

Media warfare; from information to influence



By Asgar Ghahremanpour
Editor-in-chief

INTERVIEW

In today's interconnected world, war is no longer fought only on conventional battlefields. It has expanded into the media space, where narratives, images, and perceptions shape public opinion and political outcomes. Media warfare increasingly relies on news framing, digital platforms, and social networks, blurring the line between information and propaganda.

The following exclusive interview, conducted with Annunthra Rangan, senior research officer at the Chennai Centre for China Studies, explores this evolving landscape and examines how control over narratives has become a key source of power in contemporary global politics.

IRAN DAILY: From a theoretical perspective in international relations, how should media warfare be best conceptualized today: as soft power, cognitive warfare, influence operations, or an extension of hybrid warfare?

RANGAN: In international relations (IR), theories are not neutral or universal truths; they are products of specific historical moments and power structures. They are developed by individuals and states to explain and often justify their own interests. In that sense, media warfare cannot be explained through a single IR theory. It is a strategic phenomenon that cuts across realism, constructivism, and critical theories simultaneously.

At its core, media warfare is warfare by itself. It is an extension of power projection, not an auxiliary activity. Media functions as a major sophisticated tool of soft power, enabling states to achieve political and strategic objectives without any direct defence-related confrontation. This is where propaganda and influence operations become central. Influence operations are not subtle or accidental; they are deliberate efforts to shape perception, control narratives, and manufacture consent at both domestic and international levels, like how China does.



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sive strategy designed to shape outcomes without open conflict.

Ultimately, this is a battle for the human mind. Media warfare attacks perception itself. Media platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook act as force multipliers, accelerating narrative dominance and reinforcing ideological echo chambers. In today's media environment, journalism is rarely neutral. News is increasingly designed to generate impact, align with a country's

ing often becomes the reference point that other countries' media later adopt, sometimes with minimal variation.

This has historically been the case. Every country has its own primary narrative drivers. India looks to The Hindu, The Times of India, and Deccan Herald; Iran relies on Iran Daily and Tehran Times. The difference lies not in the existence of national media, but in how strategically and systematically these narratives are deployed.

What we are witnessing today is a carefully curated information network where narratives flow in a predictable pattern: from official statements to major media outlets and then into international reporting. While wordplay may differ, the core framing often remains aligned with the original state position. This is where influence operations become central to media warfare.

China offers a textbook case of influence operations. Through instruments such as Confucius Institutes, Beijing has embedded soft power messaging within major South and Southeast Asian countries. Its "50-Cent Army," comprising thousands of online operators, actively amplifies pro-China narratives while discrediting adversaries. During periods of heightened tension, including recent India-Pakistan escalations, coordinated digital campaigns were deployed to promote narratives favourable to Pakistan and hostile to India. These are not spontaneous public reactions; they are structured influence efforts.

Similarly, the United States' media strategy toward Iran over the past four decades and Palestine in recent years demonstrates how sustained narrative framing can shape global opinion. Through aligned media coverage, think tanks, and policy research institutions, certain perspectives are amplified while others are systematically marginalised. As a result, alternative viewpoints struggle to gain legitimacy, regardless of evidence or context.

That said, the operational space of media warfare has expanded beyond direct state control. Private media corporations, social media platforms, public relations firms, think tanks, and even individual influencers now act as force multipliers. While these actors may not be formally coor-

than a complete representation of reality. Algorithms do not distinguish between information and propaganda. They reward core engagement. This means emotionally charged narratives, moral framing, and polarising content are systematically amplified, while nuanced or inconvenient perspectives are deprioritised. As a result, the line between informing the public and manipulating perception has become increasingly blurred.

Social media platforms further collapse these distinctions by placing state narratives, media reporting, influencer commentary, and public opinion within the same ecosystem. In modern conflicts, influence is not exercised through isolated campaigns but through sustained narrative environments. A single news story can simultaneously inform, persuade, and psychologically condition audiences. This is clearly visible in conflicts such as Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, or narratives surrounding Iran, Russia, and other non-aligned countries — if I could put it that way — where reporting and strategic messaging operate in parallel and reinforce one another.

While the terminology of information, propaganda, and psychological operations still exists for analytical clarity, the reality is that contemporary media warfare operates on a fused model. These elements now function together to shape not just short-term opinion, but long-term perceptions of legitimacy, threat, and morality.

Today, social media often influences public opinion more than traditional news itself. Influencers shape perceptions more powerfully than institutions, and consumption patterns are determined by algorithmic design rather than informed choice. Platforms like Meta effectively decide what gains visibility and what does not. Content that challenges dominant Western or pro-Israel narratives often faces "shadow-banning". This is not an anomaly. It is how modern media power operates.

Do you believe the traditional distinction between information, propaganda, and psychological operations still holds in contemporary conflicts?

In today's media environment,

the traditional distinctions between information, propaganda, and psychological operations no longer function as separate categories. In practice, they form a single influence continuum. Often, it is not the content itself but the interpretation and framing of that content that has the greatest impact. What is presented as news today is rarely neutral; it is shaped by perspectives, interests, and strategic intent rather than objective reporting.

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14-year-old Ahmad Salaymeh, a Palestinian teenager who was released on November 28, 2023, as part of a captives-prisoners swap deal between Hamas and Israel, and his father Nawaf Salaymeh talk through social media after Ahmad was prevented from returning to school, in the occupied al-Quds (Jerusalem), on December 7, 2023.

AMMAR AWAD/REUTERS

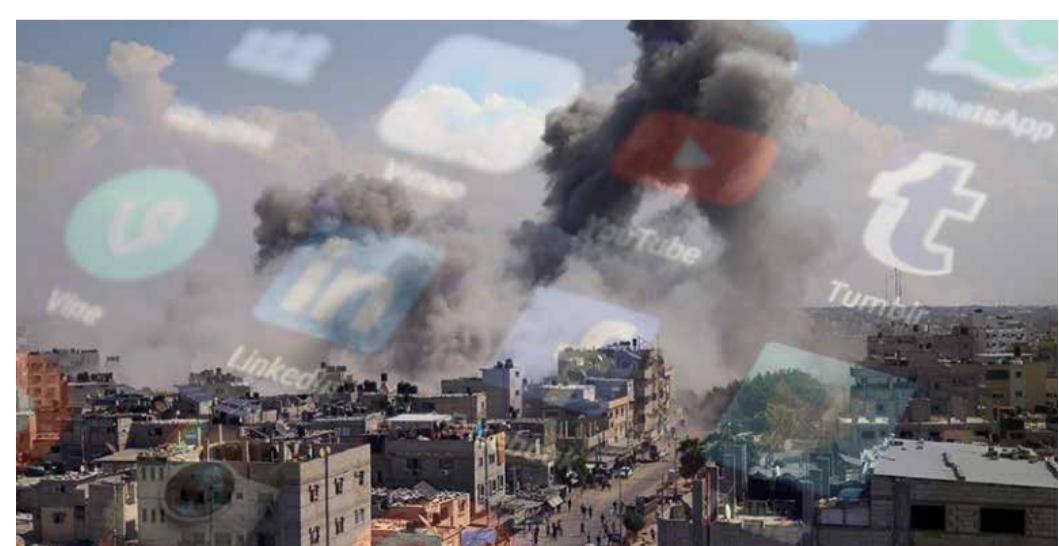
Globally, the dominant narrative continues to be the Western narrative. This dominance is structural and has been entrenched since World War II. Western media does not merely report events; it has its own definition of legitimacy, morality, and acceptable opinion and backs it up with its reporting. By repeatedly projecting its perspective as the "international consensus," it marginalises alternative voices and normalises a pro-Western worldview as objective truth. Modern media warfare operates on multiple interconnected levels. Cognitive warfare targets how people think, feel, and interpret reality. Information warfare determines what information is released, what is suppressed, and how events are framed. The current narratives surrounding Iran and Palestine clearly demonstrate this selective framing, where certain actions are amplified while others are systematically ignored or justified by Israel and the US. Hybrid warfare is the deliberate fusion of media, diplomacy, economic pressure, technology, and digital platforms into one offen-

interests and narratives, and sustain propaganda news rather than present balanced realities. Media warfare is mainly about power, control, and the strategic manipulation of truth.

To what extent is modern media warfare still state-driven, and how much has it become a networked process involving private media, platforms, and non-state actors?

The state remains the architect of media warfare. Targets, threat perceptions, and the overall nature of media conflict are not accidental — they are designed and guided by state doctrines, national security strategies, and foreign policy objectives. Media houses and propaganda ecosystems do not operate in isolation; they function within a framework created and sustained by the state to project legitimacy and shape global perception.

If we take the United States as an example, major media outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Bloomberg act as narrative setters. Their fram-



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