Unveiling Counter-Narratives: The Impact of Citizen Journalism via Social Media on the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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Abstract: The Israel-Palestine conflict has traditionally been portrayed by mainstream media through dominant narratives that often align with specific viewpoints and agendas. In this context, the rise of citizen journalism has introduced both challenges and opportunities by providing alternative perspectives and counter-narratives to mainstream representations. However, the precise impact and role of citizen journalism in shaping these counter-narratives during the Israel-Palestine confrontations remain underexplored and require further investigation. Therefore, this study aims to examine how citizen journalism is utilized to offer alternative perspectives on the mainstream media's coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict and to influence public perception of products and services associated with Israel. The study finds that social media has amplified the reach of citizen journalism, serving as a platform for digital activism among Palestinians, and providing alternative narratives to those presented by mainstream media. This has enabled Palestinians to garner support from international allies, condemn the violence committed by Israeli military forces, and contribute to Israel's gradual loss in the battle of public opinion, thereby limiting the effectiveness of Israeli propaganda in both mainstream and new media.

Keywords: *Counter-Narrative, Social media, Israel-Palestine Conflict*

1. Introduction

Technological advancements have drastically reshaped lifestyles, revolutionizing communication and granting effortless access to vast information. The creation and enhancement of various technologies have undoubtedly introduced a broad spectrum of benefits and opportunities in our rapidly advancing modern society. The advent of the Internet and digital platforms has particularly transformed conventional systems, especially within the media industry, altering how information is disseminated to the public. Allan (2013) emphasizes the participatory aspect of this journalism, which contrasts with the traditional, top-down approach typical of mainstream journalism.

Citizen journalism is described as the gathering, writing, editing, production, and distribution of news and information by people not trained as professional journalists, often to provide an alternative to the mainstream news agenda (Goode, 2009). Mainstream news media are often governed by entities with specific agendas and interests, which can result in selective reporting and controlled media framing. Citizen journalism, however, has the potential to uncover hidden truths, providing a platform for oppressed individuals to voice their realities. Citizen journalism has been crucial in delivering unfiltered, on-the-ground observations directly from the conflict zones. By utilizing social media and digital platforms, ordinary individuals take on the role of citizen journalists, offering immediate and personal accounts that often contrast with mainstream media narratives. Thus, this study seeks to explore how citizen journalism is utilized to offer alternative perspectives to mainstream media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict and its significant impact on public perception.

2. Citizen Journalism in the Modern World

The relationship between traditional journalism and citizen journalism is intricate and multifaceted. While traditional journalism originates from established news organizations and adheres to established editorial practices, citizen journalism has emerged as a complementary—and at times disruptive—force within the media landscape. Citizen journalism has always existed alongside traditional journalism practices. While pinpointing the exact inception of citizen journalism is challenging, it is more meaningful to examine the events that contributed to its rise. The emergence of citizen journalism is linked to the increasing interaction between

journalists and the general public, providing ordinary individuals with the opportunity to communicate outside the traditional constraints of time and place (Mutsvairo & Salgado, 2020).

The evolution of citizen journalism has been a dynamic process that has fundamentally transformed traditional journalism, marked by significant milestones over the years. One early example is cited by Allan (2013), who notes that in 1963, Abraham Zapruder unintentionally became a citizen journalist when he captured the assassination of John F. Kennedy on his camera. Though not intentional reporting, this incident highlighted the potential for ordinary people to document historic events, laying the groundwork for the rise of citizen journalism. The term "citizen journalism" gained prominence following the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001. It later became more apparent during the 2004 Asian tsunami, as photographs and videos personally blogged by travellers gained widespread attention (Jurat, 2013).

The rise of citizen journalism paralleled technological advancements in the last decade of the twentieth century, which revolutionized how information is disseminated, particularly due to the rapid growth of the Internet and social media. Technology, including smartphones and social media platforms, played a critical role in this transformation, enabling anyone with a phone or internet connection to share stories. Ordinary individuals can use their phones to capture and document events as they happen and immediately share these stories through social media. The unrestricted access to social media tools allows virtually anyone to quickly disseminate information, news, or opinions without delay, often accompanied by photos and video evidence.

Additionally, with the capabilities of social media, this approach empowers everyday people to engage in shaping and spreading news narratives, ensuring that a wider range of voices and perspectives are represented in the media. This, in turn, fosters a more inclusive and democratic media environment. Furthermore, citizen journalism addresses the issue of trustworthiness in news distribution, particularly in authoritarian regimes, by enhancing public access to reliable and credible sources of information, thereby promoting engagement and reinforcing concepts of independence and reliability. As a result, citizen journalism not only democratizes content distribution but also bolsters the trustworthiness and dependability of shared information.

Moreover, citizen journalism has the potential to influence the agendas of traditional media and shape government policy in democratic countries (Khan et al., 2022). It encourages public participation and discourse, shaping the topics and narratives that gain prominence in mainstream media. This influence has been particularly evident in addressing the credibility gap and public skepticism towards mainstream news, especially during major events like the COVID-19 pandemic, within the context of crisis management and risk communication (Sheen et al., 2021). In Malaysia, for instance, the government has integrated both mainstream journalism and citizen journalism to disseminate information and policies related to COVID-19. News practitioners, health experts, and social media influencers have collaborated to educate and relay information to the public from various perspectives. By providing alternative sources of information and a broader array of viewpoints, citizen journalism reinforces the credibility of news, contributing significantly to a more informed and empowered public, thus helping the government build public trust in managing the crisis.

While citizen journalism amplifies voices often unheard by mainstream media, it is also met with skepticism by professional journalists due to its lack of validation processes and perceived lack of neutrality. Mahamed (2022) notes that one of the primary concerns with citizen journalism is the lack of training and resources available to citizen journalists. Unlike their professional counterparts, citizen journalists may lack the expertise and resources needed to report accurately and objectively. This deficiency can lead to the spread of misinformation and fake news, with significant consequences for both individuals and society. Another issue is the lack of accountability and transparency. Without a formal organization or editorial process, citizen journalists may not be held to the same standards of accuracy and ethics as professional journalists, potentially resulting in biased reporting or the dissemination of rumors and unverified information.

Additionally, concerns about the credibility of citizen journalism persist. Some view citizen journalists as less trustworthy than professional journalists, which can undermine the overall credibility of citizen journalism. Research indicates that media users have different expectations of professional journalism and place higher importance on the roles of professional journalists compared to non-professional citizen journalists. Although citizen journalism is widely recognized and influential, it does not replace traditional journalism but rather

complements it in several ways. Its immediacy in capturing events and presenting diverse perspectives has significantly expanded the scope of journalism. During major crises such as natural disasters, citizen journalists on social media provide instant updates, thereby supplementing the coverage offered by established news outlets.

3. The Emergence of Citizen Journalism in the Ongoing Israel-Palestine Conflict

The Israel-Palestine conflict traces its roots back to the late 19th century, a period marked by the Zionist movement's efforts to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, then under Ottoman rule. This territory, traditionally regarded by Jews as the Land of Israel, became the focus of increased Jewish migration, particularly after the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which endorsed the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Following World War II and the Holocaust, international advocacy for the creation of a Jewish state intensified, leading to the founding of Israel in 1948. This event catalyzed a protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinian population, marked by the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, a consequence of the war that followed Israel's establishment (United Nations, 2023).

Palestinians seek to establish an independent state within the boundaries of historic Palestine. However, Israeli control over the West Bank, the blockade of the Gaza Strip, and internal political divisions within Palestine continue to impede this objective. Despite numerous peace negotiations, a sustainable peace agreement remains elusive. The conflict has been characterized by significant violence, involving Palestinian militant activities and resistance movements, as well as Israeli military actions. Key issues such as Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the status of Jerusalem, and the future of Palestinian refugees have complicated international mediation efforts, particularly those led by the United States (United Nations, 2023).

Central to the conflict are territorial disputes, security concerns, and the pursuit of self-determination. Israeli control over Palestinian territories, especially Gaza, has had far-reaching impacts across several domains, including healthcare, food security, mobility, and media. The Israeli blockade has severely restricted access to medical supplies and other essential resources for Gazans, negatively impacting their health and overall well-being. Additionally, limitations on mobility have disrupted daily life, economic opportunities, and access to critical services in Gaza. The control exerted by Israel over Gaza has also shaped the flow of information and the narratives presented to the global public. Both Israel and Palestine have sought to sway international opinion through extensive media coverage. Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools in this context, facilitating the spread of alternative narratives and diverse perspectives on the conflict. This development has elevated the role of citizen journalism in the ongoing battle to shape public perception and influence global discourse

Genesis of Citizen Journalism and Social Media Role in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Debates have arisen regarding the role of citizen journalism and the dissemination of information through social media platforms. Citizen journalism has played a crucial role in deepening the understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict by offering dissenting perspectives and challenging dominant narratives. The advent of social media has empowered users to document events, share personal experiences, and engage in public discourse. For Palestinians, social media has become a battleground to showcase their resistance against Israel's suppression and occupation, revealing aspects of the conflict that mainstream media may overlook and countering Israeli narratives.

Research has demonstrated the impact of social media on conflict coverage, the polarization of public discourse, and the role of suspicion and distrust in shaping media narratives. Furthermore, investigations into war and peace journalism perspectives have highlighted the influence these approaches have on the framing and portrayal of international conflicts, including the Israel-Palestine situation (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023). Yarchi and Ayalon (2020) explored the pivotal narratives in the Israel-Palestine conflict, emphasizing that modern conflicts involve a struggle to control the narratives conveyed, particularly within the media sphere. They identified a common pattern in how political entities, both state and non-state actors, strive to position themselves as victims, assign blame to the opposing side, and propose their solutions. However, these narratives diverge depending on specific events and cultural contexts.

The Israeli narrative, for instance, focuses on self-defense, portraying Israelis as victims and justifying their actions as necessary responses to Palestinian terrorism. This narrative underscores Israel's desire for peace, its efforts to prevent bloodshed, and its defense against global terrorism, thereby resonating with concerns about terrorism and the potential loss of national identity, particularly in light of recent waves of immigration. Conversely, the Palestinian narrative, particularly as expressed by Hamas, centers on the liberation struggle, aiming to highlight the plight of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation and to garner international support. This narrative depicts the conflict as a fight for freedom and justice, portraying Palestinians as victims of oppression and territorial control while rationalizing their resistance as a legitimate response to Israeli aggression.

With the advent of the Internet, Palestinians have been able to connect regardless of geographic location—whether in Israel, the occupied territories, refugee camps in Lebanon, or the diaspora. Online Palestinian political activism has been facilitated by the convergence of physical and virtual spaces, with participatory online media, social media, and geospatial data (Foursquare) playing key roles. Palestinians have leveraged the Internet and social media to counter Israeli government oppression, participating as citizen journalists to provide alternative information and truths that challenge mainstream media portrayals (Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2021).

Social media has significantly empowered the Palestinian people to share their stories, advocate for their cause, and counter mainstream narratives. Palestinian residents have used social media to coordinate political and social gatherings, mobilize public sentiment, and share news and updates related to the Palestinian cause. Social networking sites have also helped to overcome communication barriers among Palestinians, allowing them to share and exchange information. During Israeli attacks on Gaza, social media platforms were utilized for real-time reporting and the rapid dissemination of breaking news. According to the "2021 Social Networking Report," Facebook was the most popular social networking platform among the Palestinian community, with 95.16% of users active on the site. WhatsApp followed with 81.5%, Instagram with 63.28%, TikTok with 27.70%, and Twitter with 26.14%. However, the Ipoke report noted that approximately 6.9% of Palestinian users were detained by Israeli authorities due to their social media activity, with 6.1% detained specifically because of the content they shared (Ali, 2022).

In 2023, an armed conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip has persisted for more than two months since October 7th. The death toll has escalated dramatically due to continuous aerial bombardments and violence by Israeli military forces against Gaza's civilian population. As of December 15th, Al-Jazeera (2023) reported that at least 18,787 Gazans have been killed, including 7,729 children and 5,153 women. The Israeli military has been accused of repeatedly violating international humanitarian law by targeting civilian infrastructure such as homes, schools, hospitals, and places of worship, as well as attacking medical staff and journalists, who are protected under international law while depriving the area of essential services like medical facilities, electricity, and water.

The Impact of Citizen Journalism on the World's Perception
Citizen journalism has been instrumental in creating more balanced media coverage for Palestinians. It enables them to connect and share information and news about their situation and the resistance movements taking place. This form of journalism significantly influences the Palestinian community, shaping their thoughts and behaviors. With restrictions on certain news media platforms regarding Palestinian content, citizen journalism through social media has become highly effective in spreading awareness about the dire situation in Palestine and in garnering international support. The coverage provided by citizen journalists not only shapes Palestinian attitudes but also fosters a strong sense of national identity and ethnic solidarity.

New media channels have a profound impact on social shaping and cultural interactions, continuously engaging with contentious political issues. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a central focus for the public, shaped by how news and stories are selected and presented on these platforms. This reshapes Palestinian consciousness about the ongoing conflict, whether in the Gaza Strip or occupied Palestinian territories like the West Bank (Horoub, 2023). In the past, most mainstream media outlets only published content from the Israeli perspective, often labelling Hamas as a terrorist group. However, during the latest 2023 war, these outlets began to report more objectively, synchronizing with new media content shared by ordinary people. Citizen

journalism and social media have significantly influenced public opinion during this war, leading many mainstream media outlets to adopt more balanced reporting and publish Palestine-related content. This has helped connect Palestinians and rally international support, with many concluding that Israel has lost the battle for public opinion, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: News Headlines on the Mainstream Media Framing on the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Citizen journalism has also contributed to significant global activism, with Palestinians and their international allies condemning and urging Israel to stop the oppression and violence against Palestinian civilians and to restore their rights. Many of the war's victims are vulnerable individuals, including children, women, and the elderly. Since the emergence of the Israel-Palestine conflict, there have been multiple rallies and demonstrations organized by international supporters, individuals, and institutions.

Figure 2: Global Demonstrations in Response to the Israel-Palestine Conflict by ACLED
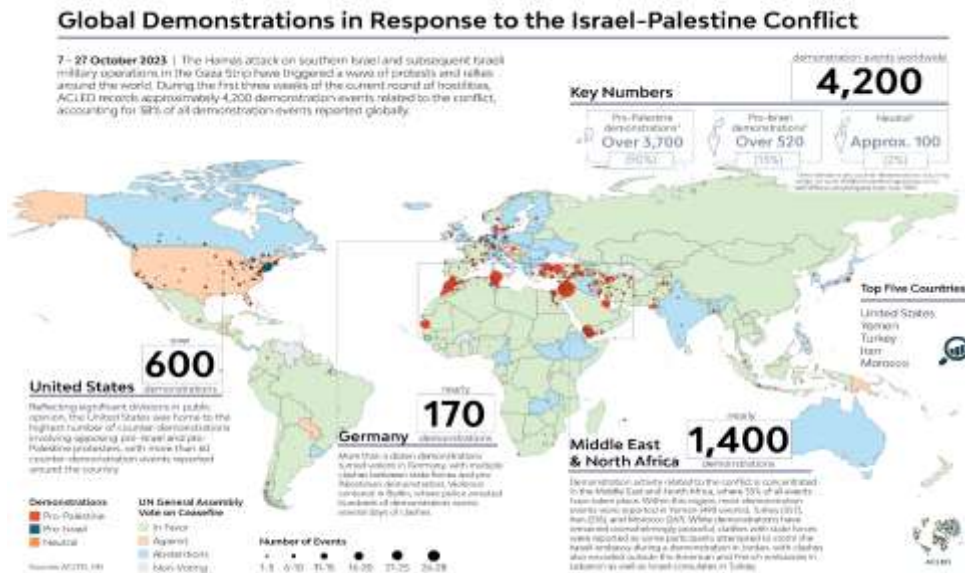

Figure 2, an illustration by The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), shows that as of November 7th, approximately 4,200 protest and rally events related to the 2023 Israel-Palestine Conflict have been held in nearly 100 countries and territories, accounting for all global demonstration events. Of these, 90%—over 3,700 demonstrations—have been pro-Palestinian, while there have been over 520 pro-Israel demonstrations and approximately 100 neutral demonstrations. Additionally, activism has extended to economic actions, with movements urging boycotts as a form of protest, fuelling the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement established in 2015 by a coalition of Palestinian civil society groups (Chughtai et al., 2023). Many brands have been severely impacted by these boycotts, leading to the closure of brand outlets in certain countries, and negatively affecting stock prices and corporate images. A list of brands boycotted by the BDS movement is shown in Figure 3.
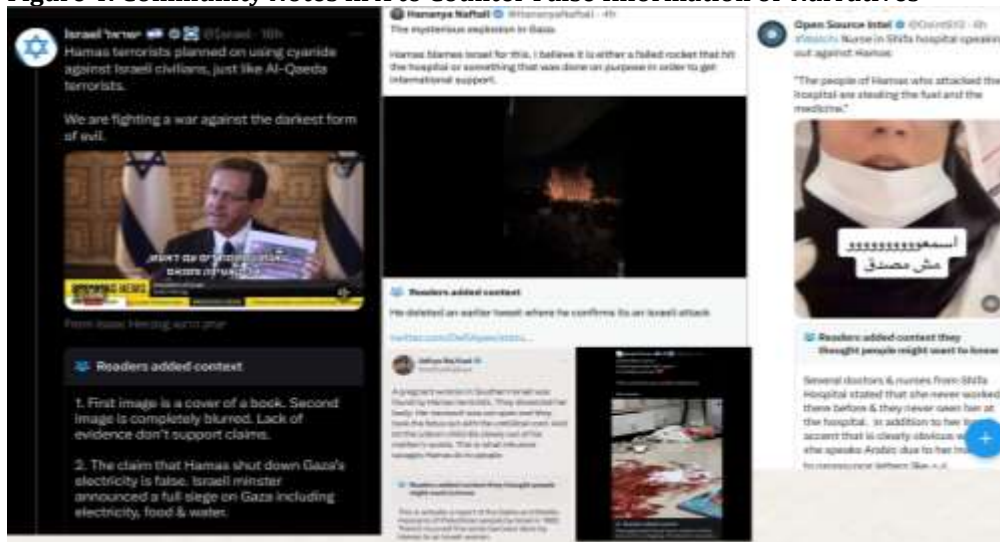
Digital activism has also gained momentum through online campaigns, leveraging social media features such as retweets, sharing updates across platforms, and utilizing hashtags to increase visibility. In response, Israel has intensified its social media campaigns to propagate its narrative. However, citizen journalism helps counter this by providing alternative perspectives and factual truths to challenge Israeli propaganda. Social media features, such as live vlogging, have been instrumental in the counter-narrative movement, allowing real-time coverage of events. Throughout the prolonged conflict, a significant amount of disinformation and fake news has circulated on social media platforms, manipulated by various actors to spread propaganda and influence public opinion. In response, X (formerly known as Twitter) has introduced a new feature called Community Notes to counter fake information.

Figure 3: List of Brands Boycotted by the BDS Movement

Community Notes is a collaborative tool that allows users to add helpful context to potentially misleading posts, with contributions from anyone on X. Supporters of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and their allies have frequently used social media to share content to win the narrative battle, often posting propaganda videos, images, and statements that include misleading or fake information. Citizens have used Community Notes to correct and counter these false narratives by providing more accurate information along with evidence. For example, a post by Jim Ferguson claimed that Hamas soldiers were using U.S. weapons "left behind in Afghanistan to attack Israel," but this was refuted by Community Notes, which clarified that the image was an old photo of Taliban soldiers from 2021 (Dixit, 2023). Figure 4 provides examples of how Community Notes on X has been used to counter false information or narratives shared on the platform.

Figure 4: Community Notes in X to Counter False Information or Narratives

However, the use of social media by Palestinians has encountered significant challenges and restrictions, including surveillance and detention by Israeli authorities based on social media activity. During the 2021 Gaza War, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms faced accusations of censorship for allegedly blocking content related to the conflict and suspending Palestinian accounts (Culliford, 2021). This conflict, which resulted in the deaths of 256 Palestinians, including 66 children, led to claims that social media companies were suppressing content about the Palestinian cause.

In the 2023 conflict, there was widespread outrage and dissatisfaction over the perceived uneven censorship of pro-Palestinian content on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Meta, the parent company of these platforms, denied the accusations, attributing the issues to potential system glitches due to the high volume of posts related to the conflict. However, investigations into Meta's censorship during Israel's 2021 assault on Gaza suggested otherwise. Recent examples have highlighted ongoing problems with Meta's algorithmic moderation. For instance, WhatsApp, also owned by Meta, produced images of children with guns when the word "Palestine" was entered, and Instagram's automatic translation mislabelled Palestinian profiles as "terrorists" (Paul, 2023). Prominent Palestinian activists have recently reported that their accounts and content have been restricted.

Despite these challenges, citizen journalism through social media has played a crucial role in helping Palestinians connect and raise global awareness of their suffering. Over the years, this has garnered significant attention and support, leading to a gradual shift in opinion in Western countries regarding the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. This shift has been facilitated by the collaboration between mainstream journalism and citizen journalism, along with the integration of various communication systems.

4. Conclusion

The Israel-Palestine conflict marked by profound humanitarian crises, political instability, economic disruptions, and regional tensions, has long been a focal point of global attention. Traditional media have often depicted the conflict through narratives shaped by specific viewpoints, which sometimes reflect the political agendas of powerful entities. However, the rise of citizen journalism, particularly through social media, has introduced a new dimension to the portrayal of the conflict by offering alternative perspectives and counter-narratives that challenge mainstream media representations.

Citizen journalism, often referred to as participatory journalism, empowers ordinary individuals to engage in news gathering and dissemination, thus democratizing the media landscape. In the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Palestinian citizens have utilized social media as a platform for digital activism, offering insights and narratives that are often overshadowed or ignored by mainstream media outlets. This grassroots form of journalism has been instrumental in mobilizing international support for the Palestinian cause, drawing attention to the hardships faced by Palestinians under Israeli military actions, and gradually shifting global opinion.

The 2023 conflict saw a resurgence of similar issues, with social media users expressing outrage over perceived uneven censorship of pro-Palestinian content. Meta's platforms were again at the center of controversy, with reports of Palestinian activists' accounts and content being limited. Additionally, problematic algorithmic moderation surfaced, such as WhatsApp generating inappropriate images when prompted with the word "Palestine" and Instagram's automatic translation mistakenly labelling Palestinian profiles as "terrorists." Despite these challenges, citizen journalism via social media has remained a vital tool for Palestinians, helping them connect with global audiences and sustain international attention and support for their cause.

The effectiveness of boycotts against Israeli products or services affiliated with Israel as a form of protest has also been a topic of discussion. The potential impacts of such boycotts include economic consequences, where the revenue of Israeli companies could be adversely affected, particularly if the boycott is widespread and sustained. Politically, boycotts can serve as a form of protest against Israeli policies, raising awareness and pressuring policymakers. Socially, boycotts can mobilize support for the Palestinian cause and foster solidarity, while also sparking dialogue and debate on the broader issues surrounding the conflict. However, boycotts may

also lead to counter-reactions from Israeli authorities or supporters, who may attempt to discredit the boycott movement or retaliate against its supporters.

The Israel-Palestine conflict continues to have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the immediate parties involved but also shaping the political, economic, and social landscape of the Middle East. Citizen journalism has played a transformative role in this context, revolutionizing the way information is communicated and enabling alternative narratives to reach global audiences. While challenges such as censorship and algorithmic biases remain, the impact of citizen journalism and social media in mobilizing international support for the Palestinian cause cannot be underestimated.

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