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Informational War: Analyzing False News in the Israel Conflict

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine, and now the war in the Gaza Strip, has been different from previous armed conflicts. In the case of the two military conflicts, we have witnessed two types of warfare, one on the battlefield and another informational, with unconventional weapons. Both have brought disinformation to unprecedented levels worldwide. In the Gaza war, fake news was spread through social media, and not infrequently, videos or photos were even picked up by media outlets in several countries. This has been possible primarily due to the lightning development of artificial intelligence tools, making it difficult to verify whether these images are from war-affected areas or fake. Secondly, the development of citizen journalism poses risks in the context of news that needs to be thoroughly verified. In this article, a content analysis is made of several fake news stories and how false information about the armed conflict in the Middle East has been propagated. This research could be helpful for researchers, media representatives, as well as decision-makers, and organizations working to combat disinformation.

Keywords: Israel-Hamas war, disinformation, fake news, artificial intelligence, citizen journalism

1. Introduction

"Nowadays, technology and information are much more developed and more accessible than two decades ago" (Porumbescu, A., 2022). We live in a digital age, where information is spreading at an astonishing speed, and disinformation has reached a level that is difficult to control, despite the joint efforts of institutions, government authorities, social networks, and journalists alike. "False information has become an important weapon in the hands of those seeking to control public opinion" (Leung J. et al., 2023). Disinformation is an even more dangerous weapon when used in military conflicts due to its potential to disrupt the public sphere (Chambers, S., 2021), especially where it is impossible to verify information on the ground, as was the case with the wars in Ukraine and Israel.

Fake news, closely related to propaganda, is a modern variant of disinformation (Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2019; Vlăduțescu, Ș., and Voinea; D.V., 2018). This misinformation, often created to manipulate public opinion or influence perceptions, spreads rapidly and widely online, potentially profoundly affecting public discourse and decision-making processes. Although with this large influx of information, we might expect people to make better decisions (Horner et al., 2021), the phenomenon is becoming increasingly complex and difficult to manage, with notable consequences for the credibility of information and the integrity of digital discussions.

Reporting from the Middle East has been a challenge for journalists worldwide since the beginning of the armed conflict. In the conflict in Israel and Gaza, images have not only come through official channels but many have been posted on social media by local people and eyewitnesses to events. Much of the news came from citizens who captured the conflict on mobile video devices. Citizen journalism (Campbell, V., 2015) is a paradigm in the current media environment that emphasizes active citizen participation in news gathering and dissemination. In the case of the Middle East conflict, citizen journalism was evident, and locals were not only consumers of media but also producers of content. The stories of refugees, the dramas of children in war-affected areas, and the moments of bombing - all were told through the eyes of ordinary people amid war. Among them were many fake photos and images that were also redistributed through various social media accounts and picked up by credible media outlets. Most of the fake images were created using artificial

intelligence tools. The propagation of false information and AI-generated images is nowadays extremely easy. Anyone with an internet connection and a mobile device can create false information in seconds. "Machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence have made photo manipulation easy and seamless" (Hristova, S., 2021).

In the article, we started with the following questions:

What kind of fake news has been spread since the beginning of the Middle East conflict?

How has A.I. technology contributed to the spread of fake news in the conflict between Israel and Hamas?

What steps can be taken to limit the abuse of artificial intelligence in manipulating information? What steps can be taken to prevent the spread of fake news during conflicts?

2. Fake news in the Hamas-Israel war

The Hamas organization launched a rocket attack on several fronts in Israel on 7 October 2023. More than 1,000 people were killed in the attack, including on kibbutzim and at a music festival. Over 100 people were taken hostage by Hamas. The Israeli government has decided that the country is officially at war, and the conflict has begun to rage both in the Gaza Strip and on Israeli territory (Federman et al., 2023). A classic armed war has begun, but also an informational one, in which fake news has taken over social media. In this landscape, faced with hundreds of images and information, journalists have had to select carefully what to report in the media. The speed of news and the desire to deliver a story first to market has led to severe slippage in the media.

a. The Gaza hospital explosion and media slippage

The timing of the Gaza hospital explosion was a real test of how fake news is distributed (Kahn, G., 2023). Media around the world distributed the message from the Gaza Health Minister that a rocket allegedly fired from Israel hit a Gaza hospital and caused over 500 deaths and injuries. Even though Israel later proved that the rocket that hit the hospital belonged to Islamic Jihad, this news did not matter as the information from the Health Minister had already been spread by Hamas and led to widespread social protests in Turkey or Jordan and later in Europe. This was like a test given to media organisations worldwide, and the results illustrated how easily journalists can be manipulated. So, media outlets published a series of corrections. The New York Times published an editors' note saying their reporting "left readers with an incorrect impression of what was known and how credible the reporting was" (Kahn, G., 2023).

b. Footage from events elsewhere, shown to be from the Hamas-Israel conflict

b.1 A video featuring thousands of Marines quickly went viral after it was posted on a social network. In the footage were U.S. service members allegedly landing in Israel. Parts of the video were also shared on other social networks. The video is set at a low resolution and was cropped from a more extended clip "uploaded to a media distribution service funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), showing soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division arriving at the Mihail Kogălniceanu base in Romania in June 2022" (Phan, K., 2023). The original video is longer, and clips posted on social media purporting to be from Israel start at minute 0.46. So the footage was older and from a different location, but it was used to mislead the public.

b.2 Another fake news story featuring North Korean leader Kim Jong Un spread quickly on social media and attracted over 200,000 likes. In the fake clip, the North Korean leader blames U.S. President Joe Biden for the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas. In reality, the video was from 2020 and showed Kim Jong Un at a Korean Workers' Party holiday, which had nothing to do with the war in the Middle East. It did not refer to the war, but the wrong English subtitle was used in the viral version. In the clip with the altered subtitle, Kim Jong Un allegedly said "Under the Biden administration, conflicts break out every year. This year, a war started between Israel and Palestine. I am afraid that if the Biden administration does not cease to exist in the next election, World War III may start", (Phan, K., 2023). The video was posted on Instagram and TikTok social media, and has garnered over 223,000 likes. An experienced translator and other Korean language experts have analyzed the portion of the viral speech and confirmed that what Kim says is not true but was just fake news.

b.3 Following the same pattern, a clip showing the Emir of Qatar threatening to cut off the world's natural gas supply if Israel does not stop bombing Gaza quickly went viral. In reality, a six-year-old clip shows the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who says nothing of the sort. Moreover, the Qatari government spokesman explained that no Qatari official has made any threats to shut off gas if Israel does not stop the bombing. "The 7-second clip is a small excerpt from his opening speech at the Doha Forum in 2017" (Marcelo, P., 2023). A Qatari government official confirmed that the video is from 2017 and is misrepresented. "This is yet another case of online disinformation against Qatar - such a statement has never been made and never will be," the country's International Press Office wrote in an email. "Qatar does not politicize its LNG deliveries or any economic investment" (Marcelo, P., 2023).

b.4 In Romania, the National Audiovisual Council, which monitors compliance with audiovisual legislation, has targeted three T.V. stations. They provided footage of alleged bombings of the Gaza Strip, and the images used were taken from Platform X. The footage was of fireworks in Algeria after the victory over football team CR Belouizdad. However, members of the National Broadcasting Council have been quite sympathetic to these editorial lapses, issuing simple warnings to those responsible.

c. False reports attributed to internationally credible T.V. channels

A fake news story, this time targeting an internationally renowned T.V. station, has made the rounds. A social media post of an alleged BBC report appeared, promoting the information that Ukraine had supplied weapons to Hamas. Specifically, in the alleged report, a so-called Bellingcat report on the supply of weapons by Ukraine to Hamas was presented. The video spread quickly and circulated mainly on Russian-language user accounts. This creates the impression that there is a direct link between the war in the Middle East and Ukraine. On the Telegram messaging platform alone, the video reached 110,000 views. The video has also been shared on Facebook and Twitter. In addition to the fake video of the BBC report, the false information was supplemented by other posts attributed to Hamas, which allegedly confirmed that it had received weapons from Ukraine to start its attack on Israel. Both news organizations, the BBC and Bellingcat denied this news (Marcelo, P., 2023).

d. Denial of the real facts of the conflict between Israel - Hamas

In the case of the war in the Middle East, we encounter fake news similar to that in Ukraine by denying the true facts, just as happened in Bucha.

The case of Palestinian baby Muhammad Hani al-Zahar fits perfectly into this type of fake news. The baby's mother and grandfather are holding his body in a hospital courtyard. However, when the images went viral, dozens of users posted messages claiming that the two were holding a doll and the whole thing was a hoax. These claims were echoed in an article in the Jerusalem Post, an influential Israeli newspaper, which featured an image of Muhammad claiming it was a doll. 'Following the outcry, the newspaper removed the article from its website, stating on X (formerly Twitter) that the report 'was based on erroneous sources' (Robinson et al.; S., 2023).

A similar case illustrates two 16-year-old Israeli brothers and their sisters. One of the brothers had witnessed the killing of his parents by Hamas fighters on 7 October while they were in their home on a kibbutz near the Gaza border. The video contained edited clips of the children recounting what happened. The video was also presented as portraying crisis actors lying about the death of their parents (Robinson, O., & Sardarizadeh, S., 2023).

3. Images generated by artificial intelligence software

New artificial intelligence (A.I.) software has generated significant opportunities and major challenges in journalism. One of the prominent risks is the use of emerging technologies to generate fake news, including deepfakes. Today, a number of algorithms allow the creation of highly realistic video and audio content, confusing fact and fiction. Fake videos of political leaders or manipulative speeches can compromise the integrity of information and influence public opinion. In the war between Israel and Hamas, images created using artificial intelligence have gone viral, and many journalists have joined the game. Several video editing and audio-video content generation programs have integrated artificial intelligence tools and can provide images based on the text delivered.

For example, an image of several soldiers marching through bombed buildings and waving Israeli flags has been picked up by mainstream media publications. "D.W. discovered the image in an article published by an online publication in Bulgaria, which did not label it as generated by artificial intelligence" (Eisele, I., & Steinwehr, U., 2023). Moreover, a French publication put in the newspaper a protester who had a placard on which artificial intelligence generated an image.

4. OSINT journalism, a solution for wartime reporting

In the context of conflict, the whole international community must work together to establish clear standards and mechanisms for verifying information. Implementing these measures could reduce the impact of disinformation in critical times and maintain an accountable information space. One option to counter the tide of false information would be OSINT journalism. This refers to the use of Open Source Intelligence (OSI) in investigating and writing news. These techniques have been used in journalism for a long time but have been more widely addressed in the context of wars in recent years. "Their work has become an important area of activity, which the Russian-Ukrainian war has brought to the forefront" (Horska et al., 2023). In the context of rapid advances in A.I. technologies, journalists and society as a whole need to be aware of the risks associated with deepfakes and media manipulation. Only a balanced approach between innovation and accountability

can ensure sustainable and ethical journalistic practice. However, OSINT journalism can also be biased, yet its beneficial role cannot be disputed in Israel-Hamas war.

5. Conclusion

The digital age brings significant challenges in disseminating information and manipulating public opinion, and the use of A.I. technology in this context amplifies these issues. The conflict in the Gaza Strip is an eloquent example of how false information can quickly permeate the public space, with consequences for global perceptions of events.

Citizen journalism played a key role in providing information during the conflict, but with easy access to A.I. technology, the line between reality and manipulation has become increasingly thin. False images generated through artificial intelligence have contributed to the confusion and have sometimes been picked up by trusted media sources.

In order to limit the abuse of artificial intelligence in manipulating information, it is essential to develop and implement technologies to verify the authenticity of online content, as well as a regulatory framework that regulates how artificial intelligence can be used for this purpose. At the same time, educating the public on identifying fake news and promoting critical thinking are important components in the fight against disinformation.

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