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## THE BATTLE FOR REALITY: INFORMATION WARFARE AS THE DEFINING FRONT OF THE CONFLICT AFTER OCTOBER 7, 2023

**Annotation.** The article is devoted to the analysis of the information war that unfolded in the global media space around the conflict between Israel and Hamas after the events of October 7, 2023. The purpose of the study is to identify the main tools and methods used by the parties to construct conflicting realities and dominate the digital environment. Based on the analysis of materials from international media (Reuters, The Guardian, BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, The Economist), the work explores opposing narratives (the "war of civilization on terror" against the "struggle for liberation from occupation"), strategies for using visual content, mechanisms for spreading disinformation and coordinated campaigns on social networks (astroturfing, manipulation of hashtags). The methodology includes a comparative analysis of discourse and a case study of key incidents. It is concluded that in the conflicts of the 21st century, the struggle for control over narrative and information space acquires strategic importance, determining international legitimacy and shaping historical memory, while traditional media face a crisis of trust and turn out to be both targets and participants in the confrontation.

**Keywords:** information war, media space, narrative, manipulation, disinformation, social networks, visual content, conflict between Israel and Palestine, Hamas

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Научная статья

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### **БИТВА ЗА РЕАЛЬНОСТЬ: ИНФОРМАЦИОННАЯ ВОЙНА КАК ОПРЕДЕЛЯЮЩИЙ ФРОНТ КОНФЛИКТА ПОСЛЕ 7 ОКТЯБРЯ 2023 ГОДА**

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена анализу информационной войны, развернувшейся в мировом медиапространстве вокруг конфликта между Израилем и ХАМАСОМ после событий 7 октября 2023 года. Цель исследования - выявить основные инструменты и методы, используемые сторонами для создания конфликтующих реальностей и доминирования в цифровой среде. Основанная на анализе материалов международных СМИ (Reuters, The Guardian, BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, The Economist), работа исследует противоположные нарративы ("война цивилизации с террором" против "борьбы за освобождение от оккупации"), стратегии использования визуального контента, механизмы распространения дезинформации и скоординированные кампании в социальных сетях (астротурфинг, манипулирование хэштегами). Методология включает в себя сравнительный анализ дискурса и тематическое исследование ключевых инцидентов. Авторы приходят к выводу, что в конфликтах 21 века борьба за контроль над нарративом и информационным пространством приобретает стратегическое значение, определяя международную легитимность и формируя историческую память, в то время как традиционные СМИ сталкиваются с кризисом доверия и оказываются как мишенями, так и участниками противостояния.

**Ключевые слова:** информационная война, медиапространство, нарратив, манипуляция, дезинформация, социальные сети, визуальный контент, конфликт между Израилем и Палестиной, ХАМАС

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**Introduction.** The events of October 7, 2023, when militants from the Hamas movement carried out a large-scale attack on Israel, became a central topic of discussion not only for the Middle East but also for the global information space. The conflict, with unprecedented speed and intensity, transformed into a total information war, where battles over symbols, narratives, and public opinion took on strategic significance. Social media became a key theater of military operations, and control over the interpretation of events became a resource as important as military might. This article is dedicated to analyzing how the warring parties – Israel and its supporters on one side, and Hamas and its supporters on the other – construct fundamentally different realities, using specific frames, manipulation of visual content, disinformation, and coordinated campaigns to dominate the digital space. The analysis is based on reports and investigations by international media such as Reuters, The Guardian, BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and The Economist, which have themselves become active participants and, often, targets in this struggle.

**Chapter 1. Conflicting Narratives: The Construction of Reality.** From the very beginning of the conflict, both sides made concerted efforts to impose their own system of coordinates for understanding what happened. These systems represent two mutually exclusive narratives, appealing to different value foundations and audiences.

**1.1 Israel's Narrative: "War on Terror and Barbarism."** The Israeli side has consistently built a frame in which the events of October 7 are presented as an act of absolute evil, devoid of any political meaning. A key role here is played by the careful selection of vocabulary. Terms such as "atrocities," "Islamist terror," and "barbarism" are used to dehumanize the enemy and strip it of any political or historical justifications. This rhetoric reaches its peak in the statements of the country's top leadership. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, this is a "struggle between civilization and barbarism" [1]. This approach allows Israel to position itself not merely as a party to a local conflict, but as an outpost of Western civilization in its clash with global terrorism and chaos. This narrative is aimed, first and foremost, at consolidating support from Western governments and societies, appealing to what they perceive as universal values of security and humanism. In this logic, any retaliatory actions, however harsh, are legitimate and necessary acts of self-defense and retribution against forces that do not recognize the rules of war or human morality.

**1.2 The Narrative of Hamas and Its Supporters: "Resistance to Occupation and the Struggle for Liberation."** In contrast to the Israeli frame, the Palestinian side, including Hamas, presents its actions as legitimate and forced resistance to decades of military occupation, blockade, and systemic injustice. In their narrative, the October 7 attack is not an act of unmotivated cruelty, but a desperate step in an ongoing struggle for freedom and national rights. The central concepts here are "apartheid" and "genocide," used to describe Israel's policies towards the Palestinians. As noted by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Palestinians are facing a "new war with signs of genocide" [2]. This narrative appeals to the language of human rights, post-colonial discourse, and anti-imperialist struggle. It is designed to mobilize support among countries of the "Global South," left-wing and progres-

sive movements in Europe and North America, as well as among diasporas around the world. In this system of coordinates, violence from Palestinian groups, however terrible, is a direct consequence of structural violence from Israel.

**Chapter 2. Visualization as a Weapon: Shock and Empathy.** In an era where attention has become the scarcest resource, visual content has become one of the most powerful tools of information warfare. Both sides actively use shocking imagery to evoke strong emotional reactions and shape public opinion.

**2.1 Palestinian Visual Strategy: The Currency of Suffering.** Supporters of the Palestinian position primarily rely on demonstrating the humanitarian consequences of Israeli airstrikes and the ground operation in the Gaza Strip. Social networks and news feeds have been flooded with footage of destroyed apartment buildings, hospitals, and schools, as well as photos and videos of wounded and dead children. These images serve several functions: they evoke deep empathy and compassion in a global audience, call into question Israel's stated principles of proportionality and distinction between combatants and civilians, and create powerful political pressure on Western governments. As *The Economist* aptly noted, "images of suffering in Gaza have become currency in the information war" [3]. This "currency" is used to purchase international legitimacy and demonize Israel's actions on the world stage.

**2.2 Israeli Visual Strategy: Documenting Brutality.** Understanding the power of visual impact, Israel made unprecedented efforts to document and disseminate evidence of the brutality of the October 7 attack. Since there were few live broadcasts from the scene, the Israeli authorities took on the role of the main distributor of this information. They organized closed screenings of raw footage for journalists, foreign diplomats, and bloggers, showing footage from surveillance cameras, dash-cams, and the attackers themselves. These materials, accompanied by captions such as "This isn't 'resistance,' this is terrorism" [4], were intended to serve as irrefutable proof of the barbaric nature of the attacks. The goal of this campaign was twofold: first, to visually confirm and make tangible its narrative of a "struggle against barbarism," and second, to try to deprive Hamas and its supporters of any moral or political legitimacy in the eyes of the world community, thereby neutralizing the effect of the images of suffering in Gaza.

**Chapter 3. Disinformation and Undermining Trust in Sources.** The information space of the conflict quickly turned into a dumpster where truth, half-truths, and outright lies mixed into a dangerous cocktail. The spread of disinformation and the tactic of undermining trust in opponents have become integral elements of the strategy of both sides.

**3.1 Case Studies in Disinformation.** In the very first days of the conflict, several high-profile but unconfirmed rumors were launched into the media sphere, which had a significant impact on public sentiment. The most telling was the story of the "beheaded babies." This rumor, spread by some Israeli officials and actively picked up by pro-Israeli activists, caused a wave of shock and outrage. However, later, outlets like CNN were forced to issue clarifications, noting that no evidence of deliberate beheading of infants had been found, although the brutal killing of chil-

dren did take place [5]. This case demonstrates how emotionally charged but inaccurate information can be used to mobilize support and demonize the enemy.

Another key incident was the explosion at the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza on October 17. Initial reports from Palestinian sources blamed an Israeli airstrike and spoke of hundreds of deaths. This news provoked mass protests across the Middle East and sharp criticism of Israel. However, a subsequent investigation by the BBC, The New York Times, and other independent media, based on analysis of geolocation, CCTV footage, and drone flight data, indicated a high probability that the explosion was caused by a failed rocket launch by the Palestinian group Islamic Jihad [6]. This episode highlights how quickly disinformation can provoke real political consequences and how difficult it is to establish the truth in conditions of chaos and a high level of trust in "one's own" sources.

**3.2 Tactics of Undermining Trust.** Parallel to spreading their own content, both sides are actively engaged in discrediting their opponents' sources of information. Israeli authorities regularly accuse the Qatari channel Al Jazeera, a key news source in the Arab world, of supporting terrorism and spreading Hamas propaganda. These accusations do not remain at the level of rhetoric: Israeli security forces have detained the channel's journalists, and its offices have been bombed [7]. The goal of such tactics is to deprive the opponent of a mouthpiece and narrow the space for an alternative narrative.

For their part, supporters of the Palestinian position accuse Western mainstream media (such as BBC, CNN, Sky News) of systematic censorship, bias, and operating within a pro-Israeli information cartel. The method of "whataboutery" is widely used, creating a vicious cycle of mutual recrimination and blocking the possibility of moral assessment of specific events. Any condemnation of the terror of October 7 is met with a counter-question: "What about the thousands of victims in Gaza?" Criticism of Israel's military actions, in turn, is met with the question: "Have you forgotten what happened on October 7?" This technique allows each side to evade responsibility by constantly redirecting attention to the crimes of the other, ultimately leading to moral paralysis and a sense that it is fundamentally impossible to establish truth and righteousness.

**Chapter 4. Astroturfing and Coordination: The Battle of Bots and Hashtags.** Behind the visible, organic activity of users on social networks lies a complex system of coordination and artificial boosting aimed at creating the illusion of mass support and dominating the digital agenda.

Researchers from the Stanford Internet Observatory and other organizations monitoring cybersecurity and disinformation have documented how both sides of the conflict use extensive networks of bots, fake and "sleeper" accounts. These networks are used to artificially boost key hashtags, such as the pro-Israeli #BringThemHomeNow or #StandWithIsrael, and the pro-Palestinian #StopGazaGenocide and #FreePalestine. The goal of such campaigns is not just to push a topic into "trends," but to create the impression among an ordinary user, journalist, or politician that a particular position

enjoys overwhelming public support. This is a form of psychological pressure designed to make people remain silent or, conversely, join the "winning" side.

In addition to hashtags, these coordinated networks are engaged in the mass distribution of propaganda memes, infographics, and video clips, often taken out of context or outright fabricated. They also organize raids on opponents' accounts, launching mass complaints and harassment. In this battle for digital space, the winner is not the one with the more substantial arguments, but the one who possesses the more developed and effective infrastructure for manipulating public opinion.

**Conclusion.** The events initiated on October 7, 2023, have clearly demonstrated that the nature of conflicts in the 21st century has undergone fundamental changes. Information warfare has ceased to be an auxiliary tool and has turned into an independent, and often defining, front of confrontation. The struggle is not only for control over cities and roads but also for how the world will perceive, evaluate, and remember the very essence of this confrontation.

The conflicting narratives – "the war of civilization against terror" and "the struggle of the oppressed for liberation" – create two sealed, parallel realities. Each is reinforced by a carefully selected, and often fabricated, visual series, an arsenal of emotionally charged terms, and coordinated campaigns on social networks. In this struggle, traditional media find themselves both hostages and targets, and their attempts to establish facts run into a wave of distrust and accusations of bias.

The ultimate stake in this battle for reality is not a momentary military victory, but international legitimacy, historical memory, and moral justification. The ability to control the narrative determines who, in the eyes of the world community, will appear as the victim and who as the aggressor, whose actions will be considered legitimate self-defense and whose as war crimes. The war surrounding October 7 proved that in the modern era, those who control the story control the future, and this battle for history is being waged today in real time on the screens of our smartphones.

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