





# The tyranny of public opinion



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## INTRODUCTION

onsideration of international public opinion, the so-called "battle for hearts and minds," plays a part in all modern conflicts, but perhaps never more so than in respect to the current events in Israel and Gaza. Is there something about this particular conflict that makes public perceptions so important, or is this simply the lens through which all conflicts are now viewed?

Even before the current war, international public opinion was already more deeply invested in the Israel-Palestine story than in many other zones of conflict. The ripples of sympathy and antipathy that spread out from events in this region have always been amplified by powerful religious, racial, historical and political themes. This is a region that evokes strong emotions even when things are relatively quiet, so it does not take much to fan those permanently glowing embers into a conflagration of international public feelings.

But there also seems to be a growing undercurrent of broader public engagement in international politics, and indeed in politics in general, albeit more as a



confrontational "contact sport" than a scholarly discipline. Although the media and the public will always make their own choices as to which conflicts attract their attention and which do not, the general level of global public interest in localized disputes appears to be steadily growing. Unfortunately, this interest tends to grow wider and shallower, not narrower and deeper.

It is not hard to see the reasons for this. Advanced globalization means human experiences and communications are Dissenting Russian
Channel One employee
staged an on-air
demonstration during
Russia's mostwatched evening news
broadcast, holding
up a "No War" poster
in protest of Russia
invading Ukraine. AFP



more interconnected than ever, so people everywhere find themselves virtually present on every battlefield — or at least every battlefield the media considers newsworthy — no matter whether they have any personal connection with it, and regardless of whether its outcomes are likely to affect their lives in any material way.

We are all programmed to stare at such events, unable to drag ourselves away from the spectacle of human suffering and violence; this is the same reason why a car crash will sometimes cause a longer tailback on the other side of the road than the accident itself.

On the other hand, one could put a more positive spin on the phenomenon and simply say that most human beings come with empathy circuits preinstalled and functioning.

As I have previously observed, international public opinion is the last remaining superpower on the planet, an idea that seems to gain currency with each passing year. Since the advent of social media, it is a superpower that has acquired a voice loud enough to make the windows rattle and become a means of direct expression that can produce rapid and tangible consequences.

Public opinion was for a long time an auxiliary factor, especially when it came to

Israeli self-propelled artillery howitzer has been used to fire rounds near the border with the Gaza Strip in southern Israel amid battles between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas. AFP armed conflict. The more people around the world who took your side in a dispute, the easier it would be to get favorable decisions from international institutions, votes at the UN, the support of other governments, perhaps a hearing from International Criminal Court, a better write-up in the history books.

But in the days before social media, the expression of public opinion was all somewhat indirect and most national leaders felt free to ignore it when it did not suit their agenda.

Now, however, international public opinion is among the most powerful political factors on the planet. Governments live in constant fear of finding themselves on the wrong side of it and so, at some level, it influences most of their policy decisions. And because the local "opinion weather" is always driven by the international "opinion climate," it is a globalized phenomenon, not simply a domestic one.

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

One of the most profound effects of social media is that people's opinions now tend to be dictated by their political loyalties, rather than their political loyalties being dictated by their opinions.



In the past, when we were not yet expected to have strong opinions about almost every issue and event on the planet, most of us held a few tame personal opinions generally related to domestic issues, which determined whether our sympathies were broadly left wing, centrist or right wing.

Developing an informed opinion on every subject under public discussion would be a full-time job for a large team of experts — yet social media now dictates that we all have robust opinions on each and every topic from the moment it emerges, and must be prepared to rush into battle every day against those with differing opinions.

We therefore tend to choose a party, an ideology or a leader on the basis that we perceive them to be a reliable wholesaler of acceptable opinions, a kind of subscription service that guarantees to provide us with a clear, combative position and point of view on every conceivable topic with minimal effort on our part. We do not have to read anything, know anything or believe anything except that our leader or our party is always right.

Social media also exerts strong influence on the manner and level at which all of these debates ("arguments" is a better word in this context) are conducted. It has a tendency to polarize discussions because the only argument a large crowd can easily follow in real time tends to be a simple binary reduction of the issues at stake.

So not only are people wedded to fixed opinions based on very shaky grounds, but nuance and subtlety — and therefore the possibility of deeper understanding, progress or even forgiveness — tend to become excluded from the process.

It is true that social media does also perform a useful role as a forum for experts, academics and journalists to express their concerns and ideas but these and other voices of well-informed reason tend to get drowned out by the baying of the ill-informed mob. The only people likely to seek them out and take the trouble to read their ideas are the minority who already reject over-simplified, polarized accounts of the world, so the net effect on international public opinion is negligible.

Attempting to finesse a complex point or idea simply takes too long when there is so much other material to consume, so many other topics to debate, so many of one's personal positions yet to expound upon.

The idea that either side in a conflict might be both good and bad, behave better on some days than on others, or display conflicting and contradictory beliefs and behaviors (just like all the rest of us) is simply unsuited to the nature of most contemporary public discourse.



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Any position that involves agreeing with, or even conditionally accepting, a single point made by one's opponent, or takes longer than a tweet to describe, or is susceptible to modification in the light of further evidence or discussion, simply cannot survive. It will not fit in with the ever-diminishing attention span of participants who are forever racing onto the next issue or the next channel.

The consequence of all this is simple to describe: Conflicts are largely generated by local issues but their course and their extent are determined to a significant degree by global opinion. If the central issues in these conflicts, the participants and their motivations generate sufficient amounts of pity, shock, fear, anger, injustice and moral outrage, then the conflict will "go viral" and become heavily influenced by international public opinion. Such strong emotions provide the fuel on which social media algorithms feed — and are the key to platforms' profits.

But when public opinion is allowed to drive conflicts around the planet, it is an unwelcome and dangerous development. This is because the people delivering the judgments about who is right and who is wrong not only have limited understanding of the issues, they generally have no skin in the game. The events are detached from their experiences, their interests and their reality, and that is no way to decide who wins and who loses.

The tribal habit of reducing and polarizing complex situations into idiotic binary choices — good or bad, right or wrong, them and us — is the behavior of a six-year-old. And who wants to live in a world where matters affecting our very survival are decided by toddlers?

And when people get bored of a specific topic, as sooner or later they surely will, whether their feelings of outrage run out of steam or they find it all too hard to understand, too finely balanced or too morally complex, they will simply drop that issue and move on to the next.

There is little chance of anyone being persuaded to change sides, or of winning or losing. There is simply endless squabbling and posturing until people get bored and their attention turns to the next outrage. Then the original issue and the arguments surrounding it either join the back catalog of historic grievances held by one or other of the warring tribes, or is simply ejected into the desert of non-issues.

This leaves the participants in the conflict, their allies and their proxies with a new, opposing problem: They are now receiving too little attention from the court of public opinion and, as a direct consequence, too little attention from other leaders and the





The dead body of a child is being carried away by a man in Rafah amidst the ongoing battle between Israel and Hamas. The violence, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths, has garnered worldwide attention and condemnation.

wider international community.

This is a problem for Sudan at the moment, for example, and for at least a dozen other countries in Africa, as well as Venezuela, Syria, Myanmar and Afghanistan. The list goes on. In such countries, as in every conflict zone or country affected by misrule, corruption, poverty, starvation, disease or natural disasters, the ultimate losers are the dispossessed, injured, homeless, starving or bereaved civilians who, more than any others caught up in these dramas, depend on international aid that is sustained by international public opinion. It goes without saying that few politicians would dream of assigning state aid to the victims of a conflict that the majority of their taxpayers do not care about or have never heard of.

The tragic truth is that the situations that attract such apathy are not social media friendly. They do not generate the high levels of anger, moral outrage or anxiety required drive energetic and sustained engagement, and therefore advertising revenue, on social media platforms. They do not play directly to preexisting, deeply rooted personal prejudices against or in favor of any of the protagonists. They are merely confusing and upsetting situations, and unless there is clearly somebody to blame — an obvious

scapegoat or a well-known villain — the most likely public reactions to such situations are limited to pity and discomfort.

Pity does not motivate as many people to furiously post their opinions as anger does. Discomfort tends to drive people away. If in addition the countries and main players involved are relatively unfamiliar to the audience, this results in even less of a reaction and, therefore, even less traction. The media circus moves on and the victims are left to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives unaided, more or less, and bizarrely isolated and alone in an ever more interconnected world.

# THE FAILURE OF PROPAGANDA

This complex picture is further complicated by the unpredictable effects of official information. The efforts of the key parties in a conflict to control the narrative are increasingly counterproductive. Another familiar characteristic of social media is that official messages are routinely greeted with doubt simply because they are delivered through official channels.

This is the sting in the tail of "advanced" democracies, where healthy skepticism about the motivations of those in power







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Rohingya children pose at a temporary shelter in Lapang Barat village, Bireuen, Aceh province in Myanmar. AFP congeals, over time, into general mistrust of everything they say and do. When the seeds of doubt about the trustworthiness of official messages are sown, it creates a vacuum into which literally any alternative narrative can readily flow. Once the public starts to believe the idea that the official version of events is bound to be a lie, it follows in the minds of many that any nonofficial version is likely to be the truth, no matter how implausible it might be. Indeed, it sometimes seems as though the more implausible a narrative is, the more it will appeal to some sections of the public.

The challenge for governments is no longer the traditional communications brief of finding or crafting the right message, one that will persuade, because no one can be persuaded except those who are already persuaded. Now, therefore, the challenge is more about finding the context, channel or persona that people other than one's existing followers will listen to for more than a split second and perhaps even trust. The medium really has become the message, and the credibility of the messenger counts more than anything else.

Having said this, the rapid spread of increasingly sophisticated deepfake

technology means it is surely only a matter of time before public trust in all communications, including from previously trusted sources, crumbles completely.

The only exception, paradoxically, might be information delivered non-digitally from personally known individuals — although we should beware the stealth influencer, covertly paid by a hidden sponsor to push a certain point of view to friends and family. The Soviet system, for example, successfully used friend-and-family networks to spy on the population, and it is clear that the influencer system is now penetrating society at an ever more granular level.

### **BRAND LOYALTY IS KEY**

The only key to absolute control over the minds of the international "audience" is absolute brand loyalty. The only thing that can ensure continued support for one country or another — through thick and thin, under the influence of confusing and conflicting messages and random behavior on both sides, the "fog of war," and the constant and growing noise of increasingly frantic and overcranked attempts to influence one's views — is deeply rooted brand loyalty to one country, race or religion.





In a storm of conflicting loyalties and information, to whom or to what do we ultimately turn? The commercial marketplace provides us with the example of trusted brands that become the last resort of a confused consumer. In a state of doubt (and there are few other states on offer) we ultimately revert, and indeed attach ourselves ever more firmly, to the brands we trust because we have trusted them for the longest time, because they remind us of our childhood or our parents' choices, and because they remind us of ourselves.

And nation brands are infinitely stickier in this way than commercial brands because they come bundled with the potent attributes of race, religion and personal identity, which tend to eclipse all other considerations.

These mechanisms hold because no matter how liberal or progressive individuals might imagine themselves to be, we humans are a profoundly conservative species at heart. Sticking to what we know is a straightforward survival mechanism.

Ultimately, we will always revert to believing what we have always believed and doing what we have always done, for the simple reason that it self-evidently did not kill us or we would not be here to tell the Dissatisfied with the election results, supporters of ousted US President Donald Trump gathered at his call and marched to Congress in Washington D.C. on Jan. 6, 2021. Shutterstock

tale. New behaviors, on the other hand, just might kill us — and we will not know one way or the other until it is too late.

That overwhelming, infallible logic presents us with the simplest of choices in the most confusing of situations, and this probably accounts for the dramatic recent rise of populist governments. The more turbulent the world becomes, the stronger the appeal of their simplistic explanations and infantile remedies.

This is also the reason why nothing is more wicked than parents or teachers raising children to fear or mistrust other groups of people. This marks them for life and turns them into unreasoning hate machines. More than any other factor, such indoctrination from an early age ensures conflicts such as the one that continues to endlessly play out in Israel and Palestine become permanent features of the landscape.

Unless we can teach our children to think for themselves, rather than simply do what they are told, human progress will continue to go backwards, and a toxic emulsion of mob rule and apathy, spurred on by social media, terrorism, nativism and populism, will end up as the single social system of all humanity.

