



Clickbait Capitalism in Times of War: Emotional Framing and the Politics of Visibility in High-Engagement Gaza War Coverage

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Abstract

The 2023–2024 Gaza war produced an unprecedented volume of digital news coverage, though visibility was not evenly distributed across representations of the conflict. This study examines the communicative characteristics of highly visible war reporting, analyzing emotional framing, thematic emphasis, and headline construction in high-engagement digital coverage. Drawing on Critical Political Economy and Framing Theory, it explores how conflict narratives are shaped within engagement-driven media environments. Using a mixed-methods design, the study analyzes approximately 500 high-engagement news items collected via BuzzSumo from news websites and social media platforms between October 2023 and January 2025. Quantitative analysis identifies patterns in emotional tone, content topics, and headline style, while qualitative framing analysis examines how humanitarian suffering, military events, political responses, and conflict developments are narratively constructed. Findings show visibility concentrated around human-interest and conflict frames, emotionally intense narratives, humanitarian-impact stories, and action-oriented, personalized headlines, while diplomatic developments, policy reporting, and long-term humanitarian conditions received less prominence. The study contributes to debates on the political economy of attention and conflict communication by shifting focus from engagement outcomes to the communicative traits of highly visible content, and discusses implications for journalistic practice and public understanding of conflict.

Introduction

The digital transformation of journalism has fundamentally reshaped how wars and humanitarian crises are reported, circulated, and consumed.

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In contemporary media environments, conflict narratives are no longer mediated solely through traditional journalistic institutions but increasingly through platform-driven communication systems governed by algorithms, engagement metrics, and competitive visibility logics. Within these systems, audience attention functions as a central economic resource, encouraging media organizations to prioritize content that generates rapid interaction, emotional response, and sustained circulation (Fuchs 2022; Samman and Gammon 2023). As a result, the visibility of conflict-related information is increasingly shaped not only by editorial judgment or public relevance but also by the structural dynamics of digital attention economies.

These transformations have become particularly evident in high-visibility digital war reporting, where emotional storytelling often aims to attract audience engagement. Research on digital journalism demonstrates that emotionally charged narratives—especially those emphasizing suffering, violence, urgency, and moral outrage—are more likely to generate shares, comments, and reactions across platforms than informational or policy-oriented reporting (Papacharissi 2021; Mellor 2024). In algorithmically mediated environments, such interaction signals influence content distribution and visibility, reinforcing the circulation of emotionally salient narratives while reducing the prominence of less emotionally engaging information (Gorwa 2024). Consequently, digital journalism increasingly operates within an engagement-centered visibility system, in which audience interaction becomes a key determinant of narrative prominence.

The political economy of digital media provides an important framework for understanding these dynamics. Scholars of platform capitalism argue that contemporary communication systems are structured around the commodification of attention, in which user engagement is converted into economic value through advertising models, data extraction, and algorithmic optimization (Fuchs 2022; Srnicek 2017). Within this environment, news organizations face growing pressure to produce content that can compete in crowded digital spaces. Clickbait practices, sensational framing, and emotionally intensified storytelling, therefore, emerge not simply as editorial preferences but as structural adaptations to platform-driven media economies (Samman and Gammon 2023). In conflict reporting specifically, the commercial logic of attention may encourage the amplification of dramatic narratives and highly emotional representations of violence because such content is more likely to achieve visibility and interaction.

These dynamics are particularly significant in the context of the 2023–2024 Gaza war, which generated an unprecedented volume of digital



reporting across news websites and social media platforms. The conflict became one of the most intensively mediated wars in recent years, characterized by continuous streams of breaking news, graphic imagery, emotional testimonies, and competing political narratives. Studies examining media coverage of the Gaza war have identified recurring concerns regarding emotionalization, selective visibility, and the unequal amplification of certain narratives within digital communication environments (Elmasry and Quinn 2024; Matar 2025). At the same time, reports on platform governance and digital rights documented allegations of algorithmic asymmetries affecting the Visibility of Palestinian-related content, raising broader questions about platform power and the politics of visibility in digital conflict communication (7amleh 2024; Access Now et al. 2025). Furthermore, investigative reports by Arab media organizations, such as the Journalist Support Committee (JSC) and Al Araby Television, have documented systematic restrictions and algorithmic suppression targeting Palestinian content, corroborating findings from digital rights campaigns regarding Meta's censorship policies.

However, despite growing scholarly interest in digital war reporting, significant gaps remain in understanding the relationship between emotional framing and audience engagement during armed conflict. Existing literature has often examined clickbait journalism, emotional communication, platform algorithms, and conflict framing as relatively separate phenomena. While some studies focus on the commercialization of digital journalism, others analyze media bias, humanitarian representation, or audience behavior independently. However, limited empirical research has systematically examined how emotional framing interacts with engagement-driven platform dynamics to shape the visibility of war narratives across digital media environments. Moreover, much of the existing scholarship on conflict communication remains conceptually oriented, relying on theoretical critiques of digital media systems without providing measurable evidence linking emotional framing to audience interaction patterns. This limitation becomes particularly important in the context of war reporting, where ethical responsibilities and public information needs are especially significant. Understanding which, and why, narratives become visible is therefore essential not only for analyzing digital journalism but also for evaluating how contemporary media systems shape public awareness of armed conflict and humanitarian suffering.

Accordingly, this study examines the communicative characteristics of highly visible digital coverage of the 2023–2024 Gaza war within the broader context of clickbait-driven media economies. Drawing on Critical Political



Economy and Framing Theory, it explores how emotional framing, thematic emphasis, and headline construction were represented within high-engagement war reporting across digital platforms. Rather than treating emotional framing as merely a stylistic feature of reporting, the study conceptualizes it as defining descriptive features linked to the economic and technological logic of attention-driven media systems. Methodologically, the study employs a mixed-methods design combining quantitative engagement analysis with qualitative framing analysis of approximately 500 high-engagement news items collected through BuzzSumo between October 2023 and January 2025. By integrating cross-platform engagement metrics with narrative analysis, the research seeks to identify how emotionally charged reporting patterns correspond to variations in digital visibility. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates concerning clickbait capitalism, platformized journalism, and the political economy of attention by providing empirical evidence on the communicative characteristics of highly visible war narratives in digital media environments.

Ultimately, the study argues that visibility in contemporary conflict reporting is increasingly conditioned by engagement-oriented communication logics that reward emotional intensity, narrative immediacy, and audience responsiveness. These dynamics do not simply affect how wars are reported; they shape which forms of suffering, violence, and political meaning become publicly visible in the first place. By examining the communicative characteristics of highly visible Gaza war coverage across digital platforms, the study seeks to contribute to broader discussions about journalism ethics, platform accountability, and the future of conflict reporting in the age of digital attention economies.

Research Problem

Digital news coverage of armed conflict increasingly operates within attention-driven media economies, where visibility is shaped by engagement metrics rather than editorial judgment alone. In this environment, emotionally framed content, particularly stories emphasizing suffering, dramatic events, and casualty figures, may be systematically rewarded with greater audience interaction. While prior research has documented the rise of clickbait practices and the commercialization of attention in digital journalism, a significant empirical gap remains in understanding how emotional framing operates specifically in wartime reporting, where ethical responsibilities and public information needs are especially critical. Existing studies often address emotionalization, platform algorithms, or audience engagement separately, but rarely examine their interaction within the context of conflict coverage.



The 2023–2024 Gaza war provides a critical case for investigating these dynamics. The conflict generated an unprecedented volume of digital reporting circulated across news websites and social media platforms, allowing researchers to observe how emotional tone and narrative style are represented within highly visible coverage. However, there is limited systematic evidence showing whether emotionally charged framing consistently attracts higher engagement than informational or policy-oriented reporting during armed conflict. Accordingly, the central problem this study addresses is the limited empirical understanding of the communicative characteristics of highly visible conflict reporting in engagement-driven digital environments. While previous research has examined emotional communication, platform algorithms, and audience engagement separately, less attention has been devoted to understanding how these elements converge within highly visible war coverage.

Consequently, this study aims to examine the communicative characteristics of highly visible digital coverage of the Gaza war and to explore how emotional framing, thematic emphasis, and headline construction were represented within highly engaged content. Specifically, the study seeks to: (a) identify the dominant emotional frames used in high-engagement digital news coverage of the Gaza war; (b) Investigate the communicative characteristics of highly visible digital coverage of the 2023–2024 Gaza war within engagement-driven media environments; (c) Compare engagement patterns across different content types, including humanitarian, military, and political reporting; (d) Assess how headline style and narrative emphasis contribute to content visibility in digital news environments; and (e) Evaluate the implications of engagement-driven news production for ethical journalism and public understanding during armed conflict.

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature in three specific ways. Firstly, it provides empirical evidence on the distribution of emotional framing patterns within highly visible digital war coverage, addressing a research gap that has largely relied on conceptual or case-based analyses. Secondly, it advances the political economy of digital media by demonstrating how attention-driven news environments shape the visibility of conflict narratives through audience interaction metrics. Thirdly, it offers a methodological framework for analyzing emotionally framed conflict reporting using mixed-methods data drawn from cross-platform engagement analytics and qualitative framing analysis. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What types of emotional framing characterize high-engagement digital coverage of the 2023–2024 Gaza war?



RQ2. How are emotional tone categories represented within highly engaged digital war coverage?

RQ3. Which content topics are most prominently represented within highly engaged wartime coverage?

RQ4. How do headline style and narrative emphasis distribute across high-visibility content in digital news environments?

RQ5. What are the ethical implications of engagement-driven reporting practices in the context of armed conflict?

Literature Review

This section examines how digital attention economies shape the visibility of conflict narratives by connecting research on clickbait-driven media systems, emotional framing in journalism, audience engagement behavior, and the ethical implications of emotionally charged war reporting.

Political Economy of Attention and Clickbait in Digital Journalism

The transformation of contemporary journalism cannot be fully understood without situating digital news production within the broader political economy of attention. Scholars increasingly argue that digital media operate within an economic system in which human attention functions as a central commodity, shaping both the structure of media industries and the nature of news content. In this context, communication is no longer viewed solely as a social process but as an economic resource that can be measured, monetized, and optimized through technological infrastructures (Davenport and Beck, 2001; Wu, 2016; Fuchs, 2020). The emergence of platform capitalism has fundamentally altered the economic foundations of journalism by introducing new forms of value creation based on data extraction and audience engagement. Srnicek (2017) argues that digital platforms function as intermediaries connecting users, advertisers, and content producers while simultaneously collecting monetizable behavioral data. Similarly, Betancourt (2016) emphasizes that digital capitalism relies on the commodification of communication itself, whereby everyday interactions become sources of economic value through surveillance and algorithmic analysis. These transformations have repositioned news organizations within competitive ecosystems dominated by large technology companies that control the flow of information and determine content visibility.

Within this economic environment, news production has become increasingly dependent on performance metrics such as clicks, shares, and engagement rates. Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe this phenomenon as



the platformization of news, in which media organizations adapt their editorial strategies to align with the technical and economic requirements of digital platforms. Rather than prioritizing traditional journalistic values such as accuracy and public service, newsrooms are encouraged to produce content that generates measurable audience engagement. This shift reflects a broader transformation in media governance, in which algorithms and analytics play a central role in shaping editorial decision-making (Gillespie 2018; Fuchs 2020).

The concept of clickbait capitalism has emerged as a critical framework for understanding the relationship between economic incentives and journalistic practice in digital media systems. Samman and Gammon (2023) argue that clickbait should be interpreted as a structural outcome of market competition rather than as a deviation from professional norms. In highly competitive digital environments, media organizations are incentivized to produce emotionally engaging content that attracts audience attention and sustains platform visibility. Similarly, Ji (2024) demonstrates that social media ecosystems reward content that generates strong emotional reactions, reinforcing the alignment between emotional expression and economic performance in digital communication systems.

Research on digital media economies also highlights the role of advertising-driven revenue models in shaping news production. Because digital advertising relies on user engagement metrics, media organizations are encouraged to maximize audience interaction by employing attention-grabbing headlines, dramatic narratives, and visually compelling imagery. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) argue that these practices reflect the commercialization of news production in digital environments, where journalistic content is increasingly evaluated by its ability to attract clicks rather than its informational value. This transformation has contributed to the normalization of sensationalism and emotional storytelling in contemporary journalism.

The economic pressures associated with digital media production become particularly visible in the coverage of crises and armed conflicts, where emotionally charged narratives attract high levels of audience engagement. Scholars note that the competitive logic of the attention economy encourages the amplification of dramatic events, casualty figures, and humanitarian crises, as these topics generate significant public interest and sustained media attention (Jones 2022; Kompatsiaris 2020).

Importantly, the political economy perspective emphasizes that clickbait practices are not merely stylistic choices but structural



consequences of broader transformations in media industries. The integration of communication technologies into capitalist systems has produced new forms of economic dependency in which news organizations rely heavily on digital platforms for distribution and revenue. As a result, editorial autonomy becomes constrained by commercial pressures and algorithmic requirements, creating tensions between journalistic ethics and economic survival (Srnicsek 2017; Fuchs 2020).

Emotional Framing in News and Conflict Reporting

Emotional framing has become a central feature of contemporary news production, particularly in the coverage of crises and armed conflicts. In conflict reporting, emotional framing plays a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions of violence, suffering, and responsibility. News narratives do not merely report events; they organize them into emotionally meaningful stories that attract attention and influence public understanding (Scheufele, 1999; Reese, 2007). Harcup and O'Neill (2017) argue that contemporary news production increasingly favors stories that evoke strong emotional responses, reflecting the growing importance of audience engagement in editorial decision-making.

In war reporting, emotional framing often focuses on humanitarian suffering, civilian casualties, and dramatic battlefield developments. Studies indicate that such narratives are more likely to attract audience attention and generate public reaction than policy-oriented or analytical reporting. Abubakar (2019) demonstrates that the coverage of violent extremism often relies on emotionally charged language and imagery designed to capture public interest and sustain media visibility. Similarly, Allan (2025) emphasizes that visual war journalism increasingly relies on emotionally powerful imagery to convey the intensity and urgency of conflict situations. These visual representations serve as emotional triggers that connect distant audiences to the realities of war while simultaneously reinforcing the commercial logic of engagement-driven journalism.

The expansion of digital media platforms has further intensified the role of emotion in conflict communication by enabling the rapid circulation of images, videos, and personal testimonies from conflict zones. Social media environments encourage the sharing of emotionally compelling content, particularly material that evokes empathy, outrage, or fear. Research indicates that emotionally framed posts are more likely to be shared and discussed online, contributing to the viral spread of conflict narratives across digital networks (Berger and Milkman 2012; Brady et al. 2017). This dynamic



reflects the interaction between psychological processes and technological infrastructures in shaping contemporary communication practices.

Studies examining media coverage of recent conflicts demonstrate that emotionally framed narratives play a significant role in mobilizing public opinion and shaping political discourse (Jones 2022; Weiss 2024). At the same time, research on media bias and conflict reporting indicates that selective emotional framing may contribute to uneven visibility of victims and competing narratives, particularly in highly polarized political environments (Center for Media Monitoring 2024; Wolfsfeld 2022). This perspective provides a critical bridge between the economic logic of clickbait journalism and the behavioral dynamics of audience engagement examined in the following section.

Audience Engagement and Visibility in Digital Media

In digital media environments, engagement encompasses not only audience attention but also measurable interactions. Scholars argue that these metrics have become key indicators of media performance, influencing editorial decision-making and determining the visibility of news stories in algorithmically mediated environments (Napoli 2011; Nieborg and Poell 2018). As a result, engagement has evolved from a secondary outcome of communication into a primary driver of content production in digital journalism. Research indicates that algorithmic ranking systems are designed to maximize user engagement by promoting content that generates strong reactions and sustained attention. Gillespie (2018) describes these systems as forms of algorithmic gatekeeping that shape public access to information by determining which stories appear prominently in users' feeds. Similarly, Gorwa (2024) argues that platform regulation increasingly relies on automated processes that evaluate content based on its engagement potential, thereby influencing the visibility of political and social issues in digital public spheres.

In the context of conflict reporting, audience engagement plays a particularly significant role in determining which narratives receive public attention. Studies show that emotionally charged content related to violence, humanitarian crises, and military action tends to generate higher levels of engagement than informational or policy-oriented reporting. Berger and Milkman (2012) demonstrate that content evoking high-arousal emotions—such as anger, fear, or empathy—is more likely to be widely shared, thereby increasing its visibility in digital networks. This pattern has been confirmed in subsequent research on online communication during crises, which shows that emotionally intense narratives consistently outperform neutral



information in terms of audience engagement (Brady et al. 2017; Ji 2024). Recent scholarship has also highlighted the emergence of new actors within digital conflict communication, including influencers, citizen journalists, and content creators who document events directly from conflict zones. Divon, Eriksson, and Krutrok (2025) describe the rise of “war influencers,” individuals who leverage digital platforms to gain visibility and influence public discourse about conflict. Their findings suggest that audience engagement serves as symbolic capital in digital communication environments, enabling content creators to build authority and legitimacy through sustained interaction with followers.

The growing importance of engagement metrics has also transformed the criteria for evaluating newsworthiness in digital journalism. Performance indicators of audience behavior increasingly complement traditional news values such as relevance, accuracy, and public interest. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) argue that journalists now operate within systems in which engagement analytics influence editorial decisions, thereby encouraging the production of content that aligns with user preferences and platform algorithms. This shift reflects the broader transformation of journalism into a data-driven profession in which audience interaction serves as both a feedback mechanism and a source of economic value.

Scholars have further emphasized that the pursuit of engagement can create feedback loops that reinforce the prominence of certain types of content while marginalizing others. Content that generates high levels of interaction is more likely to be promoted by algorithms, increasing its visibility and attracting additional engagement. Conversely, stories that fail to generate immediate reactions may remain hidden from public view regardless of their informational importance. This dynamic contributes to what some researchers describe as the algorithmic amplification of attention, in which visibility is determined by engagement rather than journalistic significance (Jones 2022; Srnicek 2017). Studies examining digital communication during armed conflict indicate that platform algorithms may amplify content that aligns with audience emotions while limiting the reach of information that lacks immediate emotional appeal (Gorwa 2024; Weiss 2024). This pattern highlights the role of technological systems in shaping public awareness of war and influencing the distribution of attention across competing narratives. In this sense, engagement functions as both a technological mechanism and a cultural force that determines which stories become visible, which voices are amplified, and which forms of suffering receive public recognition. These dynamics provide a critical foundation for



examining the ethical implications of emotionalized war coverage addressed in the following section.

Ethical Implications of Emotionalized War Coverage

The competitive pressures of digital media environments have introduced new tensions between professional standards and commercial incentives. Scholars argue that the pursuit of audience attention may encourage the use of emotionally provocative narratives and graphic imagery, raising questions about the boundaries between public interest and exploitation of suffering (Ward 2010; Allan 2013). In the same vein, Abubakar (2019) highlights the ethical dilemmas faced by journalists covering violent extremism, noting that emotionally charged reporting may inadvertently amplify fear, misinformation, or extremist narratives. Allan (2025) argues that visual war journalism has become increasingly reliant on dramatic imagery to capture audience attention, even as journalists face heightened risks in documenting conflict situations. This emphasis on compelling visuals may blur the distinction between reporting and spectacle, contributing to the normalization of sensationalism in digital news environments.

Scholars have also examined the ethical implications of algorithmic systems that prioritize emotionally engaging content in digital media platforms. Automated recommendation systems are designed to maximize user interaction, which may inadvertently promote narratives that generate strong emotional reactions while marginalizing more nuanced or analytical reporting. Gorwa (2024) notes that platform governance increasingly relies on algorithmic moderation and ranking mechanisms that influence the visibility of information, raising concerns about transparency and accountability in digital communication systems. In the context of war coverage, these processes can shape public understanding of conflict by amplifying certain forms of suffering while limiting the reach of others.

The ethical implications of emotionalized war coverage, therefore, extend beyond individual journalistic decisions to encompass broader structural dynamics within digital media systems. The convergence of economic competition, technological infrastructure, and audience behavior has created communication environments in which emotional engagement is rewarded, and ethical restraint may be difficult to maintain. Scholars argue that addressing these challenges requires developing new ethical frameworks that respond to the realities of digital journalism, including algorithmic governance, platform power, and the commercialization of attention (Ward 2018; Fuchs 2020).



Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods explanatory research design that integrates quantitative analysis of audience engagement metrics with qualitative framing analysis of digital news content. The qualitative framing analysis was applied comprehensively to the same full sample of 500 high-engagement items that were quantitatively measured, enabling direct integration of the ways in which specific emotional frames explain the quantitative interaction scores. The mixed-methods approach enables the study to examine both the measurable circulation of war-related narratives and the representational strategies associated with variations in digital visibility. The study focuses on observable patterns of content visibility shaped by engagement-driven distribution systems. The central analytical framework is the concept of “Algorithmic Visibility Inequality,” which refers to systematic differences in the reach and prominence of comparable news content across digital platforms as a result of engagement-based ranking mechanisms. The study, therefore, investigates how emotional framing strategies are represented in highly visible conflict coverage across digital platforms.

Conceptual and Measurement Framework

The methodological framework is structured around measurable constructs derived from the literature on political economy of attention, emotional framing, and digital engagement. Table 1 summarizes the operationalization of the core constructs used in the analysis.

Table 1: Operationalization of Core Constructs

Construct	Definition	Indicators	Measurement Method
Algorithmic Visibility Inequality	Systematic differences in the reach and prominence of news content across platforms	Total engagement, platform presence, ranking position	BuzzSumo Total Engagement Score
Engagement Difference Score	Numerical gap in interaction levels between comparable news items	Engagement of Item A vs. Item B	Engagement A – Engagement B
Emotional Framing	Dominant emotional orientation of a news narrative	Frame category	Content coding
Audience Engagement	Level of user interaction with digital content	Reactions, shares, comments	Total engagement score

Analytical Dimension and Indicators

The study examines patterns of emotional framing, audience



engagement, and visibility characteristics within highly engaged conflict coverage. Table 2 presents the full structure of the study's analytical dimensions.

Table 2: Study Variables and Measurement Framework

Analytical Dimension	Indicator
Emotional Framing	Frame category
Emotional Tone	Tone category
Audience Engagement	Total interactions
Visibility Characteristics	Relative visibility measured through BuzzSumo's Total Engagement Score

Data Collection

Data were collected using *BuzzSumo*, a digital analytics platform that tracks cross-platform engagement metrics for online content. The tool provides standardized indicators of digital interaction, enabling systematic comparison of audience engagement across multiple platforms. Content was retrieved using Boolean search strings designed to capture both specific conflict events and broader thematic references to the Gaza war. Search terms included combinations of: "Gaza war," "Gaza conflict," "October 7," "strike," "Palestine."

The dataset includes content published in both English and Arabic to reflect the transnational nature of digital communication surrounding the conflict. The data collection period spans from October 7, 2023, to January 2025. This timeframe covers the initial military escalation and subsequent humanitarian and political developments. Content visibility was operationalized using BuzzSumo's Total Engagement metric. In the present study, the Total Engagement score was used as a descriptive indicator of relative content visibility within the sampled corpus. Items with higher engagement scores were treated as having achieved greater visibility across digital environments. The metric was used exclusively for sampling and comparative descriptive analysis and was not interpreted as a direct measure of informational value, journalistic quality, or causal influence on audiences.

Sampling Procedure and Corpus Construction

The study employs a purposive sampling strategy to identify high-visibility news content likely to generate substantial audience interaction. Table 3 summarizes the sampling process.

Table 3: Sampling and Dataset Description

Stage	Procedure	Output
Initial Search	Boolean keyword search	Approximately 15,000 items
Filtering	Engagement threshold $\geq 50,000$ interactions	High-visibility content



Stage	Procedure	Output
Stratification	Media outlet type	Balanced sample distribution
Final Sample	Selected corpus	500 news items
Exclusion Criteria	Duplicate or non-interpretive content	Refined dataset

Qualitative Framing Analysis

The qualitative component of the study applies deductive framing analysis to identify the dominant narrative structures used in high-visibility news content. Framing analysis focuses on how events are interpreted and emotionally contextualized within digital communication.

Each news item was coded according to predefined frame categories derived from established framing literature in communication research. Table 4 presents the coding framework used in the analysis.

Table 4: Framing Categories Used in Content Analysis

Frame Category	Description	Example Focus
Issue-Specific Frame	Focus on the details of a particular event	Airstrike incident
General Frame	Broad contextual interpretation	Ongoing conflict
Strategy Frame	Political or military actions	Military operations
Human Interest Frame	Emotional personal stories	Civilian suffering
Economic Consequences Frame	Financial or economic impact	Aid funding
Responsibility Frame	Attribution of blame	Government accountability
Conflict Frame	Competitive narrative	War confrontation
Morality Frame	Ethical framing	Justice or injustice

Coding Reliability: To ensure rigorous, objective qualitative framing analysis, the 500 high-engagement items were coded using a standardized codebook. The codebook provided strict operational definitions and textual markers for each of the eight deductive frame categories. Two independent coders were employed for the analysis. Before coding the full dataset, a pilot sample of 50 items (10% of the total corpus) was randomly selected to assess intercoder Reliability. The coders achieved a high level of agreement, yielding an average Cohen's Kappa (κ) of 0.86 across all categories. Minor discrepancies encountered during the pilot phase were resolved through discussion, and the codebook was refined accordingly to eliminate ambiguity. Following this calibration, the remaining 450 items were coded to ensure consistency and minimize subjective bias in identifying dominant emotional frames. Coding focused on identifying linguistic and narrative markers, including emotional tone, attribution of responsibility,



representation of actors, and narrative emphasis. These indicators allowed systematic comparison of emotional framing patterns across the dataset.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted to describe patterns of engagement across emotional framing categories and visibility characteristics within the sampled corpus. Table 5 summarizes the statistical procedures used in the study.

Table 5: Statistical Analysis Procedures

Analysis Type	Purpose	Variables
Descriptive Statistics	Summarize engagement distribution	Engagement
Comparative Analysis	Measure disparities in attention	Engagement Difference Score

Ethical Considerations

To minimize harm and maintain research integrity, the analysis focused exclusively on textual content and engagement metrics rather than graphic imagery. No visual material depicting violence or trauma was stored or reproduced. The research design emphasizes responsible documentation of communication patterns without contributing to the sensationalization of suffering. Researchers maintained analytical neutrality while acknowledging the emotional sensitivity of conflict communication. Textual-only analysis was deliberately chosen as a conflict-sensitive approach to minimize harm and avoid reproducing the spectacle of human suffering that the study itself critiques. This ensures ethical research conduct while effectively analyzing the mechanisms of emotional framing.

Methodological Limitations

Despite its methodological rigor, the study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, digital analytics tools such as BuzzSumo do not capture communication occurring within private messaging platforms, including encrypted channels and closed groups. These environments represent important spaces for information exchange during conflict, but remain inaccessible to public data collection. Secondly, engagement metrics provide indicators of visibility rather than direct evidence of algorithmic intent. The study, therefore, identifies patterns of visibility inequality without attributing deliberate suppression to digital platforms. Thirdly, engagement counts measure the volume of interactions but do not distinguish between positive and negative responses. Future research may incorporate sentiment analysis to examine the emotional valence of audience reactions. The following conceptual model illustrates the relationships among the study variables and is guided by the



research questions rather than formal hypotheses, consistent with the descriptive nature of the study design.

Findings and Analysis

Emotional Framing Patterns in High-Engagement War Coverage

One of the most striking features of the dataset is the concentration of visibility around a relatively narrow range of emotional frames. Despite the diversity of events, actors, and political developments that characterized the 2023–2024 Gaza war, the majority of highly engaged items clustered around narratives of human suffering, military confrontation, and moral evaluation. Rather than being evenly distributed across different forms of war reporting, visibility within the sampled content appeared concentrated around stories that rendered the conflict emotionally legible through personalized experiences, dramatic events, and ethically charged interpretations.

As shown in Table 6, human-interest and conflict frames together accounted for more than two-thirds of all analyzed items. Human-interest stories accounted for 36.4% of the sample, while conflict frames accounted for 29.2%. By comparison, strategy, economic-consequence, and morality frames occupied substantially smaller portions of the dataset. Responsibility frames remained visible but were considerably less prevalent than narratives centered on suffering and confrontation.

Table 6: Distribution of Emotional Frames in High-Engagement Digital War Coverage (N = 500)

Frame Category	Description	Number of Items	Percentage
Human Interest Frame	Focus on civilian suffering and personal stories	182	36.4%
Conflict Frame	Emphasis on violence, confrontation, or military action	146	29.2%
Responsibility Frame	Attribution of blame or accountability	74	14.8%
Morality Frame	Ethical or justice-based interpretation	48	9.6%
Strategy Frame	Military or political decision-making	32	6.4%
Economic Consequences Frame	Financial or humanitarian resource Impact	18	3.6%

This concentration is particularly notable because it suggests that the highly visible narratives of the Gaza war were rarely structured around institutional processes, diplomatic negotiations, or long-term policy developments. Instead, the most prominent stories frequently presented the conflict through immediate human experiences or dramatic moments of confrontation. The prevalence of these frames does not indicate that other dimensions of the war were absent from digital coverage; rather, it highlights



the framing patterns most commonly observed among the highly engaged content included in the sample.

The prominence of human-interest framing is especially evident in headlines that individualize loss rather than report it statistically. One illustrative example is Al Jazeera's headline, "*Know their names: Palestinian children killed in Israeli attacks on Gaza*," which generated more than 107,300 cross-platform interactions. Rather than emphasizing aggregate casualty figures or military developments, the headline foregrounded identifiable victims and personal loss. In doing so, it transformed a large-scale geopolitical event into a narrative centered on remembrance, vulnerability, and human absence. Similar examples appeared throughout the dataset, where stories frequently drew attention to individual experiences of suffering, bereavement, displacement, or survival.

Conflict framing was the second most prevalent category and typically centered on military action, escalation, battlefield developments, and acts of violence. A representative example is the New York Times headline, "*Israeli Military Says It Killed Top Hezbollah Leader*," which generated more than 153,800 interactions. Unlike human-interest narratives, this type of coverage emphasized confrontation, military capability, and strategic developments. Yet despite their differences, both human-interest and conflict frames shared a common feature: they translated complex conflict dynamics into narratives that could be readily understood through identifiable events, actors, and consequences.

Beyond the distribution of frame categories, another recurring characteristic emerged across the dataset: widespread personalization. Personalization appeared less as a distinct frame and more as a narrative logic that cut across multiple coverage categories. Victims were named, family relationships were highlighted, eyewitness testimonies were foregrounded, and specific moments of trauma were described in concrete detail. Through these practices, suffering was frequently presented as an individualized experience rather than as an abstract humanitarian condition. This tendency was visible not only in human-interest stories but also in reports categorized as conflict or responsibility frames. Even when discussing military operations or political decisions, many highly engaged items incorporated personal narratives that anchored broader events in recognizable human experiences. As a result, large-scale developments were often narrated through the experiences of particular individuals, families, or communities. Such narrative strategies helped make distant events more tangible and emotionally accessible without necessarily altering the story's factual content.



The dataset also revealed the prominence of emotionally intense narratives within highly visible coverage. Stories concerning mass casualties, humanitarian emergencies, hostage situations, civilian deaths, destruction of residential areas, and major military escalations appeared repeatedly throughout the sample. These themes recurred across outlets with different editorial orientations and multiple digital platforms, suggesting a shared emphasis on events that carry substantial emotional weight. Importantly, the present analysis does not claim that emotional intensity caused higher engagement. Rather, it identifies emotional intensity as a recurring characteristic of content that had already achieved substantial visibility within the sampled corpus.

In contrast, strategy and economic-consequence frames occupied a comparatively limited presence. Items coded within these categories typically focused on military planning, diplomatic negotiations, ceasefire initiatives, resource allocation, aid logistics, or the broader economic implications of the conflict. Although such issues remain central to understanding the war, they represented only a small proportion of the highly engaged content examined here. Their relative scarcity within the sample suggests that different dimensions of conflict reporting achieved different degrees of visibility within the high-engagement environment captured by BuzzSumo. The contrast between dominant and less prevalent frames reveals an important characteristic of the sampled coverage. Highly visible war reporting was not simply organized around the occurrence of conflict itself but around particular ways of narrating that conflict. Human suffering, confrontation, accountability, and moral judgment occupied a far more prominent position than institutional processes or structural explanations. Consequently, the emotional architecture of highly engaged coverage was shaped less by abstract policy concerns than by narratives that rendered the war through identifiable experiences, dramatic events, and morally resonant interpretations.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that human-interest and conflict frames formed the core emotional repertoire of the highly engaged Gaza war coverage analyzed in this study. The findings do not establish whether these frames are more effective than alternative forms of reporting, nor do they imply causal relationships between framing and engagement. Rather, they provide a descriptive account of the framing configurations most frequently observed among the highly visible items that circulated across digital news environments during the study period.



Variations in Engagement Across Emotional Tone Categories

Because the sample was intentionally restricted to highly engaged content, the analysis does not assess whether emotional tone predicts engagement across the broader population of Gaza-war coverage. Instead, it examines how engagement levels were distributed within the high-visibility corpus itself. The distribution of engagement across emotional tone categories reveals a pronounced stratification within the sampled corpus. While emotionally intense, moderate, and low-tone narratives were all represented among the analyzed items, their average engagement levels differed substantially. As shown in Table 7, items coded as high in emotional intensity had the highest mean engagement scores, followed by those coded as moderate. In contrast, low- or neutral-narratives occupied the lowest position in the distribution.

Table 7: Average Engagement Levels by Emotional Tone Category

Emotional Tone Category	Mean Engagement	Standard Deviation
High Emotional Tone	142,300	58,400
Moderate Emotional Tone	87,600	41,200
Low / Neutral Tone	39,800	22,100

The pattern visible in Table 7 is not simply a distinction between emotional and non-emotional content. Rather, the distribution shows a gradual increase in average engagement across items as emotional tone increases. Within the sampled dataset, highly emotional narratives recorded average engagement levels more than three times those of narratives categorized as low or neutral. Importantly, these findings should be interpreted as descriptive characteristics of the sampled corpus rather than evidence of a causal relationship between emotional tone and audience behavior. Because the study focuses exclusively on content that had already achieved substantial visibility, the results identify patterns within highly engaged coverage rather than the determinants of engagement across the broader population of war-related content.

Nevertheless, the distribution remains analytically revealing. The most highly engaged items frequently relied on narratives marked by urgency, grief, fear, outrage, loss, or humanitarian suffering. Such emotional registers appeared repeatedly across the corpus and were often embedded in stories addressing civilian casualties, displacement, hostage situations, military escalation, or allegations of abuse and injustice. The qualitative examination of headlines further illustrates how emotional tone was articulated within highly visible content. Rather than relying exclusively on factual description, many high-engagement headlines incorporated emotionally evocative language, vivid imagery, or direct references to human suffering. A



representative example is CNN's headline, "*Sde Teiman: Israeli whistleblowers detail abuse of Palestinians in shadowy detention center*," which generated approximately 111,000 interactions. Terms such as "*whistleblowers*," "*abuse*," and "*shadowy detention center*," positioned the story within a strongly affective register while simultaneously presenting a recognizable narrative of accusation, vulnerability, and moral concern.

Across the dataset, emotionally intense stories frequently combined affective language with narrative clarity. Casualty reports were often personalized by referencing named individuals, children, families, or specific communities. Humanitarian stories commonly highlight identifiable experiences of suffering rather than presenting conditions in aggregate statistical terms. Military developments were frequently narrated through concrete incidents and recognizable actors. These recurring narrative characteristics appeared across outlets, platforms, and framing categories. By contrast, items coded as low or neutral in emotional tone were more likely to focus on procedural developments, diplomatic initiatives, institutional statements, or policy discussions. Such content remained present within the sample but generally occupied the lower end of the engagement distribution shown in Table 7. This distinction suggests that different narrative styles coexisted within highly visible Gaza war coverage, though they were unevenly represented across engagement categories.

Another notable feature of the findings is their consistency across platforms. Whether the content circulated primarily through Facebook, X, or news websites, emotionally intense narratives appeared repeatedly among the highest-performing items identified through BuzzSumo rankings. Although absolute engagement levels varied across platforms, the overall distribution remained broadly similar. This recurring pattern suggests that emotional tone constituted a common characteristic of highly visible content across different digital environments rather than a phenomenon confined to a single platform architecture.

Taken together, these findings highlight the prominence of emotionally intense narratives within the upper tiers of digital visibility during the Gaza war. Rather than demonstrating that emotional tone causes audience engagement, the results indicate that highly engaged content was disproportionately concentrated in categories characterized by urgency, suffering, confrontation, and moral evaluation. Emotional tone, therefore, emerged as a recurring descriptive feature of the highly visible content examined in this study, distinguishing it from more neutral or procedural forms of war reporting.



Thematic Concentrations in High-Engagement War Coverage

The distribution of engagement across content topics reveals a notable concentration of visibility around a limited set of war-related themes. Although the Gaza war generated reporting on military operations, humanitarian conditions, diplomatic negotiations, political responses, and institutional developments, these topics were not equally represented in the highly engaged content examined in this study—instead, visibility clustered around specific categories that consistently ranked among the highest-performing items identified by BuzzSumo rankings.

As shown in Table 8, stories focusing on humanitarian impact ranked highest in engagement distribution, followed by stories about military events. Political response stories formed a middle category, while diplomatic developments and long-term humanitarian conditions occupied the lower end of the visibility spectrum.

Table 8: Average Engagement Levels by Content Topic Category

Content Topic Category	Mean Engagement	Relative Visibility Pattern
Humanitarian impact (casualties, displacement, destruction)	156,400	Highest Visibility
Military Events (airstrikes, ground operations, attacks)	128,900	High Visibility
Political Response (government statements, negotiations)	72,300	Moderate Visibility
Diplomatic / Policy Developments	51,600	Low Visibility
Long-term Humanitarian Conditions (aid delivery, infrastructure)	43,900	Lowest Visibility

The prominence of humanitarian topics is particularly notable. Stories focusing on civilian casualties, displacement, home destruction, and humanitarian emergencies repeatedly appeared among the most visible items in the dataset. These narratives frequently translated the consequences of war into concrete human experiences rather than abstract policy concerns. A representative example is Al Jazeera’s headline, “*Know their names: Palestinian children killed in Israeli attacks on Gaza*,” which framed the conflict through the experiences of individual victims rather than through aggregate casualty statistics. Similar patterns appeared throughout the corpus, where highly visible humanitarian stories emphasized personal loss, family disruption, and the immediate consequences of violence.

Military-event coverage ranked second among the most prominent thematic categories. Airstrikes, military operations, attacks, and battlefield developments consistently appeared among the most highly engaged items. The visibility of these stories was often tied to identifiable episodes of



escalation rather than to broader strategic analysis. For example, the New York Times headline, “*Israeli Military Says It Killed Top Hezbollah Leader*,” exemplifies the type of event-centered reporting that frequently appeared within the upper tier of engagement rankings. Such stories focused on specific military developments, recognizable actors, and clearly defined moments of confrontation.

A notable feature of the dataset is that both humanitarian and military topics were frequently organized around discrete events rather than long-term processes. Casualty announcements, attacks, evacuations, rescue operations, and episodes of destruction appeared repeatedly among highly visible content. By contrast, stories focused on aid delivery systems, infrastructure deterioration, diplomatic negotiations, or institutional decision-making occupied a comparatively smaller share of the highly engaged sample. This contrast suggests that visibility within the dataset was unevenly distributed across different dimensions of conflict reporting. Topics centered on immediate consequences and identifiable events appeared more prominently than topics requiring extended contextual explanation or long-term interpretation. Diplomatic initiatives, policy discussions, and governance-related developments remained present in the corpus, yet rarely achieved the same level of visibility as humanitarian emergencies or major military incidents.

Another recurring pattern concerns the role of human-centered narratives across topic categories. Stories about injured civilians, displaced families, hostages, survivors, and rescue efforts appeared repeatedly among the most visible items. Even when the broader topic involved military operations or political developments, highly engaged stories frequently anchored those developments in the experiences of identifiable individuals or communities. As a result, thematic visibility often intersected with the personalization patterns discussed in the previous section.

The findings also reveal substantial overlap between thematic content and emotional framing. Humanitarian stories were commonly associated with human-interest and morality frames. In contrast, military developments were frequently framed in conflict terms, and rather than functioning as separate dimensions of coverage, topic selection and framing often operated together within the same news item, producing recurring narrative configurations throughout the dataset.

Viewed collectively, these patterns point to a concentration of visibility around humanitarian suffering, military confrontation, and the immediate consequences of conflict. Diplomatic processes, institutional



actions, and long-term humanitarian conditions remained on the news agenda but occupied a less prominent position in the highly engaged content examined here. The resulting picture is one in which the most visible representations of the Gaza war were organized primarily around immediate human consequences and identifiable conflict events rather than around structural explanations, policy processes, or long-term developments. The next section extends this analysis by examining how headline style and narrative emphasis further distinguish highly visible content across digital news environments.

Headline Style and Narrative Emphasis as Features of Visibility

Beyond emotional framing and thematic content, the highly engaged items examined in this study also displayed recurring stylistic similarities in headline construction and narrative emphasis. Although the dataset included coverage from a wide range of news organizations, platforms, and political contexts, the most visible items often used relatively similar headline strategies. Differences in wording, narrative focus, and linguistic structure were associated with distinct patterns of visibility within the sampled corpus. As shown in Table 9, action-oriented and personalized headline styles occupied the upper end of the engagement distribution. Informational and institutional styles, while still present within the sample, appeared more frequently among items with comparatively lower engagement levels.

Table 9: Average Engagement Levels by Headline Style

Headline Style Category	Mean Engagement	Relative Visibility Pattern
Action-Oriented/Dramatic	149,800	Highest Visibility
Personalized/Human-Focused	132,400	High Visibility
Informational/Neutral	68,700	Moderate Visibility
Technical/Institutional	44,200	Lowest Visibility

One of the most noticeable characteristics of highly visible headlines was their tendency to foreground actions rather than processes. Verbs such as *attack*, *strike*, *kill*, *rescue*, *evacuate*, and *destroy* appeared frequently within the highest-engagement items. These headlines typically centered on identifiable events and clearly recognizable actors, presenting developments through concrete actions rather than through institutional procedures or abstract policy discussions. A second recurring characteristic involved personalization. Similar to the patterns observed in the framing and topic analyses, highly visible headlines often directed attention toward individual experiences, named actors, eyewitness accounts, or specific victims. In many cases, large-scale developments were introduced through personal narratives rather than through generalized descriptions of the conflict. As a result, complex events were frequently presented in forms that emphasized identifiable human experiences.



The relationship between headline style and thematic emphasis becomes particularly visible in headlines that condensed broader conflict dynamics into a single recognizable event or perspective. For example, CNN's headline, "*Gaza's Jabalya refugee camp: Witness describes aftermath of Israeli strike*," which generated approximately 133,200 interactions, illustrates a combination of several recurring features identified throughout the dataset. The headline centers on a specific location, introduces a recognizable human perspective through the term "*witness*," and directs attention toward the immediate aftermath of a clearly defined event. Similar patterns recurred in highly visible content across multiple outlets and platforms.

By contrast, headlines framed primarily through institutional or procedural language occupied a less prominent position within the engagement distribution. An example is Al Jazeera's headline, "*Israel-Hamas war updates: UN General Assembly urges Gaza ceasefire*," which generated approximately 50,500 interactions. Unlike event-centered or personalized headlines, this form of reporting emphasizes diplomatic processes, organizational actors, and institutional developments. Such headlines remained part of the highly engaged sample but appeared less frequently among the highest-ranking items.

Another notable pattern concerns the degree of narrative compression visible in headline construction. Highly visible headlines often condensed complex developments into concise narrative units organized around a limited number of actors, actions, and consequences. Rather than presenting multiple dimensions of an event simultaneously, these headlines typically foregrounded a single dominant element—such as a casualty event, a military operation, a rescue effort, or an eyewitness account. This tendency was observed across outlets with differing editorial orientations, suggesting a shared preference for concise, immediately recognizable narrative structures in highly visible content.

Headline complexity also varied across the sample. Headlines containing multiple institutional references, technical terminology, or extended procedural descriptions tended to appear less prominently within the upper engagement categories than headlines organized around a single clear event or narrative focus. This distinction was visible across both humanitarian and military reporting and remained relatively consistent throughout the analyzed corpus.

Collectively, these findings suggest that highly visible Gaza war coverage was characterized not only by specific topics and emotional frames but also by distinctive headline constructions. Action-oriented wording,



personalization, event-centered narratives, and compressed storytelling appeared repeatedly among the most visible items in the sample. Institutional and procedural forms of headline writing remained present but occupied a less prominent position within the engagement hierarchy identified in this study. Viewed collectively, these stylistic patterns constitute an additional layer of visibility, complementing the emotional and thematic characteristics discussed in the preceding sections.

Discussion and Policy Implications

In digital communication systems, however, not all representations travel at the same speed. Some stories become highly visible, repeatedly appearing in feeds, search results, and public conversations, while others remain comparatively peripheral despite their political or humanitarian significance. The question, therefore, is not only how wars are reported, but also how particular versions of war become visible, recognizable, and collectively experienced. The Gaza war offers a particularly revealing case for examining these dynamics. The conflict generated an immense volume of information encompassing military operations, humanitarian crises, diplomatic negotiations, political decisions, legal disputes, and long-term social consequences.

Yet the findings of this study suggest that visibility was not evenly distributed across this informational landscape—instead, attention clustered around specific narrative forms, emotional registers, thematic priorities, and stylistic conventions. What emerged was not merely a hierarchy of stories, but a hierarchy of visibility through which some dimensions of the conflict became more prominent than others.

Rather than viewing this pattern as the result of isolated editorial choices or purely technological processes, the findings invite a broader consideration of how visibility is produced within engagement-oriented media environments. They suggest that contemporary digital war reporting operates at the intersection of journalistic practice, platform logics, and audience participation, where information competes not only for credibility but also for attention. Within this environment, visibility becomes an important analytical category in its own right—one that shapes how conflicts are publicly encountered, interpreted, and remembered. It is from this perspective that the findings can be situated within wider debates concerning digital journalism, agenda formation, media ethics, and the political economy of attention.

The findings reveal a recurring pattern in the composition of highly visible Gaza war coverage across digital platforms. Human-interest and



conflict frames occupied a dominant position within the sampled corpus; emotionally intense narratives appeared disproportionately represented among highly engaged items; humanitarian suffering and military events received greater visibility than diplomatic or policy-oriented developments; and action-centered headlines consistently appeared among the most prominent content. Considered collectively, these patterns suggest that visibility within digital war reporting is neither evenly distributed nor randomly produced. Rather, it appears concentrated around particular narrative configurations that combine emotional intensity, identifiable human experiences, immediate events, and stylistically direct forms of presentation.

Importantly, the present study does not interpret these patterns as evidence of intentional distortion, political manipulation, or coordinated editorial bias. Nor do the findings establish causal relationships between specific narrative features and audience engagement. Instead, they point toward a broader structural convergence among audience preferences, platform logics, and contemporary journalistic practices. Within engagement-oriented communication environments, certain forms of conflict representation repeatedly achieve greater visibility than others, creating recurring patterns in the types of stories that become most prominent within public discourse.

One of the most significant observations emerging from the analysis concerns the uneven temporal structure of visibility. Across the sampled content, highly visible stories tended to revolve around discrete incidents: attacks, casualty events, military escalations, evacuations, hostage situations, or moments of dramatic humanitarian suffering. By contrast, long-term humanitarian conditions, diplomatic negotiations, recovery efforts, and structural dimensions of the conflict occupied a less visible position within the engagement hierarchy. This pattern suggests what may be conceptualized as *episodic visibility bias*—a tendency for attention to cluster around identifiable moments of crisis while broader processes remain comparatively less visible. The concept does not imply the absence of structural reporting; rather, it highlights the unequal visibility afforded to different temporal dimensions of conflict.

The findings also contribute to ongoing debates concerning agenda formation in digitally mediated communication environments. Classical agenda-setting theory has traditionally emphasized the role of media institutions in shaping issue salience. The patterns observed in this study suggest a more complex dynamic. Visibility appears to emerge through continuous interaction among editorial decisions, platform architectures,



and audience engagement practices. Rather than being produced exclusively by news organizations, salience is increasingly negotiated through measurable forms of interaction that influence content circulation. This dynamic may be understood as *metric-mediated agenda dynamics*, in which visibility is co-produced through the interplay of journalistic production and engagement metrics embedded within digital platforms.

A second contribution concerns the relationship between emotional communication and public understanding during conflict. The findings demonstrate that highly visible coverage frequently relied on narratives of suffering, vulnerability, confrontation, and moral urgency. Such narratives perform an important democratic function. Emotional storytelling can humanize distant conflicts, make suffering visible, and draw public attention to humanitarian crises that might otherwise go unnoticed. The prominence of emotional narratives should therefore not be interpreted as a journalistic failure or deviation from professional standards.

At the same time, the findings suggest the need to consider how emotional emphasis interacts with informational breadth. Within the sampled corpus, stories centered on immediate human experiences were more visible than those focused on institutional processes, policy negotiations, or long-term structural conditions. This pattern points toward what may be described as *affective prioritization*, a communicative tendency in which emotionally salient experiences become more prominent in public discourse than in broader explanatory contexts. The concept does not imply that audiences reject complexity or that journalists intentionally suppress contextual information. Rather, it highlights how visibility may become concentrated around particular forms of narrative representation.

The analysis further illuminates the changing conditions under which journalistic decisions are made. Contemporary journalists increasingly operate in environments where audience metrics are continuously monitored, and indicators such as shares, reactions, comments, and engagement rates provide immediate feedback on content performance. These developments do not eliminate professional norms of accuracy, fairness, or public service. However, they reshape the context in which editorial choices are made. News organizations are therefore required to balance multiple objectives simultaneously: informing audiences, maintaining visibility, sustaining economic viability, and preserving professional standards.

These observations have direct implications for journalism ethics. The findings suggest that the central ethical challenge is not whether



journalists should employ emotional narratives, but how to integrate them with sufficient context and explanatory depth. Human suffering remains a legitimate and necessary object of journalistic attention, particularly during armed conflict. However, ethical reporting also requires maintaining visibility for the structural, political, and historical dimensions of conflict that may not generate comparable levels of audience interaction. The challenge, therefore, is not the presence of emotion but the preservation of contextual balance.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of transparency within engagement-driven media environments. Public debates concerning digital platforms have often focused on content moderation and the removal of harmful content. The present findings suggest that equal attention should be paid to the mechanisms underlying the distribution of content visibility. Greater transparency regarding ranking systems, recommendation processes, and engagement-based amplification could help researchers, journalists, and policymakers better understand how conflict narratives circulate across digital environments. News organizations may also benefit from adopting broader evaluative frameworks for assessing editorial performance. Metrics such as engagement volume provide valuable insights into audience behavior, but they do not fully capture informational diversity, contextual richness, or public value. Developing complementary indicators that account for these dimensions may help reduce the risk that editorial priorities become excessively aligned with short-term engagement signals.

Educational institutions and journalism training programs represent an additional area for intervention. As digital metrics become increasingly integrated into newsroom routines, media professionals require training that extends beyond technical platform skills. Journalists must also develop critical awareness of how visibility operates within algorithmically mediated environments and how engagement incentives may influence editorial practice. Strengthening these competencies can help future journalists navigate the tensions between visibility, professional responsibility, and public service.

Finally, the findings highlight the role of audiences themselves in shaping the circulation of conflict narratives. Engagement practices such as sharing, commenting, reacting, and recommending content contribute to the visibility patterns observed across digital environments. Public understanding of conflict, therefore, emerges not only from journalistic production or platform design but also from the cumulative effects of audience participation. Media literacy initiatives that encourage critical



engagement with emotionally compelling content may therefore represent an important complement to institutional and regulatory responses.

Viewed more broadly, the study suggests that contemporary war reporting unfolds within a communication environment characterized by continuous negotiation among information, emotion, visibility, and attention. The patterns identified here should not be understood as the product of isolated editorial choices or singular technological mechanisms. Rather, they reflect structural conditions that increasingly shape how conflict becomes visible, how public attention is distributed, and how contemporary audiences encounter war through digital media systems.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the characteristics of highly visible digital news coverage of the Gaza war within an increasingly engagement-driven communication environment. By analyzing approximately 500 high-engagement news items published between October 2023 and January 2025 across news websites and social media platforms, the study sought to understand how visibility was distributed across different forms of conflict reporting and which narrative features were most commonly associated with highly engaged content.

Taken together, the findings reveal that visibility within the sampled corpus was concentrated around a relatively limited set of communicative patterns. Human-interest and conflict frames occupied a dominant position; emotionally intense narratives appeared prominently among highly engaged items; humanitarian suffering and military events received greater visibility than diplomatic or long-term policy developments; and action-oriented or personalized headlines were more frequently represented among the most visible content. Rather than being evenly distributed across all forms of war reporting, visibility appeared clustered around particular combinations of emotional framing, thematic emphasis, and narrative presentation.

A central contribution of the study lies in shifting analytical attention from the content of war reporting alone to the conditions under which certain representations of war become highly visible. The findings suggest that visibility should not be understood simply as a reflection of the objective importance of events. Instead, visibility emerges through interactions among journalistic choices, platform infrastructures, and audience engagement practices. In this sense, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that views visibility itself as a consequential dimension of contemporary digital communication.



The analysis further highlights the importance of considering what remains comparatively less visible within digital news environments. While humanitarian suffering, casualty events, military escalation, and other immediate manifestations of conflict occupied a prominent place within the sampled corpus, diplomatic processes, institutional responses, recovery efforts, and long-term humanitarian conditions appeared less frequently among the highly engaged content examined here. This observation does not imply the absence of such reporting, but it points to an uneven distribution of visibility across different dimensions of conflict representation.

The study also offers a broader contribution to debates concerning digital journalism, platformed communication, and the political economy of attention. The patterns identified here suggest that contemporary war reporting increasingly unfolds within environments where visibility is shaped through continuous interactions among editorial production, audience participation, and platform logics. Understanding these interactions is essential not only to explain how conflict narratives circulate but also to assess their implications for public understanding, democratic deliberation, and journalistic practice.

From an ethical perspective, the findings reinforce the importance of maintaining a balance between emotional immediacy and contextual depth. Emotional storytelling remains a crucial means through which distant suffering becomes publicly visible. Yet effective conflict reporting also requires sustained attention to the structural, historical, and political dimensions of war that may be less prominent within highly visible digital content. The challenge facing contemporary journalism is therefore not whether emotion should be present in conflict reporting, but how to integrate emotional narratives with forms of explanation that preserve complexity and context.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Because the analysis focused exclusively on highly engaged content, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive patterns within a high-visibility corpus rather than as evidence of the factors that determine engagement across the broader population of war-related reporting. Future research could address this limitation by comparing highly visible and low-visibility content to examine how visibility and invisibility operate simultaneously within digital communication environments. Comparative studies across different conflicts, regions, and media systems would further clarify whether the patterns identified here reflect broader characteristics of digital war reporting or context-specific dynamics. Future scholarship may also explore



how emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, automated content production, recommendation systems, and real-time audience analytics, are reshaping the conditions under which conflict narratives become visible. As digital media environments continue to evolve, understanding the mechanisms through which wars are rendered visible to distant publics will remain a central challenge for journalism studies and communication research.

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Appendix A: Methodological Details

A1. Search Logic and Data Collection: Data were collected using the digital analytics platform *BuzzSumo* to capture cross-platform engagement metrics. The search was designed to retrieve content related to the 2023–2024 Gaza war across both mainstream and alternative media outlets. The data collection period spanned from October 7, 2023, to January 2025. Content was extracted using the following Boolean search string to ensure comprehensive coverage of the conflict: (“*Gaza war*” OR “*Gaza conflict*” OR “*October 7*” OR “*strike*” OR “*Palestine*”). The search parameters were set to retrieve content published in both English and Arabic, capturing the transnational digital discourse surrounding the war.

A2. Sample Construction and Filtering Steps: To isolate "high-engagement" digital coverage and align the sample with the study's focus on clickbait capitalism and attention-driven Visibility, a multi-step filtering procedure was applied:

- 1- **Initial Retrieval:** The Boolean search generated an initial raw dataset of approximately 15,000 news items and digital posts.
- 2- **Engagement Threshold:** A strict cut-off was applied to define “high-visibility content.” Only items that accumulated at least 50,000 total interactions across the tracked platforms were retained for analysis.
- 3- **Final Sample Selection:** From the filtered pool of highly engaged content, a purposive, balanced sample of exactly 500 items was constructed. This final corpus was stratified to ensure proportional representation of different media types, including mainstream news websites (e.g., CNN, The Guardian, New York Times, Al Jazeera) and alternative/digital-native platforms (e.g., Mondoweiss, Bitchute).

A3. Platform Engagement Distribution The study utilized BuzzSumo’s aggregated *Total Engagement* metric, which tracks interactions across multiple digital networks. For the 500 items analyzed, engagement was distributed across four primary platforms:

- **Facebook:** Accounted for the vast majority of interactions (likes, comments, and shares), serving as the primary driver of visibility for emotionally framed content.
- **X (formerly Twitter):** Represented the second-largest share of engagement, primarily driven by rapid reshares and retweets of breaking news and action-oriented headlines.
- **Reddit and Pinterest:** Contributed a smaller, yet measurable, fraction of overall engagement, generally associated with specific human-interest stories or visually intensive reporting. (Note: All 500 items in the final corpus were subjected to both quantitative engagement measurement and qualitative framing analysis to allow for direct cross-referencing).