categorisation is not only misleading and inaccurate but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and prejudices. Furthermore, the dissemination of disinformation extended beyond social media platforms and infiltrated popular messaging applications like WhatsApp. Messages widely circulated on this platform not only encouraged Hindus to arm themselves but also advocated for a complete boycott of Mus-



lims. The underlying message seemed to convey a sense of urgency, warning that India could potentially face conspiracies and attacks similar to those experienced by Israel. The suggestion that Hindu women may face cruelty in the future was particularly distressing, as it further perpetuated fear and division within the country. Regrettably, this dangerous narrative was not confined to social media and messaging apps alone. It also managed to permeate some of India's most inflammatory news channels. One notable example is Arnab Goswami, a right-wing presenter on India's Republic TV, who unabashedly echoed this narrative to his viewers. He boldly claimed that the same radical jihadist Islamist terrorist thinking that Israel contends with is also a threat faced by India. In his impassioned monologue, Arnab Goswami explicitly stated that Israel is not only fighting this war for its own survival but also on behalf of all of us. This assertion, though highly controversial and questionable, was delivered with unwavering confidence and conviction, potentially influencing the perspectives of his viewers (Petersen 2023).

WHY IS SO MUCH ANTI-PALESTINE DISINFORMATION COMING FROM INDIA?

Electoral season is happening in India. National and local elections are approaching. Disinformation is being used to mobilise people. Tensions between Hindus and Muslims rise during elections. A report by *Logically Facts* explains the disinformation campaign before the Indian elections in 2024. Anti-Muslim sentiment has increased since the right-wing party came to power. *Hindutva Watch* recorded hate speech incidents against Muslims. Most incidents occurred in BJP-ruled states. BJP supporters face similar threats as Israel when it comes to terrorism, and hence, India has now become more interested in Israel (Khatsenkova 2023). Right-wing accounts originating from India, which often showcase both the Indian flag and the Israeli flag side by side, have expressed unwavering support for Israel on various online platforms. These accounts hold a prominent position in disseminating misleading information that is critical of Palestine, thus becoming influential purveyors of



anti-Palestine disinformation. Scholars have observed that Indian accounts leaning towards the right side of the political spectrum have contributed substantially to promoting the Israeli narrative to audiences in South Asia, a demographic that is not easily reached by Western media.

This phenomenon may have tangible consequences for India's Muslim community, which is already experiencing a pervasive sentiment of hostility towards Islam. India is the most populous country in the world and home to many internet users, particularly those proficient in English. This feature makes propagating disinformation very convenient to the masses in India (Hourany 2023).

As we observe an increasing number of attacks in both Israel and Palestine, individuals of significant influence, such as politicians, business leaders, athletes, celebrities, journalists, as well as ordinary citizens like ourselves, find themselves embroiled in a form of warfare known as fourth generation warfare, wherein networks of information serve as a potent weapon. These networks play a pivotal role, as it is through engagement that certain units of information, such as viral videos, hashtags, or memes, are disseminated across vast distances (Donovan 2023). India has more WhatsApp users than social media users, so most misinformation and disinformation come from WhatsApp. However, some argue that X is the main platform for spreading misinformation and disinformation. Right-wing Indian influencers play a major role in disseminating Israeli propaganda on social media platforms. They intentionally share false emotional content to attract a large audience. These accounts can earn money on X, incentivising them to keep posting. Despite community notes, some people continue to post false information for profit. Before Elon Musk acquired the platform, accounts that posted inappropriate or false content would be suspended, but now they get amplified. Anti-Muslim sentiments are used by populist leaders to gain popularity. India's digital media power and influence should not be underestimated. Indian influencers promoting disinformation are significant. Many popular tweets about Israel and Palestine are from Indian journalists who support Israel. The BJP's IT Cell plays a key role in spreading propaganda. Despite efforts to speak up for Palestine, the pro-Israeli stance is dominant in India. False narratives portray Palestinians as terrorists



and predators against women. Zionism and Hindutva share a fear of being outnumbered by Muslims, which strengthens nationalism. It is challenging to discuss the plight of Palestine in India (Hourany 2023).

POTENTIAL HARMS TO SOCIETY DUE TO FAKE NEWS DISSEMINATION IN THE ONGOING WARFARE

Fake news and deepfakes can have profound and far-reaching consequences during times of war, causing significant harm and negative impacts. These nefarious tools have the ability to exacerbate tensions, manipulate perceptions, and exert a powerful influence over public opinion in ways that can greatly impact the ongoing Israel and Palestine conflict, military strategies, and civilian populations. It is imperative to fully comprehend the specific effects of fake news and deepfakes during wartime, as their ramifications are wide-ranging and highly detrimental.

Misinformation and disinformation

One of the most detrimental effects of fake news and deepfakes during war is the spread of misinformation and disinformation. These malicious forms of communication can disseminate false or misleading information about the ongoing conflict, including the fabrication of incidents, casualties, or events. This flood of misinformation can serve to confuse the public, distort their understanding of the conflict, and erode trust in reliable sources of information (DiBella 2023). The consequences of this are severe, as it can hinder people's ability to make informed decisions and take appropriate action.

Manipulation of public opinion

Another grave impact of fake news and deepfakes during wartime is manipulating public opinion. These deceptive tools can be utilised to sway public sentiment, both domestically

and internationally, by constructing narratives that favour one side of the conflict or demonise the opposing side. This manipulation can significantly influence support for or against military actions, potentially affecting national morale and international perceptions. The implications of this are immense, as it can shape the conflict's trajectory and alter diplomatic relations.

Instilling fear and promoting propaganda

Additionally, fake news and deepfakes can be employed as potent tools of propaganda during times of war. They can escalate tensions, provoke fear, and even justify aggressive actions. Fake news exploits sensitive topics, incites communal violence, and creates divisions among populations within and between countries involved in the conflict. The consequences of such actions are dire, as they can further aggravate the conflict and hinder the efforts towards peace and reconciliation. Reuters' fact-checking unit found instances of fake images and information regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict on social media. Additionally, there were cases where confusion, rather than intentional disinformation, escalated tensions (Burnett et al. 2023).

Impact on diplomacy and negotiations

The effects of fake news and deepfakes during wartime extend beyond the battlefield and profoundly impact diplomacy and negotiations. Disseminating false information and manipulated media can greatly complicate diplomatic efforts and hinder negotiations to resolve the conflict. This flood of misinformation erodes trust-building measures between conflicting parties, making reaching mutually beneficial, peaceful resolutions increasingly difficult. The implications of this are significant, as it prolongs the suffering of those affected by the conflict and perpetuates a cycle of violence.

Security and military implications

Furthermore, deepfakes, in particular, pose significant security risks during times of war. These fabricated videos or audio can depict political leaders or military figures issuing false orders or statements. As mentioned by the researchers in the induced frames, the frames “False claim frame” and “Deepfake frame” clearly highlight how deepfake can be used as a tool to manipulate and deceive people with statements that were never said or events that never happened. This can potentially disrupt command structures, confuse military operations, and compromise national security. The consequences of such actions can undermine the effectiveness of military forces and jeopardise the safety and well-being of the military personnel as well as the civilians of both Israel and Palestine.

Humanitarian loss

The impact of fake news and deepfakes during wartime also extends to humanitarian consequences. False information can misguide relief organisations, impede aid distribution, and even endanger civilians by spreading rumours about safe zones or relief operations. This can cause hinderance to the efforts’ to alleviate suffering and provide much-needed assistance to those affected by the conflict. The implications of this are catastrophic, as it exacerbates the existing harrowing humanitarian situation and prolongs the suffering of innocent civilians.

Strain international relations and alliances

Moreover, misinformation and deepfakes during war can strain international relations and alliances. Fake news and deepfakes may target foreign governments or create misunderstandings between allies, increasing tensions and mistrust. The consequences of this are far-reaching, as it can hinder curb cooperation and collaboration between nations, impede efforts towards peace, and further escalate the conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS TO FIGHT THE MISINFORMATION FOG

Media literacy

Firstly, avoid knee-jerk reactions to shocking information, as context may be missing. Wait for the full picture to emerge. Secondly, conduct your own research by searching for additional reports and reputable sources. Consider the expertise of individuals publishing on the topic. If you come across images, especially in the age of generative AI, perform a reverse Google image search to verify their source and credibility. Pay attention to factors such as simultaneous social media posts and reputable sources' use of the image. Analyse details like people's hands, background, and image quality to determine authenticity. Approach information with caution to avoid real-world violence (Wirtschafter et al. 2023). Examine supporting evidence for viral claims and consult reliable sources before engaging with social media content. Analyse the source and intent of the information. Challenging circumstances impede objective reporting during the war, leading to the spread of fake news, allegations, and deepfakes. Be mindful that misinformation is most frequently spread during the unfolding of a conflict or war (Veiga 2023).

User accountability

Safeguarding the truth is not exclusively the duty of our colleagues, journalists, and media professionals within the news industry. It is incumbent upon all of us as information consumers, particularly in this era of digitalisation and the global village, to demonstrate utmost vigilance (Ali 2023). According to philosopher Gideon Rosen, individuals who adopt a passive stance towards a given event generally do not bear ethical culpability for said event. When perusing the internet, individuals are bound to encounter numerous images and associated texts in a passive manner, leading them to potentially believe that they hold no responsibility for the images depicting warfare and widespread violence that they come across.



Digital media users are not simply passive recipients of fabricated images and narratives. On the contrary, they can influence the types of images that manifest on their screens. It is important to realise that they are not merely passive recipients of truth but rather key participants in combatting the spread of disinformation (Ali 2023). Consequently, this implies that users assume some ethical responsibility for consuming visually deceptive and misleading information (Morrow 2023). While relying on social media algorithms for news updates is convenient, it is important to seek credible news independently. Social media algorithms may not prioritise standard-based news and can contribute to an echo chamber that reinforces personal views (Veiga 2023).

Control the algorithms

The focal point of the criticisms revolves around the recently implemented policies at X, that the numerous “verified” or blue-tick accounts that have been disseminating or endorsing fabricated information. Within its novel policies, X demonstrates a preference for tweets originating from its blue-tick subscribers and offers them incentives. Tweets crafted by verified users are accorded precedence on the main feed. Furthermore, if these posts achieve virality, the verified “creators” become eligible for remuneration from X. Abhilash Mallick, the editor of *Quint WebQoof*, an IFCN-certified initiative focused on fact-checking, highlighted the monetary incentives associated with garnering more views as a factor that compels individuals to distribute sensational content (Sodhi 2023). Digital media platforms use algorithms to deliver content, which is influenced by user behaviour. Users lack control over content but can influence it. Algorithms are not fully transparent but are driven by past user engagement. Engaging with certain content leads to more encounters with similar content. Enforcing community guidelines on social media platforms is challenging, but hiding, reporting or simply disengaging with violent content leads to fewer such messages coming in. It may also reduce the odds that such content will reach others. If one knows that a

social media content creator has shared false information before, it is possible to block that friend or unfollow that creator. Users have some responsibility for algorithmically generated misinformation (Morrow 2023). The misinformation on X is likely related to its premium service which promotes content from verified users, according to Ian Bremmer, a prominent foreign policy expert. Nivedita Niranjankumar, a news editor at *Boom*, believes that Twitter's explosive nature may be due to algorithmic changes and paid verification of accounts. Niranjankumar also suggests that Elon Musk's disregard for verification and giving blue ticks to anyone willing to pay has compromised the platform (Sodhi 2023).

SIFT: Stop, Investigate, Find and Trace

The SIFT protocol encompasses four distinct stages that implore users to halt their actions, thoroughly investigate a message's source, seek more reliable and accurate coverage, and trace the origins of quotes and claims back to their original contexts. The origins of images can often be traced back to their authentic contexts. Google's reverse image search tool enables users to select an image – or specific components of it – and effortlessly discover its presence elsewhere on the internet. It is important to recognise that no single technique or protocol can grant users absolute control over the images they encounter during war, nor can it provide infallible assurance against disseminating false information. Nevertheless, by comprehending and implementing SIFT, users can mitigate the risk of disinformation and foster a future founded on truth and veracity (Morrow 2023). Be cautious of your beliefs and the information you choose to distribute. Seek reliable sources, verify information when possible, question emotionally charged content or exaggerated headlines, and think twice before sharing (Helmus, Marcellino 2023). In the event that you suspect the account in question to be an imposter, it is advisable to perform a reverse image search of the profile pictures and account banners and examine whether the way-back machine has captured screenshots of the account from previous months or years. In order to identify spam, examine any attached media (such as pictures,



videos, or links) and search for duplicates, as well as ascertain whether this account partakes in the act of spam posting, such as replying to numerous posts with innocuous comments (Donovan 2023).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The attack on Gaza has brought attention to the harmful impact of technology, particularly artificial intelligence, in distorting the truth in times of conflict (Al-Kbat 2023). Irrespective of one's position in this enduring conflict, prevailing narratives are frequently transmitted from one generation to the next. The remarkable capability of these narratives to shape public opinion is evidence of their formidable effectiveness. Disinformation becomes a valuable tool in shaping these deeply ingrained perspectives, revealing the susceptibility of individuals when confronted with a deluge of misleading or blatantly false information. Importantly, even notable individuals with access to extensive resources – such as journalists, politicians, and ironically, CEOs of social media companies – can become victims of the insidious influence of disinformation (Goudarzi 2023). Mohammed Zubair, an Indian journalist and co-founder of *Alt News*, an Indian non-profit fact-checking website, is an exemplary figure who zealously endeavours to debunk misinformation and combat Israeli propaganda while concurrently amplifying the voices of the Palestinian population (Hourany 2023).

To effectively address the multifaceted effects of fake news and deepfakes during wartime, it is crucial to recognise the severity and extent of their impact. Robust measures must be implemented to counteract the dissemination of false information and manipulated media. This includes fostering media literacy, promoting critical thinking skills, and ensuring the availability of reliable and trustworthy sources of information. Additionally, international cooperation and collaboration are vital in combating the spread of fake news and deepfakes, as the effects of these malicious tools transcend borders and impact nations globally. By working together, we can mitigate the detrimental effects of fake news and deepfakes during times of war, safeguard the integrity of information, and foster peace and stability



(Uskova, Usvyatsova 2023). In this polluted information environment, truth and falsehoods coexist and distinguishing them can be challenging for reliable sources (Callahan 2023). For certain individuals, the distortion and persistent dissemination of videos from past calamities evoke thoughts of “re-victimisation,” wherein survivors are relentlessly compelled to relive their agony (Fichera 2023). During war and conflict, the public needs accurate information to avoid hate speech and war-mongering. Peace journalism is the most essential type of journalism in this process. It is based on facts and seeks creative solutions for peace. It pays attention to language and uses a language of peace. It is necessary to look at underlying issues and not just immediate triggers. It is important to report on the possibilities of parties finding common ground instead of focusing on their differences (İnceoğlu 2023). As stated by the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, countering disinformation necessitates a persistent commitment to fostering societal resilience and attaining proficiency in media and information literacy (Al-Kbat 2023).

FUTURE STUDY

The future study could involve interviews with journalists and fact-checkers to gain their perspectives on reporting and debunking fake news during the war. Investigating the most popular social media platform responsible for spreading fake news during the conflict would also be an interesting topic. This study focused on India’s viewpoint and media coverage of the war. A similar study could be conducted on how Western and other countries’ news outlets covered the Israel-Hamas conflict in 2023. The researchers could only consider English news articles, but in other Indian regional languages, fake news was also widespread during the war. Exploring fake news in other Indian regional languages could be a valuable future study.



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