



● RESET DIALOGUES

Classic media theories remain relevant today, but their application has evolved. Modern media is less about neutral reporting and more about aligning with the strategic interests of powerful actors (non-governmental actors, to be precise) and shaping narratives that serve those interests. In this sense, states leverage the media to project power and advance their objectives — a very realistic use of information as a tool of influence. Among classic theories, the Hypodermic Needle model is particularly evident today. Media messages are “injected” directly into audiences, who often accept them uncritically. Modern media doesn’t just inform people, it guides them to adopt the narrative it dictates.

Framing and agenda-setting remain important as well. Media not only selects which topics to cover but also determines how they are interpreted, highlighting certain aspects while omitting others. This structural bias is especially visible in capitalist media systems, where ownership, advertising, sourcing, and ideology influence what reaches the public. For example, how often do we see reporting on corporate misdeeds in India, like issues around Adani, versus how extensively China’s Covid response is covered in its own media? Or how much coverage does the Epstein case currently receive in the US? These are a few examples that illustrate that media narratives are curated to serve elite interests and shape public perception, precisely what classic media theories like agenda-setting, framing, and manufacturing consent sought to explain, but now in a more sophisticated, strategic, and networked form, like you mentioned.

In your view, has media warfare shifted from persuasion toward strategies of cognitive overload, confusion, and emotional exhaustion?

Media warfare today has moved far beyond online consumption; it is actively shaping how people think, perceive, and process reality. The volume and repetition of digital content have reached a point where information doesn’t just inform, it settles into the mind. People are rarely given the space to pause, reflect, or engage in original thinking because the flow of content is constant and overwhelming. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to the same biased viewpoints, those perspectives begin to feel like the objective truth. Over time, the brain starts aligning itself with that bias, not necessarily because the information is accurate, but because it is familiar and frequently reinforced. This is no longer just about belief formation. What we are seeing instead is a form of paralysis, polarization, and emotional capture. Media narratives increasingly mix facts, half-truths, and outright fabri-

cations, while accelerating news cycles ensure that stories disappear before they can be properly verified or challenged. The result is confusion and emotional fatigue rather than clarity, making audiences less capable of critical engagement and more vulnerable to manipulation.

How do Western mainstream media employ framing techniques in their coverage of the Israel–Palestine conflict to shape perceptions of legitimacy and self-defense?

It is widely evident that Western mainstream media coverage of Israel’s actions in Gaza is deeply biased. From the very beginning of the war, Israeli military operations have consistently been portrayed as acts of self-defense. Even when examined closely, these actions are framed as legitimate rights rather than acknowledged as potential crimes under international law. Western media narratives overwhelmingly support the offenders, including Benjamin Netanyahu, and tend to align themselves with Tel Aviv. Over time, a powerful and simplified perception has been constructed in which Israel is repeatedly presented as the victim, while the actual victims often go unnoticed. This bias is clearly reflected in the language used in news reporting and opinion pieces. Israeli actions are described as Israel “defending” itself, whereas Palestinian efforts to resist or protect themselves are framed as Gaza “attacking” Israel. Such linguistic choices subtly but effectively shape public perception of legitimacy and morality.

Another important factor is contextual omission. Much of the coverage begins at moments of escalation, such as rocket fire or sudden attacks, without adequately addressing the broader structural realities of occupation, blockade, and long-standing power asymmetries. By stripping events of their historical and political context, violence is portrayed as sudden or irrational rather than as part of a prolonged and deeply rooted conflict.

Visual framing further reinforces this imbalance. Israeli casualties are often individualized and humanized, shown as innocent civilian deaths with personal stories and faces. In contrast, Palestinian deaths are frequently presented in large numbers and anonymous images, reducing human suffering to statistics. This repeated pattern conditions audiences to emotionally side with Israel, while Palestinian loss is normalized and treated as routine news rather than a humanitarian tragedy.

Would you consider Israel one of the most effective actors in aligning its media narrative with broader Western foreign policy discourse? If so, how is this alignment sustained?

Yes, Israel is one of the most experienced actors in aligning its media narrative with Western foreign policy discourse, and it has done so in a highly methodical way. Its close and long-standing alliance with the United States has allowed Israel to mirror Washington’s strategic language so closely that, over time, their narrative styles have become almost indistinguishable. Tel Aviv consistently frames its actions using concepts that already resonate within Western policy thinking, such as counterterrorism, self-defense, democracy under threat, and shared civilizational values. Because these frameworks are familiar, Israeli messaging appears legitimate and normalized rather than exceptional, aligning seamlessly with how Western states justify their own military actions.

This is reiterated through strong institutional ties with Western governments, think tanks, media outlets, and policy elites. Israeli officials and military spokespersons are often the first and most accessible sources during moments of escalation, allowing them to shape the initial narrative, which is crucial because first frames tend to endure even when later evidence challenges them. Tel Aviv has also invested heavily in professional public diplomacy and coordinated digital communication strategies that are fast, disciplined, and tailored specifically for Western audiences. In contrast, Palestinian narratives remain fragmented, under-resourced, and structurally marginalized. Ultimately, this alignment is sustained by power asymmetries. Western media systems privilege state actors, security frameworks, and strategic allies, making Israeli perspectives more readily accepted as authoritative, while Palestinian voices are frequently treated as secondary or emotional rather than political.

How can the asymmetry in media representation of Palestinian civilian casualties be explained from an institutional or political economy of media perspective?

Mainstream media organizations tend to operate within power centers that privilege state actors, official sources, and geopolitical allies. Since Israel is closely aligned with Western governments, its narratives and civilian losses receive greater institutional legitimacy and visibility. From a sourcing perspective, Western media rely heavily on Israeli cabinet officials, military spokespersons, and Western diplomatic sources, all of whom are seen as credible and authoritative. Palestinian civilians, on the other hand, lack comparable institutional access and are often mediated through numbers, humanitarian agencies, or brief mentions rather than direct voices. This creates a hierarchy of whose suffering is consid-

ered narratively important. There is also an economic dimension. Media outlets are influenced by advertisers, political pressures, and audience sensitivities within Western markets. Humanizing Israeli civilians aligns more comfortably with dominant political narratives and avoids backlash, whereas sustained, empathetic coverage of Palestinian suffering risks being framed as controversial or politically risky. Additionally, newsroom routines and time pressures favor simplified, security-focused frames. At the end of the day, the world will side with the one that helps you generate money and not the real sufferers.

Has the rise of social media genuinely weakened Western narrative dominance on the Israel–Gaza war, or has it merely shifted the battlefield? How significant is the role of platform algorithms in shaping visibility and suppression of narratives, and can we speak of a form of “geopolitical algorithmic bias”?

No, in my view, the Western narrative has not weakened. Based on personal observation, there is significantly less information about Gaza circulating on social media today, and public engagement has sharply declined. Very few accounts or pages now consistently report on Gaza, and even during the peak of the war, coverage from the Palestinian perspective was far more limited compared to the Israeli side.

This imbalance was not organic. During the height of the conflict, a large number of social media accounts aligned with Western and Israeli narratives emerged and actively shaped the information environment. At the same time, platforms played a decisive role in containing Gaza-related content. Meta, in particular, restricted or suppressed accounts that reported on Gaza. Even when accounts were not outright blocked, their reach was systematically reduced. Certain keywords, such as “Gaza,” “Palestine,” “genocide,” and “war,” were effectively penalized. Posts using these terms saw a sharp decline in visibility, and in many cases, entire accounts experienced reach suppression.



● SCMP



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