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The visual nature of information warfare: the construction of partisan claims on truth and evidence in the context of wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine

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Abstract

Despite the potential of visual disinformation to deceive people on pressing socio-political issues, we currently lack an understanding of how online visual disinformation (de)legitimizes partisan truth claims at times of war. As an important next step in disinformation theory and research, this article inductively mapped a wide variety of global visual disinformation narratives on armed conflicts disseminated via social media. The narratives were sampled through various international fact-checking databases, involving multiple social media platforms and countries. The analyses reveal that visual disinformation mainly consisted of existing footage that was decontextualized in a deceptive manner based on time, location, or fictionality. Moving beyond existing research exploring how decontextualized visuals offer proof for counter-factual narratives, our findings indicate that visuals contribute to the process of othering by constructing a "delusional rationality" that legitimizes mass violence and the destruction of the other. These findings have crucial ramifications for international policy and interventions at times of global armed conflicts that are covered widely across social media channels.

Keywords: disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, visual communication

Within hours after the violent uprise in Gaza in October 2023, multiple accounts of reality prevailed on social media platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter). Social media users, journalists, and influential political elites disseminated stories, visuals, and videos of suffering soldiers, citizens, and even beheaded and burnt babies to emphasize the severity of the attacks. Much of the visual proof allegedly revealing the atrocities on both sides, however, turned out to be untrue, as indicated by various independent fact-checks of viral content disseminated amidst the conflict (e.g., Durani et al. 2024; European Digital Media Observatory, 2024). As an example, only days after the surge of violence in Gaza, disinformation videos falsely claiming to offer evidence of Israel dropping bombs on Gaza were viewed 300,000+ times. These videos, in fact, showed a Russian bombing of Ukraine in March 2023. As many citizens and leading politicians shared the most shocking and hateful content suggesting it represented reality, people's beliefs and emotional stances on the wars may be based on misinformed representations of reality—which eventually steers support for (armed) interventions and global policies.

In this setting, the urgent democratic threat of the (visual) disinformation narratives surrounding polarized armed conflicts is that they cause uncertainty and relativism related to factual information (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017), and herewith potentially legitimize collective hate and violence. Disinformation can be defined as false information that is created or disseminated to achieve (political) goals (e.g., Chadwick & Stanyer 2022; Hameleers, 2023). We specifically focus on disinformation disseminated in times of war. In line with historical accounts of propaganda, information warfare, and disinformation spread about armed conflicts, disinformation in this context may contain visual information to evoke sympathy for supported camps, or illustrate the harmful acts of the other (e.g., Seo, 2014). Deceptive visuals may thus play a central role in shaping boundaries between warring sides.

Despite the clear visual nature of the social media context of information warfare surrounding recent armed conflicts, we know markedly little about how visual disinformation is used to offer proof for deceptive statements (but see e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). Even more so, we lack an understanding of how visuals are involved in the two faces of the disinformation disorder at times of war: How are they used to legitimize false narratives supporting the in-group and delegitimize the truth claims of the other side? This question is especially urgent to answer in the context of armed conflicts such as the Israel/Palestine war. As citizens and political elites across the globe supported different camps, also legitimizing violent war crimes in the name of retaliation for atrocities, it is crucial to assess how public and political viewpoints of conflicts may be strategically disinformed by images that seek to legitimize violent acts targeting both sides of the cleavage.

Against this backdrop, we rely on a visual content analysis of global disinformation narratives in the context of both the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israel/Palestine war. These narratives were selected based on databases of various international fact-check platforms covering the wars in 2022–2024. The qualitative analysis focuses on different platforms varying in levels of content moderation, promoted ideological perspectives, and targeted audiences, considering

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that different social media platforms such as X are known for failing gatekeeping barriers, low levels of content moderation, and different levels of embedding fact-checking and other interventions. Hence, many journalists and independent fact-checking organizations quickly labeled the digital information landscape as a breeding ground for conspiracies and (visual) disinformation narratives which volume exceeded verifiability. As main contribution of this article, we explore how partisan truth claims were legitimized and opposed claims delegitimized through visual disinformation narratives and disinformation accusations. We thus explore the role of visuals in disinformation as both a genre and label of disinformation (see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Visual disinformation in digital information ecologies

We define disinformation as the intentional creation, fabrication, decontextualization, or manipulation of information (e.g., Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022; Hameleers, 2023). Although it is difficult to assess the intentionality behind the dissemination of falsehoods, we focus on disinformation narratives in which clear partisan claims on the conflicts were made, whereas the truth claims of the other side were delegitimized. As such, although it reaches beyond the scope of this paper to prove intentionality, we aim to offer insights into how deceptive information legitimizes partisan viewpoints in times of war.

Responding to urgent calls voiced in extant literature (e.g., Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023; Yang et al., 2023), we focus on visual disinformation in this article. We consider visual disinformation as an umbrella-term for all forms of visual information that are decontextualized, fabricated, or manipulated intentionally to offer proof for misleading claims (also see e.g., Dan et al., 2021; Hameleers et al., 2020). In line with the overview of Heley et al. (2022), we consider that visual disinformation often includes the pairing of visuals with text or audio to contribute to an inaccurate or deceptive representation of reality. As such, visual disinformation often comprises of the deceptive re-contextualization of visual information by embedding visuals into deceptive textual or audio-based interpretations.

There may be various forms of visual disinformation with unique properties and implications (e.g., Heley et al., 2022; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). As explicated in Weikmann and Lecheler's (2023) typology, visual disinformation can be low or high in technological sophistication and modality. As an example, a deepfake video created with AI can be regarded as high on both dimensions. Visual decontextualization, in contrast, scores low on both dimensions: Still images that are created without manipulation or doctoring techniques are presented in a different context to alter their meaning and to deceive the audience.

At this stage, there are various indications that we should be most worried about forms of visual disinformation that are low in technological sophistication and manipulation (e.g., Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). As shown in an analysis of visual disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, most disinformation that relied on visuals was based on cheapfakes and decontextualized images (Brennen et al., 2021). Cheapfakes can be understood as forms of visual disinformation that are not generated with AI, but constructed by deceptively re-contextualizing authentic footage, or using other lower-tech tools to alter the presentation or meaning of images or videos (e.g., Hameleers, 2024). Practices of re-contextualization include the cropping or zooming of photo evidence, interchanging subtitles of videos with deceptive statements, or swapping the audio component of interviews to deceptively re-contextualize political statements (e.g., Qian et al., 2023). Thus, although visual information itself is often not synthetic or fabricated, visual content can become part of disinformation narratives through their out-of-context placement and association with deceptive narratives (also see Yang et al., 2023).

Crucially, as such deceptive presentations of visual information may come across as authentic and credible, decontextualized and re-interpreted visual information can be regarded as highly disruptive modes of visual disinformation. Hence, decontextualized visuals offer a direct indication and unmanipulated image of reality, which may promote heuristic processing through the "seeing is believing" heuristic (Sundar et al., 2021). The strong impact of visual disinformation may further be regarded as a consequence of the truth-default state of information processing (Levine, 2014): By directly depicting events, visual disinformation may circumvent the activation of suspicion that content deviating from reality can trigger.

The applied conceptualization of visual disinformation takes into account that different techniques may be used to create deceptive or false information (also see Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). On the most sophisticated level, visual information may be generated or fabricated from scratch, as is the case with AI-generated deepfakes based on synthetic videos or audio (e.g., Hameleers, 2024; Heley et al., 2022; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). Next to this, visuals may be manipulated, which includes the use of photo editing software to selectively crop, zoom, or add visual elements to existing storylines (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Heley et al., 2022). Visual disinformation may also correspond to the manipulation of the axes or context of graphs or other forms of graphically depicted empirical evidence. Such visual doctoring can be used to make it seem as if certain issues are more or less prevalent depending on the intentions of the disinformation creator (Heley et al., 2022). Finally, visual re-contextualization can be understood as all forms of visual disinformation in which the visual itself is unaltered and unmanipulated, but deceptively re-contextualized to change its meaning (Heley et al., 2022). Taken together, visual disinformation ranges from the complete fabrication or generation of fake footage and images to the textual re-contextualization of authentic materials.

To date, extant research found that textual forms of disinformation are not salient in people's newsfeeds (Acerbi et al., 2022). Hence, less than 5% of people's general media diets may be classified as disinformation (e.g., Acerbi et al., 2022; Grinberg et al., 2019). Yet, visual disinformation may be far more prominent: Yang et al. (2023) demonstrate that 23% of visual political content on Facebook can be considered disinformation. Given that even low amounts of disinformation may be influential through its online amplification and mainstreaming (e.g., Lukito et al., 2020; Starbird, 2019), it is crucial to assess how partisan narratives on wars may be constructed by relying on deceptive visual materials. Moreover, in light of extant research suggesting that visual disinformation is more credible than textual disinformation,

and able to strengthen existing partisan beliefs (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2020), a specific focus on how visuals are used to construct and legitimize partisan narratives may offer important insights into the role that visuals play in legitimizing partisan truth claims of warring sides.

Although we regard visual de- or re-contextualization as a likely form of visual information warfare, our inductive analysis is open to other forms of visual manipulation and deception. Thus, although cheapfakes may have been more prevalent in other non-war contexts (Brennen et al., 2021), it could be the case that AI-powered forms of disinformation, such as deepfakes, are more prominent in the context of war propaganda and deceptive content on armed conflicts. Crucially, our analysis takes into account that visual content itself does not have to be disinformation (also see Heley et al., 2022). Visuals may be embedded in disinformation through its pairing with textual or audio fragments that alter their meaning. Founded in extant literature on visual mis- and disinformation (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Dan et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2024; Heley et al., 2022; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023), we theoretically distinguish between various practices and modes of visual disinformation, including the decontextualization of existing visual content or the manipulation of visual information, for example, through generating synthetic visual content. The corresponding research question reads as follows: How is visual information on social media manipulated or decontextualized to construct counter-factual truth claims in visual disinformation on the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine? (RQ_1).

Beyond an informational threat: visual disinformation as fake news accusations

In the wider epistemic or trust crisis surrounding disinformation, factual information is often delegitimized, challenged, or even labeled as "fake news" (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). These different aspects do not operate in isolation. Hence, disinformation narratives themselves are often found to contain a delegitimizing and anti-establishment perspective that challenges the truth claims of established institutions (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers & Yekta, 2023). Against this backdrop, we also consider how the counter-factual truth claims voiced in disinformation contain delegitimizing references to established sources of information and truth claims, herewith amplifying the cleavage between opposed claims on reality.

Integrating the different aspects of a wider disinformation order, visuals may not only play an important role as proof for deceptive statements (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023), but may also be used to delegitimize opposed truth statements. As an example, a decontextualized visual showing footage from a violent warfare videogame deceptively used as proof for the atrocities committed by the Israeli army may not only offer evidence for a pro-Palestine perspective, but can also be used to emphasize how established media and political elites allegedly spread "fake news" that legitimizes a false representation of events. Here, we regard the dynamics of disinformation as a legitimizing and de-legitimizing tactic intertwined in a spiral of epistemic polarization: The cleavage between legitimized and delegitimized truth claims may be constructed by using visual disinformation.

As an important theoretical contribution to the disinformation literature, we thus integrate contrasting accounts of disinformation as a label and genre of false information (also see e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). In line with literature on disinformation as blame-shifting labels (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019), the analyses aim to unravel how "fake news" accusations and other discourses that attack the validity and honesty of information are used to delegitimize the opposed side of the conflict. These labels may be used to question the impartiality, objectivity, and honesty of incongruent information, and herewith contribute to an increased cleavage between congruent truth claims of the in-group and the alleged deception and lies spread by the out-group (e.g., Hameleers, 2022; Tong et al., 2020).

Accusations of disinformation and attacks on the truth claims of established information sources may delegitimize and lower trust in expert knowledge and established sources, which undermines the objective and authoritative status of (accurate) information (Egelhofer et al., 2022; Van der Meer et al., 2023; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Although delegitimizing media criticism is not widespread, it is central in the communication of populist politicians that aim to cultivate distrust in the established order (Egelhofer et al., 2022). By priming suspicion related to established information and empirical evidence, such discourses can lower the credibility of attacked information sources, or even lower general news trust among populist news users (Egelhofer et al., 2022). Even without using "fake news" as an explicit term, widespread discourses about misinformation can lower people's trust in factually accurate information (Van der Meer et al., 2023). In light of the relevance of disinformation discourses and their undermining effect on trust in authentic information, we formulate the second research question of this article: How is visual information on social media used to construct disinformation accusations and other delegitimizing truth on the wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine? (RQ_2).

Context

Both issues covered in this article have been regarded as major armed conflicts across various official sources. The Russian invasion of Ukraine reportedly started on the February 23, 2022 (Statista Research Department, 2024). From this date, attacks by Russian troops commenced in large Ukrainian cities, such as Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights officially reported that, at the time of writing (May 2024), 10,582 civilians died in Ukraine as a consequence of the violence, which includes children. The war erupted into a major humanitarian crisis, given that thousands of Ukrainians fled their country to seek shelter in neighboring countries.

Although the reports on Gaza are surrounded with a higher degree of uncertainty given the various (partisan) sources involved in the reporting of casualties, the most up-to-date statistics gathered from multiple sources (i.e., the Gaza health ministry, the Israeli military and prime minister's office, the UN, and independent reporting from news organizations across the world) were consulted. Based on this, in May 2024, 33,137 Palestinians were reportedly killed in Gaza (including more than 13,000 children). In Israel, 1,200 people were killed. During the attack on October 7, 2023, 780 civilians were killed, including foreigners. Although these statistics are surrounded by degrees of uncertainty and potential

under- or over-reporting by partisan sources, they were verified across different sources.

Method

Sample and data collection

To answer the research questions, we rely on a qualitative content analysis of international disinformation narratives disseminated via social media in the first period after the attacks in Gaza and Israel (starting on October 7, 2023) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (starting on February 24, 2022). The project received ethical approval from the University of Amsterdam under the project number FMG-5383. Due to the international scope of the (dis)information landscape surrounding both events, we look at fact-checked disinformation that is not necessarily tied to a specific region. Yet, for practical reasons and comparability, the analysis is focused mostly on disinformation and refutations written in English, although certain individual social media posts were translated into English for the purpose of analysis.

Although open science principles are mostly applied to quantitative research, the main questions and procedures of qualitative research can also be pre-registered (see e.g., Dienlin et al., 2021). To enhance transparency, we have therefore pre-registered the research questions, sample plan, and analysis strategy (see https://aspredicted.org/QMN_FTD). To account for the flexible nature of qualitative research and the cyclic-iterative process of data collection and analysis, we specified the general approach to collecting and sampling data and developing themes rather than predetermined steps and sample sizes.

Considering that multiple disinformation narratives went viral on social media only hours after the attacks covered in this article, we decided to focus on a short period after the outbreak of the wars in both settings: Six weeks. The aim of selecting this period is to offer in-depth insights on how disinformation narratives legitimized alternative truth claims (i.e., through visual evidence) and delegitimized established narratives or opposed perspectives in a period of high stakes, information demand, and uncertainty on the development of the conflicts.

Considering that disinformation may be hard to distinguish from honest or accurate information based on a pre-determined set of content characteristics (e.g., Hameleers & Yekta, 2023), the selection of disinformation narratives for the sample frame was difficult to systemize. Especially given that disinformation around crisis events may rely on authentic visuals (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021), selecting disinformation using indicators of deceptive information may not yield valid or exhaustive results. We therefore used a similar approach as previous content analyses (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Humprecht, 2019). We selected disinformation narratives by consulting international fact-checking databases and independent fact-checkers that have verified various streams of information on social media, including X and other platforms.

Keywords were kept as general as possible to allow for the inclusion of a diverse set of disinformation narratives. Specifically, Ukrain*, Palestin*, Russia*, Israel*, war*, invasion, and conflict were used to sample relevant narratives. A first manual reading of all hits on the selected platforms and timeframe was used to select relevant narratives (i.e., 14.5% of the hits were deemed irrelevant as they were about previous conflicts, other wars, or other developments in the respective countries). Next to a keyword search, we used the thematic pages of fact-checking platforms and databases to access all relevant disinformation narratives, such as the page https://edmo.eu/thematic-areas/israel-hamas-conflict/ where monthly fact-checks of disinformation are included for different issues, including the wars covered in the sample frame of this paper. In addition to these records, databases that listed all fact-checks on both issues across languages were included, such as recorded on EDMO's (European Digital Media Observatory) website: https://edmo.eu/publications/war-in-ukraine-the-fact-checked-disinformation-detected-in-the-eu/.

To minimize the bias of specific fact-checking platforms, we included multiple sources for the identification of disinformation narratives: Associated Press, Reuters, Poynter (representing the International Fact-Checking Network), PolitiFact.com, and Rappler.com. We additionally referred to databases of different national hubs of EDMO, which ensured an inclusive perspective of disinformation narratives across the European region. Although the selection of claims to check may be surrounded by biases (e.g., Uscinski, 2015), selecting multiple platforms across national contexts may help to minimize biases and offer an outlook on the disinformation landscape surrounding the conflict. Another advantage of using fact-checkers as the entry point of sampling is that they offer context for the disinformation statements: The fact-checking organizations often contrast false statements to empirical evidence and the original context of decontextualized claims. This aids the interpretation of the delegitimizing tactics of deceptive information.

Although most disinformation narratives that were debunked and fact-checked were disseminated via X, we should acknowledge the multi-platform dissemination of most of the included disinformation narratives. As explicated in many fact-check messages, various narratives were present across social media (i.e., TikTok, X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) and similar captions were used across platforms to re-interpret and decontextualize footage on the wars. In many instances, the disinformation narratives were even published by established news organizations out of the belief that they were accurately reflecting the unfolding events—this was especially the case during the first days after the Gaza attack in October 2023. By capturing prominent disinformation narratives, we thus also take into account wider disinformation narratives that were spread across (online) media channels—amplifying and legitimizing the reach of disinformation campaigns (also see Lukito et al., 2020).

Given the extensive scope of the disinformation landscape surrounding both wars, we could not include all disinformation narratives disseminated at the selected time period. We relied on theoretical sampling and looked for maximum variety in disinformation statements (i.e., a balance between partisan perspectives, false evidence, and nature of the fabrication or decontextualization of information). The inclusion criteria aimed to offer variety in the formats of visual disinformation (i.e., text paired with images versus videos versus stand-alone videos) and means of construction (i.e., decontextualized, altered, and fabricated visuals). Topic-wise, clear partisan narratives across the four positions were included, as well as less ideologically biased disinformation to enhance the diversity of the sample. Exclusion criteria entailed the lack of a direct connection to the event (i.e., disinformation narratives on other wars) and unverifiable information. Appendix offers more details on included versus excluded narratives.

Data collection stopped until theoretical saturation was achieved on the level of the most salient themes: Based on a back-and-forth movement between the collection of new data and the analysis of the content, we stopped including more content when the new disinformation narratives did not enrich the emerging themes with more variety. This point was reached after 67 disinformation narratives on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and 89 disinformation narratives for the Israel-Palestine war. These 156 narratives consisted of at least a fact-check article and one disinformation post. Against this backdrop, it should be explicated that a disinformation narrative comprised of more than individual (fact-checked) statements or visuals. Indeed, the fact-checks often referred to wider storylines containing counter-factual truth claims that were spread through different social media accounts and using different messages, sources of evidence, or (manipulated) visual content. In this paper, we included all examples and the wider narrative and storyline they propagated as units of analysis: We herewith regard disinformation narratives as the construction of storylines that include textual, visual, or multimodal expressions of reality that are used to interpret and construct coherent representations of reality, offering an organized presentation of events with a suggested interpretation to audiences.

Analyses

The thematic analysis of the disinformation narratives was structured by using the three-step coding framework of the grounded theory approach (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). Specifically, initial unstructured open coding was followed up by focused and axial coding to map variety on the themes resulting from the data. During open coding, we labeled relevant segments of the data without imposing a-priori categorizations on the data. Although the construction of truth-claims and discourses of delegitimization guided the allocation of open codes as sensitizing concepts, we did not inform the coding by pre-conceived ideas of (visual) disinformation.

During the second step of focused coding, however, we merged similar codes into more generic themes, grouped codes that dealt with a similar dimension describing the data, or raised prominent and recurring codes to a higher level of analytical abstraction. The second step of focused coding mainly revolved around grouping different elements of similar dimensions and finding analytical labels to capture the underlying variety. Finally, after developing themes capturing variety on the main dimensions of the uses and discourses of visual disinformation, we established the connection between themes during axial coding. As an example, themes related to various modes of decontextualization were related to each other as different forms of using authentic visual materials to legitimize opposed truth claims.

Although most coding was done by the main researcher, all steps were discussed with a second researcher. During the first stage, 20 disinformation narratives that were not included in the main results were coded together to establish congruency in the coding procedure, and to make sure that the coding was open, but focused regarding the research questions. Only after full agreement on coding procedures was achieved, the actual sample was coded. The second researcher was again consulted to review the open codes, specifically checking for overlap or missing elements. The codes were revised until agreement on completeness and exhaustiveness was reached. Focused coding and axial coding were also discussed until full agreement.

Results

Decontextualization across time, place, and realities

The analyses of the visual disinformation narratives confirm that the fabrication of visual content, for example, through generating disinformation with AI or by editing and manipulating existing footage, occurred only rarely in fact-checked disinformation (less than 5% of the sample). Decontextualization was thus most dominant in the sample. Answering RQ_1, the data supports three modes of decontextualization: deceptively assigning visual information from either other periods, locations, or realities (i.e., fictional materials) with the ongoing wars in both settings. Decontextualization mostly occurred based on a combination of using authentic footage from another location and time, such as older photos taken from another region.

In terms of decontextualizing information originally coming from different periods, visual disinformation on both wars often relied on old footage of other armed conflicts. For example, a video showing Egyptian aid convoys for Gaza in 2021 was falsely labelled as footage from the ongoing war in 2023, and interpreted as evidence that aid convoys were denied access to support Palestinian citizens, herewith emphasizing that Israel was not respecting international humanitarian laws: "Breaking: Aid vehicles at Rafah border refused entry into Gaza by Israel." In many cases of decontextualization, both the temporal and spatial dimension of footage were displaced.

In terms of decontextualized realities, finally, a very prominent way of misrepresenting footage across both wars was the use of gameplay footage of war videogames or movies and documentaries, which allegedly showed the bombing or devastation faced by different parties involved in armed conflicts. Hyperrealistic synthetic footage from videogames was often interpreted as evidence for real-life events. As an example, gameplay footage from *Arma 3* was used as evidence for the claim that Hamas "shot down two Israeli helicopters." This was different from the usage of material from movies or documentaries, which was either used to claim that the other side was staging the event (i.e., through showing behind-the-scenes footage of movies falsely interpreted as proof for acting out victimhood) or to falsely show the suffering of individuals (i.e., by showing wounded children or other civilians).

Overall, the findings confirm research on the nature of visual disinformation in non-war settings (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Dan et al., 2021): The footage used in disinformation narratives was often unaltered and originated from authentic contexts. However, it was deceptively mislabeled and falsely interpreted as proof for events that either legitimized the in-group or delegitimized the out-group. Across these applications, we identified different ways through which reality was misrepresented. Decontextualization first of all involved the deceptive and false association of authentic materials (reality) with other actors (i.e., politicians and civilians) that were not displayed in the original footage, or locations and periods that were not actually shown in the authentic materials. Decontextualization could also imply that fictional materials (i.e., a film or videogame) were falsely re-interpreted as visual evidence. This also occurred the other way around: Real-life footage of the wars was falsely interpreted as fictional and

labeled as staged events to deny the claimed suffering of the opposed camp.

Regarding RQ1, we found that visual information can play different roles to offer proof for deceptive claims. Our findings suggest that deceptive re-contextualization rather than complete fabrication is the most salient form of visual disinformation.

The usage of arousing graphic materials to present counter-factual claims

RQ_1 further asked about how visuals were used to construct and legitimize counter-factual truth claims. One very prominent form of visual disinformation especially in the context of the Israel/Palestine war is using extremely graphic materials seemingly depicting vulnerable victims of the war—including children and civilians—with the statement that the other side of the conflict is pure evil, considering the awful actions they are capable of. As an example, a video dating back from 2015 depicting a 16-year old Guatemalan girl being burnt to death was falsely associated with the Israel/Palestine war. Deceptive quotes shared on X and other platforms used the video to emphasize the atrocities of the Palestinians, as the following post exemplifies: "Do we have a dirtier, more hateful and more savage people than this?!! They burned alive a 14 year old girl that captures in Israel." By falsely associating the video with an anti-Palestine perspective, the visual disinformation narrative was used to delegitimize the other side in the conflict. Crucially, the content suggested a moral boundary between groups by negatively stereotyping the other as an internally consistent group of evil people that were capable of extremely violent, immoral, and evil actions.

Emotionally invoking visual material was also shared in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, in this context, most disinformation narratives focused less on individual suffering and graphic content of casualties. Instead, the collective emotions experienced by, for example, the Ukrainian people or armed forces were illustrated by deceptively interpreting footage from other places or locations. As an example, a photo from praying U.S. soldiers was miscaptioned as evidence for the collective praying of Ukrainian soldiers, allegedly telling "Another part of the unseen story. Join them in praying." In line with this, many narratives of hope, loss, fear, and heroism where shared to evoke support for Ukraine. As another example, a viral image of the 2015 Miss Grand Ukraine winner holding a gun was falsely used as evidence that she joined the military. Although the image was intended to inspire people, the former miss universe did not actually took part in the war to defend her country.

All in all, the visually depicted disinformation narratives may form a crucial part of identity politics: Visuals demonstrating the suffering or heroism of the in-group were contrasted with decontextualized imagery of the enemy, which was depicted as an evil out-group. Answering RQ_1, visuals used in counter-factual truth claims constructed emotionalized partisan boundaries, emphasizing the moral distinctions between warring sides and the evil acts of others.

How visuals are used to exaggerate the global scope of the conflict

Beyond offering false proof for the atrocities of the other side through mislabeled graphic content, decontextualization was also often used to falsely exaggerate the scope of the conflict, and herewith the severity of the threat posed by the opposed camp (RQ_1). For example, in the context of the Israel/Palestine war, visual disinformation narratives targeting Palestinians often voiced the claim that the entire Islamic community supports Hamas, and that Hamas and ISIS are part of the same threat that Israel is allegedly fighting, herewith legitimizing acts of war and even the "destruction of a common enemy" committed in Gaza. Concretely, graphic videos of the violence against women and children committed by the Yazidis—a religious minority in Syria—was used to substantiate the claim that Hamas commits similar crimes as the Islamic State. This was even voiced by the Israeli prime-minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who commented on the decontextualized disinformation video on October 9, 2023: "We have always known who Hamas is. Now the entire world knows. Hamas is ISIS." This example shows how the counter-factual disinformation claims viral online can even become part of elite communication at war times: When the message suits the agenda of political leaders, and legitimizes war acts, it was also used to suggest support from the (international) community.

Similar references were made in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The two different wars covered in this study were even falsely connected to each other to emphasize the global scope of the armed conflict. As an example, a video clip that went viral across various social media platforms decontextualized a speech held by Putin, and falsely claimed that the video demonstrated Putin expressing his support for Palestine amidst the Israel-Palestine war in 2023. Social media users endorsed the false message by emphasizing global support for the Palestinians: "Vladimir Putin announced Russia will openly help to Palestine. No one can stop us." In a similar vein, a decontextualized video viewed more than two million times falsely claimed that Putin was meeting with the president of South Korea, falsely suggesting that Russia and South Korea were joining forces, and were united against one common enemy that needed to be destroyed. In fact, the video was published two years before the armed conflict, and shows Putin in a meeting with the president of North Korea.

The visual construction of the atrocities committed by the enemy

Related to the arousing nature of false or decontextualized images and videos in the setting of both wars, visual disinformation was often shared to delegitimize the opposed side of the war, and associate them with atrocities (RQ_1). Beyond the theme related to the use of arousing and graphic materials, disinformation narratives in this category connected the alleged evil nature of the other to the justification of violent acts, and the destruction of the other as an appropriate response to the atrocities allegedly committed by them. Associating the other with evil acts thus hinted at the justification of violence to destroy the other, who was framed as evil and stripped of human characteristics. As such, dehumanization was central in the disinformation narratives belonging to this theme.

In the context of both wars, the other side was often associated with the brutal killing of civilians, and children or women in particular. To offer an example, graphic footage of a baby being rescued from under the rubble in the earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria in February 2023 was deceptively labeled as proof for the atrocities committed by Israeli troops in the Israel-Palestine war. One comment on the decontextualized video on social media, for example, used the video to

associate the other side with evil acts: "#ISRAEL IS KILLING BABIES After indiscriminate Israeli occupation force bombing. Palestinians rush to find survivors. They hear the cry of a baby and use their bare hands to shift rubble. They find the baby alive but injured. Saved by its dead mothers embrace! #Palestine #Gaza." In line with such accusations, many disinformation narratives explicated the justification of retaliation and violence. For example, in response to visual disinformation allegedly showing how Israel kills civilians and children in brutal ways, different statements were expressed that justified war. One example includes the pairing of decontextualized visuals with a quote from the Quran used to justify war and violence: "Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made because they are oppressed, and most surely Allah is well able to grant them victory."

Although a similar discourse was found in visual disinformation narratives in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, depicting the other as evil through falsely associating them with atrocities committed to children, and specifically babies, was less salient in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although alleged crimes committed to civilians were often part of disinformation narratives, the content was much less graphic and less focused on a prevalent episodic frame of individual suffering as compared to the armed conflict in Gaza.

Against this backdrop, the theme of dehumanization and the strong emphasis on evil individual behaviors that have been associated as violence-legitimizing rhetoric in war propaganda, politically induced violence, and genocides (e.g., Semelin, 2005) is much more salient in episodically framed disinformation in Israel/Palestine as compared to the war in Ukraine. Although it reaches beyond the scope of this paper, it could be argued that the political and social setting in Western democracies was much more identarian and divided in the case of the war in Israel/Palestine as compared to Russia/Ukraine, where the predominant pro-Ukrainian stance offered a less conducive context for the legitimization of violence and retaliation for both sides of the conflict. In line with RQ_1, re-contextualized visual information was often used to depict the evil nature of the other side, and graphic material was used as proof for counter-factual claims on the allegedly inhume acts of the other side. Eventually, this was used to legitimate violence and war—as the evil and inhumane others allegedly needed to be destroyed.

Disinformation as genre and label: visuals as evidence for staged events

In line with RQ_2, we also explored how visual information was used in the context of disinformation accusations and delegitimizing discourses. In the context of both wars, the other side of the conflict was often accused of spreading disinformation, or even staging the conflict, casualties, or cruelties committed by the other side. In this way, disinformation as a genre (i.e., the deceptive decontextualization or fabrication of visual content) and label (i.e., accusing others of spreading disinformation) came together. As an example, during the first week after the attacks in Gaza, CNN footage was manipulated by pairing it with a fabricated audio fragment that made it seem as if the airstrikes covered by CNN were fake, and thus that the media were orchestrating a nonexisting attack. One post on X exemplifies the way that the doctored video was framed in order to accuse the media of spreading fake news: "DEVELOPING: CNN got caught faking an attack from Hamas in Israel."

This theme was also dominant in the disinformation narratives spread on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both Russia and Ukraine were often accused of staging the war, hiring actors and orchestrating war-like settings in order to falsely show the war crimes committed by the other side. As an example, the claim that there is allegedly "zero evidence from the Ukrainian war" went viral online across social media platforms, and falsely accused Ukrainians of claiming the role of victims of an invasion whereas there was no actual war. As another example, recordings of the film Invasion Planet Earth were deceptively interpreted as evidence that Ukraine staged the war, and actually hired director Sean Penn to create a credible but false depiction of a "staged" war: "American actor-director Sean Penn flew to Ukraine late January and spent several months there. A lot of fake videos disseminated are from his production team."

It should be emphasized that the theme of an allegedly staged war was very prominent in visual disinformation narratives in the context of both armed conflicts. In case of the Israeli delegitimization of Palestinians, the term "Pallywood" was often invoked to falsely accuse Palestinians of faking injuries and death, herewith allegedly framing Israel as the enemy to a global stage. This disinformation narrative can be seen as an integration of the label and genre aspects of disinformation (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), where the disinformation narrative acts as both an accusation of "fake news" or disinformation (i.e., the other side is staging a fake war to attack global support) *and* actual disinformation as a genre (i.e., visual evidence is deliberately mislabeled to accuse the other side of faking the war or war crimes).

Answering RQ_2, fake news labels and other delegitimizing narratives were used mostly to accuse the other side of staging events. By decontextualizing existing footage from other regions and periods, both warring sides created images that associated the enemy with deception and falsely constructed images of suffering denied by the in-group.

Discussion

In the first days after the violent attacks in Israel and Gaza, social media platforms became the center stage of viral visual disinformation narratives. As these deceptive narratives amplified cleavages between warring sides, for example, by falsely depicting the atrocities committed by the enemy, the graphic disinformation narratives may play a central role in global public opinion, and even inform international policy and interventions in the conflict. Although extant literature has emphasized the crucial role that decontextualized images and videos play in disinformation (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Dan et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023), we currently lack an understanding of the epistemic threats of (de)legitimizing disinformation in the context of war. Therefore, this study relied on a qualitative content analysis of global visual disinformation disseminated in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israel/Palestine war.

Moving beyond existing visual disinformation literature, we propose a typology of decontextualization consisting of (a) temporal decontextualization, (b) spatial decontextualization, (c) fictional decontextualization, and (d) actor decontextualization. These types of decontextualization often co-occurred in disinformation narratives. For example, we

found different instances in which older footage (temporal decontextualization) from a different location (i.e., another war setting or a disaster) was used to legitimize counter-factual partisan truth claims. Fictional decontextualization occurred mostly in cases where materials from filmsets or videogames were used to accuse the other side of staging events. Actor decontextualization, finally, relates to instances in which authentic footage from existing persons was deceptively re-contextualized by referring to them as either perpetrators, partisan supporters, or victims. As such, real persons were falsely connected to the war settings in order to legitimize or delegitimize truth claims. This type of decontextualization also involved the deceptive re-labelling of known persons (i.e., celebrities or political elites) as either supporting or opposing warring sides of the conflict. All forms of decontextualization seemed to serve a similar purpose: Reinforcing the boundary between the supported camp of victims versus the "evil" enemy that used disproportionate violence, spread "fake news" to make the other look bad, and committed war crimes against civilians.

Although decontextualization was by far the most prominent mode of visual disinformation, we do find some cases of low-tech manipulation in our sample. These mostly concern the placement of deceptive subtitles below foreign content, or combining a fabricated audio fragment with authentic footage to alter the meaning of the footage in a goal-directed manner (i.e., making it seem as if war footage is staged by the media). In line with previous content analyses on visual disinformation (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021), we find no support for the usage of political deepfakes in the context of the armed conflict. Thus, more than AI-generated deepfakes and other modes of disinformation that have been the cause for prominent concerns across societies (e.g., Dan et al., 2021), at this stage, it seems that cheapfakes are much more prominent.

Although this insight may need to be revised as tools for AI-driven disinformation are developing rapidly, in the context under study, the mislabeling and strategic re-contextualization of existing (graphic) content seemed to fit the aims of malicious actors, elites, and partisan social media users. There may be different reasons for this. First of all, as cheapfakes are not based on synthetic media or manipulated visual content, deception may be hard to detect for both fact-checkers and social media users: Given that there is no suggestion of suspicious content as authentic and unaltered footage is disseminated, cheapfakes may not sidestep the truth-default of information processing (Levine, 2014). Second, it is much easier to add a deceptive storyline, change subtitles, or crop images than to generate synthetic media from scratch. From an actor-centered perspective, cheapfakes are much more efficient, especially given the large volume of disinformation that malicious actors disseminate around ongoing developments, such as wars.

Beyond the ways in which disinformation is constructed and presented, our findings offer strong support for the partisan ways in which truth claims are falsely constructed, and used to legitimize the boundary between warring sides. Here, visual information was mostly decontextualized or altered to make the other side look evil and inhumane. Especially in the context of the Israel/Palestine war, Israelis and Palestinians were constructed as "monsters" and "pure evil"—given that there was allegedly proof that they "slaughtered" innocent children, women, and civilians. The construction of the other also legitimized violence and retaliation, as the in-group of victimized partisans had the right to attack the other and punish the out-group for their atrocities and war crimes. In that sense, the arousing, emotional and often shocking visuals fueled the strong affective and hate-filled boundaries between warring sides.

Is this any different when we compare the recent information warfare staged on platforms such as X to other armed conflicts and wars? Although propaganda and information warfare have been associated with past armed conflicts too (e.g., Lasswell, 1971), the truth and reality may have become more subject to partisan attacks in a time of factual relativism (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Hence, although objectivity in war settings have also been debated for established media settings pre-dating the rise of the internet (e.g., Hallin, 2004), social media offer a favorable stage for the construction of opposing truth claims, delegitimizing accusations of disinformation, and an amplification of uncertainty and distrust amidst an overwhelming amount of competing realities. As there are many seemingly realistic truth claims to choose from, people may rely on confirmation biases and support the truth claims that reassure their existing views on politics and identity. Especially given that half of the world population is unsure on what to believe and worried about mis- and disinformation (e.g., Newman et al., 2023), the setting of distrust and concerns about deception may create the perfect storm for partisan information warfare.

Another crucial difference is the role of visual disinformation in the digital society (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). Information warfare and propaganda can rely on extremely powerful and emotional imagery that may amplify disinformation in two specific ways. First, visual information is known to evoke strong emotional responses and bring people close to real-world events (e.g., Powell et al., 2015). Especially in the context of war, visuals that depict death bodies, or even mutilated babies, can evoke extremely strong responses and fuel a strong sense of (blind) hatred to the party allegedly committing these atrocities. Words would not be able to evoke a similar response. Second, images and videos, even if they are mislabeled and intentionally decontextualized, function as proof for events and situations (e.g., Brennen et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Visual information may motivate heuristic processing through the so-called "seeing is believing" heuristic (Sundar et al., 2021). In the context of this study, for example, a video of dead bodies in a domestic region can credibly be associated with the Israel/Palestine war—even if the video pre-dates the time of the conflict.

In the themes resulting from the analysis, there is also an important link to existing historical accounts of processes of dehumanization and othering central to the underpinnings of genocides and mass violence. As discussed in Semelin's (2015) comparative analysis of the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia Herzegovina, processes of mass violence may be driven by a comparable process referred to as the construction of a "delusional rationality." This rationality is driven by a social mental image constructed based on resentment and fears, and gradually eliminates the constructed "enemy" from society by associating them with inhumane and evil images. Deceptive imagery of the other is constructed to exclude them from the in-group, which eventually justifies violence and destruction.

Although this historical analysis predates the recent mediatized armed conflicts and key developments in the digital society, it can be argued that visual disinformation facilities the

construction of the delusional rationality that can lead to genocidal processes and turn ordinary people into perpetrators. Hence, the visual disinformation narratives revealed in this study contribute to the construction of the enemy as evil, dangerous, and inhumane. Arguably, more than textual descriptions of the enemy's evil demeanor, visuals help to evoke strong negative emotions toward the enemy, whilst emphasizing and making vivid the alleged suffering of the victims. In light of this, although processes of othering and the construction of a delusional rationality based on deceptive imagery of the other have been central in war propaganda and communication about the enemy across history, visual disinformation afforded by social media may add a more vivid and emotional dimension that can amplify the exclusion of the enemy and justify hate fantasies and mass violence targeted at the complete destruction of the enemy.

This has important implications for how journalists may cover wars, and how fact-checkers and media literacy initiatives should warn people about false information. First, journalists should be extremely careful in accepting visual information as "proof" for partisan attacks when they did not verify the information themselves. Images and videos of attacks are often coming from partisan sides that have a stake in blaming the other for war crimes, as we have seen in the case of the airstrikes on a Palestinian hospital in October 2023. In a context of high uncertainty, journalists should acknowledge the level of uncertainty to audiences, or only communicate claims when there is sufficient evidence backing this up.

Second, citizens, as well as platforms, journalists, and policy makers, need to be more aware of how to evaluate the authenticity, honesty, and credibility of visual communication in times of crisis. Current interventions and media literacy message pointing to "manipulated" images or the textual nature of disinformation fall short in enhancing resilience toward the strategic decontextualization and sharing of visual information that is authentic but mislabeled and decontextualized. Hence, although pre-bunking interventions are found to lower the credibility of deceptive headlines in various studies (e.g., Hameleers, 2022; Vraga et al., 2022), these interventions may not sufficiently warn people about the nature of visual disinformation, and how to distinguish between the accurate and honest contextualization of visual information and the deceptive decontextualization and manipulation of authentic materials. An important suggestion for both academic research and practice is to acknowledge and incorporate the role that visual decontextualization plays in disinformation. Next to, for example, warning people about the narrative construction of disinformation and the specific language likely to be associated with disinformation (e.g., Damstra et al., 2021), it is important to warn people about the role that the deceptive embedding of authentic visuals plays in legitimizing violence.

The logic of social media content moderation and journalistic interventions may also play a role in the uncontrolled dissemination of decontextualized visual disinformation. Although interventions and detection software currently mostly focus on the identification and de-platforming of AI-generated content, there are currently no clear guidelines for responses to decontextualized information. The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation, for example, mainly focuses on AI-generated disinformation, bots, trolls, and other forms of malicious information that have clearer fingerprints based on manipulated information. As such, there may be a crucial blind spot in policy and interventions when it comes to deceptive re-contextualization, and the false connections made between textual interpretations and visual materials used to legitimize influential disinformation narratives.

Crucially, as the visual materials themselves are often authentic and unaltered, it is more difficult to automatically detect visual decontextualization. In addition, given that the deceptive re-contextualization of visuals does not involve practices of manipulation or doctoring, malicious actors can deny deliberateness and avoid sanctions. At the same time, it is more difficult for journalists and fact-checkers to assess the veracity of visual information as they have to take into account the (original) context of visual information, and the match between textual interpretations and visual content in order to verify or falsify content. This shows that the context of information has to take center stage in policy and interventions around disinformation.

Despite offering new insights into the construction of visual disinformation amidst global armed conflicts, there are some noteworthy limitations that should be discussed. First of all, the selection of disinformation narratives in this study was driven by the verification efforts of fact-checkers, which may overlook unverified disinformation or false narratives that were less viral or visible at the time of data collection. We therefore suggest future research to additionally include disinformation narratives beyond fact-checked narratives. Second, our qualitative analysis does not allow us to draw any inferences about the scope of visual disinformation or its consequences for the justification of violence. Although existing studies indicate that disinformation may be more prominent in visual content online as compared to other modes and platforms (Yang et al., 2023), we suggest future research to develop quantitative measures to test the prevalence of the various themes identified in this study. Finally, although we looked at global disinformation narratives, the analysis exclusively focused on disinformation in the English language. This does not allow us to tease out contextual differences in the construction of disinformation. We suggest future research to further study international dynamics in disinformation's creation across more and less resilient national contexts (e.g., Humprecht et al., 2020).

Data availability

The qualitative social media data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to privacy and ethical considerations. Segments of the data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

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Appendix. Examples of included and excluded disinformation narratives

Narrative	Included or excluded	Rationale
False narrative suggesting that Israel obstructs humanitarian aid: "Breaking: Aid vehicles at Rafah border refused entry into Gaza by Israel."	Included	Narrative clearly refuted as false by different fact-checkers; clear application of partisan re-contextualization; prominent narrative across different online channels
False narrative claiming that suffering of Palestinian civilians is staged: "And Winner For Best Performance Goes To … Palestinians are seen carrying a small boy's 'body' that has fell victim to Israeli airstrikes."	Included	Narrative was clearly refuted as false based on the deceptive re-contextualization of the original image; diverse and prominent example of how visuals are used to accuse other camp of staging event; reflective of a broader theme in global disinformation on both wars
Narrative suggesting that Zelensky said that Western world has to join the war to fight Russia: "Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said America's 'sons and daughters' will be obligated to fight and die for his country."	Excluded	Narrative classified as misleading and not completely false; no clear legitimizing or delegitimizing narrative; unclear statements and connection between visuals and disinformation narrative; already saturation on the exaggeration of scope of conflict through other narratives
Narrative falsely claiming that Hamas is funded by Western actors: "EU finances Hamas directly, so yeah, they have to be held accountable for that."	Excluded	Theme on global interference and scope of conflict other actors was already saturated; the example did not offer novel insights into disinformation constructions or the embedding of visual elements as proof for false claims.

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