

# **Framing the Israeli-Palestine conflict after October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

A comparative analysis of news organizations' Instagram Reels

Student Name: Cecilia Taylor

Student Number: 697164

Supervisor: Sergül Nguyen

Master Media Studies - Media & Business

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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## Preface

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Context of the study and research question

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, is a political and military conflict with a complex and nuanced history that has been studied by peace and conflict scholars for decades. Though the conflict has received a great deal of international media attention throughout the 21st century, it has recently re-emerged in the headlines after a large-scale Hamas-led attack which took place primarily at an Israeli music festival in Negev, but also other Israeli locations, on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Reports of the day vary, but most sources agree the devastating attack resulted in the death of over 1,000 Israeli citizens (Reuters, 2023, para. 1) and the kidnapping of over 200 hostages. Israel's government moved swiftly to declare a state of war and launch a large-scale attack against Hamas, which included air strikes in civilian locations. Immediately following these attacks, news coverage surged across the globe, as countless public figures, from political commentators, to celebrities, to heads-of-state were called upon to condemn the violence. These events serve as the backdrop of this exploration of the media's current role in shaping the narrative of this conflict through their framing practices. As was the case in other comparable conflicts with deep-rooted intergroup hostility, such as 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland and the Rwandan genocide, it has been determined that news media can also play a considerable role in shifting perceptions, both internationally and on-the-ground (Thussu, 2000, p.346), which can therefore have real-life consequences for the trajectory of war and peace-making efforts (Armoudian, 2016, para. 2; Ayyad & Lugo-Ocando, 2023, p.12).

Broadly speaking, the two 'sides' of the conflict, the "Israeli" and "Palestinian," describe the two national identities of people occupying this land, as well as denoting the groups vying to reclaim the territory as their 'homeland' based on religious and historical ties to the region. The Israeli state was formed according to an ideology known as Zionism, which is invested in the Jewish right to self-determination (Mock et al., 2012, p.1246). On this same territory, the Palestinians, who are mostly Muslim and Arabic-speaking, have lived for centuries and believe themselves to be the indigenous people of this land (p.1246). To complicate this stalemate further, the territory of Gaza, a 141 square-mile strip given to the Palestinian Authority in the 1994 Oslo accords, is now under the elected leadership of the political and military organization, Hamas, which came to power in 2006, and in many countries, but not all, is defined as a terrorist organization with fundamentalist Islamic ideology (Robinson, 2024, para. 2). While this land is governed by Hamas, Israel's military, the Israeli Defense

Forces (IDF), plays an instrumental role in patrolling its high-tech border fence and defending the Israeli territory against attacks.

Earlier investigations by Wolfsfeld (1997; 2017), one of the leading scholars in Israeli-Palestinian media research, have already established how the media has exacerbated the tension in Israel through negative framing and sensationalism. While there have been numerous studies examining international news framing of various phases of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Doufesh & Briel, 2021; Shahzad & Shehzad, 2023; Tasserou, 2021), this thesis aims to add to the literature by focusing on the most recent and also one of the deadliest stages of the conflict. Specifically, it will be an exploratory study of how various news outlets use their Instagram platforms to frame the escalation in the fighting.

*RQ1: How have international news media organizations framed the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict since October 7<sup>th</sup> in their Instagram Reels?*

This broad question, suitable for a mixed-methods case study design, allows for the observation of numerous features of each news outlets' Instagram Reels, guided by the content itself. This means that both quantitative features such as number of sources and number of speakers will be analyzed, followed by a qualitative section that seeks to find latent meanings that will be codified.

## 1.2 Academic and societal relevance

This study will be informed by the framing tradition of Entman (1993), De Vreese (2001), and Semetko & Valkenburg (2000), which has been used in countless studies to examine news coverage in contested fields, from political reporting to war journalism. The academic relevance of this research lies in the fact that there is a significant gap in the literature of framing in this conflict since most previous studies only focus on traditional news media and don't consider the younger audiences who are consuming their news in fundamentally different ways.

According to a report by Reuters (n.d.), younger audiences view news consumption as "a chore," and, as a consequence, prioritize news content that is more exciting and on the periphery of legacy media, including more infotainment, cultural, and grassroots content. The news media landscape has altered drastically in the last decade with the advent of new media technologies, and as such, it is no longer sufficient to study only the impact of traditional print news. According to Pew Research Center,

half of U.S. adults get their news from social media “at least sometimes,” a figure that speaks to the power of social media to change our beliefs (2023, para.1). It is difficult to ascertain whether people are consuming their news incidentally - through algorithms - or directly from the source, but the large Instagram following of mainstream news outlet accounts indicates that there are still many people who are exposed to this news content on social media on a daily basis. As such, it is academically imperative to investigate precisely how news organizations converge and differ in their coverage. Research related to social media usage in this conflict either relate to user-generated content or perceptions of the effect of new social platforms. Recent interviews with both Palestinians and Israelis revealed a concern that the internet is social media are better at spreading hate and extremism and have been used widely by both groups, both Israeli and Palestinian (Wolfsfeld, 2018).

In this study, regional differences in the news coverage of the conflict will be assessed, as each region has a different relationship to the two warring states. For example, the U.S. and Israel have been firm allies since the inception of the Israeli state, with the former providing continuous economic and military support due to their strong Jewish community and vested interest in the region (Gilboa, 2023, p.484). Meanwhile the neighboring Arab states, such as Egypt and Jordan, have launched many wars against Israel, acting in solidarity with the largely Arab population of Palestinians and defending themselves against what they view as a Western encroachment on the Middle East (Mock, 2012, p.1252-1258). For this reason, it is expected that the content from news outlets in each of these regions will vary based on the agenda of the governments of each region and how much influence the state exerts on each outlet.

The social relevance of this research is that there have been several historical cases in which international news media has tangibly influenced a foreign conflict, oftentimes changing public perception in a way can have long-lasting implications. Some examples include the intervention by NATO into a sovereign state, under the guise of humanitarian intervention, such as in Kosovo (Thussu, 2010), and the amplification of voices of dissent to depose of an authoritarian government, as seen during the Arab Spring (Ayyad & Lugo-Ocando, 2023). Relatedly, the term, “the CNN effect” is one often used in political science and media studies to describe how the newest media disruptor – the television, and its 24/7 flow of information - could impact governmental foreign policy by forcing them to respond more immediately (Robinson, 1999, p.301; Tomja, 2023, p.19). One study found evidence of “the CNN effect” in a case study about U.S. foreign policy initiatives in Somalia, in which heavy public pressure was a factor that likely contributed to the “timing and nature of the U.S.” intervention (Tomja, 2023, p.24).

Ultimately, it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between news coverage and political actions in general, but it is still crucial to acknowledge the importance of changing perceptions. While it is impossible for news sources to remain wholly unbiased, media organizations carry a duty to their audiences to provide accurate information featuring multiple perspectives. As this is an ongoing conflict and interest in the region has surged, there is still time for the media to reflect on their coverage, and perhaps, to use their platform to further support the peace process. Finally, the analysis will serve as a valuable case study addressing how news outlet's Instagram coverage, in contrast to print or TV coverage, has played a role in shaping the narrative of the conflict.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Historical overview of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

When a conflict is so contested, “history becomes one of the primary battlegrounds” and what textbooks include as “historical events” are laden with emotionally charged significance (Mock et al. 2012, p.1246). Though the focus of this thesis is on the role of news media, it would be heedless to analyze the differences in coverage without discussing the context of the fighting. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has spanned many generations, officially starting with Israel’s War of Independence, also known as ‘Al-Nakbha’ in the Arab world (Mock et al., 2012, p.1252). The 1948-49 war broke out when the British withdrew from the region and a UN resolution was passed declaring Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, after recognizing the dire need for a homeland where the Jewish people would be free from Nazi persecution after devastation of the Holocaust (2012, p.1252). This resolution proposed a Partition plan to divide the territory into an Arab and Jewish state, split the contested city of Jerusalem and give the Jewish people a slight majority. When the fighting broke out, members of the Arab League, representing the neighboring Arab countries joined in to support the Palestinian fighters, but were thwarted by a superior Israeli army who, with this victory, were able to secure even more territory for the Israelis. Two major effects of this war still have important implications today: firstly, that the West Bank territory was annexed to Jordan and the Gaza territory to Egypt, representing the remaining 22% of Palestinian land not captured, and secondly, that there was a mass expulsion of between 750,000 and 900,00 Arab residents fleeing the war zone, though it is debatable the degree to which this exodus was voluntary or forced (p.1254).

The subsequent 6-Day war in 1956, sparked by the attempt to nationalize the Suez Canal in Egypt, was another time in which Arab states convened to attack Israel, and again led to an Israeli victory in which they conquered the territories of Gaza, the West Bank, and others (Mock et al., 2012, p.1254). The victory had a profound impact by reinforcing a sense of Zionist nationalism by securing of several sites of significance in the Jewish tradition and cementing an “ambiguous” status for the Palestinians in the occupied territories who could not be afforded the privileges of citizenship. These developments led to the inception of the controversial Israeli settler movement, influenced by Revisionist Zionism, which aimed to secure Israel’s borders by encroaching more and more on the occupied territories. Though this historical overview skips many of the details related to the formation of the left-wing Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and its fundamentalist Islamic alternative, Hamas, the subsequent time period was marked by a series of regional wars and Palestinian uprisings



and targeted attacks against Israel, solidifying the persistent threat to Israel's security, as well as the perpetual sense of fear its citizens are experiencing.

Another critical moment in the history of the conflict was the peace talks at Camp David, facilitated by the United States, which collapsed before reaching a resolution, and is therefore frequently referenced today as a past failure that makes achieving peace today nearly impossible (Reykowski, 2015, p.11). Camp David was a pivotal time in which Israeli media circulated a narrative of how the Israeli prime minister had done everything in his power to reach a peaceful agreement and that the Palestinians simply "were not interested in peace," creating a 'cognitive frame' through which all further attempts at reconciliation would be evaluated (2015, p. 11). In 1993, the Oslo Accords were another attempt at reaching a resolution as Israel and the Palestinians agreed to mutual recognition, allowing for the creation of a Palestinian delegation to rule over Gaza and the West Bank without the creation of a Palestinian state (Mock et al., 2012, p.1258). During the subsequent intifadas, characterized by violent uprisings against the Israeli security forces, the Israeli government used the media to inform its citizens about how the attacks were a carefully planned threat to their existence (2015, p.12).

More recently, an Israeli offensive in Gaza in mid-2014, known as the 2014 Gaza war, resulted in thousands of dead and injured, the majority of whom were Palestinian citizens, though many Israeli soldiers were also killed (Tasseron, 2021, p.581). This development is highly relevant for the context of the following research, as it contained many of the same factors as the ongoing escalation - with each side fiercely blaming the other and the international community feeling pressure to respond in a way that protects their regional interests (2021, p.582). Even more critically, it was the first time in which countless images of war scenes and destruction were shared globally, turning public sentiment against Israel and spurring protests and debates worldwide (Aouragh 2016, p.272).

Many scholars agree that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an intractable conflict, a subjective classification referring to difficult conflicts that persist over a long time and are perceived to be impossible to resolve (Reykowski, 2015, p.5-6; Wolfsfeld, 2018). One of the effects of this intractability is that the conflict has developed a "sociopsychological infrastructure," which contains three major elements: collective memory, ethos of conflict, and collective emotional orientation (Reykowski, 2015, p.8). In each one of these elements, there are overlapping themes regarding victimization and delegitimization of the enemy, (p.9), and these sentiments can be captured and shaped by the media to develop a general impression of the conflict that becomes increasingly resistant to modification as time passes.

## 2.2 Influence of media on public perception

In democratic societies, journalism serves several functions including keeping citizens informed about the actions of those in power and taking on the role of a watchdog to ensure accountability and transparency (Christians, 2010, p.30; Shi, 2023). Political scientist, Bernard Cohen (1963, p.13) effectively captured the essence of agenda setting in news, when he wrote, “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” Agenda setting theory refers to the way news media have more of an influential role in shaping public opinion than simply the way they cover a story. Not only do journalists tell the public what they should think, they also have the ability to raise certain issues into prominence while omitting others (McCombs et al., 1972, p.184). As such, agenda setting is the foundational framework through which to examine the relationship between news and political conflict and is deeply intertwined with framing theory.

According to Wolfsfeld’s 2001 study, both Israelis and Palestinians hold the belief that the media can play a role of equal importance to the military (Wolfsfeld, 2001, p.113). One of the most crucial ways that news media contribute to how international audiences view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is through the ways in which they legitimize or delegitimize the actions of certain players (Simonsen, 2019; Tasserou, 2021). According to Rojo and Van Dijk (1997, p.560), legitimation involves the use of persuasion tactics and sometimes manipulation. The three levels of legitimation are pragmatic, semantic, and socio-political, and each seek to build authority while delegitimizing the opponent (Tasserou, 2021, p.582). Images play a key role in this process, as they are generally seen as factual evidence of an account in question (p.583), and consequently, it is in the best interests of both sides of a conflict to gain control of them. Of course, given the dangerous and closed-off nature of conflict zones, reporters are limited in what they have the ability to photograph. Similarly, as access, to certain areas or groups can be limited, it becomes necessary for journalists to rely more on official sources of information, rather than gathering it firsthand (2021, p.583).

The media’s coverage 2014 Gaza war was a prime example of information asymmetry, in which interviews from journalists emphasized that it was “virtually impossible” for them to access Hamas leaders once the IDF was involved (Tasserou, 2021, p.594). Meanwhile, the IDF directly contacted journalists for interviews and even had staging areas close to the Gaza border. Furthermore, there was a lack of diversity in how each actor was portrayed, with visual analysis revealing that IDF soldiers were usually shown in combat positions, walking through *discovered* Hamas tunnels, and generally giving off

the impression of authority and competence without showing their victims (p.590). On the other hand, the handful of photographs depicting Palestinian militants included shots where men were masked and armed, conforming to stereotypes of non-state militants (p.593). There is also a great focus on Palestinian rockets, which Lastly, according to some lexical studies of news framing, one of the major ways that Israel's PR strategy seeks to avoid legal condemnation for killing civilians is by focusing on Hamas's taking of "human shields" (Simonsen, 2019, p.506; Tasseron, 2021,), thereby rejecting responsibility.

## 2.3 Public diplomacy and propaganda

It is impossible to discuss the role of news media in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, without explaining the ideologies- and resulting propaganda - from both sides. According to the propaganda model by Noam Chomsky, raw news is sifted through several filters before it distributed to the public (Pedro-Carañana et al., 2018, p.2). These filters are identified as ownership, advertising, sources, flak (or criticism), and anti-communism – though the revised versions of the model include the role of journalistic professionalism which includes ethics, objectivity, and more standardization of practices (p.28-29). Two of these filters, ownership and sources, will be accounted for during this study by evaluating the biases that each news outlet may have and where their information is sourced from.

Israel's public diplomacy initiatives, which lean heavily on media cooperation, have been equated to totalitarian state propaganda, though it is still widely considered a democratic nation. In Israel, the term *Hasbara*, or 'to explain' in Hebrew, describes how Israel's government aims to fill the gap between 'soft' public diplomacy and hard propaganda and psychological operations (Aouragh, 2016, p. 273). *Hasbara* is both an enduring strategy and a highly professionalized informal Ministry, that responds to key moments in the conflict. A more specific definition of *hasbara* is "the manufacturing of discontent with, or toward, Palestinian self-determination, while simultaneously constituting consent for Israel's dominance" (2016, p.273), which has persisted since the creation of the State yet will forever be altered by online perceptions beyond its control. Another way that *Hasbara* manifests in Israeli diplomacy, is in the establishment of Pro-Israeli groups with connections all over the world. One prominent example of this is known as CAMERA, or the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, which is a nonprofit organization that intensely monitors news coverage related to Israel and steps in to correct any perceived bias in reporters' stories.

One of the ways the Israeli government achieved this is by painting the leaders of the adversaries as terrorists, which then becomes reflected onto the whole Palestinian ethnic group (Reykowski, 2015, p.12). Though research by Aouragh (2016, p.278) continues to explore how the rise of online media has destabilized traditional hasbara strategies, it claims that hasbara is a problematic operation in the first place, as its Zionist messages are incompatible with a post-colonial, post-conflict shift). Essentially, while Israel continues to conduct its military operations, it cannot convince the world that it has legitimate reason to occupy and suppress Palestine.

Though the Israeli government enjoys more sophisticated communication tactics and direct access to international audiences, Hamas, as the weaker organization in this asymmetrical information war must also communicate its objectives to the Palestinian people and to the international community at large (Flamer, 2023, p. 1171). In the early days of its founding, it relied on local publications and flyers to achieve this, but later, it incorporated radio and television into its strategies as well as developing video content to disseminate on the internet (p.1171). Hamas is also deeply embroiled in a propaganda campaign, with a recent study of its video content finding that the organization's Hebrew videos were targeting Israeli citizens and are a form psychological warfare (Rubinstein-Stemer & Flamer, 2023, p.336). Furthermore Schleifer (2014, p.152) illustrated how Hamas has leveraged classic propaganda techniques to increase its legitimacy and "wear down Israel's political will." Some of these include spreading images of Israeli's destruction of the livelihoods of Palestinian civilians, accusing Israeli government officials of anti-Arab sentiments, and lowering morale among Israeli soldiers (Rubinstein-Stemer & Flamer, 2023, p.337). Many times, these images are first disseminated on social media and were then picked up and reshared by Palestinian solidarity organizations for advocacy purposes (Hayes, 2023, p.104).

## 2.3 Peace and war journalism

In Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung's peace versus war journalism framework, he advocates for peace journalism, which avoids sensationalism and demonization of the other, and instead promotes non-violent solutions through more neutral and positive framing (2003; Gouse, 2018, p.436). On the other hand, war journalism focuses on divisions and violence, and typically portrays a conflict as a more black-and-white "zero-sum" game instead of exploring the complexities of the fighting. Galtung used the example of the healthcare journalism to illustrate the approach that conflict journalists should take; where the reporter would not simply discuss the details of the conflict itself (the disease), but also the

causes and potential solutions (the cure) (Galtung, 2003; Gouse, 2018, p.437). War journalism is often considered to be oriented more towards elite and government actors, propaganda and patriotism, and victories and violence (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023, p.102; Galtung 2003). These features contribute to an “us versus them” narrative, which relates to the aforementioned issue of legitimation, in which one side is framed in a dehumanized manner.

Though Galtung’s framework is a helpful starting point, it fails to consider some of the issues with classifying news articles as either “peace” or “war”-oriented. In their critique of the previous framework, Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al. reimagine the peace versus war journalism dichotomy, creating four narratives that more accurately describe coverage by Israeli newspapers (2015, p.162). Two of the narratives are violence-focused, with one centered on internal POVs and the other on external actors as well as victims. The other two describe narratives dealing with political or diplomatic elements. Within this study the researcher was able to integrate Israeli news outlets’ positionality into the analysis showing that outlets differ greatly depending on their nation’s involvement in a conflict (Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2015, p.162). Though this framework will not be implemented directly, as the researchers themselves emphasizes its complexity, it offers a helpful starting point to guide the subsequent content analysis.

## 2.5 Conceptualizing framing

Framing theory is a popular paradigm and methodology within the field of media studies, especially used in studies analyzing news content. According to Entman (1993), one of the leading experts on framing, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p.52). There are four places where frames manifest: with the *communicators*, who make framing judgements about what to include and omit, in the content of *the text* itself, in the *receiver’s interpretation*, and in the *culture* at large, which holds a reserve of common and generic frames that have been used over time (p.52). The rationale behind why framing was selected as a paradigm for this study is that it offers a flexible approach that considers context, contradictions, and emphasis. Furthermore, it continues the tradition of research in this subject area, as framing has been implemented in countless studies of news stories worldwide.

De Vreese et al. (2001) was one the first studies to distinguish between generic and issue-specific news frames and it defined the methodology of framing by analyzing different countries' news coverage of the introduction of the euro as a currency, (p.109). Generic frames apply to the majority of news stories, and, regardless of time or culture, can be easily compared and contrasted among different outlets to determine not only which frames are most prevalent, but also how they are implemented. Issue-specific frames, on the other hand, are highly context-specific and dissect the main themes of an issue or an event in great depth. Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) developed the typology of generic frames which was derived from a study of news articles published by Dutch news outlets over a specific period. The frames included were the "Conflict" frame, "Economic Consequence" frame, "Human Interest" frame, "Morality" frame, and attribution of "Responsibility" frame. As previously alluded to, the incidence of these frames is significant when considering the agenda-setting capabilities of news outlets.

In this research, generic frames will be used to explore the difference in framing between different news outlets' Instagram pages, followed by an analysis of issue-specific frames derived from the Reels themselves. The definition of each frame is outlined below, adhering closely to the original 2000 framework created by Semetko & Valkenburg. The "Economic Consequence" frame relates to stories that focus on the economic ramifications of an issue or an event on specific individuals, communities, and societies. The "Human Interest" frame adds a human element or an emotional perspective to the reporting of an issue or event. It has also been found to be a common frame in news, and – similar to the "Conflict" frame – it has been shown to better capture audience's attention through its use of emotion and drama. The "Morality" frame situates an issue or an event within a moral or religious context. Though professional standards often prohibit journalists from offering their opinions, oftentimes it is easy to skirt this by attributing this viewpoint to an external group, which is where a moral stance may indirectly be communicated. And finally, the "Responsibility" frame shows the causality of a problem or an event, attributing responsibility and blame to various individuals or groups or suggesting that they may be the ones to resolve or alleviate an issue. One study of Chilean elite press by Gronemeyer et al. (2019) found that the "Conflict" and "Attribution of Responsibility" frames are frequently linked, and when it is used, "Morality" is also frequently linked to "Conflict."

## 2.6 Empirical research on the framing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

There have been numerous studies regarding the role of framing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict across different news outlets and historical periods. This makes sense given the findings that Israel and Palestine have been the “world’s most prominent polities after the United States” in terms of international coverage (Segev, 2013, p.386). In a study investigating framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict across four different outlets (RT News, Al Jazeera, CNN, and the BBC), findings showed that RT and Al Jazeera devoted more coverage to “Pro-Palestinian” and “Human-Interest” frames compared to the BBC and CNN, which focused on “Pro-Israeli” and “Conflict” frames (Shahzad et al., 2023, p.11-12). A special interest in U.S. news coverage of this conflict is also present in the literature, as Bhowmik and Fisher analyzed CNN’s framing of the same conflict in 2021, through the lens of peace journalism (2023). This study showed how CNN undertook a mixed peace and war journalism approach in their reporting and found evidence of a “counter-discourse” by elite social members that had an effect on mainstream media’s framing (p.1032). Despite this finding of pushback against the dominant U.S. position, the study found that CNN’s coverage generally heightened tensions by showing many images of destruction while still justifying Israel’s position as a defensive one (2023, p.1030).

To add to the study of peace journalism, a 2010 study by Sheaffer & Dvir-Gvirsman also had several interesting findings regarding news framing during the Oslo peace process in the 1990s. One major revelation was that publics react much stronger to negative news framing than positive news framing, making it more difficult for the government to encourage consensus in times of conflict (p.213). This finding speaks to the impact of news media on reconciliation during past peace-making efforts, highlighting the media’s role as not only a mediator, but also an actor that has the ability to “spoil” the peace process because of the news industry’s intrinsic rules that favor drama and conflict (2010, p.212). As such, this study will consider the negativity and positivity of framing, by analyzing the news outlets’ tendency to feature conflict over all other frames.

## 2.7 Framing in modern conflict

To further understand the current media moment, it is important to consider how international news organizations have framed similar modern conflicts. One major example is the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine presents many similarities to the Israel-Hamas war, including heavy media attention, global boycotts, and a mass refugee crisis. A 2017 study by Makhortykh & Sydorova conducted a visual analysis of social media content about the conflict in Eastern

Ukraine, prior to the full-fledged declaration of war. After analyzing posts from both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian online communities, researchers found a stark difference in framing, with one side interpreting the violence as a “limited military action against local insurgents,” and the other characterizing it as “an all-out war” against the Russians living in Eastern Ukraine (p.377). The study argues that this disparity led to a difference in expectations about the outcome of the war, and that social media has hindered the potential for dialogue between Russians and Ukrainians as they are confronted with past collective traumas. Though this investigation dealt with user-generated content and not professional news, it nevertheless provided a categorical basis for how to code visual data in the context of a modern-day war, which was adapted from Griffin and Lee (1995). It also allows for direct comparison, as social media content is often picked up by news organizations. For example, Makhortykh & Sydorova (2017) found infrequent use of the “animals,” “landscapes,” or “action” codes, instead utilizing more images with “civilians”, “dead”, “combatants” and “military machines” (p.369).

Another visual analysis of Western news media covering the Ukraine war by Xu & Zhang (2023) served as an important point of comparison, as researchers examined the most prevalent issue-specific frames and how they compared to other crises such as Afghanistan and China. The focus in this study was comparing humanitarian crises, and the findings showed how the “victimization” frame appeared most frequently, with individualized depictions of suffering focusing on women and children (p.13). The second most common frame, “biopolitics,” showed “massified and homogenized vulnerability” (p.13), arguing that Ukrainians were more often associated with victimization, and as a result, international solidarity movements that were also covered by news media. The findings of these two studies are significant, because they also have agenda-setting implications that are inherently different from that of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Finally, in a study of news framing in the Bosnian war, a similar conflict with intergroup hostility, it was determined the competing “ethnic war” and “genocide” frames were used by news organizations to create different realities in the minds of their audiences (Hammond, 2018, p.434). These frames, seen as essentially contradictory, have subsequently been applied to other conflicts involving large scale violence and refugee crises, such as the long-lasting violence in Myanmar and Darfur which have both flickered in and out of public spotlight. As the humanitarian crisis escalates in Gaza - one of the most densely populated urban areas in the world - it is evident that the language and visuals used to portray the crisis have immense legal and political implications.



## 2.8 The rise of digital and social media news

According to Makhortykh & Sydorov (2017), though many studies have investigated the effect of mainstream media on violent conflict, very few account for the proliferation of digital technology and the rapid growth of social media platforms (p.360). Online and social media consumption of news are on the rise, which has led to an increase in audiences' freedom to choose to consume media that already aligns with their worldviews (Young, 2023, p.126). While social media can link "geographically dispersed people" and ease "political and economic restraints," its rise in popularity also led to an influx of misinformation that is impossible for journalists to verify given the pressure to report on stories as fast as possible (Caled & Silva, 2021, p.123-124).

In addition to the change that audiences experience, news agencies have also been forced into compliance with platform characteristics and logics centered around maximizing the virality of content (Anter, 2023, p.1). It has been found that speed of publication is an important factor, in the sense that online journalists are less likely than traditional news media journalists to take an active or interventionist approach in stories with conflict featuring conflict frames (Bartholomé et al., 2018, p.1693). Additionally, a recent study of news outlets found evidence that outlets adapt their language to suit specific platforms and, as expected, may adjust accordingly to audience feedback (Anter, 2023, p.14). This study also showed that despite widespread fears that news will be "softened," by prioritizing popular, entertaining stories with less substance there is no general trend of a "softening" effect as many outlets are legacy brands that must protect their reputation (2023, p.13).

The advent of the digital age and subsequent widespread social media usage has led to a rise in toxicity and hatred-filled discourse and has been used by both Israel and Hamas to further polarize each base (Wolfsfeld, 2017, p.120). As such, Instagram Reels have been identified as a data-rich medium that offers insights into what types of messages different regional audiences prefer to consume. Instagram is a social media platform owned by the American company Meta and is one of the most prominent social networks in the Western world. Instagram Reels, launched in 2020 to compete with Bytedance's viral application, TikTok, is a feature within the Instagram app that allows users to capture, edit, and share short-form video content that is then linked directly to their home pages or discovered through the application in the separate Reels section.

## 3. Methodology

This chapter will provide an explanation of the methodological framework employed by this study, including the rationale (3.1), design (3.2), and steps undertaken to collect a sample and analyze the data (3.3).

### 3.1 Research design and rationale

The method used to investigate this open-ended research question is an exploratory content analysis of Instagram Reels, guided by the paradigm of news framing. Content analysis is a popular methodology in the field of media communication studies used to analyze data such as texts, audio, video, and audio-visual content. According to Krippendorff (2019), a key researcher in this field, content analysis is a replicable and valid way to make sense of media messages in a highly context-sensitive manner that considers the textuality of a source (p.24-25). The dataset comprises Reels posted by international news organizations from four key regions: The United States, Israel, Europe, and the broader Middle East.

The study employs a mixed methods approach with both a quantitative and qualitative element to add richness to the analysis, by addressing the weaknesses inherent in each methodology. For example, while quantitative analysis is often seen as more objective and factual, measuring specifically operationalized concepts with numerical data, it often fails to account for the bigger picture which can lead to lingering questions about why and how a phenomenon occurs. On the other hand, qualitative analysis offers more flexibility in assessing complex and non-numerical information, including latent concepts, but can more easily be influenced by researcher subjectivity which may lead to differences in interpretations. For this reason, a mixed methods approach was selected to bridge the disciplines and provide a more thorough analysis of Instagram news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The approach was also purposefully sequential and explanatory, meaning that the quantitative data was first coded and then interpreted in light of the qualitative findings (Cresswell & Clark, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013).

The study is also informed by the methodology of news framing, addressed in the theoretical framework of this paper, using both generic frames by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), and inductively deriving issue-specific frames from the Instagram Reels themselves to offer a more conceptual and complementary perspective to the quantitative data. Throughout the analysis, each Instagram Reel was

viewed holistically, with all textual, visual and auditory features observed but not noted unless specifically related to the variables selected to answer the research question or relating to a frame directly derived from the data in the qualitative phase of the study. A second round of coding, with an expanded codebook, ensured that all relevant concepts were measured.

## 3.2 Methods: Quantitative and qualitative content analysis

The following section gives an overview of each step of the analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, detailing each step undertaken by the researcher to ensure reliability and validity of results at every stage of the process. In this study, the researcher was the coder, and each Reel was considered as a single unit of analysis.

### 3.2.1 Quantitative content analysis

The first part of this methodology involved a quantitative approach, using a codebook created by the researcher using concepts defined in previous literature relating to news framing in conflicts. Each individual Reel was downloaded and stored digitally, saved in an Excel workbook, and coded systematically. The codebook was first pre-tested on a selection of 10 Reels to ensure the measurability of each concept. The process was highly iterative, as the categories for variables such as “Speaker” quickly emerged after coding around 40 Reels, or 20% of the total sample. To increase the accuracy of this process, Reel-specific information was recorded with descriptive notes such as “Palestinian Red Crescent Worker,” which led to the Reel later being coded under the umbrella category of “NGO Worker,” for comparison.

#### *Generic Frames*

As the focus of this study is on news framing, the coder used the questions developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) to determine the generic frame employed by each Reel. The 20 questions, with “yes” or “no” answers, included items such as “Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue/problem?” to indicate the “Human Interest” frame, and “Does the story contain any moral message?” to indicate the “Morality” frame. For a Reel to qualify as utilizing a certain frame, the coder had to record “Yes” for at least half of the defining questions. The

binary nature of the questions led to high intercoder reliability in previous studies (2000, p.99). The full list of questions is included in Appendix A.

As previously mentioned, the Reels were considered holistically, with the most weight given to the caption or headline in the text overlay. The frames were not mutually exclusive, as it was to be anticipated that the majority of Reels could fall into the “Conflict” frame. In addition, the “Responsibility” frame was also coded in a way to note which side of the conflict, whether Israeli, Palestinian, both sides, or the U.S., was primarily blamed for the event described by the Reel.

To ensure reliability of this step, which can be coded in a highly subjective manner, a test for intercoder reliability was conducted, where 16 Reels, representing 10% of the data was coded by an independent co-reader given clear instructions and access to the generic frame codebook. Krippendorff’s  $\alpha$  was then applied to assess the level of agreement. For the codebook to be deemed reliable, the Krippendorff’s  $\alpha$  value needed to be a minimum of .67, with an agreement level of 75%. The first reliability test revealed that there was minor disagreement in the interpretation of two frames, “Economic Consequence” and “Morality.” To address this issue, the instructions were updated to place “economic consequence” in the context of business lost and food production halted, rather than assessing this impact only in terms of monetary financial gains and losses. The instructions for coding the “Morality” frame were also amended to code words with moral implications such as “innocent” and “guilty,” as well as strong references to a legal framework such as “genocide” and “war crimes,” which hold strong moral implications in modern society.

Once these items were specified, the reliability on these items increased to acceptable levels, with four items reaching the optimal Krippendorff’s  $\alpha$  value of above 0.80 The final results of the test can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Percent agreement and Krippendorff’s  $\alpha$

	Percent Agreement	Krippendorff’s $\alpha$
Conflict	100%	1
Human Interest	100%	1
Economic Consequence	94%	.82
Morality	88%	.76
Responsibility	94%	.90

The following additional variables were coded:

*Speaker(s)*: The identity of the individual narrating the video or responding to questions posed by a journalist. This information could be verified based on visual cues, the description in the caption, and any titles that were present while a person was speaking. If the Reel being coded only had a text overlay accompanying the images, rather than a person speaking, then it was noted as " N/A. " The codes were selected by age, nationality, occupation, and affiliation – with either a political or military group, considering the intersectionality of these identities throughout the analysis. All speakers were given equal consideration, regardless of speaking time.

*Source(s)*: What kind of information each news account used to tell their story, noted either in the text overlay of the video, spoken verbally, or cited in the caption. This concept considered whether footage was recorded by the news outlet itself, or “obtained” in another way, perhaps through publicly available social media accounts or through public relations with a governmental, military, or humanitarian group, such as the IDF or the UN. This category also considered how often classic A-Roll and B-Roll footage with narration was used, labelled broadly as “news footage,” as opposed to an interview segment where interviewees were speaking directly to the camera, labelled as “local interview.” Another source type that has grown in prevalence is social media, with some outlets choosing user-generated content, such as video documentation of events, self-narrated vlogs, and commemorative photos, which are attributed to an individual or an account. If a source was unclear, or unspecified, it was also noted.

*Audio-visual content*: A broad sweeping category to describe what is explicitly seen, heard, or written within the caption of each Reel, based on a similar visual study of recent news coverage during the ongoing Ukraine war (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017), with categories adapted from a prior study of visual representations in the Gulf War (Griffin & Lee, 1995). Examples of common content in modern-day violent conflict include (1) action (videos showing violent exchanges between two groups), (2) landscapes (photos or video shots focusing on the scenery or setting), (3) animals (e.g. pets or livestock), (4) civilians, (5) militants (members of an armed group, including Hamas) and (6) ruins (destroyed buildings and wreckage) (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017, p.369). While some codes from the original study were removed, others were added due to their dominance in the representation, such as children, hostages/prisoners, and humanitarian aid. Strongly emotive auditory content was also noted, such as

dramatic music, blaring sirens, or people crying. Though this study did not go in depth into visual features such as body posture or foregrounding, recording the presence of certain content features greatly aided in the subsequent qualitative analysis and the categorical nature of the data made it possible to compare among news outlets.

Two concepts, *Emotional tone* and *Presence of hope or fear* were initially selected for the original codebook but were discarded during pre-testing after observing little emotional variation between Reels, which fluctuated mildly between overlapping anger, grief, desperation. Although the word “hope” was occasionally mentioned by speakers in the Reels, it was not without the absence of fear, and used more in a wistful manner than a positive outlook on the conflict. This made it nearly impossible to reach a consensus with the second coder, as addressed in section 3.2.1.

After all concepts were coded a first time, a second round of coding ensured that categories and themes that were noted the first time were applied equally across all data. The data was then analyzed using the statistical analysis software, SPSS, to determine which generic frames were used more often, what types of speakers had the most opportunity to share their views, and what types of sources news outlets cited most frequently.

### 3.2.2. Qualitative content analysis

The second part of the methodology was a qualitative analysis guided by the results of the audio-visual analysis, the historical context of the conflict, and empirical evidence of past framing studies. As previously elaborated on during the theoretical framework, journalists use framing techniques in a way that “defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy” (Nelson et al., 1997, p.567). A classic method to uncover issue specific frames, is to “define problems,” “diagnose causes,” “make moral judgements” and “suggest remedies” (Entman, 1993, p.52). These are the classifications through which issue-specific frames arise, which are highly context-dependent. Similarly to in the quantitative step, the data was viewed many times and observations were linked to each other and to the literature in an iterative manner.

This process involved noting down recurrent themes from the data, to find instances in which a Reel could be part of a larger issue-specific news frame. The goal of this analysis was not simply to understand which news outlets used which frame more often, such as in the quantitative analysis of generic frames, but also what elements of framing or story construction were commonly used in combination to convey a specific theme.

An important distinction must be made between the “Responsibility” frame and the “Causal Diagnosis” category, which appear to be similar at first glance. While the “Responsibility” frame focuses on the assignment of responsibility in the context of a specific action as the focus of the news study, such as an airstrike or a terrorist attack, the “Causal Diagnosis” category addresses the root cause of the current phase of the conflict post October 7th, whether that be a past injustice or a recent violent instigation.

## 3.3 Data Collection

### 3.3.1 Selection of news outlets

News outlets can be defined as organizations that provide an “original editorial product,” usually across different mediums such as TV or radio broadcasts as well as print newspapers and digital news sites (Anter, 2023, p.3). The four news outlets selected for this study are the U.K.’s British Broadcasting Company (BBC), the U.S.’s Cable News Network (CNN), Al Jazeera English (AJE), and The Jerusalem Post (JP). The goal of this selection is to include outlets that are in some manner connected to the conflict, whether it be representative of two sides of the conflict, with AJE and JP representing the interests of the Palestinians and Israelis, the BBC representing Great Britain (whose imperialism established the mandate in Palestine) and CNN representing the U.S. (which provides military aid to Israel and considers itself an ally). Though each outlet enjoys a different readership and has differences in editorial oversight, it is important to note that much of the original reporting, photography, and videography used in their stories are sourced from the Associated Press (AP), the Agence France-Presse (AFP), and Reuters (Tasseron, 2021, p.583). These news agencies produce generic images that are simple to understand with ‘quickly recognized symbolic markers’ (Griffin, 2010, p. 36). Essentially, this means that The following outlets were chosen not only due to their large audiences and established digital platforms, but also adherence to certain journalism standards such as operating within similar professional codes. Additionally, they had either the largest or second-largest social media platform in their respective regions, a testament to their high visibility and influence.

#### *The British Broadcasting Corporation*

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is one of the largest and most highly trusted news brands in the world, and one of the most widely used as a source of news among all other public service news corporations (Nielsen, 2023). It has a wide reach both locally and internationally with a politically

diverse audience, though is not immune to criticism, especially from younger readers. Furthermore, while there is mistrust from both sides of the political aisle, a trend that has been witnessed across the board for news outlets, it is more trusted by people who identify with the political right. A recent report by the Reuters Institute found that the BBC's audience tends to skew towards older readers and those with higher levels of education. Finally, the same report discovered that the BBC is the only news provider in the United Kingdom that is more widely used for online news than search engines and social media (2023). As of April 2024, its Instagram account (@bbcnews) had 27.5 million followers.

### *Cable News Network*

Cable News Network (CNN) is one of the largest news networks in the U.S. and was rated as having a slight left lean by AllSides.com. According to recent surveys by Statista, CNN has very mixed levels of trust in the U.S., though this may be a reflection of the fragmented and somewhat polarized media ecosystem (2024). As discussed in the theoretical framework, CNN's coverage of the conflict has already been heavily analyzed, and according to a 2024 article by the Guardian, CNN staffers have reportedly stated that current editorial policies include "tight restrictions on quoting Hamas and reporting other Palestinian perspectives while Israel government statements are taken at face value." (McGreal, 2024). As of April 2024, its Instagram account (@cnn) had 19.9 million followers.

### *Al Jazeera English*

Al Jazeera English (AJE) is a subsidiary of Al Jazeera, an international news organization focused on the Middle East. Though it has been described as having a left of center bias, it has also faced criticism for being Qatari state-owned and therefore reflecting the same agenda. AJE's slogan is to "provide voice to the voiceless" and is known for their reporting that features underrepresented groups that are typically overlooked by other international news organizations (el-Nawawy & Powers, 2010, p.61). On Monday, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Israel forced the Al Jazeera office in Jerusalem to close on the grounds that it was a threat to national security (Said-Moorhouse, 2024). As of April 2024, its Instagram account (@aljazeeraenglish) had 4.6 million followers.

### *The Jerusalem Post*

The Jerusalem Post (JP) is Israel's most widely read English newspapers and was established during Israel's British Mandate period in the 1930s (*The Jerusalem Post - About Us*, n.d.). Though it is not



on the same reputational level as large networks such as CNN and the BBC, it is also the most prominent within the Jewish world, and therefore its Tel-Aviv based coverage offers an important firsthand perspective of the conflict (*The Jerusalem Post – About Us*). Its Instagram account covers several topics related to the Middle East, with most of its content since October 7<sup>th</sup> relating to the Israel-Hamas war. Despite its self-proclaimed center bias, it is generally seen as having a right-of-center lean. As of April 2024, its Instagram account (@thejerusalem\_post) had 149 thousand followers.

### 3.3.2 Sampling

This study used purposive sampling by scrolling back to October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, on each news outlets' Instagram account under the Instagram Reel section and selecting all Reels that contained the keywords "Gaza," "Hamas," and/or "Israel" in either the title or the accompanying caption. The time frame of the Reels spanned 25 weeks, from October 7<sup>th</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup>, and basic information such as number of likes or caption (which can be edited after posting) were recorded the week of April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024. The time period was selected to give enough time for audiences to engage with the content, and to include periods of frequent and infrequent coverage of this issue as public interest waxed and waned over the months. The majority of Reels were between 40 seconds and 2 minutes, with the shortest Reel duration at 8 seconds and the longest at 7 minutes and 20 seconds.

As each Instagram account varied greatly in the amount of content that was posted about the conflict, the sample had to be narrowed down. The first step involved removing any Reels that were primarily text-based, as some accounts provided podcast-style soundbites that were not suited for detailed visual analysis. It also excluded many Reels that were more explanatory in nature, informing viewers about topics such as the genocide case against Israel, the location of the safe zones, and historical context of the conflict presented in a documentary style. The reason for this methodological choice is that, in those videos, the news accounts did not necessarily show any original reporting in these segments, and they often had lower engagement rates. Similarly, any Reels with footage located primarily outside Israel, such as coverage of foreign protests or analysis by international political analysts was also excluded. The one exception to this rule was interviews by Israelis or Palestinians who had left their country, or family members of Israeli hostages or Palestinian prisoners, who felt the effects of the conflict directly through loss or displacement.

The sample initially included 2,304 Reels (84 BBC, 264 CNN, 259 JP, and 1,698 AJE), and was narrowed down by dividing the total into equal groups of 40 Reels. For example, out of all the CNN Reels that matched the above criteria, every fifth Reel was selected for further study. The randomized design

of this study, aided by Excel, ensured that each Reel had an equal chance of being selected. The sample of 160 videos was then saved to collections on Instagram, screen-recorded for preservation, and recorded in a Microsoft Excel workbook. Any text overlay was included, and number of likes was also captured as an engagement metric for further analysis. Lastly, only Reels in English were considered, including those with English subtitles, but any dialogue in the background was not translated for analysis as the audience of these Reels would likely also not be able to understand their content.

During the qualitative step of the analysis, a smaller sample of 37 Reels was defined based on purposive sampling guided by Entman's issue-specific framing techniques. Reels were selected based on how well they exemplified these concepts, and any relevant quotes were also noted to supplement the analysis. As with in the quantitative step, the Reels were manually coded, and any numerical information analyzed using SPSS.

## 4. Results

The following section will explain and elaborate on the results of the content analysis. The first sections focus on quantitative aspects such as the descriptive features and analysis of generic news frames, while the last section will present the qualitative analysis with the derivation of issue-specific frames.

### 4.1 Descriptive features

Likes were used as the primary measurement of audience engagement, which were considered in proportion to the size of each news outlet's audience. BBC Reels had the highest like count with 68,675, followed by AJE with 49,073, CNN with 43,018 likes, and JP with 1,719 likes. The use of content warnings, used to denote sensitive or graphic content was used in 21% of the total sample ( $M=8.25$ ,  $SD=3.95$ ). The BBC and CNN had the highest use of content warnings either placed in the caption or with a disclaimer at the beginning of the Reel, which they used in 32.5% and 25% of Reels, with AJE and JP's usage both at 12.5%.

### 4.2 Generic frames

The incidence of generic frames across all news outlets can be found in Table 2. ( $N=160$ ). The average number of frames per outlet is 93.5 ( $SD=5.45$ ), while the average number of frames per Reel is 2.60.

**Table 2.** Incidence of generic news frame usage\*

	BBC	CNN	AJE	JP	Total Count
Conflict	90% (36)	90% (36)	95% (38)	83% (33)	(143)
Human Interest	40% (16)	43% (17)	50% (20)	28% (11)	(64)
Morality	28% (11)	18% (7)	35% (14)	50% (20)	(52)
Economic Consequence	13% (9)	10% (4)	5% (2)	0% (0)	(15)
Responsibility (Both)	15% (5)	5% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	(7)
Responsibility (Israel)	30% (12)	38% (15)	58% (23)	0% (0)	(50)
Responsibility (Hamas)	15% (6)	25% (10)	5% (2)	58% (23)	(41)
Responsibility (U.S.)	0% (0)	3% (1)	3% (1)	0% (0)	(2)
Total Count	(95)	(92)	(100)	(87)	(424)

\*Note: Percent is frames per news outlet; count is in parentheses

While a chi-squared test is typically used for assessing the independence of two categorical variables, the pre-test assumption of independence was not met as the frames were not mutually exclusive to each of the Reels and some of the expected count in the contingency table were too low. Instead, a basic analysis of the data was conducted, revealing that the most frequently employed frame is “Conflict”, with a consistent usage across outlets. “Responsibility” is the second most commonly used frame, with Israel being held responsible the most often, followed by Hamas, both sides, and the U.S. “Human Interest” is also represented frequently in the dataset, but had a higher standard deviation, which is evidence of greater variability in application. The least common frames were “Morality” and “Economic Consequence”, both with relatively high variation in usage.

As expected, the “Conflict” frame shows up as the most dominant frame across all outlets, with a 95% usage by AJE, a 90% use by the BBC and CNN, and an 83% use by JP. This is unsurprising considering the nature of conflict as increasingly violent, with this time period representing an escalation in fighting rather than peacemaking. Three of the four news outlets were also similar in their employment of the “Human Interest” frame, which was adopted close to half of the time, with the BBC’s usage at 40%, CNN’s usage at 43% and AJE’s at 50%. JP’s usage of this frame was considerably lower at only 11%, and when it was used, the focus of the Reel was largely on creating sympathy for Israeli hostages or heroizing IDF soldiers. When the BBC, CNN, and AJE utilized the “Human Interest” frame, it was more often used to illustrate the everyday struggles of Gazan citizens, with a specific focus on children, mothers, and injured civilians recovering at the hospital.

These findings are also indicative of great differences in framing. While the BBC uses the “Economic Consequence” frame 13% of the time, JP did not use this frame at all. One reason for this could be the way in which the definition of the “Economic Consequence” frame was expanded to include Reels that focused on disruption to work and lack of basic resources, which was only the case with the three news outlets which covered the air strikes in Gaza more intensively. On the other hand, JP focused more on the psychological loss that Israel experienced, framing it primarily in terms of lives lost and perceived threat to safety, which led to more use of the “Human Interest” frame, compared to other frames.

A stark difference in the way that the news outlets covered the conflict is how they used the “Responsibility” frame. The BBC used the “Responsibility” frame in 57% of their reporting, explicitly attributing responsibility to Israel 30% of the time, Hamas 6% of the time, and both parties 15% of the time. CNN used the “Responsibility” frame more frequently, in 70% of their Reels, attributing responsibility to Israel in 38% of Reels, Hamas in 25%, both parties in 5% and the U.S. a single time,

representing 3% of the sample of CNN Reels. AJE used the frame in 60% of their Reels, with 58% of Reels attributing responsibility to Israel, compared to only 5% to Hamas, 3% to the U.S., and zero to both parties. Finally, JP’s usage of the “Responsibility” frame is largely one-sided, with 58% of Reels using the frame and 100% of the responsibility attributed to Hamas. These results indicate that throughout all the Reels sampled, news outlets tend to blame one side over the other rather than ascribing the responsibility to both parties and/or to the intractable nature of the conflict.

### 4.3 Speaker features

**Table 3.** Incidence of speakers

	BBC	CNN	AJE	JP	Totals
Foreign Journalist	14	41	4	0	59
Local Journalist	8	1	2	3	14
Journalist (Total)	22	42	6	3	73
Political Figure	1	3	1	1	6
Gazan Citizen	7	17	19	0	43
Gazan Child	2	3	5	0	10
Gazan (Total)	9	20	24	0	53
Palestinian (Non-Gazan)	0	2	0	0	2
Palestinian (Total)	9	22	24	0	55
Israeli Citizen	3	6	2	6	17
Israeli Child	1	1	0	0	2
IDF Solider	0	2	1	4	7
Israeli (Total)	4	7	2	6	19
Humanitarian Worker	2	4	5	0	12
Medical Worker	1	1	7	2	11
<i>Totals</i>	48	99	70	12	236

Across the 160 Reels studied, there were a total of 236 speakers observed ( $M=57.25$ ,  $SD =36.7$ ), shown in Table 3. The first category of speakers that this study focused on was journalists, both belonging to the news outlets themselves or sourced from a local Palestinian or Israeli news organization. All four news outlets featured journalists who provided intros for or explanations of a story, yet there were great differences in the manner of their usage. CNN, for example, included

journalists in nearly all its Reels, with an average of about one journalist per Reel, but they were mostly used to give context or provide a lead-in to the rest of the story. The BBC also included many journalist voices, including recurring ones, but its usage differed from CNN, in the sense that many of its Reels with journalists included on-the-ground footage. In the month of October, the BBC included several harrowing moments where its live broadcasts were interrupted by air strikes, in which reporters were forced to take cover. AJE and JP, in contrast, included a more modest of journalist voices, instead using more text overlay to convey the same information.

There was a noteworthy absence of speaker in political positions across the board, with only six political figures included, representing just 0.03% of all speakers. Benjamin Netanyahu, prime minister of Israel, was the speaker in two of these Reels, with the rest of the speakers comprising a former Israeli Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, the Palestinian Prime Minister, Mohammad Shtayyeh, and a spokesperson from the U.S. Department of State. This sample of speakers is too small to generalize from but may suggest a disparity in legitimacy of Israeli versus Palestinian actors in discussing the conflict, or perhaps only a lack of access to these speakers, whose whereabouts must remain confidential.

In terms of Israeli versus Palestinian representation, all the outlets except for JP included many more Palestinian voices than Israeli voices, with JP including no Palestinian voices at all. However, this finding should also be viewed in the context of JP's significant lack of speakers overall, as it preferred to use text instead of audio narration, allowing the video footage sent in by their audience or taken directly from social media to speak for itself. Only the BBC was slightly more balanced in its representation, including 4 Israeli speakers and 9 Palestinian speakers, which is a much smaller disparity than that of the other outlets.

Another noteworthy finding within these results is the inclusion of many speakers in the medical profession and with humanitarian backgrounds, either from a local NGO, an aid organization, or the UN. Though they are often visible in the background of Reels, they also are frequently used by the BBC, CNN, and AJE as credible first-hand accounts of the brutality of the fighting. For example, AJE interviewed the most medical workers, including many Palestinian Red Crescent volunteers, who gave updates on the hospital situation in Gaza. Only JP diverges from this pattern, including only two interviews with ZAKA volunteers (Israel's international search and rescue unit), which were staged with professional lighting and camerawork.

### 4.3 Source features

**Table 4.** Incidence of source references

	BBC	CNN	AJE	JP
News Footage	28	26	12	2
Local Interview	13	19	13	3
Foreign Interview	0	3	3	0
Local News Source	1	1	2	8
News Wire/Agency	0	10	1	0
Tech Company	1	1	0	0
IDF Footage	2	2	0	19
IDF Info	1	10	2	1
Israeli Government Info	4	2	1	2
Hamas Footage	1	0	0	2
Hamas Info	3	6	1	0
UN Info	3	1	1	0
Humanitarian Info	1	2	0	0
Social media	1	6	16	5
Vlog/Self-Filmed	4	13	12	6
Undetermined	0	1	2	6
Totals	63	103	66	54

Another variable that was measured in this study is the usage of sources, shown in Table 4., with a total of 286 unique sources, including video clips where the source was undetermined. CNN used by far the greatest diversity of sources, including sources from each category. One of the most interesting findings is that CNN, the BBC, and AJE far outnumbered JP in the number of interviews, both foreign and local, they showed. The BBC and CNN were more transparent with their sources, frequently alluding to the fact that footage was gathered directly by their press teams and emphasizing incidences of original or exclusive reporting. These two news outlets used original news footage 28 and 26 times, respectively, with a greater focus on current breaking news. On the other hand, AJE and JP published more Reels where parts of the video lacked source attribution, labelled “undetermined”, though typically, they still followed the industry convention of reporting source information in the credits.

A trend that also emerged throughout the dataset is the reliance on user-generated content, submitted by individuals who are witnesses to an event or obtained from various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter). These clips fell into two categories: footage of dramatic events unfolding, such as the aftermath of a bombing or a hostage being abducted, or documentation of the individuals' everyday activities and how they have changed since the onset of the conflict. This second category, termed "civilian journalism," included several Reels where a speaker spoke candidly to a camera, filming live events such as the smoke outside or people in the street, with personal commentary of the sights, sounds, and emotions they were experiencing in the moment. Reels like these always fell into the "Human Interest" frame, as they showed a glimpse into the private lives of those who were most impacted.

After analyzing the types of information presented by the spokespeople from either side of the conflict, whether Hamas or IDF, there was also a great disparity in which official sources were included and which were questioned. JP relied heavily on IDF footage, which they used in nearly half of all their Reels, while only the BBC used Hamas footage one singular time, in a brief clip that showed the release of two Israeli hostages from Gaza. The IDF footage was well-filmed and edited, and typically included a spokesperson who discussed military strategies on a high-level or showed evidence of soldiers defending themselves against an attacker. When sharing unfavorable information about the IDF, there were many times where CNN, specifically, reportedly reached out for comment, and received no answer. Hamas information, cited verbally or in the caption, was often referenced by CNN and the BBC as the Hamas-run Ministry of Health, which was sometimes prefaced as a potentially unreliable source of information. Surprisingly, JP used Hamas footage twice, compared to AJE who used it only once, showing the celebration of Hamas leaders after October 7<sup>th</sup>, as well as footage from a Hamas Telegram account in which Hamas militants attacked Israeli soldiers.

Lastly, it is interesting to look at the quantity of footage and information provided by third party sources that are seen as reputable and/or are independently verified by the outlets themselves. Due to the restricted access to Gaza, it is likely that all outlets used some footage sourced from news wires such as Reuters or AP, however, CNN is the only source that consistently cited their use, relying on a lot of footage from the news agency, AFPTV which specializes in fast and verified coverage. The BBC and CNN also frequently utilized footage from Planet Labs, a company with satellite imagery services, Maxar, a space technology and intelligence company, as well as local CCTV and dashcam footage.

Another organization that JP often collaborated with was The Hostages and Missing Families Forum, identified by its tagline, "BringthemHomeNow," an Israeli nonprofit organization that was



founded within 24 hours of the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack, and works directly with families to share personal stories of those who have been abducted. JP also led the outlets in number of Reels that included sources from local Israeli news outlets, such as the prominent Israeli Channel 12 news, the Middle East Media and Research Institute TV, and Maariv, a local Israeli publication.

## 4.4 Audiovisual content

The frequencies of audiovisual content in the sample are presented in Table 5. The full list of codes, which are referenced in the analysis below, can be found in Appendix B. The grouping of codes into the following categories can be found in Appendix C.

**Table 5.** Incidence of thematic content features

	BBC	CNN	AJE	JP	Totals
Action	23	13	17	10	63
Auditory Features	9	4	13	13	39
Civilians/Animals	36	48	50	30	164
Combatants	3	18	8	20	49
Crisis Workers	20	14	15	4	53
Weapons	9	15	13	24	61
Casualties	17	22	30	14	83
Destruction	13	14	5	8	40
Cultural Features	17	9	4	11	41
Landscapes	3	14	5	15	37

In the following analysis, the audiovisual codes with the most significance to the research question will be discussed. The code that was the most present in this dataset was “civilians,” which was used 64 times, with a relatively equal distribution across all news outlets. This is in contrast with the code “combatants” which appeared 45 times, suggesting a focus more on victims than actors of violence. This is supported by the next most prominent code being “dead,” used 53 times, and was present in testimonies of loss, images of white body bags lined up, photos commemorating those who were lost, and death tolls in the captions. All news outlets used this code in their coverage, but AJE and CNN used it slightly more, with 19 and 17 uses, respectively, compared to the BBC and JP who used it 9 and 8 times.

Another code that was highly salient was “children,” which occurred 48 times, representing 30% of the entire dataset, and was used roughly equally by all four outlets, with JP using it slightly less

frequently. The code “children” was often used together with the code “family,” used 24 times and the code “baby,” used 6 times, and could usually be found in stories with the “Human Interest” frame. Reels about children included imagery of children looking through the rubble, injured and hospitalized children, and photos memorializing smiling children who were abducted or killed.

“Symbols” is a code that was also unequal in application, with 8 of its 9 total uses coming from JP, which included many representations of the Stars of David and the Israeli flag. This contrasts with the absence of any stories from outlets that featured the red and green Palestinian flag or the black-and-white-keffiyeh, which have come to symbolize the Palestinian resistance. This finding comes in light of the exclusion of many stories from the BBC, CNN, and AJE that commonly use these symbols in their coverage of Pro-Palestinian protests.

Two of the codes that been linked to stories about Hamas militants by previous literature (Aouragh, 2016, Tasseron, 2021,) are “rockets” and “tunnels,” which are used in 7 and 8 Reels, respectively. Consistent with previous studies, the Israeli news outlet, JP, used these features most often, with more in-depth reporting than other outlets about the use of tunnels and the damage of the rockets flying from Gaza into Tel Aviv.

Auditory features are undoubtedly an important psychological framing device and are present across all four news outlets to amplify the tone of a story. “Sirens”, for example, are present within 8 Reels, creating a sense of fear and urgency. “Crying” was another emotional auditory feature that showed up 16 times, with roughly equal use by the BBC, AJE and JP, but less by CNN. And finally, “music” was identified in 14 of the Reels studied, used equally by AJE and JP with 7 uses each, and only once by CNN in the background of a festival video. In general, American news outlets tend to use music sparingly, following ethical codes that prohibit sound effects or other audio that may “embellish” or “fabricate” an event (The Associated Press, 2024).

## 4.4 Qualitative analysis

The following section will take a deeper look into the content of the Reels studied and will be informed by Entman’s four framing functions (1993), as explained in Table 6. The aim is to bridge the quantitative section, by exploring issue specific frames constructed from the previous elements discussed in the content analysis.

**Table 6.** Issue-specific news frames within current coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

<b>Category</b>	<b>Frame</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Problem definition	Humanitarian crisis	The Reel emphasizes the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, specifically focusing on the harm to Gaza residents.
	National security	The Reel highlights the heightened threat to Israel's security.
Causal diagnosis	October 7th	October 7 <sup>th</sup> is identified as the impetus of the war.
	Historical grievances	The Reel cites past violent events as leading to the escalation.
	Israeli control	Israel's control over Gazan resources and borders are stressed.
Moral judgement	Pronouncement of innocence/guilt	The Reel identifies certain actors as essentially innocent or guilty.
	Religious evaluation	Religious beliefs are used to contextualize an action.
	Accusations of lying	In the Reel, one actor is portrayed as false or dishonest.
	U.S. as complicit	The nature of the United States's involvement in the conflict is questioned.
Treatment recommendation	Ceasefire	The Reel calls for a ceasefire or a permanent pause in fighting.
	Two-state solution	The Reel features voices calling for a separate Palestinian state.
	Legal accountability	The Reel mentions involving the justice system to hold individuals and states accountable.
	Eliminate Hamas	The Reel describes the necessity of killing all Hamas terrorists.

#### 4.4.1 Problem definition

Entman (1993) defines the “Problem Definition” category as assessing “what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values” (Entman 1993, p.52). Two major frames addressing this category have been derived from the data, that of humanitarian crisis and that of national security. While these frames are not inherently competing, in general, they represent the two most salient viewpoints held by Israelis and Palestinians regarding the shift in the conflict since October 7<sup>th</sup>.

##### *Humanitarian Crisis*

Across the three international news outlets, the BBC, CNN, and AJE, the dominant frame employed to shape the conflict in the mind of its audiences is that of humanitarian crisis. This is evident from the sheer quantity of Reels covering the destruction of the Gaza Strip, from the decimation of its residents to the collapse of its infrastructure, to the anguish that communities are experiencing trying to find normalcy in the chaos. Examples of this include the several instances in which Reels showed the active destruction of buildings, some of which included hospital or school targets, either through primary footage or from an aerial view. Loss of community and memories of home were also prominent motifs, with one emotional account by a Gazan BBC reporter at a hospital emphasizing the way in which he was personally impacted. “This is my local hospital,” He says, “Inside are my friends. My community” (Reel 15) Another testimony comes from a Palestinian Red Crescent Society volunteer filming from inside a hospital under siege in Gaza, explaining how he and other staff members used a single shared phone to look at pictures from home, claiming that Israel does not want to “leave us any good memories of this country” (Reel 305).

Many Reels also highlighted specific problems such as hospital bombardments, air strikes on refugee camps, and the scores of residents who are gravely injured and have missing family members yet somehow must persist without safety or aid. These stories often create a heightened tension by referencing the density of the Gaza Strip and the demographics of its residents, showing how children are bearing a great cost for a war that they did not choose. There are also many Reels involving pregnant women and mothers, one showing firsthand the worry and distress that expectant mothers face, one showing a mother after giving birth to quadruplets in Gaza during the peak of the war, and one that celebrates a woman who was reunited with her baby in Egypt after a period of separation but acknowledges that this is a lucky case. “All you can do is hold your baby tight and hope you survive this

nightmare,” she says (Reel 240). The BBC, CNN, and AJE all dedicated coverage to family separations, while JP only focused on the separation of hostages from their families.

Another issue that is present throughout these three outlets’ coverage, and largely absent in JP’s coverage, is the challenges aid organizations and medical professionals face. This theme is signified through many interviews with NGO employees, doctors, and aid workers, who stress the collapse of the medical system, the dwindling food supply, and the lack of safe water and electricity as an infringement of basic human rights. In many of these stories, there is also a call to action directed towards the international community, but the overarching sentiment is that of despair and not hope. They emphasize the extremity and urgency of the situation, including their own increasing sense of helplessness, with one tearful UNICEF official saying in an AJE interview, “I had a person say that to me, ‘Are you here to end the war?’ What to say? No, your life is being determined elsewhere, we’re here to stop the bleeding” (Reel 287). These kinds of accounts add credibility to the “Humanitarian” frame, emphasizing that the problem is not simply a political or ideological one, but also one of human suffering on a scale previously unseen.

### *National Security*

The other frame that is largely dominant, primarily in JP’s coverage, but also widely throughout CNN and the BBC’s reporting, is that of national security, which has been cited as a major concern for Israelis since the inception of the state of Israel in 1948. This frame was first emphasized by all during the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, a day in which many communities which considered themselves to be largely removed from the everyday impact of the conflict, i.e. the Israeli rave community and the local kibbutzim, faced horrific violence and bloodshed at the hands of a highly organized terrorist group. In an early clip by JP (Reel 318), text overlay is used to highlight the different nationalities who were victims, convincing the world that Hamas terrorism is an issue that affects everyone. The bloodshed of October 7<sup>th</sup> and the mass kidnapping of hostages, served as a defining moment in which any semblance of peace was broken. In an emotionally charged Reel posted by JP a grandmother is interviewed about her experience as Hamas terrorists attacked her home, asking, “In what twisted world a grandmother buries her granddaughter?” (Reel 329). Similar questions and expressions of survivor’s guilt were present throughout all the interviews with hostage families, and as with the Palestinians trapped in Gaza, these interviews were usually accompanied with a plea to the world to support efforts to bring home the hostages or to end the war.

The threat to the existence of the Jewish people is one that frequently arises in Reels featuring Israelis. In a CNN story about the disturbances to daily lives that children experience in Israel (Reel 115), one child said, "Every day living in Israel you need to be scared for your life," referencing the commonplaceness of terrorism and the deep-rooted fear that Israeli communities face. This is supported by Reels by CNN and the BBC which show terror spreading beyond the occupied territories, with one CNN Reel focusing on the rockets in Tel Aviv being intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome (Reel 100). Another key element of the national security frame, as it is used in this conflict is the reference to psychological trauma. Out of JP's coverage, 8 Reels were noted to discuss this theme in detail, and it was especially common when talking about the shock of witnessing acts of terrorism in areas that previously felt safe to interviewees. It is also important to mention that two of JP's Reels focused specifically on the theme of sexual crimes committed by Hamas on October 7<sup>th</sup> (Reel 339 & 352) and to the hostages they abducted, while this detail was largely absent in the other outlets' reporting.

JP's use of the national security frame is especially pronounced by its references to other terror groups and genocides that are broadly condemned by the Western world today. One post by JP uses the hashtag, #hamasisisis in the caption, and #standwithisrael, to rally people around the common enemy of Islamic extremism (Reel 318). However, the BBC also utilizes this frame in their earlier coverage, including a quote from former Prime Minister, Neftali Bennet, who announces, "We have an ISIS state," in a BBC Reel warning the world about the dangers of radical Islam (Reel 24). A BBC reporter visiting the site of the music festival post-attack called the grounds the "ground zero" of the attack, in a reference to the 9/11 terrorist attack in the U.S (Reel 14). These allusions are often used in combination with a call to mobilize the Western world against a fundamental threat to liberal values.

#### 4.4.2 Causal diagnosis

The framing category of "Causal Diagnosis" "identifying the forces creating the problem" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The frames that were observed here are October 7<sup>th</sup>, Historical Grievances, and Israeli Control, nearly all of which were present in every outlet's reporting.

The attack on October 7<sup>th</sup> is the obvious starting point of causality, as it represents the point in which coverage of the Israeli Palestinian war increased sharply. In the captions of many of the Reels, it is directly cited as the reason for Israel's retaliatory campaign. Many Reels from JP cover the aftermath of this event, relying heavily on the firsthand accounts of individuals and how their lives will never be the same. CNN and BBC both posted Reels with similar interviews, yet their focus on October 7<sup>th</sup> was not as steady over the course of the same time-period, as they shifted the focus to the air strikes in Gaza. Only

AJE used this frame without acknowledging the scores of Israeli victims, framing it as an “infiltration” of Israel by Palestinian “fighters” (Reel 265).

The frame, historical grievances, refers to instances in which a Reel refers to moments in the past that have directly contributed to the escalation of the conflict. In one Reel posted by CNN, a 90-year-old Palestinian woman who lived through the original Nakba, is interviewed, and she says the current mass expulsion of people from Gaza is even worse (Reel 135). AJE, CNN, and the BBC also use references to the Nakba in combination with visuals of crowds to frame the mass migration out of the Gaza Strip. In another vlog from a girl from Gaza (Reel 270), she says, “This did not start on October 7<sup>th</sup>. This has been going on for the past 75 years.” Statements like these emphasize the difficulty of selecting a single point from which the conflict stemmed.

Lastly, Israeli control is another less common, yet still present frame that is used, either referring to Israeli settler occupation, Israeli’s control of water and electricity supply, or the security checkpoints which restrict the flow of goods and people between Israel and Gaza. Though this category can also be referred to as a historical grievance, it refers less to the back-and-forth nature of Palestinian attacks against Israelis and vice versa, and more to the political and economic control that Israel holds over the Gaza Strip. In one of the few Reels featuring the “Economic Consequence” Frame, the importance of the Rafah Crossing is explained by a BBC journalist, as it is the only exit point out of Gaza not controlled by Israel. The Reel used a combination of maps, diagrams, and video clips to illustrate how tightly controlled the territory is, though avoided passing much judgement about its implications.

#### 4.4.3 Moral judgement

Entman’s definition of moral judgement, which serves as a secondary layer of explanation for the “Morality” generic frame, is how stories “evaluate causal agents and their effect” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The concept of morality, which is usually concerned with the distinction between right and wrong, considers related value systems such as religion, ethics, and law, but it does not equate any one of these categories. In this content analysis, several moral judgements were coded, including Pronouncement of Innocent/Guilt, Religious Evaluation, Accusations of Lying, and U.S. as Complicit.

The first frame, pronouncement of innocence/guilt occurs frequently throughout the dataset, especially within Reels by AJE and JP. It manifests in obvious ways such as in the caption of the Reels, with one JP Reel stating, “At this very moment, 242 innocent lives, including babies, children, fathers, mothers, and the elderly, are held in the cruel grip of Hamas” (Reel 330). A different JP Reel presents an interview with a released hostage, who describes the psychological torture she faced, including a

moment when a “ Hamas child ” was given candy to eat in front of her while she herself starved (Reel 352). About her Hamas captors, she says, “ There is not one innocent civilian in there. None. They don't exist. ” This is the one time that civilians are not synonymous with innocence and explicates the guilt of Hamas militants and their families. Conversely, in an AJE Reel, the opposite narrative is presented, with a freed hostage describing her captors as gentle and non-abusive (Reel 273). Within the dataset, there is only one mention of Hamas taking human shields, made in a speech to CNN by a former Prime Minister, which, as mentioned in section 2.2, often protects Israel's government from more condemnation of killing civilians.

There are also times in which innocence and guilt are implied in statements about people's level of involvement in the war. Again, this occurs in every news outlet's Reels, as they grapple with questions of innocence in a war with so many civilian casualties. In a BBC interview with witnesses to the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack (Reel 10), one Israeli woman said, “ “ They were just murdered for dancing in nature, ” emphasizing the apolitical nature of the Nova festival that was supposed to represent peace and love. In an AJE Reel, a young woman from Gaza says, “ I don't care about politics. about his child, “ What did she do? She was inside a tent, in the freezing cold, she was hit by a strike. ” These statements are only a few of countless Reels across the BBC, CNN, and AJE that emphasize the immorality of Israeli actions.

Despite the conflict's religious underpinnings, religious evaluation was not an overwhelmingly common frame. While it's true that “ religion ” was a common audiovisual code, these types of Reels – used especially by JP – showed prayers, funerals, and religious leaders in a more objective way that did not discuss the evaluation of causes, as the “ moral judgement ” definition requires. There were two instances in which religion was explicitly mentioned: including one Reel from JP (Reel 351), where a ZAKA volunteer says, “ It is written in the Quran, do not murder children, women, or the elderly, ” to characterize Hamas militants as unfaithful to their own religion. ” Another one from AJE (Reel 294) showed how Palestinian Christians cannot celebrate Christmas this year. A sentiment that is not overtly religious but frequently captured in AJE is the concept of martyrdom, which entered the Arabic world through contact with Christians, but differed in its connotation by taking on an active and political meaning (Buckner & Khatib, 2014). “ How many more children like Hind need to be martyred? ” A mother asks in a CNN Reel, after her 5-year-old daughter was killed by Israeli fire while trying to flee Gaza (Reel 245).

Related to the journalist's role as a watchdog, as explained in section 2.2, an important frame that coincides with the “ Responsibility ” frame is accusations of lying, in which the truthfulness of an actor and their intentions are questioned. This frequently coincides with references to “ fake news, ”



“disinformation,” or “propaganda” which destabilizes the communication efforts of the opposing party. All four news outlets used this frame, exposing the hypocrisy and lies of both the IDF and Hamas. “They say ‘go to shore’ and then they bombed the shore next day,” A Palestinian-American tells CNN (Reel 80), one of Palestinians accusing the Israeli government or the IDF of lying about their bombing targets. Another example comes in a BBC Reel interview in which a Palestinian citizen labels leaflets distributed by the IDF as “propaganda” (Reel 26). Hamas is also accused of lying, with one example coming from an IDF soldier giving a tour of the Al-Shifa hospital after its bombing, showing viewers Hamas weapons that had been callously stashed behind medical equipment and implying that Hamas strategically took the risk to endanger the lives of all injured civilians. “It seems like there’s no shortage,” The IDF soldier said offhandedly about the Gazan people’s medical supplies, “But we’ll leave that for another discussion” (Reel 337). Another example of a direct accusation comes from a JP Reel (Reel 346), whose caption states, “Arouri appeared on Al-Jazeera doubling down on the falsehood that Hamas did not target Israeli civilians and that Israel’s offensive on Gaza would prove weaker than Hamas’s defensive plan.” While AJE and JP more often make explicit accusations, CNN and BBC reporters are more likely to state that they are “looking into” claims, or that they cannot verify the information presented.

Finally, the international community is not exempted from moral judgment by the media. One frame that has been used a few times by CNN and once by AJE, is America as complicit. CNN’s interview with Netanyahu refers to the Americans as “my friends,” but also says that sometimes it is necessary to “say no to your friends”, evidence of a strained allyship (Reel 235). In a tense moment between an AP reporter and a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State, the complicity of the U.S. was alluded to, when the journalist pointed out the controlled nature of the demolition of Israa university in Gaza, and the spokesperson appeared to not have all the facts. “I’m a little hesitant, for reasons that should be understood, to pass definitive judgement on it from this podium,” He said, after stating that the concern had been raised to the Israeli government (Reel 229). A sharper attack of the U.S.’s actions came from a JP Reel showing a broadcast from Hamas senior leader, Saleh al-Arouri, who said “America is morally bankrupt regarding anything related to the conflict in Palestine” (Reel 346).

#### 4.4.4 Treatment recommendation

The last framing function that will be applied to the dataset, is “treatment recommendation,” which Entman defines as how media aims to “offer and justify treatments for the problems and their likely effects.” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Throughout history, there have been countless solution proposed

to bring forth a resolution, but this dataset was not able to capture the diversity of opinions, excluding often-discussed options such as a one-state solution or dividing the occupied territories to the neighboring countries. The solutions presented here are not mutually exclusive, instead they represent the different priorities for the stakeholders embroiled in this conflict.

Among historians and politicians, one of the most proposed solutions to the conflict is a permanent diplomatic ceasefire, but this solution does not appear often within the dataset. Debate over the terms of a ceasefire is framed either as a humanitarian necessity or as an undeserved victory for Hamas, a position taken more often in Reels with Israeli speakers. In a BBC interview with Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh, he calls for a ceasefire along with safe passage of international aid but refuses to immediately engage in conversation about the hostages, saying, “[Israel] must sit down with the Palestinians and put together a political track, so this does not repeat itself” (Reel 27). The other instance where a ceasefire is mentioned is in a JP Reel reporting about Hamas’ statement that there “would be no more hostage-prisoner swaps until a complete ceasefire is implemented,” though the Reel itself passes little judgement on this assertion (Reel 346).

Though the word “ceasefire” is not directly stated, the following examples represent times where the outcomes that people are hoping for align with the vision of a ceasefire. As was previously discussed in section 4.3, there are Gazan citizens who share vulnerable stories and advocate for themselves. One 18-year-old tells AJE audiences, “Please do anything right now. There is no one doing anything about what we are witnessing right now,” referencing the desensitization of the world to the increasing aggressions towards the Gazan people (Reel 270). In a standout case from a BBC interview, an Israeli man who lost family members on October 7<sup>th</sup>, says that he believes “Revenge will just lead to more suffering,” indicating that he does not believe in his nation’s quest for retribution (Reel 19). Like most of the Reels demanding action, the treatment recommendation regarding the sovereignty of Israel remains vague and undefined.

A treatment recommendation that has been discussed extensively by historians but is only mentioned a handful of times in the Reels in this study by the two Western outlets, is a two-state solution. In an interview with Netanyahu by CNN, the anchor explains how the U.S. and President Biden are encouraging this option, seemingly frustrated at Netanyahu’s refusal (Reel 235). The Israeli Prime Minister explains that “In any arrangement, Israel must control the security of all the land which is west of the Jordan River...and it clashes with the idea of sovereignty.” In the same Reel, clips of a speech U.S. Department of State spokesperson reinforce the intractability of the conflict, but the official ultimately says:

*“There is no way to solve their long-term challenges of national security, and there is no way to solve the short-term challenges of rebuilding Gaza and establishing governance in Gaza and providing security for Gaza without the establishment of a Palestinian state.” (Reel 235).*

The other reference to a two-state solution, which is combined with the treatment recommendation of killing all Hamas terrorists, comes from the father of a woman who was killed on October 7<sup>th</sup>, who says he hopes that, in the near future, they “will be able to do peace and build two states and be able to live next to each other” (Reel 45).<sup>z</sup> This is the second time the BBC featured an Israeli perspective that acknowledged the potential sovereignty of Palestine, which is significant, since it is a minority Israeli opinion expressed by half of the BBC’s Israeli interviewees.

An avenue that is occasionally mentioned and alluded to, is the treatment recommendation of seeking justice through the legal system. The frame is present across CNN, BBC, and AJE, but absent within JP’s coverage. Legal accountability often comes in the form of asking international bodies such as the ICJ to hold leaders accountable. For example, in the caption of a post by AJE is stated: “Palestinians say they hope the International Court of Justice (ICJ) will live up to its name,” referencing South Africa’s genocide case against Israel on the international stage (Reel 297). AJE does not shy away from the term “genocide” or “war crime” posting two Reels interviewing doctors who describe the attack of medical facilities as illegal under international law (Reel 268 and Reel 282).

JP again differs in their treatment recommendation, as they represent a voice that sees continuing the war against Hamas is the only way forward for the state of Israel to exist. In addition to having many Reels that advocate for bringing the hostages home, JP also features many speakers who believe that they will only be safe if all Hamas militants are eliminated. Reels from JP see the IDF as the way to victory, and there is a heavy emphasis on civil duty of soldiers, with one Reel celebrating an Israeli soldier reciting a Jewish prayer inside a church in Gaza (Reel 350). Out of the two Western outlets, only CNN glorifies IDF soldiers in some of their Reels, referencing to soldiers in “the famed Golani Brigade” who lost their lives to Hamas militants (Reel 210), although their coverage is not without criticism. “If we need to get into Gaza, house by house, that’s exactly what is going to happen,” another IDF soldier tells CNN, representing just one of the many videos where IDF soldiers explain the importance of their tactical operatives (Reel 160). Finally, it is interesting to note that this frame often is accompanied by calls for displays of national solidarity, with JP using hashtags that state “standwithIsrael” to encourage people to show their support.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Main findings

The results of this study indicate significant differences in framing of news outlets regarding the Israel-Palestinian conflict since October 7<sup>th</sup>. Though this study did not have a baseline for comparison for the BBC, the British news outlet fell in step with the other Western outlet, CNN, in balancing factual and emotional accounts, featuring mostly “Conflict” and “Human Interest” frames. As was discovered by Bartholomé et al. (2018, p.1693), this could be due to the “urgency” of digital news to tell a story as fast and descriptively as possible, reducing media intervention or insertion into the narrative. According to the results, the BBC did not feature as many journalistic voices as CNN, but when it did feature journalists on camera, it was often in unscripted, live moments of danger. This pattern could be interpreted in two ways: (1) to call attention to the danger that journalists face, or (2) to create tension and conflict to grab the audience’s attention.

One of the most interesting findings that this study has brought to light is that the American news outlet, CNN, has frequently used more pro-Palestinian, humanitarian crisis frames than in previous empirical studies (Shahzad et al., 2023, p.11-12). Despite President Biden’s ongoing support for Israel, the liberal news outlet broke away, leaning in further to a counter discourse emerging across the United States and the world that questions the legitimacy of Israel to unleash such great retaliatory violence against the Gazan people. Though Bhowmik and Fisher’s 2023 analysis of CNN’s framing focused on coverage of the U.S.’s political elite, this study shows the outlet utilizing far more sources critical of the Israeli government from outside the political arena. This is reflected in CNN’s great diversity of sources - perhaps a result of the persistent criticism it receives from both sides of the political aisle - and the diligent attribution of every piece of photo and video content. However, CNN does attribute responsibility to both Hamas and Israel more evenly, showing it does not depart completely from the views of the Oval Office. Instead, it appears to work with the information it is presented with. One of the most striking examples of this is that CNN both accepts IDF hospitality to report from staged combat zones, but also features many voices that criticize the IDF’s actions.

Al Jazeera English, as contrasted with the other two outlets that adopted more pro-Palestinian and humanitarian frames, was notable in its exclusion of pro-Israeli speakers and sources and its consistent attribution of responsibility to Israel. It also used the most “Conflict” and “Human Interest” frames, which it used primarily to show the effects of the war inside of Gaza including the devastating number of casualties. This framing is unsurprising considering AJE’s mission to “a provide voice to the

voiceless,” (Who We Are | Al Jazeera Media Network, “VISION”), as historically, Palestinian voices have been excluded from the conversation. Similar to CNN, AJE frequently used citizen journalism and aired many self-filmed clips, giving more legitimacy to the stories of individuals than that of official government sources. AJE also contributes to the Hamas propaganda strategy of showing the IDF acting unethically, by working with NGOs and other aid organizations to broadcast abuses to international audiences (Hayes, 2023)

The Jerusalem Post varied the most in its framing from the other outlets, choosing more pro-Israel frames and using the “Conflict” frame to paint the senseless violence of Hamas and the “Human Interest” frame to continually renew interest in saving the hostages. Notably, it also used a lot of violent imagery with inconsistent use of content warnings, publicizing far more graphic material than other outlets. As was previously discussed, this contributes to the creation of a “National Security” frame that leads to a rejection of Palestinian suffering. By highlighting the constant threat of Hamas rockets and the heroic actions of the IDF, JP justified Israel’s military responses as necessary for the nation’s survival. These findings fall in line with its’ previous coverage of the conflict as an organization with heavy governmental oversight.

## 5.2 Theoretical implications

There are numerous agenda-setting implications of these findings, as illustrated by McCombs & Shaw (1992), in which the framing choices used by news outlets emphasize and highlight certain narratives over others. The intractability of conflict, as outlined by Reykowski (2015, p.5-6), is emphasized with the dominant use of the “Conflict” frame throughout all outlets’ reporting, followed by the “Human Interest” frame. Furthermore, though many treatment solutions, according to Entman’s framing functions, were presented within the dataset, there was generally more focus on the problem diagnosis. A clear dichotomy emerged, with CNN, AJE, and less, the BBC, frequently utilizing the humanitarian crisis frame, while JP exclusively used the national security frame. This is evidenced by the former outlets using more Reels with Palestinian voices, more content with destruction and casualties, and more interviews with humanitarian and medical personnel. Conversely, JP Reels included more Israeli speakers, leaned heavily on IDF footage, and utilized more videos with images of weapons and military aspects.

As indicated in the results, news outlets overwhelmingly used the “Conflict” and “Human Interest” frames to hold their audiences’ attention during the months after October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Futile

attempts at peacemaking were made during this time period, yet the coverage remained negative and without hope. Though it is yet to be seen whether reconciliation can be achieved, according to Sheaffer & Dvir-Gvirsman (2010, p.213), the constant bombardment of the public with negative news about the conflict only adds to its intractability.

This study continues the tradition of using framing to dissect international news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which can then be mapped over time to find links between media frames and the actions of governments and non-state actors. It draws from the literature of visual framing, exploring its legitimizing function (Tasseron, 2021; Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997), which has always been at the heart of the conflict as each side fights for a legitimate claim to this historic land. In comparison with the visual coverage of the 2014 fighting (Tasseron, 2021, p.583), there far less mentions of Hamas taking human shields, instead, slightly more Reels directly attributed responsibility to Israel for their killing of civilians. This finding may indicate that news outlets – Western outlets in particular- are taking a more nuanced perspective that does not legitimize the actions of the Israeli State by default.

Given the results that the IDF footage is used far more frequently across news outlets, than information from Hamas leaders, this study's findings fall in line with previous research which have explored the effect of journalists' lack of access to information from both sides (Tasseron, 2021). Despite this finding, there is not a tendency from any outlet to rely too heavily on official or elite sources, as is typical in war journalism (Galtung, 2003). While the BBC and CNN use many local interviews, primarily of Palestinians, AJE and JP use a large quantity of user-generated content to tell their stories. While it has already been explained how this contributes to perceptions of legitimacy, it also reduces the informational asymmetry which has been the norm throughout prior stages of conflict (Tasseron, 2021.)

In addition to the lack of access to sources, there is also evidence of a lack of access to resources. The overrepresentation of CNN journalists, both foreign and domestic, may reflect the American company's broad network of international correspondents, whereas JP's lack of journalistic representation can be attributed to the fact that it is primarily a print newspaper, rather than a broadcasting company with an established videography team. Instead, the Israeli outlet favored Reels with heavy text overlay interspersed with other footage, using more emotional and incendiary language to resonate with its audiences.

News outlets, despite best editorial practices, are not immune to spreading propaganda, and it is virtually impossible to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without adhering to a dominant ideological perspective. JP exemplified this the most, according to Chomsky's propaganda model (Pedro-

Carañana et al., 2018, p.2), sourcing most of its material from the IDF and pro-Israeli groups, and using strong, active language urging its audience to take Israel's side. The trend of posting Reels featuring a montage of family photos accompanied with emotional music, aligned more with the style of PSAs than traditional news content. This type of content, consistent with past Hasbara strategies, serves as evidence of the Israeli government attempting to manufacture consent for their invasion of Gaza (Aouragh, 2016).

## 5.4 Societal implications

There are a few key impacts of the proliferation of digital news that have implications for news organizations worldwide. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents an interesting case in that its origins predate the internet, yet over the decades, it has received news coverage from every form of media imaginable. The flow of information, blurring lines between news organizations and citizen journalists, means that journalists must spend more time verifying information than producing original content. This effect is already seen through the outlet's easy integration of multimedia content from platforms like X and Telegram. Furthermore, there is a tricky line to balance with directly reporting events that could be construed as disinformation or propaganda, as evidenced by the many frames that accuse the opposing party as lying. Though neither this study, nor the one conducted by Anter (2023), found clear evidence that mainstream media "softened" its content for social media, except in the case of JP, there was a dominant usage of the conflict frame which is typically seen as more entertaining and engaging. However, without comparison to the outlets' print coverage, it is impossible to establish any editorial changes.

This study also found that coverage of the conflict contained many of the same audiovisual features as in the Ukraine war (Makhortykh and Sydorova, 2017), with "militants/soldiers," "civilians" and "dead" showing up prevalently to give audiences an emotional and oftentimes graphic inside look at the fighting. Through the widespread use of the humanitarian crisis frame within the Reels, there was also a similar level of victimization of the Palestinian people, which, in the Ukrainian case led to them being viewed as more desirable refugees (Xu & Zhang, 2023). Despite this, there is a marked difference between how Ukrainian soldiers are portrayed to be heroes defending their country, while the Palestinian resistance, inherently tied to decades of terrorism, cannot be painted the same way. As such, it is yet to be seen how the Palestinian people will be framed in the aftermath of the war and further research could be conducted to compare these conflicts in an empirical manner.

Finally, the findings could provide valuable insights to lawmakers, media regulatory bodies, and NGOs who seek to reduce harm and facilitate constructive dialogue within the framework of peace journalism.

## 5.5 Strengths

As outlined in the methodology section, the greatest strength of this study is its mixed-methods approach, which accounts for many of the methodological weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative studies. Furthermore, the study captured data on a lot of different levels, using qualitative reasoning to conduct a thorough analysis of numerical information. Instead of focusing only on surface-level categories such as “Israeli” speakers and “Palestinian” speakers, which would lead to shallower conclusions, the researcher looked at the interplay of more dimensions that allows for a nuanced discussion. Additionally, the choice of Instagram Reels as a data source is a novel element that reflects the importance of social media in the contemporary media landscape.

The use of framing as a paradigm links this study to previous studies in the field of media and communication, as well as in history and the social sciences. Using established framing methods by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) in addition to Entman’s (1993) framing functions ensured a strong theoretical basis and a methodological rigor that other framing studies lack due to their liberal use of the term “frame” and inconsistent application. The resulting codebook was greatly benefited by a pre-testing phase, including an intercoder reliability test, to improve the validity of the items asked and to assess as many variables as possible. Finally, a great strength of this study was the researcher’s prior knowledge of the conflict, which allowed for a deeper analysis and discussion including comparison to past historical moments.

## 5.6 Limitations and future research

Though the researcher worked diligently to identify any flaws in the methodological framework, there are still several limitations to the study that may impact the validity of the findings. The most significant issue involved the use of systematic sampling, or dividing the Reel population by 40, to create equal samples from each news outlet. As Instagram Reels are rich in data, a smaller sample allows for a more detailed analysis that notes all features of the content. However, a smaller dataset limits the generalizability of the findings and runs the risk that many patterns and outliers in the greater population could be missed. Furthermore, separating out the quantitative elements, such as source and speaker features, for analysis runs the risk of a less holistic analysis during the qualitative section due to



priming and represents a limitation of the sequential design. While the study was intended to be a case study exploration, a more focused time period, such as the month after October 7<sup>th</sup>, or a more focused research question, such as the way IDF footage is used to portray the conflict in Gaza, could have yielded more specific results. Additionally, to capture the effects of agenda setting, future research should be conducted to study framing's impact on audience reception, such as in Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017), and in quantitative studies that can determine whether there is a relationship between media coverage of a conflict and the events following that conflict.

Secondly, another limitation was the choice of news outlets, which included three international outlets and one regional one serving a broader Jewish audience. Though JP was selected due to its wide English reach, making it more accessible to international audiences than other Israeli newspapers, it cannot be readily compared to the other news outlets. This is because JP does not have the same video capabilities or the ability to repurpose segments from proprietary TV broadcasts to adapt to Instagram's unique platform demands. To mitigate this effect, future studies could examine the difference in media coverage for news outlets that are already established in broadcasting, comparing their TV coverage to the Reels they post on Instagram. In addition, the choice to select only one news outlet to represent each region doesn't allow the ability to infer relationships between regions and their framing, so a more thorough analysis using more varied news sources from each region may be even more relevant to predicting agenda-setting effects.

Finally, like all studies that addresses the highly politicized Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this study will inherently be impacted by researcher bias. In the interest of researcher reflexivity, it is important to mention that the researcher comes from an American background and was first introduced to the specifics of the conflict in a classroom setting that presented a narrative countering the dominant American position. In addition to this, much of the scholarly research included throughout this paper uses language that reflects certain value judgements about the conflict, though efforts have been made to include diverse sources. As such, careful consideration has been given to which words have been selected to characterize the actors and the nature of the fighting. For example, there is a key distinction between the classifications of "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide," both terms which have been used by news organizations and politicians to describe the destruction of Gaza and its people, but neither of which have been officially applied by the UN. Lastly, efforts have been taken to emphasize the fact that the Israeli government is not entirely representative of the will of the Israeli people, just as Hamas does not reflect the Palestinian cause. With the conflict continuing into the summer of 2024, the world has yet to see the significance of the first few months of coverage and how they might alter the fate of Gaza.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Generic frame codebook, adapted from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)

Frame	Items
Conflict	The story reflects disagreement between two parties.
	One party/individual/group/country does reproach another.
	The story refers to two sides of the problem.
	The story refers to winners and losers.
Human Interest	The story provides a human example or 'human face' on the issue.
	The story emphasizes how individuals and groups are affected by the issue.
	The story employs adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy, sympathy or compassion.
	The story goes into the private lives of the actors.
Economic Consequence	The story mentions financial losses or gains in the past, present or future.
	The story mentions the costs/degree of expenses involved.
	The story refers to the economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action.
Morality	Does the story contain any moral message?
	Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?
	Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?
Attribution of responsibility	The story suggests that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the issue
	The story suggests that some level of government is responsible for the issue or problem
	The story suggests solution(s) to the problem/issue
	The story suggests that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the issue/problem
	The story suggests the problem requires urgent action



## Appendix B – Incidence of thematic content features

Content Features	BBC	CNN	AJE	JP	Totals
Action	12	10	6	10	38
Air Strikes	11	3	11	0	25
Animals	0	1	2	1	4
Babies	0	2	1	3	6
Children	12	13	15	8	48
Civilians	13	19	17	15	64
Combatants	3	18	8	20	49
Crowds	8	9	9	2	28
Crying	5	2	5	4	16
Dead	9	17	19	8	53
Documents	1	0	1	0	2
Family	8	7	6	3	24
Fires	5	5	3	3	16
Humanitarian aid	4	4	1	0	9
Injured	8	5	11	6	30
Journalists	11	5	2	0	18
Landscapes	3	11	5	11	30
Maps	2	5	0	1	8
Medical workers	5	5	12	4	26
Music	0	1	7	7	13
Military vehicles	0	1	3	1	5
Refugees	3	6	9	0	18
Rockets	0	1	2	5	8
Ruins	2	5	2	4	13
Religion	14	4	4	2	24
Sirens	4	1	1	2	8
Symbols	1	0	0	8	9
Trash	6	4	0	1	11
Tunnels	0	3	0	4	7
Weapons	9	13	8	18	48

## Appendix C – Codebook of audiovisual categories

Category	Definition	Codes
Action	An active scene of violence or destruction.	Action, Air Strikes
Auditory features	Auditory elements that enhance the narrative or emotional tone.	Music, Sirens, Crying
Civilians/animals	Non-combatant humans and animals.	Civilians, Family, Babies, Children, Refugees, Animals
Combatants	Militants and soldiers.	Combatants
Crisis Workers	Individuals involved in emergency response, medical care, or journalism.	Journalists, Humanitarian Aid, Medical Workers
Weapons	Mentions and depictions of weaponry and military equipment.	Weapons, Military Vehicles, Rockets
Casualties	Instances of death and injury.	Dead, Injured
Destruction	Elements related to physical damage and destruction.	Ruins, Fires, Trash
Cultural Features	Cultural and symbolic elements.	Religion, Symbols, Maps
Landscapes	Natural and geographical elements.	Landscapes, Tunnels