



Algorithms of Mass Destruction

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Abstract

The genocide in Gaza has been widely witnessed on social media, where the rapid dissemination of news and the rise of social activism have left many unsure of where to turn for accurate information. This paper critically examines the role of propaganda and dataism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on how social media platforms contribute to the dehumanization of Palestinian civilians. Drawing on autoethnographic insights from Instagram, the paper explores symbolic violence and the construction of narratives that essentialize and marginalize Palestinian identities, leading to compassion fatigue among global audiences. The analysis underscores the dual role of social media as both a tool for resistance and a mechanism of oppression within a broader techno-capitalist framework, highlighting the complexities of digital activism in the context of colonial violence.

Keywords: Propaganda, dataism, compassion fatigue, techno-capitalism

AS OF EARLY AUGUST OF 2024, Al Jazeera reports that the Israeli government has murdered at least 40,000 Palestinian civilians, the majority of whom (16,500) are children (AJLabs 2024), and has displaced 1.9 million civilians (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). Many of the uncounted Palestinian civilians remain under the rubble, with even more missing and taken as hostages by the IDF. These attacks on Palestinian civilians are part of a long and excruciating history of settler colonialism that has displaced millions of Palestinians from their homes for nearly a century. Most media sources, however, remain mainly concerned with the aftermath of the Hamas-led October 7th attack against Israeli citizens. This analysis will proceed with the recognition that the Israeli government has been forcing Jewish settlements on Palestinian lands, enacted an apartheid state, limited access to humanitarian aid in Gaza and the West Bank, set up multiple checkpoints to surveil and manage the Palestinian population, and led numerous military operations resulting in the deaths of countless Palestinian lives, all of which has been reduced to the metaphor of ‘mowing the lawn’ in Israeli discourses over the past 75 years (Chomsky and Pappé 2015).

After the October 7th attack on Israeli civilians, the Israeli government retaliated with a wave of airstrikes and by opening fire on innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza, justifying this as an effort to exterminate Hamas. Since October 7th, social media platforms have been employed by both sides as tools for resistance as well as instruments of dehumanization. This paper explores how propaganda is used to essentialize and dehumanize Palestinian civilians. I explore the role of dataism in reducing individuals to faceless statistics, and the resulting compassion fatigue that diminishes social media users’ empathy. Additionally, I aim to critically examine the positionality of social media within the broader framework of techno-capitalism, highlighting the biases of and limitations within these platforms.

Symbolic Violence and Propaganda:

In a lecture at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver on November 15, 2023, Safiya Noble discussed the emergence of “propaganda wars” through the mediation of the internet and social media platforms. In this context, propaganda refers to the essentializing, authenticating, and othering narratives deployed by the Israeli government against Palestinian civilians (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreis 2021). These propaganda wars use seemingly innocuous language and imagery to dehumanize and mislead the online public, creating a divisive 'us versus them' mentality.

Following October 7th, various news organizations and world leaders framed the conflict in terms of ' Hamas/Israel.' This language, originating from the IDF's official website, has been adopted by 'neutral' Western news sources. For example, The New York Times posted a seemingly 'neutral' article titled *“Israel-Gaza Fighting Flares for a Second Day”* in which the media outlet used language like 'Islamic militants', 'jihad' and 'misfired rockets' to narrativize 'Israel's right to defend itself' (Baroud 2024). This is a strategic form of propaganda that shifts the narrative away from the loss of innocent lives in Palestine and instead justifies the Israeli government's actions as necessary anti-terrorist measures. Such language not only embodies symbolic violence but also represents a mobilization of political language against Palestinians (Bourdieu 1984). It works to “reinforce the deep distrust—not incompatible with an equally deep form of recognition—which the dominated feel towards political language,” fostering a sense of helplessness and apathy among the public (Bourdieu 1984, 464–65). This 'neutral' political language, broadcasted by news organizations, echoed by politicians, and amplified on social media, serves to essentialize all Palestinians as Hamas, rendering Palestinian civilians as a homogenous, dangerous group and thereby justifying the inhumane acts committed against them. These descriptions of Palestinians as illustrated below

aim to strip away their individuality by associating their identity with violence and weapons, thereby reinforcing a sense of facelessness.



Figure 1. Propaganda images posted by the Israeli Defence Force X account (@IDF, December 1, 2023).

The IDF's use of propaganda on their X (formerly Twitter) page further illustrates this manipulation. For example, fig. 1 above contrasts an Israeli child with an adult Palestinian woman. The deliberate association of the Palestinian woman with weapons reinforces her facelessness, reduces her identity to a terrorist combatant and as someone who is violent towards Israelis, further preventing the audience from empathizing with her. This intentional dehumanization through visual rhetoric makes her, and by extension all Palestinians, easier to other and essentialize as threats. The stark color schemes and selected images (a bike vs. a bomb) are meticulously chosen to deepen the narratives of Palestinian culpability and Israeli victimhood. This image exemplifies how propaganda operates, creating and disseminating harmful, dehumanizing narratives (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreis 2021).

While social media platforms like Instagram have facilitated the global spread of dehumanizing narratives such as the ones highlighted above, they have also played

a significant role in shaping global reactions and mobilizing social movements in support of Palestine. These movements are often inspired by Palestinian journalists and activists who risk their lives daily to humanize Palestinians and remind the world of their names and faces. While Instagram did not create these movements, it provided the infrastructure that facilitated their organization and spread (Rodineliussen 2019, 240).

However, it is crucial to critically examine the positionality of social media within techno-capital. These platforms are not neutral; their algorithms are highly biased, often reflecting the interests of the corporations that control them. For instance, Human Rights Watch reported that Meta's policies and practices have been censoring Palestinian voices. Content related to Palestine has been suppressed under flawed policies such as Dangerous Organizations and Individuals (DOI), which unfairly categorize Palestinian context as violent (Brown and Younes 2023). Additionally, the IDF's AI system, 'Lavender,' has been used to identify airstrike targets through WhatsApp contacts (Middle East Monitor 2024). These examples highlight how tech giants like Meta are far from unbiased, and their platforms, influenced by these biases, can perpetuate the very injustices they claim to be neutral towards. While social media has undeniably facilitated activism, it is also embedded within a broader techno-capitalist framework that can undermine and censor the very movements it helps to amplify.

Counter-Narratives, Dataism, and Resistance

Social media has played a significant role in mobilizing global protests for Palestine, with Palestinian journalists and activists using these platforms to bring attention to the realities on the ground. Journalists like Motaz (@motaz_azaiza) and Motasem (@motasem.mortaja) have used their Instagram platforms to share personal stories and document the violence against Palestinian civilians. Their work

goes beyond mere reporting; it fosters a deep connection between the international community and the Palestinian people, cultivating compassion and reinforcing Palestinian identity on social media. Organizations like "We Are Not Numbers," a Palestine-based initiative, have further amplified these efforts by creating profiles of those lost in the conflict. They, along with media outlets like B'Tselem (2024), Al Jazeera (Haddad and Antonopoulos 2023), and The Washington Post (Mellen, Galocha, and Ledur 2023), work to share the stories behind the statistics, putting faces to the numbers seen on Instagram. These narratives challenge the dehumanization that occurs when individuals are reduced to mere figures.

However, it is essential to recognize that numbers and statistics are also tools used by the IDF and the Israeli government to generate propaganda within a colonial framework. Numbers are used to dehumanize Palestinians, rendering them faceless and desensitizing the public to their suffering. Numbers are employed to dehumanize Palestinians, rendering them faceless entities and desensitizing the public to their suffering. As Elia Zureik (2010) highlights, the collection of statistics within the Palestinian population reflects power imbalances, often with Palestinians not being the ones producing these figures. A striking example occurred on July 24, 2024, when Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, addressed Congress in Washington. He stated, "I asked the commander there [in Rafah], 'how many terrorists did you take out in Rafah?' He gave me an exact number: 1,203. I asked him, 'how many civilians were killed?' He said, 'Prime Minister, practically none.'" This quote illustrates how the Israeli government carefully selects and presents numbers to shape public perception. Netanyahu's emphasis on the number of "terrorists" killed, while falsely claiming no civilian casualties, highlights how statistics are manipulated to create specific narratives about Palestinians. As Zureik notes, "counting the Palestinians becomes a political act laden with controversy [...] depending on who does the counting" (Zureik 2019).

Following the October 7th attacks, numbers have taken on a life of their own on social media, with big, bolded statistics dominating the narrative. While it is crucial to remember the lives lost, constant exposure to quantitative data like death tolls can have a numbing effect. Numbers alone do not convey the lived experiences behind them; they reduce real people to statistics and only further dehumanize them. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of dataism, defined as “a widespread belief in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behavior and sociality” (Fors et al. 2020, 25). Dataism strips numbers of context while smoothing over and erasing the stories behind them. When applied to human narratives, dataism reduces the complexity of the Palestinian experience to mere statistics, overlooking the fact that these numbers represent real people with families, culture, and identity. This quantification instills a sense of facelessness, embedding a false sense of objectivity into knowledge systems that render individuals commensurable and legible within settler colonial frameworks (Willmott 2023).

In this context, the practice of dataism, when discussing Palestinian casualties, produces what I term ‘conversation-stopping narratives.’ These narratives arise when users repost numbers without engaging with the human realities beneath them. Dataism functions as a conversation-stopping narrative because it often leads to “compassion fatigue” (Moeller 1999), where people become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data and stop discussing the underlying issues. Instead of focusing on the people who have died and their stories, the conversation shifts solely to the numbers, effectively silencing deeper discussions about the human cost of the conflict. Thus, while Palestinian activists and journalists work to humanize the numbers and tell the stories behind them, the pervasive influence of dataism inadvertently contributes to the very dehumanization they seek to resist.

Post-October 7th, my Instagram feed filled with images and reports from Gaza, many shared by journalists risking their lives to document the unfolding crisis. As the situation worsened and journalists were targeted or forced to evacuate, civilians took it upon themselves to capture and share what was happening. Amid waves of compassion fatigue and as people began to post and talk less about Gaza, these civilians urged the online community not to remain silent. Compassion Fatigue, a term coined by Susan D. Moeller (1999) in *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War, and Death*, refers to the public's diminishing emotional response to humanitarian crises due to overexposure. I witnessed this firsthand on Instagram, where Palestinian civilians, including those in desperate situations, posted pleas for visibility and support, resisting the algorithms that sought to filter out their voices. For example:

- "I will not forgive anyone who watches this video without sharing it. I am Khamis from Gaza. You can help me and my family by donating. Donation link is in bio. Share this video. Like and comment." (@khames._mahmoud, July 28, 2024)
- "For 5 seconds, watch this video if you care about us in Gaza. If you can watch it till the end, I know you want to help us. Please press the buttons you see on the screen to save me and my family." (@musbah.family11, June 12, 2024)
- "Please don't skip this video. We are so tired. Please help my family survive this war. Watch this video and donate if you can. The link is in my bio." (@m0taz_family, August 6, 2024)
- "Please stop. We know that you are tired of watching videos like this, asking you not to skip them. But what other option do we have? My father and sister are infected. We lost our house and now we have no

income. Please help us by liking, sharing, commenting, and donating if possible." (@ziad.alhindawi.family, August 3, 2024)

After the attacks on October 7th, social media, particularly Instagram, was flooded with real-time coverage from Palestinian journalists and civilians. Initially, the online world seemed to engage actively, but as the crisis prolonged, interest waned, and posts became less frequent. This decline in engagement is something I observed on my own Instagram feed. The diminishing emotional response, exacerbated by the constant stream of brutal images and overwhelming casualty statistics, speaks to compassion fatigue. The repetitive exposure to these numbers and images can numb people and reduce their ability to empathize. Numbers alone, detached from the human experiences they represent, contribute to this desensitization and render real people as faceless statistics.

Compassion fatigue also results from the sheer volume of crises happening simultaneously, which overwhelms the public's capacity to engage with all of them. In the context of Palestine, the prolonged nature of the conflict, combined with explicit and gruesome images, pushes many to retreat to ignorance as a form of self-preservation. As Moeller (1999) notes, "Didactic images can overload the senses. A single child at risk commands our attention and prompts our action. But one child, and then another, and another, and on and on is too much. A crowd of people in danger is faceless. Numbers alone can numb."

Journalists in Palestine have observed this compassion fatigue within international audiences. For example, Yara Eid, a prominent Palestinian activist and journalist, recently posted, "It seems like the world got tired of us being murdered: we're seeing fewer social media posts, less coverage globally. Since day one, this has been Israel's goal. To make us all fatigued and used to their war crimes. But Palestinians are still being slaughtered every day... we need you to call for an end to this genocide; we still need you to fight for us!" (@eid_yara, Nov 21, 2023). The

world is gradually becoming desensitized to the Palestinian cause, bombarded with faceless numbers that make it easier to forget that real human beings are suffering on the ground. This dataism-caused facelessness reinforces the dehumanization of Palestinians, making it harder for the public to maintain empathy and engagement.

Conclusion

The intersection of social media, propaganda, and dataism has profoundly influenced global perceptions of the Palestinian genocide. While platforms like Instagram enable the spread of counter-narratives and help humanize the victims, they are also embedded within a techno-capitalist framework that can undermine these efforts. The influence of biased algorithms and the dehumanization inherent in dataism contribute to compassion fatigue, making it easier for the global audience to become desensitized to the ongoing suffering in Palestine. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing the power and limitations of social media in shaping public discourse. After 10 months, the genocide in Gaza continues, with Palestinians losing their lives, families, and homes while Instagram users watch from their phones. This reality underscores the importance of our digital footprints and serves as a reminder not to become desensitized or stop posting in the face of mass cruelty and compassion fatigue.

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