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| RESEARCH ARTICLE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Mediated Polarization: The Impact of Digital Platforms on Conflict Narratives |                                          |
| Saidani Selami                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Researcher                                                                    |                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Mohamed Boudiaf University of M'sila                                          |                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Algeria                                                                       |                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Email: Salami.saidani@univ-msila.dz ; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8624-3104   |                                          |
| Leila Feguri                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Researcher                                                                    |                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Mohamed Boudiaf University of M'sila                                          |                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Algeria                                                                       |                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Email: leila.feguri@univ-msila.dz ; https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2698-9846     |                                          |
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| Abstract                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                               |                                          |
| <p>In the era of digital media, modern communication platforms have become one of the most influential factors in shaping public opinion and directing societal discussions. With the rise of crises and conflicts, the phenomenon of electronic polarization has emerged, where digital platforms are used as tools to reinforce ideological and political divisions, leading to an environment filled with tension and bias. This presentation aims to explore the role of digital media in fostering polarization, while providing real-world examples that highlight its impact in times of conflict.</p> |                                                                               |                                          |
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| <p>© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Science, Education and Innovations in the context of modern problems (SEI) by IMCRA - International Meetings and Journals Research Association (Azerbaijan). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems, Issue 7, Vol.VIII, 2025</p>                                                                                                                                   |                                                                               |                                          |
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## 1. Introduction: Setting the Context

In the contemporary digital age, media no longer merely reports conflict—it shapes, amplifies, and in some cases manufactures its narratives. With the rise of digital platforms, conflict zones have become fertile ground for the production of electronic polarization. This phenomenon involves the intentional or incidental deepening of social, political, or ideological divisions through digital media content. The influence of algorithms, echo chambers, and real-time dissemination mechanisms has made digital media a central player in the escalation or manipulation of public sentiment during crises.

## 2.Problem Statement:

In light of escalating international conflicts and the growing reliance on digital media as a primary source of information, these platforms have moved beyond merely conveying reality—they now play a pivotal role in shaping and constructing it to serve particular agendas. This raises the central question:

To what extent does digital media, through its technical mechanisms and audience interactions, contribute to the manufacture of electronic polarization during times of conflict? And what impact does this polarization have on public perception of reality and on traditional media discourse?

### - Sub-questions:

1. What are the technical mechanisms employed by digital media in reinforcing electronic polarization during conflicts?
2. How do platform algorithms contribute to the amplification of divisive or extremist discourses?
3. What is the nature of audience interaction with polarized content on social media during periods of conflict?
4. How do digital media practices affect the credibility of traditional journalism during times of crisis?
5. What are the most prominent real-world examples that illustrate the role of digital media in manufacturing electronic polarization (e.g., the war in Ukraine or the Gaza conflict)?

## 2. Conceptual Framework: What is Electronic Polarization?

Electronic polarization refers to the fragmentation of public opinion into hostile ideological camps, largely facilitated through digital technologies. It is often engineered by: (Hammond, 2007, p113)

- **Algorithmic filtering**, which curates content that reinforces user beliefs.
- **Disinformation and propaganda**, particularly during crises.
- **Emotionally charged content** that exploits fear, anger, or group identity.
- **Bot and troll campaigns** designed to destabilize discourse.

This process can result in a distorted perception of the “other,” erosion of trust in institutions, and a digital battlefield where truth is contested.

## 3. The Role of Digital Media Platforms

In the digital age, media platforms have transitioned from traditional broadcast models to interactive, algorithm-driven environments. Digital media platforms—such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram—have become primary channels for information dissemination, public engagement, and socio-political mobilization. Their ubiquity has fundamentally reshaped how individuals consume content, express opinions, and participate in public discourse.

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and TikTok operate on engagement-driven models that often prioritize sensationalism over nuance. In conflict scenarios: (Snow, 2020, 269)

- **Virality outpaces verification.**
- **Visual content (images, deepfakes, AI-generated graphics)** has disproportionate impact.
- **User-generated content** becomes both a tool for resistance and manipulation.

Digital platforms can be weaponized to stoke divisions, recruit sympathizers, and reinforce polarizing narratives through targeted content delivery. (O’Loughlin, 2010, p39)

### 3.1. Redefining Information Flow

Digital media platforms operate through decentralized content production. Unlike traditional media, where editorial hierarchies controlled the message, today’s platforms allow users to generate, distribute, and amplify content. This has democratized the flow of information but also raised concerns about misinformation, echo chambers, and declining content quality. (Hammond, 2007, p116)

### 3.2. Algorithmic Personalization and Engagement

One of the defining features of digital platforms is the use of recommendation algorithms. These systems prioritize content based on user preferences, previous interactions,

and behavioral data. While this improves user engagement, it can also lead to filter bubbles—environments where users are exposed only to like-minded perspectives, reinforcing existing biases and polarizing communities. (Knightley, 2006, p99)

### 3.3. Impact on Journalism and News Consumption

Digital media platforms have disrupted traditional journalism. While they offer journalists greater reach, they have also shifted the news economy toward virality, speed, and audience metrics over depth and accuracy. The rise of “clickbait” headlines and real-time reporting has challenged the journalistic emphasis on verification and objectivity. (Merrin, 2018, p65)

### 3.4. Political and Social Mobilization

Platforms like X and Facebook have been instrumental in political activism, citizen journalism, and social justice movements. From the Arab Spring to #BlackLivesMatter, digital media has enabled grassroots movements to gain visibility. However, these same platforms can also be exploited for disinformation campaigns, foreign interference, and hate speech.

### 3.5. Ethical and Regulatory Considerations

The increasing power of digital platforms has raised ethical and regulatory concerns. Issues such as data privacy, platform accountability, content moderation, and the spread of harmful or false content are at the forefront of global debates. Governments and international organizations are now exploring frameworks to ensure these platforms operate responsibly while preserving freedom of expression.

Digital media platforms have become central to modern communication, altering how societies engage with information, politics, and culture. While they offer opportunities for greater participation and innovation, they also present new challenges that must be addressed through thoughtful regulation, media literacy, and ethical platform design.

## 4. Case Studies: Real-World Examples of Manufactured Polarization

### a. Russia-Ukraine War (2022–Present)

- Russian and Ukrainian digital propaganda machines flooded platforms with conflicting narratives.
- Deepfake videos (e.g., Zelenskyy’s fake surrender) misled audiences temporarily.
- Western vs. Eastern bloc media framed the conflict with starkly different moral binaries.

The Russia-Ukraine War, which began with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24, 2022, marks one of the most significant and destabilizing conflicts in Europe since World War II. This war has reshaped global geopolitics, triggered a humanitarian crisis, and led to an ongoing confrontation between Russia and

the West. It is not only a regional dispute but also a broader struggle involving sovereignty, identity, security, and international law.

#### 4.a.1. Background and Causes

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have historical roots, particularly since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of conflict in eastern Ukraine. Russia's strategic motivations include : (Picco, 2022, p219)

- Preventing Ukraine's integration into Western institutions like NATO and the EU.
- Reasserting influence over the post-Soviet space.
- Promoting Russian nationalism and the protection of Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine.

Ukraine's 2014 Revolution of Dignity, which ousted a pro-Russian president and aligned the country with Western values, is often cited by Russia as a turning point that justified its later military actions.

#### 4.a.2. Course of the War

The war began with Russia launching a multi-pronged invasion from the north, east, and south. Initial efforts to capture Kyiv quickly failed due to strong Ukrainian resistance. The conflict has since evolved into a prolonged and attritional war, particularly focused in the eastern Donbas region and the south near Crimea.

- Key developments include:

- Ukrainian military counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson in 2022.
- Massive Western military and financial aid to Ukraine.
- Russia's mobilization of reservists and annexation claims of occupied territories.
- Ongoing missile and drone strikes targeting civilian infrastructure.

#### 4.a.3. Humanitarian and Economic Impact

The war has resulted in a devastating humanitarian crisis:

- Over 10 million Ukrainians displaced internally and abroad.
- Thousands of civilian casualties.
- Destruction of cities, energy infrastructure, and agricultural land.

Globally, the war has contributed to:

- Rising energy prices.
- Disruptions in global food supplies, particularly grain exports.
- Intensification of inflation and economic instability, especially in developing countries.

#### 4.a.4. International Response and Geopolitical Consequences

The war has intensified global divisions: (Webster, 2023, 409)

- NATO and the EU have shown unprecedented unity in supporting Ukraine.

- The U.S. has led in supplying advanced weapons and imposing sanctions on Russia.

- Countries like China, India, and Brazil have adopted more neutral or strategic positions, focusing on their own geopolitical and economic interests.

The war has also accelerated military modernization, cyber defense initiatives, and debates over global security frameworks.

#### 4.a.5. Media, Propaganda, and Information Warfare

The conflict is heavily mediated by digital platforms and information campaigns: ()

- Russia has employed state-controlled media and disinformation tactics.

- Ukraine has utilized digital diplomacy, viral media campaigns, and open-source intelligence (OSINT) to counter narratives and gain international support.

This has made the war not only a military conflict but also an information and narrative battleground.

The Russia-Ukraine War continues to evolve, with no definitive end in sight. It represents a watershed moment in modern geopolitics, challenging the post-Cold War security order and testing the resilience of international institutions. The outcome will significantly influence the future of global alliances, sovereignty, and conflict resolution in the 21st century.

#### b. Gaza Conflict (2023)

- AI-generated imagery of victims spread rapidly, invoking global outrage.

- Competing hashtags (#FreePalestine vs. #StandWithIsrael) fueled narrative warfare.

- Platforms struggled to distinguish between authentic content and synthetic propaganda.

The Gaza Conflict of 2023 represents a critical chapter in the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It erupted on October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched a large-scale attack on Israel, triggering Israel's military response. This conflict has added another layer of complexity to the region's volatile political landscape, marked by cycles of violence, territorial disputes, and humanitarian crises. The Gaza strip, controlled by Hamas since 2007, remains a focal point of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle for sovereignty, identity, and survival.

#### 5.b.1. Background and Causes

The Gaza Conflict of 2023 cannot be fully understood without considering the historical and political context that precedes it:

- **Israeli-Palestinian Tensions:** The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates back to the mid-20th century, rooted in competing national identities and territorial claims. While

Gaza has long been a flashpoint, it became particularly contentious after Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the territory, which subsequently fell under the control of Hamas, an Islamist militant group.

- **Blockade and Humanitarian Crisis:** Since Hamas took power, Israel has imposed a strict blockade on Gaza, severely restricting the movement of goods and people, contributing to a humanitarian disaster marked by poverty, limited access to healthcare, and economic collapse.
- **Tensions in Jerusalem:** Incidents in Jerusalem, especially related to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, have often sparked violence and inflamed tensions. The events surrounding the Temple Mount have historically been a trigger for escalations.

The immediate cause of the 2023 conflict was a large-scale attack by Hamas on Israeli towns, followed by Israel's retaliatory airstrikes on Gaza. This escalated into heavy fighting, with widespread casualties on both sides. (Robinson, 2023, p356)

#### 5.b.2. Course of the Conflict

The war saw an unprecedented level of violence, with both sides utilizing advanced military technologies and traditional methods of warfare:

- **Hamas' Attack:** On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an unexpected attack on Israel, involving thousands of rockets and ground forces, targeting Israeli towns and military installations. Hamas also took hostages, further escalating the conflict.
- **Israeli Response:** Israel, which has a technologically advanced military, responded with airstrikes aimed at Hamas' military infrastructure and leadership in Gaza. The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) targeted rocket launchers, tunnels, and weapons storage facilities in the densely populated strip.
- **Humanitarian Toll:** The Gaza Strip, one of the most densely populated regions in the world, suffered catastrophic damage. Thousands of civilians were killed or injured as Israeli airstrikes targeted militant strongholds, resulting in significant destruction to homes, hospitals, and schools. In Israel, rocket attacks from Gaza led to dozens of civilian casualties and widespread property damage.

#### 5.b.3. International Reactions and Global Impact

The 2023 Gaza Conflict garnered significant international attention and divided opinions across the globe : (Robinson, 2023, p366)

- **International Condemnation and Calls for Ceasefire:** Various international organizations, including the United Nations and the European Union, called for an immediate ceasefire, urging both sides to stop the violence and protect civilians. The international community, however, was deeply divided in its approach to the conflict, with some nations

supporting Israel's right to self-defense, while others condemned Israel's airstrikes as disproportionate.

- **Arab World and Muslim Solidarity:** The Arab League and many Muslim-majority countries expressed strong solidarity with the Palestinian people, and large-scale protests erupted across the Middle East, demanding an end to Israeli actions. Countries like Iran, Turkey, and Qatar condemned Israeli airstrikes while offering moral support to Hamas.
- **US and Western Support for Israel:** The United States and many European countries expressed unequivocal support for Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism. However, growing pressure emerged for Israel to limit civilian casualties and provide humanitarian aid to Gaza.

#### 5.b.4. The Role of Digital Media in the Gaza Conflict

As with many modern conflicts, the Gaza conflict of 2023 has been significantly shaped by digital media and social media platforms:

- **Real-Time Updates and Propaganda:** Both Israel and Hamas have utilized social media to promote their narratives, share real-time updates, and mobilize supporters. While this has helped raise global awareness, it has also led to the spread of misinformation and propaganda, further polarizing opinions.
- **Deepfake and Disinformation:** During the conflict, there were widespread reports of manipulated images and videos (including deepfake content) designed to inflame passions and mislead viewers. Both sides engaged in disinformation campaigns to sway global opinion and maintain internal support.
- **Public Diplomacy:** Palestinian and Israeli officials alike turned to platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram to broadcast their positions. The use of these platforms was crucial in shaping the perception of the conflict worldwide, especially among younger audiences.

#### 5.b.5. Humanitarian and Economic Impact

The conflict has had severe humanitarian consequences, particularly for the residents of Gaza:

- **Casualties and Displacement:** Thousands of civilians in Gaza have lost their lives, and more than a million have been displaced, many seeking refuge in UNRWA facilities. The death toll on the Israeli side, while lower, has also been significant.
- **Destruction of Infrastructure:** Gaza's infrastructure, already fragile due to the years of blockade, has been severely damaged. Power plants, hospitals, water supply systems, and essential services have been destroyed or rendered inoperable, leading to an acute crisis in the region.
- **Economic Devastation:** The conflict has worsened the already dire economic situation in Gaza, which suffers

from one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. Israel's blockade and repeated military incursions have stymied efforts for reconstruction.

The Gaza Conflict of 2023 is a stark reminder of the enduring challenges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, marked by the suffering of civilians and the devastating impact of military escalation. The war also highlights the complexities of modern warfare, where the digital realm, propaganda, and global media narratives play a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing diplomatic efforts.

Ultimately, the Gaza conflict serves as an urgent call for renewed diplomatic engagement and peace efforts in the region. While a military solution remains elusive, the ongoing suffering of civilians on both sides demands a rethinking of how conflict can be managed and resolved in the 21st century. (Robinson, 2023, p381)

### c. U.S. Capitol Riots (2021)

- Polarization incubated through conspiracy theories on fringe platforms.
- Echo chambers intensified radicalization and organized offline violence.

### 5. Mechanisms of Polarization Amplification

- **AI and deep learning** in content personalization.
- **Filter bubbles** that isolate users from opposing viewpoints.
- **Hashtag activism**, where symbolic identification replaces nuanced understanding.
- **Influencer-led campaigns** that polarize through selective framing and affective rhetoric.

### 6. Impacts on Societies in Conflict

- **Erosion of social cohesion** and growth of hostile public spheres.

- **Legitimization of extremist ideologies** via repeated exposure.

- **Devaluation of journalism**, as synthetic media floods the information space.

- **Difficulty in post-conflict reconciliation**, as digital divides persist beyond ceasefires.

### 7. Ethical and Regulatory Challenges

- Should platforms **moderate political speech** more aggressively in wartime?
- Who verifies **AI-generated content**?
- How to preserve **freedom of expression** while mitigating disinformation?
- The need for **digital literacy education** to combat manipulation.

### 8. Towards a More Responsible Digital Media Ecosystem

- **Algorithmic transparency**: Users must understand why they see certain content.
- **Media literacy campaigns**: To help users identify manipulation techniques.
- **AI content labeling**: Clearly mark AI-generated media.
- **International cooperation**: Develop legal frameworks to counter cyber propaganda in conflict.

### 9. Conclusion

Digital media's power to construct reality has become especially potent in conflict zones. The manufacturing of electronic polarization is not merely a technological side-effect but a strategic instrument of modern information warfare. Addressing this phenomenon requires a combination of policy reform, platform accountability, ethical journalism, and an informed public. Without intervention, the weaponization of digital media may continue to escalate global tensions, hinder peace efforts, and undermine democratic discourse.

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