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Q&A: When it comes to Israel-Hamas war videos, don't always trust what you see

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Palestinians inspect the damage following an Israeli airstrike on the El-Remal aera in Gaza City on Oct. 9, 2023. Credit: CC photo via Wikimedia Commons

Flip through TikTok, Instagram or X (formerly Twitter) each day, and a barrage of grainy, chaotic videos paints a complicated picture of the

Israel-Hamas war.

In one, a soldier is thrown to the ground during a fiery bomb blast, the victim of "the destruction of an Israeli tank in the attack of Hamas," the caption proclaims. Another, titled "Israel attempting to create fake footage of deaths," shows a boy lying in a pool of blood as a director shouts instructions and a videographer films. In a third, U.S. marines are shown exiting an airplane, purportedly arriving in Israel to join a ground war.

The problem: None of these clips, already viewed by millions of people around the world, represent this conflict. The first is from a video game. The second is a behind-the-scenes shot from a short film production, and the third is video captured as marines arrived in Romania for a celebration in April.

"Unfortunately, truth can be the first casualty of war," said Sandra Ristovska, a professor of media studies in the College of Media, Communication and Information who studies the use of images and video in times of war and conflict.

While much footage coming out of the Israel-Hamas war is, indeed, real and some can play an important role in exposing human rights violations, Ristovska says people should view with caution. Here, she offers her take on the role video plays in war and how not to be duped on social media.

How has video, historically, been used to document conflict?

Video has always played an important role in helping us understand human rights issues. But in the past, we didn't have cell phones, and most

satellites were controlled by governments. For example, at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, which investigated war crimes in the Balkans in the 1990s, human rights investigators had to petition governments to get access to satellite images. And the other videos they had to work with came from activist human rights groups recording with old VHS cameras.

How have things changed?

Today, we are experiencing a new generation in fact-finding. We now have commercial satellites that produce images available to anybody who dares to look. We have cell phones with cameras, so anyone at any time can make a video, and we have social media platforms where these images can be easily circulated to millions of people. Suddenly, there is a wealth of video information that journalists, activists and investigators can use to look into human rights violations under international laws.

Many people are turning to TikTok to stay up to date on this conflict. Why?

In times of conflict, people naturally gravitate toward images to help them understand the complexity of what is going on. They provide evidence, but they also appeal to our emotions in a way that print doesn't. This happened during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and before that with the Arab uprising in Syria.

Now that Instagram and Tiktok are taking over as the platforms of choice among many users, particularly younger generations, video is becoming even more prevalent as a tool people seek out to make sense of things.

What's the potential downside?

When a news organization publishes a story, they ideally contextualize the images, telling us what happened and when and making sure the image shown is from the conflict described. With social media, videos often lack context and these lines get blurred. Even the most well-intentioned users can get caught sharing a video that supposedly describes the current situation but is really from a different conflict or from a few years ago. People also tend to make assumptions about videos before all the facts are in, and that can be dangerous.

For example, take the destruction of the Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza Oct. 17: From the moment it happened, there were videos circulating all over the news media and social media and people jumped to conclusions saying that it was Israel who did it, or it was Hamas who did it. At the same time, independent investigations by both the New York Times and the the Washington Post cast doubt on the version of the events, based on video, presented by Israel and the United States. It's still unclear what exactly happened.

What kind of impact do these videos have?

We know from research by social psychologists that the first time we get information, visually, is the most impactful. So, if the first time we see a video—let's say it was mislabeled or out of context—it can sway us so much that, later on, even if we get the "facts" of the story, we may not believe those facts. That's the real danger.

What can journalists do to make sure these videos reflect reality?

To counter all this, investigators and journalists have moved away from the practice of thinking that any one piece of video is evidence and have begun to look at things more holistically. For instance, with the Gaza

hospital, we had the Israeli military and Aljazeera and people on the ground releasing videos. Journalists and human rights investigators look at all of them to try to authenticate what happened and when. But we, as the general public, can't be expected to do that.

What can people do to ensure they are not duped?

More than ever, it's important we are not swayed by just one piece of evidence. If we encounter videos on TikTok or Instagram that move us, we should resist sharing right away, if at all, and instead turn to trusted news sources and human rights organizations to confirm they're legitimate. We should also resist the impulse to figure things out now and in the moment. To arrive at the truth, sometimes we need time.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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