

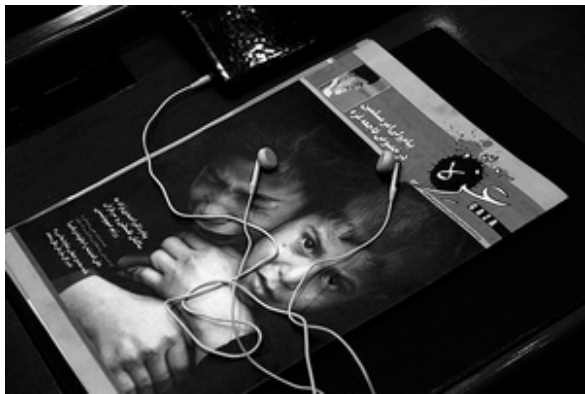


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Information wars: how journalists navigated social media in the Israel-Palestine conflict

It's not uncommon now to hear social media termed as the 'new battleground' when it comes to conflict coverage. Conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine are widely reported by both traditional and social media, as was the Israel-Palestine [conflict](#) [1]. As the fighting now settles into an unsteady but hopeful [ceasefire](#) [2], [Lucy Dean](#) [3] examines the use and abuse of social media in Gaza, and explores how journalists can navigate the terrain.



Rival hashtags [#IsraelUnderFire](#) [4] and [#GazaUnderAttack](#) [5] provided spectacular displays of emotion, blood and confusion at the height of the Israel-Palestine conflict. [Celebrities](#) [6] used Instagram to offer support for either Gazans or Israelis, and in some cases they hastily removed controversial comments or images. Politicians disseminated statements on Facebook, while military representatives on both sides of the conflict [propagandized](#) [7] on Twitter.

It can be difficult for journalists to navigate the nebulous world of social media in the context of conflict. Rich personal anecdotes, revealing images, and stories from the inside fascinate and can add value to news stories. However, social media also poses many challenges and risks for journalists - especially in the important area of verification.

Social media silos

[Magda Abu-Fadil](#) [8], director of [Media Unlimited](#) [9], describes the impact of social media on public feeling and public knowledge as “multi-faceted.” She told the World Editors Forum “On the one hand, those predisposed to believe one party to the conflict have had their convictions reinforced. On the other hand, with greater exposure to what has befallen the mostly unarmed civilian population in Gaza, social media and citizen journalists have disseminated powerful content mostly in the form of images and videos that have made recipients sit up and take note.”

“Close to two million people living in a state of siege for many years were being pounded relentlessly to kingdom come. Social media in this case filled the gaps left by traditional media coverage,” Abu-Fadil said.

Social media works in the same way as any social relationship, according to chief digital officer at respected Israeli daily *Haaretz* [10], **Lior Kodner** [11]. Users surround themselves with friends and those of similar beliefs and so users' beliefs are rarely challenged or broadened.

Kodner points out that dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians via social media is fairly limited. Instead, within Israel it is the left and right that clash, “each of them accusing the other of being either fascist or anti-patriotic. We saw many clashes, especially on our pages and on other pages - people starting to fight regarding the news.”

How information is dispersed on social media

Betaworks [12] data researcher and **TOW Knight** [13] advisory board member, **Gilad Lotan** [14], describes the Palestinian cause as, “gaining significant traction online, in an organic manner – groups of activists from around the world are surfacing content across various social media feeds. It is much more from the ground up.”

In comparison, the spread of Israeli information is generally sourced from the top-down. “There are specific Israeli units (**Hasbara** [15]) that generate images, illustrations and messages to be passed out by its group, and then Israel-proponents. Israeli messages these days are also spreading through Whatsapp groups, as well as large public Facebook groups.”

Manar Al-Amleh from the **Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms** [16] (MADA) sees social media as a platform for global solidarity. “If we take a look, we can find a large number of people promoting causes or personal issues heading to social media, where they know they will build a large audience for their cause...Public knowledge is really increasing like never before.”

Accuracy, verification and propaganda

Globally, clashes between pro-Palestinians and pro-Israelis grew more common during the Gaza conflict. In Paris, the number and style of protests led to assertions that anti-Semitism in Paris is at its **highest since WWII** [17]. And in the Maldives, Jewish tourists were **evacuated** [18] for their own safety.

Tensions are high and graphic images shared on social media platforms could be fuelling the fire. Raw, emotive, and worryingly, sometimes inaccurate, these images are held up as proof of the horror. For journalists, aside from the ethical dilemma sharing these photos pose (as Julie Posetti **writes for the World Editors Forum** [19]) there is a responsibility to be accurate.

Eliot Higgins [20], author of **Brown Moses**, [21] is exasperated by the volume of journalists re-tweeting **inaccurate information and images** [22] in the context of conflict. “A five-second search on Google images shows that the image is from Syria,” he told the World Editors Forum, but the image is inaccurately reported to be from Gaza. Higgins’ advice to journalists: “Just do the basic (verification) stuff to begin with - people aren’t doing that!”

“When we talk about situations like that [Israel-Palestine conflict], it’s a very complex situation and it’s not helped by people sharing bad information, so just having those basic techniques in people’s heads before they use these tools is a good start.”

Manar Al-Amleh sees propaganda as the biggest threat. “The most important thing they [journalists] should be careful about is propaganda.”

"When they want to write news, they should make sure it is right, they should have the right sources. This is for the sake of their credibility, and when they achieve this, they will get a large audience that trusts what they publish," Al-Amleh told the World Editors Forum.

Social media seat-belts: double-checking

Gilad Lotan says journalists need to remember that "social networks are massive, and serve multiple purposes. They're using them professionally to access an audience, most people on Twitter are just hanging out. The same goes with Facebook and Instagram. This makes it very easy to take things out of context, or just forget about the multiplicity of usage."

He suggests that journalists mining social media should "Get in touch. Ping the person on Twitter, email them or even call. Over time you build up a fairly good understanding of the broad community of bloggers in the region that you're mapping. You also build up an intimate relationship with the trolls... sadly, that comes with the job!"

For *Haaretz*, using social media as a resource when covering the Gaza conflict is simply too much trouble with too little a payoff. Lior Kodner said "We are very innovative with this [using social media] among Israeli broadcasters and media but during this crisis, it wasn't so useful. There was no reliable news there."

He viewed most reports from Gaza as Hamas propaganda and from the Israeli side, the Israeli army was reporting the same stories in the same way as Israeli reporters.

To deal with propaganda, misinformation and heightened feeling, Magda Abu-Fadil checks, checks and checks again. She will drop a story if it doesn't pass the test, or stories will feature a disclaimer informing the reader that a fact or source is unconfirmed. "There's no 100% guarantee on authenticity but one has to make an effort to find out how reliable the information is. Deadlines and competition shouldn't take precedence over media ethics," she said.

"Social media are growing at an incredible speed. This in itself makes journalists lose their balance. A click is often faster than legwork to obtain information and shape it into good story form. I believe the same rules apply to social media as legacy media in terms of coverage and good journalism, albeit in more condensed form and at greater speed: accuracy, balance, fairness, ethics."

Note: Read more about trends in social media verification [here](#) [23] and [here](#) [24].

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