



PUBLIC OPINION MANIPULATION THROUGH MASS MEDIA. A STUDY CASE ON GAZA-ISRAEL CONFLICT¹

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Abstract. *This paper presents how the mass media and new communication technologies influence the formation of public opinion. The main purpose is to demonstrate that social media plays an essential role in influencing the public. By analyzing the main functions of the mass media and manipulation techniques, we will observe how these are reflected in the news about the Gaza-Israel conflict, as well as the effects they generate.*

Keywords: *public opinion, manipulation, Israel, Gaza, conflict*

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1. Introduction

Manipulating people's interests is a recurrent topic in history, with roots stretching back to ancient times and persisting through the ages. Great historical figures like Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Martin Luther King primarily wielded unparalleled oratory skills, capable of moving masses, evoking powerful emotions, and uniting people for common goals. The art of oratory gave rise to the art of manipulation, which seeks to control the hearts, minds, and actions of the masses. Manipulation is a crafty practice that can reshape the psycho-emotional structure of individuals, directing them like puppets, highlighting the vulnerability of people to external influences. Only through strong awareness and constant vigilance individuals can protect themselves from the flood of false news and deceit that pervades all around. Before the advent of mass media, mass manipulation was challenging to achieve and targeted smaller, more homogeneous groups (Raiu, 2012). Today, it is very easy for millions of people to be ensnared in this game, as they spend a lot of time on the internet or watching TV.

An analysis of Cicero's famous work "*De amicitia*" reveals the role of flattery in electoral campaigns, the use of lies, empty promises, and falsehoods to manipulate the populace and gain trust. In 64 BC, a year before the consular elections in which his brother participated, Cicero outlined clear directions for manipulating public opinion and influencing perceptions as desired (Voinea, 2014). The famous Latin expression "*Panem et circenses*" by Juvenal, translated as "bread and circuses," demonstrates that mass manipulation is a psychological game exploiting primary needs while suppressing higher aspirations. It is evident how collective attention is diverted from real issues to trivial matters, making people easily controllable through minor promises. It is very interesting how the attention of thousands of people can be easily distracted from serious problems by placing minor subjects at the center of debate.

Assuming that the manipulation of public opinion is a factor that spreads societal discord by increasing tensions among people and turning public spaces into conflict zones, the following chapters will explore the main functions of mass media and how it influences public opinion. Alongside the study of mass manipulation techniques and their effects, we will also focus on providing practical and current examples to demonstrate the application of theoretical principles to real-world situations.



2. A literature review on mass-media: the Fourth Estate and the manipulation of public opinion

2.1. The primary functions of mass media in a Constitutional State: a forum for political disapproval and a crucible for public opinion

A foray into media history will take us to the town of Antwerp in the Netherlands in 1605 when the first periodical newspaper appeared, later developing daily newspapers. For the next hundred years, newspapers continued to spread around the world and be the main source of information for millions of people, until the advent of the telegraph, radio and, later on, the television. But with them, the first forms of manipulation of public opinion through the media were also born.

Mass media is the most popular means of mass message transmission in a continuous development, with an amazing influence and conviction, fact which brought it the reputation of "fourth estate". The essential element of the media is **communication**. Thus, in order to have a clarification of the concept of media, it is necessary to note the role and size of communication. Communication appears as a primary necessity in maintaining social relationships. Etymological, „communication” has its origin into the Latin "communis", from which the word "common" was formed and this word refers to "something that belongs to many". (Lesenciuc 2017, p. 11)

There are many definitions of communication, which demonstrate its complexity, beyond a simple action. According to the American psychologist Carl I Hovland, communication is an art. In his opinion, communication can be defined as the process by which "an individual (emitter) sends a message (usually verbal) to change the behavior of the other person (receiver)"(Hovland, 1948). Journalist Richard Dimbleby in *More than words* sees communication as a form by which all our senses are touched and not limited to verbal communication alone. Moreover, he argues, communication is an art that must be refined. (Dimbleby and Burton, 2020) Communication has been divided into several specific forms: direct, indirect, multiple and collective, the last one being known as mass communication. (Radulescu 2015, p. 63)



The peculiarity of mass communication lies in the fact that it is addressed to very large groups of different people, whose only common denominator is given by the consumption of the same product. Mihai Coman points out in his book *Introduction to the media system* that "the mass represents a huge conglomerate of people who do not know each other, do not live in relationships of spatial proximity, do not communicate or have common values and purposes, but they are linked by only one thing – the consumption of the same cultural product, widely distributed through modern technologies." (Coman 2016, p. 17).

Media was metaphorically called „the fourth estate” due to its characteristic to influence large groups of people, but also to stimulate the state to make certain decisions, contributing to public debate and the supervision of power to ensure transparency (Raiu, 2015). Claude-Jean Bertrand believes that through the role of „intermediaries between citizens and governors, the media is transformed into central institutions, into pivots of democracy” (Bertrand, 2001, p. 37).

In order to have a broader understanding of the designation "fourth power", we need to relate to its functions and observe what role they play in the formation of public opinion.

In the work *The Image of the Public Institution*, Professor Corina Radulescu identifies four essential functions of the mass media: "informative, formative, commercial, and recreational" (Radulescu 2015). Claude-Jean Bertrand argues that in a democracy, "the mass media represents an industry, a public service, and a political institution: three somewhat incompatible roles" (Bertrand, p. 34). Based on these classifications of the functions of mass media, it must be noted that in a rule-of-law state, it also serves as a guarantor of freedom of expression, correct information, and political impartiality by exposing irregularities and maintaining transparency for the public.

Thus, perhaps the most important function of the mass media is to **supervise power**, ensuring accurate, unbiased information that exposes deviations to the public. Claude-Jean Bertrand maintains that the title of "the fourth estate" given to the media derives from an "independence and qualification that allows them to evaluate and criticize those elected on behalf of citizens" (Bertrand, 2001, p. 36) Bertrand also notes that some of the main actors in the media are



politicians, who have attempted, and sometimes succeeded, in controlling the dissemination of information to the public, either through censorship or by purchasing media outlets.

Closely related to this primary function is the **function of information**. Through information, important global news quickly reaches billions of people, influencing opinions on various subjects and even mobilizing people from different parts of the world to act similarly for a common cause. For example, in 2023, southern Turkey was severely affected by two earthquakes, resulting in the deaths of thousands and leaving many others injured or homeless. News about this calamity dominated the headlines for weeks, prompting people worldwide to donate clothes, money, or food for those affected.

The formative function complements the first two, consisting of the media's role in shaping and educating public opinion. Today, thousands of articles on various topics—from science to religion, linguistics, finance, economics, law, to astronomy and cybernetics—are published online daily. Communication experts believe that the formative function aims to "express and shape opinions, behaviors, and mentalities, contributing to the general level of knowledge and education in culture and civilization" (Rădulescu, 2015, p. 96).

The formative function of the mass media has an ambivalent dimension, as it decides what types of information people are exposed to, what is broadcasted, and consequently shapes beliefs and attitudes toward societal events. The media uses the image of popular individuals to create admired models and successfully instills behaviors and thought directions. Certain habits can even be subliminally implemented through advertisements.

The commercial function reflects the media's power to sell and stimulate consumption, with the ultimate goal being profit. By manipulating information, the media creates needs in the collective mind that otherwise would not exist. It exerts immense psychological pressure, turning the public into victims of shopping. "The two established means of mass manipulation are advertising and propaganda. The immense expenses incurred worldwide for advertising aim to form a conviction in clients that can transform them into buyers" (Rădulescu 2015, p. 96). For example, at the beginning of the pandemic from 2020, parts of the media contributed to the general panic, giving



the impression that very bleak times and even famine were imminent. This led to the toilet paper crisis and the instantaneous emptying of store shelves worldwide.

Another highly popular function of the mass media today is **entertainment**, which caters to people's need to detach from everyday life. By consuming entertainment, individuals enter a virtual world, an imaginary reality that provides a sense of relaxation and fun. The enormous popularity of social media platforms confirms the necessity of this media function. Statistics show that over 5 billion people worldwide use at least one social media platform. This popularity has created new professions for content creators, from travel vloggers to motivational speakers and influencers.

Experts in the field believe that the mass media serves as the stage for public debates, acting both as a source of public opinion and as a driver of democracy: "The mass media contributes to the social organization of debates and amplifies democratic social dialogue, becoming an essential condition for democratic evolution: the democratization of society passes through the democratization and pluralization of communication, with the mass media constituting a fundamental source of public opinion" (Moraru, 2008).

2.2. Public Opinion as "Agreement in Diversity"

It's astounding how millions of unique and different people from completely opposite corners of the planet can believe in the same things or share a common opinion about something. Public opinion unites many microenvironments (the personal opinions of individuals) into a macro environment (a generalized opinion, a complex of emotions, thoughts, and views on issues that go beyond the personal sphere and affect the community).

Martial Pasquier asserts that "mass media groups together very varied realities with specific rules, logics, and codes" (Pasquier 2018, 212). This arises from the fact that media is not a homogeneous ensemble; each media channel has its own particularities, meaning that the way information is transmitted can differ greatly from one radio station to another, and there are differences in how news is conveyed through radio, newspapers, or television, influenced by the space each medium can allocate to a given piece of news. In this context, the challenge arises of



reaching a common and accepted agreement in a world marked by differences of opinion on general issues.

The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas was concerned with the phenomenon of diversity in public opinion, which unites different views into a common agreement, and he is credited with the concept of "agreement in diversity" developed in his works. (Habermas and McCarthy, 1985) In the early 1980s, Habermas developed the *Theory of communicative action*, which places central importance on communication in society. He highlights the role of reason and rational communication in building a common space for mutual understanding in a world marked by differences, with the public sphere being dedicated to dialogue to maintain democratic values. By "agreement in diversity" Habermas suggests that a level of understanding on a subject can be reached despite differing personal views in a public environment becoming more and more technocratic (Raiu & Mina Raiu, 2023).

Once with the modernization of mass media, the public space begins to shape very differently. The emergence of the public sphere becomes conditioned by the existence of the mass media, which is seen as a tool of democracy, playing an essential role in what will be called the "new public sphere" along the XXth century (Raiu, 2023). Mass media becomes the space for free discussions on various topics, allowing the expansion of the media horizon by bringing everyday issues to public attention, as Camelia Beciu presents in *Sociology of Communication and the Public Sphere*. The same author highlights the media function of the new public sphere, characterized also by online activism due to the emergence of the internet and discussion groups, where communication has an informal character and there is a shift from public interest to commercial interest (Camelia Beciu, 2016). The appeal to the emotional side of discourse aims to sensitize, potentially even manipulating public opinion.

Furthermore, the emergence of the internet generates and develops microenvironments, discussion forums on different topics that can even impact political decisions or be uncomfortable for governments, but it also mobilize people en masse for causes they believe in, which can lead to protests or strikes. An example of this occurred in 2019 when Moldovan entrepreneur Ștefan Mandachi launched the slogan "șîeu" as a criticism of the government's neglect in building highways in that region of Romania. Those words were more than just criticism; they sparked an



entire movement against the poor management of road infrastructure in Romania, which had led to thousands of accidents in recent years. The day he inaugurated, as a protest, the first meter of highway in Moldova, was a day when employees of several multinational companies and institutions held a brief strike in solidarity with the movement that had become very popular on Facebook, even featuring a logo many added to their profile pictures. His manifesto elicited reactions from politicians and brought the topic into public discussion. Subsequently, "Romania wants highways" became a frequently used slogan in the public space and even at various protests.

2.3. The manipulation of public opinion by the media through transforming the public sphere into a private zone of conflict

Conceptual changes in the public space have led some authors to argue that individuals' ability to filter information through critical thinking is disappearing, giving way to an ease of accepting what the media sells. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that media also has the commercial function, which is increasingly exploited today. **The public sphere can be transformed into a private zone of interest when public opinion is manipulated, and public debate is steered in the desired direction by actors controlling the media through advertising or favoritism.** Psychologists argue that "the modern man is a probable victim of propaganda, a certain victim of manipulation by political, commercial, and media organizations" (Teodorescu, 2007).

Habermas draws attention to the transformation of what was once a public opinion focused on moral principles into an opinion influenced by consumerism, which leads to shaping people's preferences to serve consumption. "The goal of communication becomes influence, and the public opinion thus constructed becomes the opinion of the masses on private perspectives, which have thus penetrated the public sphere." (Lesenciuc, 2017). Professor Coman highlights that through his studies, Habermas shows that in the new public sphere mass media messages and debates are controlled by financial interests, leading to the disappearance of the rational dimension (Coman 2016).



Since public opinion can be shaped in the desired direction, people's thinking is formed based on the messages transmitted by the media without filtering the information personally. Media can amplify or diminish the significance of an event or situation, hide an occurrence by focusing attention on a trivial but impactful event. For instance, a government adopts an abusive legislative measure, but the media highlights a famous actress's divorce or a major accident in a distant country. This has led some authors to consider propaganda as the primary function of the mass media. An example is the manipulation of public opinion through propaganda by political parties. Bertrand believes that politicians use the media to influence public opinion, gain votes, highlight their achievements, while distorting reality and omitting certain aspects (Bertrand, 2001).

The specialized literature defines manipulation as "the action of determining a social actor to think and act in a way compatible with the initiator's interests, not with their own, by using persuasion techniques that intentionally distort the truth, giving the impression of freedom of thought and decision" (Coman, 2016, p. 103). Manipulation is characterized by disinformation and lies, propagating false news presented under the guise of truth, giving the impression of an indisputable reality. The information that reaches the public sphere is carefully controlled to serve the interests of those who wish to maintain control. The same author mentioned above evokes that manipulation involves a psychological struggle aimed at diminishing individuals' critical spirit to filter received information through reason. Media manipulation is also characterized by censorship of sensitive subjects, even if not overtly. For example, videos discussing certain political or social topics are automatically deleted by social media platforms or their algorithms reduce visibility for most users.

Moreover, transforming the public sphere into a private zone of conflict implies the affinity for certain sensitive subjects that appear in public discussions, leading to the ambivalent development of opinion, which divides people and creates a conflictual zone. The emphasis is on contradictory discussions, generating conflict and strong emotions that polarize the public, making them easy to manipulate. These emotions can include hatred, pity, regret, anger, appreciation, etc. The same author notes the intentional fragmentation of transmitted information, either by omitting parts or by conveying falsehoods, leading to a misunderstanding of the subject.



3. Manipulation of public opinion by the media: Techniques and examples

3.1 Techniques for manipulating public opinion through mass media and social networks

In order to observe how manipulation influences our opinion and what effects it produces, we need to understand what it entails and how it is carried out. There are four main ways through which manipulation occurs: **misinformation, non-information, counter-information and sub-information**. Thus, not only the transmission of false information but also the silence of the press about a subject is a form of public opinion manipulation that shapes people's minds. At the same time, it is noted that the media processes the information, amplifies the rumors to take the public debate in the desired direction. However, an essential feature of manipulation is that it does not leave freedom of thought, but only gives a false impression that we are master of our thoughts, feelings, and even actions. **Studies show that the effectiveness of communication is influenced by the credibility level of the source that is sending the message.** The more trustworthy the source conveying the message is considered to be, the more receptive the audience will be to what it asserts.

New technologies play the most important role in manipulating public opinion because they have assertive effects and are accessible to everyone. Today, social networks such as Facebook and Instagram boast an astounding number of over 5 billion users, placing them at the top of electronic communication media. Meanwhile, the YouTube platform records approximately 10 billion users, facilitating the instantaneous transmission of various news to any corner of the world. Through social media, influential public figures can even instill beliefs in people, control crowds, and transmit convictions. For example, the message "Stop Asian Hate" posted by American singer Justin Bieber on Instagram in 2021 garnered over 2 million reactions from fans worldwide. The fact that an internationally renowned superstar intervenes in a social issue carries great persuasive power over those who follow him. But, even though social media is an efficient means of mass communication, it also allows for the proliferation of numerous fake news stories in the public space.



The main techniques of manipulating public opinion are: **propaganda, control of information and emotions, distraction, framing, omission and amplification of different situations.** These techniques are commonly used for various types of manipulation, as manipulation can take several forms. Generally, the most common form of manipulation is psychological, closely related to informational and emotional manipulation. (Cebanu and Pravițchi, 2020) However, public opinion is also influenced by economic, media, political, technological, informational, and social manipulation.

3.2. Vulnerability of public opinion to media manipulation

Media is known for its tendency to manipulate public opinion through various ways. Most often, it distracts the audience from one topic by placing another of less importance in the foreground and creating amazing news that keeps the audience distracted from real problems. To gain a clearer picture of how the media manipulates public opinion, we will focus on the following example from the Romanian public sphere.

It concerns a news story from October 2022, when it was rumored that Elon Musk rented Bran Castle and came to Romania to celebrate Halloween. The rumors spread rapidly and were taken over as main news by the major Romanian televisions. Without concrete evidence to support information about his participation in the famous private party inside the castle, the press presented various arguments and testimonies: "from the hotel where he stayed, to the barn where he ate" (Cincea 2022), and headlines like "Elon Musk is coming to Romania" (www.stirileprotv.ro, 2022) made front-page news. But it all turned out to be a setup when, on December 31, 2022, Elon Musk himself denied being in our country, as a response to a comment on X, the former Twitter, where he wrote, "I did not attend to that party in Romania" (www.x.com, 2022). While some newspapers, such as *Libertatea*, apologized to readers for misinformation, others remained silent on the matter.

This event makes us wonder if it was just an attempt by the media to exploit its commercial function by prioritizing audience over accurate information, or if there is something more to it. Could it be an attempt to distract the public attention by placing an unimportant subject in the spotlight? The coincidence is that these rumors surfaced just as Romania was commemorating the



7th anniversary of the tragic Colectiv nightclub fire, where 64 people died. Not only did the mass media fail to give the necessary attention to the news regarded to that event, but apparently, these were overshadowed by alleged mysterious visits. This might had happened because Romania of 2022 still did not have any suitable hospital the effective treatment of severe burns, despite such incidents becoming more frequent in recent years, as highlighted in a report by the national television. Could the news about Elon Musk have been merely a political manipulation to divert attention from serious social issues, from corruption and the lack of action?

Nowadays, it has become even easier to manipulate the public opinion due to the development of artificial intelligence. New challenges are generated by the fake news phenomenon and some of them seem so real that is very hard to say what is false and what is true. For example, in March 2023 a photo of Pope wearing a Balenciaga jacket became viral on Internet and many people were fooled by it. Soon, it was proven that the photo was AI-generated, but it was too late because a lot of people were already outraged. However, it is believed that the experiment marked the first major mass misinformation caused by AI.

4. Case Study: Social Media and the shaping of public opinion. The Middle East conflict

If the wars of recent years, natural disasters, and health and economic crises were not enough, the outbreak of a new conflict has put humanity on alert, and the media contributes to shaping public opinion regarding events in Gaza and Israel through societal polarization. What is the impact of manipulation on public behavior? In the following analysis, we will observe the effects of manipulation and how it is carried out.

The Middle East is known for its frequent armed conflicts, maintained by terrorist groups and political rivalries, as well as the involvement of external states in local events. The area is like a volcano ready to erupt at any moment. This happened again on October 7, 2023, when Hamas, which exercises control over the two Palestinian territories: the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, crossed and attacked Israel's southern border, bombing several settlements and targeting people attending a music festival. The day resulted in more than 250 kidnappings and approximately 1,200 casualties, as reported by the BBC (www.bbc.com, 2024). This action by Hamas received a violent response from Israel, which on October 9 launched an offensive, classifying the Hamas



attack as a terrorist attack and its actions as a mission to combat terrorism, self-defense, and an attempt to rescue hostages.

The study period covers approximately six months from the outbreak of the conflict, and relevant data regarding the manipulation of public opinion are recorded, without addressing the subject from a political or subjective perspective.

Public figures and influencing followers' opinions on social media

As we have seen in previous chapters, authors in sociology have often argued that one of the functions of the media can also be considered propaganda. It is noted that in the conflict between Gaza and Israel propaganda is mainly used in manipulating public opinion, along with fake news, framing and disinformation.

A lot of messages have been spread through platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, to incite hatred among internet users towards one side of the conflict. We also see a distortion of reality, manipulating public opinion through the dissemination of rumors and fake news about the events. Referring back to the statements in previous chapters about the credibility of the source, we observe how the involvement of worldwide superstars in this conflict by expressing their opinions about the events generates effects among their followers.

Celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Bradley Cooper, and the Hadid sisters have publicly spoken about the events in Palestine and the cruelty of war, showing their support for the population there. Although their actions were intended to convey a message of peace, public opinion split into two camps: supporters of Israel and supporters of Palestine, with manifestations of hatred against Jews reaching alarming levels again. In a world of cancel culture, expressing a firm opinion on something can trigger a chain reaction. For example, an article in the American publication *The Guardian* highlighted that celebrities who spoke about the Gaza conflict suffered abuses, censorship, and some were even fired by major advertising agencies because Hollywood has firmly supported Israel since its founding as a state, in 1948. (Smith 2023) One example is the case of Oscar-winning American actress Susan Sarandon, who was fired from the media agency she worked for due to her public support for Palestine, as stated in the same article.



Political organizations labeled messages supporting Palestine as anti-Semitism, and any message condemning Israel's actions automatically attracted this classification, which only fueled the anger of internet users and divided the world into two groups. Statements in which celebrities condemned the attacks and suffering caused by the fighting in Israel and Gaza were often taken out of context to influence and manipulate public opinion. For example, Bella Hadid, who is an international model with Palestinian origins, was very vocal about Gaza, publicly expressing her support for her homeland and condemning Israel's actions. The star has over 61 million followers on Instagram, and a post of hers from May 16, 2024, about the Zionist Movement and the oppression of Palestinians in recent decades gathered over 1 million reactions. According to *Time Magazine*, the model is among the top 100 most influential people of 2023, which proves she enjoys credibility among her fans. Why is it important to have all this information? After declaring in one of her speeches that she would continue to advocate for Palestine's liberation even if there would be repercussions on her career, a false news story spread online, claiming that the famous fashion house Dior had terminated Bella's contract due to her statements and had replaced her with another model of Israeli origin (Hannah Hudnall 2023).

Hatred against ordinary Jews was increased by spreading that fake information, and many anti-Semitic messages spread online. The news turned out to be false, as the model's contract with the famous brand had expired long before the conflict broke out. Manipulation occurred through the exposure of false news and the creation of a story that would touch the public. Indeed, an Israeli model appeared in the new campaign of the fashion house, but it was just a coincidence that their new collection was launched just a few days after the Gaza conflict started, with its date being pre-set. This shows how easily information spreading online can be controlled to manipulate public opinion.

Media Subjectivity in Event Reporting

Framing is used many times in the news about this conflict. How does it manifest? Firstly, the language the media uses to present news about the two sides is carefully chosen to subtly convey an evident message: victim versus aggressor. Let's take BBC, the renowned London broadcasting station, as an example and observe how it presents news about war victims. It is noteworthy that



BBC is considered among the most reliable global news channels, with a weekly audience of over 318 million people, according to their statistics center (BBC, 2023).

On October 9, 2023, just two days after the conflict erupted, in a post on platform X, BBC headlined that "over 500 people have died in Gaza as a result of Israel's retaliations," while "over 700 people have been killed in Israel since Hamas launched attacks." ([X](#), 2023) Labels are placed through language, even if indirectly. By the manner in which events are presented, what Israel does is seen as self-defense, while what Palestinians do is seen as a crime. We can observe how the media's function of informing is contaminated by subjectivity and political favoritism. Furthermore, Western media has been accused numerous times of manipulating public opinion regarding the Gaza conflict. But like in any other war, in the end, those who suffer the most are those who can defend themselves the least: ordinary people. Therefore, the media should use its function of overseeing power and provide objective information about both sides while also advocating for peace.

Another thing the media does is fail to provide a complete picture of the situation. For example, it highlights the crimes committed by Hamas, the attacks, and the mistreatment of hostages, presenting Israel's actions as a defense against the attacks from the opposing side. However, it does not show that the people of Palestine are subjected to severe restrictions by Israel and have faced numerous abuses over time. The press speaks little about the fact that human rights have often been violated in Gaza and the West Bank, and this is a very old issue. For instance, the organization Human Rights Watch published a report in 2017 that detailed the abuses of power committed by Israel against the two occupied territories, under the pretext of national security against Palestinian rebels. According to the report, the people of Palestine were victims of unjustified killings, had their movement restricted or even banned, had their homes demolished, and faced restricted access to the two Palestinian areas. The same report mentions that there were armed responses from Palestinian terrorist groups in reaction to the abuses against the population (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) also posted an article highlighting that Israel's actions in Gaza since the conflict began are entirely against human rights, depriving civilians of food, water, and electricity. Additionally, the article published on November 9, 2023,



enumerated a series of severe violations and atrocities such as mass killings of civilians, including many children, the forced depopulation of Palestinian territories through military force, mass arrests, and torture in prisons, censorship, violence against Palestinians who speak out about abuses, and other similar actions (FIDH, 2024). A statistical calculation shows that in the first four weeks after the conflict erupted, the number of arrests among Palestinians increased by 18% compared to before, and in April 2024, statistics indicated that the number of incarcerated Palestinians had nearly doubled compared to before October 7 (Al Jazeera, 2024). These individuals were subjected to violent treatment in prisons, and local sites show that one of the most frequent reasons for incarceration was publicly expressing support for Palestine. (www.addameer.org, 2024)

In a recent article published by *Fox News*, one of the largest international media outlets, it is highlighted in the title that Israel killed two Hamas commanders in one of the attacks on the city of Rafah, a place where civilians have taken refuge from the war, but also dozens of civilians. It is important to analyze how the events are presented. Fox News emphasizes in the first part of the article that there were numerous terrorists in that area and that the attack was directed against legitimate targets. As for the civilians killed in the attack, the news reports that there were a few dozen civilian casualties, with the exact number being uncertain. Although the article mentions that civilians were injured, that a fire broke out as a result of the bombing in which many people perished, and that the number of Palestinian casualties has reached tens of thousands since the conflict began, it ultimately concludes by stressing that it is important for those territories to be freed from terrorism (Fox News, Bradford Betz and Trey Yingst, 2024). Here, aspects contributing to psychological propaganda can be observed.

When Israel bombed hospitals in Gaza, such as the one in Shifa, several international newspapers like *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Associated Press (AP)* published articles propagating the news conveyed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which claimed that Hamas leaders were hiding beneath hospitals where there are underground tunnels. To reinforce the justification for the necessity of the attack on the largest and best-equipped hospital in Gaza, the media amplified the idea of Hamas using human shields. To make the IDF's justification plausible, they spoke about recordings in which Palestinians complained that Hamas leaders were not allowing them to



flee south to seek shelter from the war. This was used as evidence by Israel to argue that human shields were being used in the conflict zone in Gaza, according to an article by *The Guardian* (Peter Beaumont, 2023). *AP* also talks about these human shields but highlights the lack of concrete visual evidence that the organization's leaders are hiding under hospitals (www.apnews.com, Josef Federman, 2023). On the other hand, *Al Jazeera* highlights that the bombings on hospitals were devastating and that not only were the buildings destroyed, but many doctors also perished. It is observed that the media tends to be biased. Even if they present information, it is exposed from an angle favorable to them, thus justifying or countering the opposing viewpoint.

Let's analyze two headlines from the international press. On one hand, we have an article from *The Guardian*, and on the other, an article from *Al Jazeera*. Both are considered biased: the former is pro-Israel, and the latter pro-Palestine. Both have a significant global impact, with millions of followers. The subject of the articles is marked by the use of human shields in Gaza, but who is accused of using them changes depending on who writes the article.

Neither of the two major newspapers denies the existence of human shields, but each presents the situation from its own perspective to suggest a clear message. While American and European media, through sites like *The Guardian*, *AP*, *BBC*, and others, published articles accusing Hamas of using human shields, Middle Eastern media channels wrote the exact opposite, accusing Israel of doing so.

Western media, reiterating Israel's statements, highlighted that human shields are being used in Gaza. For instance, an article from *The Guardian* published on October 30, 2023, titled "What are human shields and how has Hamas been accused of using them?" (Peter Beaumont 2023), presents how civilians are used by Hamas as human shields to make Israel be accused of war crimes for attacking vulnerable areas where the organization's leaders are hiding. Israel justified the bombing of hospitals in Gaza by stating that there are many tunnels under them where members of the terrorist group are hiding. Although at the time of the article, Israel's statements were not demonstrated by international sources and there was no visible evidence to attest to these things, such strategies had been used in past confrontations, and it might have been justified this time as well since international conventions condemn attacks on sensitive areas such as



hospitals, schools, and churches, where there are civilians, as war crimes: "the act of attacking or bombarding, by any means, towns, villages, dwellings or buildings which are undefended and which are not military objectives" (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, July 17, 1998), art. 8, lit. b,(v)). The use of human shields is illegal, and places where this occurs should not be targeted. The article also highlights that the group does not really care about people, using them to hide, hoping that the adversary will respect international laws.

Thirteen days after this article in the British newspaper, *Al Jazeera*, the main broadcasting station in the Middle East, published an article titled: "What are human shields and why does Israel use them in Gaza?" (Federica Marsi 2023) and highlighted that there is no conclusive evidence to show that Israel's claims are true and mentioned that Hamas denied Israel's accusations that it is hiding under hospitals and using human shields. Furthermore, it accuses Israel of using this argument just to bomb vulnerable areas. Why is this categorization used? Experts believe that the term *human shield* is used by both sides to blame each other for the killings

Several techniques of public opinion manipulation can be observed, such as **framing** and **misinformation**. On the one hand, media labeled as pro-Palestine presents the idea that Israel accuses Hamas of using human shields merely to justify its actions, which are destructive to civilians. On the other hand, Western media emphasizes that the terrorists are the ones employing such tactics, disregarding the consequences for people, making it impossible to avoid collateral casualties.

Another manipulation tactic is through **language**: in the *Al Jazeera* article, emotionally charged terms such as "crime," "abuse," "civilian damage," and "victims" are used to generate sympathy for the people of Gaza and outrage against the Israelis. In contrast, *The Guardian* opts for a more technical and military perspective. **The perspective** from which situations are presented also matters: the British newspaper's article focuses on national security and the Israeli army, while the Qatar's newspaper focuses on human rights and the Palestinian perspective.

It's noteworthy that pro-Palestinian newspapers minimize or even omit the fact that taking hostages is also a war crime condemned by international conventions, just as pro-Israel media try to mask many parts of reality. The way news is presented significantly influences public opinion



and further divides it into two rival camps. These articles present events as self-defense missions and anti-terrorist actions, discussing technical and military details of attacks and bombings between the two sides, but minimizing or briefly mentioning the impact on civilians to distract from human rights violations. If pro-Palestine media ignores the fact that taking hostages is a human rights violation, pro-Israel media avoids discussing that hundreds of thousands of Gaza residents are transferred by Israel to various areas within the Gaza Strip, only for the most severe attacks to occur precisely there.

Social Media – between debate and polarization through the spread of fake news and misinformation

A TikTok video posted on May 7, 2024, serves as one of the most illustrative examples of public opinion manipulation on social networks regarding the Israel-Hamas conflict and how the media divides public opinion into two camps. The 16-second video, which has amassed a total of 7.7 million likes and 43 million views, is the perfect example of how psychological and emotional manipulation occurs. Four words with a strong psychological impact are used: “same planet, different worlds” (tiktok.com, 2024) and the images presented evoke strong indignation on one side and deep pity on the other. The video is a comparison between the 2024 Met Gala in New York and the war in Gaza. In the first few seconds, Zendaya, a famous actress from Disney and Hollywood movies, is seen walking the red carpet in a festive dress, immediately followed by apocalyptic scenes of bombings and explosions in the Gaza Strip. Then, for a second, another sequence from the lavish event in America appears, followed by an image of several hungry and dirty children picking a few plant remnants from the dirt with their bare hands in Northern Gaza, just to have something to eat. The image of a celebrity waving to the crowd during the gala evening, with a broad smile while wearing an elegant dress, is juxtaposed with the image of women torn by grief, mourning their families lost under the rubble from the bombings in Gaza, and at the end, the message: “Free Gaza” appears.

The post garnered over 53,000 comments, most of which support Palestine and disapprove of Israel, America, and, of course, the celebrities attending such events. The world we live in has often been compared by netizens to the famous Hunger Games film series, accusing the event organizers of siding with Israel; otherwise, they would have canceled this event, which distracts



public attention and debate from the conflict to what happened on the night of the Met Gala, from the guests' speeches to their outfits. Users who did not express approval of this opinion were harshly criticized in the comments by those who support Palestine. Words like "genocide," "massacre," and "victims" frequently appear, contributing to framing through the use of language. We can see how such a video contribute to the polarization of society by considering the fact that this video was shared over 300,000 times and reposted by dozens of other accounts, generating several million additional views. The background music chosen for the clip further conveys the idea of social inequality, as it is taken from the Hunger Games series.

In the film, for example, there is a society divided between the powerful and the common people, where authoritarian control is exercised, maintaining population submission through violence. Similarly, the idea is conveyed that the same thing happens in Gaza, where people are forcibly subjected by a stronger economic and military authority, and any attempt to retaliate is severely punished. Additionally, one could refer to the fact that civilians caught in conflict appear in the film, just as children, women, and helpless people fall prey to the unequal war.

Emotional manipulation is among the preferred forms of influencing public opinion, especially by social media. Notably, videos that depict the tragedies of people who fall victim to war and elicit strong emotions are frequently used. For instance, a video was posted on TikTok showing a woman screaming in pain amidst a sea of rubble because, upon returning from grocery shopping, she finds everything destroyed by bombings. The title used is: "She went to buy flour and found her family buried in the rubble." This video was viewed by over 15 million people and garnered 2.3 million likes, according to TikTok statistics.

Fake news are used to manipulate the public opinion too. Whether using artificial intelligence, taking images and words out of context, or propagating lies, fake news alarms and creates strong emotions in those who see it. The days immediately following the Hamas attack, a series of fake images taken from video games emerged, showing Israel under aerial assault by Hamas. The images, published on the X network, spread rapidly and appeared both on social media and on some television channels worldwide. Shortly after, BBC journalist Shayan Sardarizadeh debunked these accusations and provided evidence showing that the images were taken from the video game Arma 3 (www.x.com, 2023)



Of course, public opinion is also manipulated on the Palestinian side by disseminating false images. France24 debunked several fake news stories circulating online and on television. It was proven that images from Syria and Ukraine were being used by users as evidence of the Israeli offensive in Gaza (france24.com, Catalina Marchant de Abreu, 2023).

From online messages to real-life actions

The effects of manipulating public opinion can already be seen in society by how people relate to the two sides. While there is generally compassion, leniency, and approval towards injured Palestinians in the conflict, there is an exaggerated antipathy, hatred, and hostility towards ordinary Jews. Some journalists and sociology experts even talk about antisemitism. In these conditions, the ability to distinguish between cause and effect, between political struggles and ordinary people, is essential. Public disapproval of Israel's military actions spills over onto ordinary Jews, who become targets of insults, threats, and even violence.

Conversely, the public support enjoyed by Palestinians is used to minimize the consequences of actions by provocateurs and terrorists, and to obscure the fact that not all Gaza immigrants are honest people; some may even cause various problems in the countries they reach.

From heated discussions on forums and social media to street movements, there was a fragile step that materialized into protests in several countries around the world. From America to Spain, the UK, Qatar, Indonesia, South Africa, and Venezuela, people united in protests of solidarity with Palestine, calling for peace and an end to the war. However, the protests and general outrage towards Israel are often used by lobby groups to exert pressure on governments. Fake news on social media led to mass mobilizations, but things have considerably escalated, with movements for peace turning into boycotts of brands, verbal and physical aggression against both Jews and ordinary Palestinians.

One of the effects generated by the way events were presented on social media is the boycott of several international brands. Among the most controversial and boycotted brands was Starbucks, the American coffeehouse chain with locations worldwide. According to northjersey.com, campaigns against Starbucks were based on distortions between the company and the workers' union, which expressed support for Palestinians on social media (northjersey.com, 2023).



Several public figures and associations in America immediately reacted to this gesture and urged people through their messages to boycott the brand, arguing that "drinking from Starbucks is like drinking Jewish blood" (www.ojchamber.com, 2023) or claiming that the brand supports Hamas terrorism. Later, the company's management disavowed the union's statements, stating that they do not support or represent their point of view, and even sued the union for inappropriate use of the brand name. In turn, the union sued the parent company, accusing it of defamation and falsely suggesting that they support terrorism.

Starbucks claimed it wanted to stay away from political involvement, but these statements angered internet users as the company had used political and ideological trends for publicity over the years. For example, it publicly supported mixed marriages and welcomed Syrian refugees to America, but this time it preferred to appear neutral, leading to massive controversies and boycotts.

The hashtag #boycottstarbucks quickly went viral on social media, with mobilizations worldwide for protests and boycotts. A TikTok video posted by the Palestinian organization "Within Our Lifetime" showed thousands of people protesting in front of a Starbucks store in New York, using slogans accusing the brand of supporting the genocide in Gaza. The video amassed approximately 43 million views and over 5 million likes, along with hundreds of thousands of comments against Starbucks, again dividing internet users into two camps: pro-Gaza and pro-Israel. Market studies show that Starbucks' shares dropped by 9% in the first three months after the movement against the company erupted, also affecting its image.

The way lobby groups and propaganda expose the issue is unethical, as they present things from a perspective that suits them. Social media videos show young people sabotaging American university graduation ceremonies or disrupting public order, spreading hate speech, and glorifying many agitators. Such behavior not only fails to help the suffering people of Gaza but also worsens their situation by creating the idea that immigrants are harmful. Today, it is very dangerous to be Palestinian in Israel and Jewish anywhere outside of Israel. It is truly sad that the suffering of defenseless people is being used for selfish interests. For example, in April this year, American university campuses were targeted by anti-Israel agitators inciting hate and



antisemitism. Several people were arrested by the police, but videos of them began circulating online, accompanied by messages of support calling them champions of humanity and heroes.

Reuters published data showing that in 2023, the UK recorded the highest number of antisemitic incidents in the last 40 years, driven by the conflict that began on October 7. According to information published on this site, two-thirds of the incidents were recorded on October 7 itself when Hamas attacked Israel (reuters.com, 2024).

It is important to maintain an objective reporting of events and to focus on discussions for peace, ending the conflict, and protecting civilians. Degenerating into accusations against actors who have no control over what is happening is not a solution, and polarizing society does not lead to beneficial effects.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, we can say that the public opinion manipulation is a phenomenon deeply rooted in history, manifesting through shaping collective perception in the desired form by those who can direct masses of people. As observed in chapters above, manipulation is a meticulously carried out practice, with present forms based on thousands of years of perfected techniques. From Cicero's "bread and circuses" to controlling masses through AI technologies, where reality becomes increasingly indistinguishable from falsehoods, one of the greatest dangers to accurate information in society is the rapid increase in the spread of fake news through AI. Even though a careful analysis can help even non-specialists distinguish fake images from real ones, if the phenomenon is not stopped or thoroughly regulated, it will become very difficult or even impossible to make this distinction in the future.

Consider, for instance, the video game images used as war propaganda in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the indignation they can stir, and the extent of their effects. The video game "Arma 3" was used to show the world how Israel was being bombed by Hamas, creating a media frenzy where news of airstrikes dominated the front pages for several days. This prompted public figures and various brands to defend Israel, fueling the anger of the pro-Palestine camp. Simultaneously, AI-generated images of wounded or even killed Palestinian children served as arguments for the worldwide protests that erupted. Even though it was later proven these were fake, once



movements and a perspective are set in motion, it becomes very difficult to stop the phenomenon. This is evidenced by the increase in violence against Jews and protests, as highlighted in Chapter III.

Studying manipulation forms and analyzing the main techniques can help recognize true information from falsehoods and foster critical thinking. In this regard, news should be verified from multiple sources before being believed. As observed in the previous chapter, the term "human shields" was used by both Western and Arab media, differing only in the actor attributed to using them. Analyzing multiple sources makes it clear that the same subject can be presented very differently from one publication to another, depending on each one's ideological perspective.

The examples provided show how easily sensationalism can replace public interest, with audience appeal taking precedence over unadorned reality. Why did a news story about a billionaire attending a party in Romania capture public attention just when the debate should have been focused on remembering the tragic Colectiv club event? When a sensitive topic arises that could awaken the public's critical spirit and even spark protests, the media offers a commercial product to distract attention long enough for the danger to pass. This is evident from the situation described in subchapter 2.1, where the news about Elon Musk disappeared immediately after the period when the victims of the October 2015 fire should have been commemorated. The spectacle around his presence in Romania lasted just long enough to overlap with this painful event for us as a country, then quickly faded away. Even though we tend to be drawn to the magnetism of fabulous news, we should focus on what is happening in society as a whole and ask ourselves if a spectacular headline is trying to omit or hide an important but delicate subject.

Comparing how mass media and social media report events shows that manipulation exists in both, but social media today has a much faster effect. The simple fact that hashtags mentioned in Chapter III can gather millions of uses shows how far the phenomenon can go. For example, the video of protesters against Starbucks garnered 43 million views, and these street and online movements caused the company's shares to drop by 9% in the first three months. Social media itself becomes an essential tool in forming public opinion, as these situations show its significant impact on our decisions. Furthermore, the source of the message is equally important. The



examples regarding Palestine show how the source has a high level of control over public opinion and how a simple impactful post can mobilize people.

However, unlike traditional mass communication channels, fake news on social media is exposed more quickly. Investing in systems that efficiently detect fake news is a first step in combating manipulation, but this situation has an ambivalence. On one hand, algorithms block what is reported as untrue content, but on the other, the question arises of where this phenomenon ends and censorship begins. Recent events in the Middle East have presented situations where videos showing real situations on the ground or testimonies of victims were simply blocked by platforms like Facebook or YouTube.

The most suitable way to combat manipulation is skepticism about what we see and hear. Filtering information, analyzing sources, and seeking at least three perspectives on what reaches us are effective methods to determine if we are witnessing media manipulation. The moment we start asking questions is the moment we step out of manipulation and observe the truth. Public opinion manipulation will always exist in one form or another, but ways to combat it will also continually emerge. Today, despite increasing censorship, social media remains one of the main sources of truth, as the same subject appears in videos, clips, and debates presenting the situation from multiple perspectives. The public outrage over the AI-manipulated images from Gaza, mentioned above, and their quick debunking as fake news, demonstrate that social networks transmit information faster than traditional media.

In conclusion, public opinion manipulation through mass media is a common phenomenon that is spreading increasingly and must be combated through personal efforts to discern the nature of news and by media channels not straying from their functions in favor of material and subjective goals.

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