

Propaganda war is now in the hands of the people



By [Anton Harber](#)

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Israel rests on its military strength. There is no doubting its ability to exercise its superiority over Gaza and, while Hamas and others harass and inflict losses on the Jewish state, no one thinks they can win on the open battlefield.

But Israel is losing the social media war. Our Facebook and Twitter feeds are filled with pictures of dead babies, weeping parents, rubble, and blood. Some of these pictures are fake, but many of them are real and they raise real issues over the effects of a steady stream of X-rated war pornography.

Both sides are using social media, and each is responsible for some of the exaggeration and manipulation flying around.

They are slugging it out in the Twittersphere as ruthlessly as on the ground. For warring parties to fight it out in the field of media and propaganda is neither new nor unusual, but this time around social media are dominant and this may be part of the reason that Israel is losing this part of the war.

Unfiltered and accessible to all

What we see is how radically the nature and effects of social media differ from traditional media. They are unfiltered and everyone has access, as both audience and broadcaster. Everyone on the ground with a cellphone is a war correspondent.

When anything happens, the pictures are available almost instantly from ordinary citizens and there often follows a social media debate about authenticity, effect, and casualties. The information flows much faster and much wider and cannot be controlled by the generals in the way it used to be.

This means that military dominance and influence in the dominant global media does not translate as easily as it used to into media victory. The victors don't always write the first draft of history anymore.

But it also means that the righteous fanatics from both sides have free rein, as the flow of information is no longer driven by reporters who have to think about accuracy, context and explanation, nor does it pass through editors to check for authenticity, taste and appropriateness.

The result is a cacophony of claims and counter-claims on an ever-increasing scale of horrors and a much greater need for consumers to apply their own filters and judgment.

Can it be trusted?

One of my deepest concerns is that social media amplify the voices of the fanatics and fundamentalists, and drown out the mass of people in the middle, who are desperate for a peaceful solution.

When we see a claim on social media, we have to ask where it comes from and decide whether to trust it. We often have to follow the social media chatter to get a sense of whether it is authenticated (and by whom). Of course, we have to do that with conventional media, but now we have to deal with much more, much quicker.

Most of our instinctive filters are, naturally, ideological. We are quick to let through what reinforces our views and hesitate to do it for those images and words that do not reinforce our prejudices.

We unfollow those whose views offend us, making it more likely that we end up with a preponderance of self-selected views that reinforce our own.

Nothing is more pointless than a debate when you are listening only to your own side.

Public discourse has changed

If there were ever a need for both sides to hear each other, it is in a war of this kind.

At home in South Africa, a handful of loudmouthed louts started a social media assault on a group of teenage Jewish debaters who expressed concern about the loss of life in Gaza.

It took a few days for conventional media to catch up to the intra-Jewish controversy and even longer for the communal leadership to tamp it down by making it clear that they had no problem with their students joining the debates over Gaza.

Social media showed themselves to be both a stimulant of debate (which started when the boys posted a picture of themselves wearing a symbolic scarf) and a tool of intolerant bullies.

But one thing is clear: the power to shape the public agenda has shifted from top-down conventional media to the more democratic social media.

It has changed public discourse - and war.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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