

The Impact of the Media on International Conflicts: From Traditional Journalism to Social Media

Arjun Malhotra¹, Krishaa Shah²

¹Founder and CEO, Earth's 911

Abstract

This paper examines the evolving role of media in international conflicts, tracing the shift from traditional journalism and television broadcasting to social media and digital platforms. Drawing on the Vietnam War, the Tunisian Revolution, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the 2025 Nepal Generation Z protests, it explores how different media forms have shaped public perception, political mobilization and the framing of conflict narratives. The paper engages with the 'CNN Effect' and 'Manufacturing Consent' theory, arguing that rather than functioning as competing explanations, the two frameworks can operate simultaneously within a contemporary media landscape shaped by both grassroots visibility and institutional influence.

These theoretical and case-study analyses are supplemented by an original survey of 100 adolescent respondents examining youth media consumption, trust in different source types, the influence of repetition and framing, and growing concern over AI-generated misinformation. The findings suggest that contemporary audiences function as networked participants who both consume and circulate information, often encountering conflict-related content through platforms they do not fully trust while still being influenced by repeated exposure and narrative framing. The paper concludes by identifying the limitations of the study and proposing directions for future research into algorithmic curation, generative AI and media literacy in shaping how international conflicts are understood.

Keywords: Media, International Conflicts, CNN Effect, Manufacturing Consent, Social Media, Misinformation

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, international conflicts are no longer confined to the geographical boundaries in which they occur. Through the flow of information across borders, conflicts are observed, interpreted and debated by audiences worldwide in real time. Consequently, the role of media in international conflicts has become a significant subject of scholarly debate. Researchers have examined how media influences conflict dynamics, shapes stakeholder perceptions, affects public opinion and impacts governmental decision-making and public policy. While earlier discussions focused on traditional forms of journalism such as newspapers, radio and television, the rise of social media and emerging forms of mass media has transformed the media landscape. This shift has introduced new actors, mechanisms of influence and challenges to the study of the media's role in international conflicts.

Using the cases of the Vietnam War, the Tunisian Revolution and the Israel-Palestine conflict, this paper explores how different forms of media have shaped international conflicts and some of the possible ramifications seen on the public due to the same. The Vietnam War saw the power of television broadcasts in influencing public opinion and sparking anti-war protests. The Tunisian Revolution, often referred to as the “Facebook Revolution,” showcased social media's role in helping the resistance against authoritarian regimes. Meanwhile, the Israel-Palestine conflict showcases the media's ability to frame narratives, through the years. Through these case studies, the paper investigates key theories like the 'CNN Effect' and the 'Manufacturing Consent' model, comparing the roles of traditional and social media while addressing issues like bias and the motivations of those who produce media.

2. Literature Review and Case Studies

2.1 Social Media's Role in the Tunisian Revolution

Robertson (2013) [1] categorizes the shift from 'old' media, as television broadcasts or newspapers, to 'new' media, represented by social media platforms. Robertson [1] suggests that, contrary to popular belief, 'new' media is less about the manner in which information is published and more about the multitude of perspectives and opinions that the common man is invited to connect to.

Considering the case studies of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Vietnam War and the Tunisian Revolution, it is essential to analyze how various forms of media played a role in each of these conflicts. The Tunisian Revolution, dubbed the 'Facebook Revolution', has been heralded by many as the turning point of social media's involvement in international conflict. Dhillon (2014) [2] argues that Ben Ali (Autocrat of Tunisia during the Revolution) 'created his own demise' through his avid interest in technology and his wish to advance Tunisia's technology sector 'as much as possible', this in turn leading to Tunisia being one of the most technologically advanced countries in Africa. Dhillon [2] further points out that this access to the internet 'made it easier for people to connect online and begin sharing ideas - some of which gave way to resistance to the regime'. In this manner, Dhillon [2] affirms that this accessibility to advanced technology was an effective contributor to the revolution and protests.

Contrarily, Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer (2013) [3] argue that while discussing social media and revolution, the level of motivation of the populace is as integral as its access to the internet. They argue, citing Herkenrath and Knoll (2011) and van Dalen (2011), that citizens who live in poorer and repressive regimes are less likely to have access to social media and have a higher likelihood of facing danger if they do gain access to the same. They further expand saying that it is this populace that lives in poor repressive regimes that have the motivation to protest while wealthier individuals in freer regimes, that have greater access to communication technologies, do not possess similar motivations to protest, attesting to their easy lifestyle. Through this, Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer [3] hypothesize that the level of communication technology available in a country is actually inversely proportional to the level of protest conducted in said country.

Thus, while Dhillon [2] views the accessibility of technology as a significant contributor to the revolution, Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer [3] argue that it is not just access but the motivation of the populace that determines the impact of social media. Thus rejecting the claim that access to social media is a cause of protest, instead denoting it as a facilitator of protests. Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer [3] further contend that social media should be considered essential if and when a populace has access to social media and the motivation to protest. Tunisian citizens, as is evident, had both, through the access to the internet that they

had through their country's advancements in technology and their motivation to protest, an implication of the autocratic regime and their poverty-stricken lifestyle.

2.2 The Vietnam War and Television

Similar differences in opinion emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War. Belknap (2002) [4] writes, 'The nightly network news brought into American kitchens and living rooms images of American soldiers killing and being wounded and killed, displaced civilians and destroyed Vietnamese villages. These images were more powerful than any print medium could ever be.', Belknap [4] further argues that it was this televised medium of gaining information that influenced the anti-war sentiments that raged throughout the United States during the Vietnam War. She contrasts these sentiments with the public's opinions in past conflicts like the second World War, suggesting that the lack of such sentiment at the time, was due to the censorship imposed on the reporters.

Luong, D. & Vu, H. (2022) [5], on the other hand, contend that it was not the medium through which information was gained that influenced the anti-war sentiments that raged throughout the country, rather it was the political landscape of the United States of America at that point in time. They suggest that because the Vietnam War took place at the pinnacle of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 70s, this emboldened the public, who were already participating in the protests of the Civil Rights Movement, to freely express their opinions and express their dissatisfaction with government policies and actions, case in point, the government's decision to intervene in the Vietnam War. They further quote Herman and Chomsky (1988, 199) [6] writing that, 'Epstein cited a 1967 Harris poll for Newsweek showing that "64 percent of the nationwide sample said that television's coverage made them more supportive of the American effort and only 26 percent said that it had intensified their opposition." The magazine concluded that, "TV has encouraged a decisive majority of viewers to support the war." ', thus providing further evidence for their argument that it was not the televised medium that influenced the anti-war sentiments, rather the political landscape of the country. This argument can be compared to Robertson (2013) [1] proposing that 'new' media is not the medium through which information is published, rather it is the different opinions and perspectives that the audience is exposed to. Over here, again it was not the medium through which information was published that can be categorized as 'new' or as the cause for the anti-war sentiments, rather the perspectives that the audience was exposed to.

2.3 Media Bias and the Israel-Palestine Conflict

The media's role in both the Tunisian Revolution and the Vietnam War has been distinct, one saw an influence in public perception while the other explored a change in governmental structure. The Israel-Palestine conflict, on the other hand, remains a unique one through the high amounts of international media attention it has received over the years, (Zahoor and Sadiq, 2021). Riaz and Chaudhry (2024) [7] suggest that the portrayal of this conflict frequently aligns with geopolitical objectives and power dynamics, these portrayals, in turn, influencing and shifting public perceptions. They further contend that the manner in which the media portrays something has the ability to strengthen biases and existing preconceptions against certain groups or individuals. Riaz and Chaudhry [7] cite Arikat (2011) and write, 'The New York Times has faced historical criticism for its alleged pro-Israel bias, since critics contend that its coverage tends to prioritise Israeli viewpoints while downplaying Palestinian voices and narratives.' Riaz and Chaudhry [7] further exemplify their argument by providing the consequences of biased and partial reporting which can 'intensify tensions and amplify distrust among warring or opposing factions.' Thereby showcasing how the New York Times' supposed biased reporting can impact public perception and exemplify the animosity between the two sides at hand, Israel and Palestine.

The focus on the New York Times can be explained through Amer (2022) [8] who includes an excerpt in his study from Bagdikian (2004, 135) [9] which says, '[the New York Times] is the only national newspaper for the general audience and has more than 250 print and broadcast news organizations that subscribe to its services, most of which use news or syndicated columnists from the New York Times daily. For these reasons, when the Times succeeds or fails it has a disproportionate effect on most of the other printed and broadcast news and, of course, on the American public.' The importance of this media outlet can be realised through the influence it holds in the public sphere.

Kressel (1987) [10], however, in his study of the biases present in the studies of media biases, points out the flaws in such research. He argues that the studies done regarding media bias in the Israel-Palestine conflict rely on the mistaken assumptions that 'fair' coverage of the conflict would mean a coverage that is accepted and preferred by the author of said studies or that a 'fair' coverage of the conflict would portray Israel as 50% positive and Palestine as 50% positive. Kressel [10] further contends that 'neither assumption is compelling', the reason why the first is wrong, he writes, is obvious and for the second case, Kressel [10] gives an example. He writes that if Stalin is covered by the New York Times, then according to the second assumption of 'fair' coverage, half the New York Times' articles should be positive and half negative, or all of them should be neutral. And the existence of this second assumption can be linked to Riaz and Chaudhry (2024) [7] where they write, 'Among all the articles, 23 were classified as highly negative against Palestine, while 10 were classified as moderately negative, suggesting a significant focus on unfavorable viewpoints. By comparison, a mere 7 pieces were classified as fairly favorable, while 9 were classified as highly positive.' Here their basis for an existence of a bias is that the amount of articles that are moderately negative or highly negative are not equal to the amount of articles that are fairly favorable or highly positive, thus not attaining that supposed 50-50 unbiased take on the conflict.

These different viewpoints showcase the complications of media bias with some scholars highlighting the consequences of biased reporting and others suggesting that the criteria that decides biased reporting, is debatable. Thus, while the media's role in shaping public perception and the repercussions of biased reporting are evident, the biases can sometimes become a matter of debate as well.

2.4 Social Media, Youth Mobilization and the 2025 Nepal Generation Z Protests

The 2025 Nepal Generation Z protests represent a contemporary example of social media's evolving role in political conflict and collective action. Although the Nepal protests constitute a domestic political conflict rather than an interstate conflict, they provide a contemporary case through which to examine the evolving role of digital media in political mobilisation. Emerging from widespread frustration with political instability, perceived government inaction and longstanding concerns regarding governance and accountability, the movement was led primarily by young Nepalis belonging to Generation Z who sought political reform. The protests were notable for the extent to which digitally connected youth drove their organization and visibility. Unlike earlier movements that relied heavily on political parties, labour unions or traditional media organizations to mobilize participants, the Nepal protests were largely coordinated through online networks. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and X were used by young citizens to share grievances, coordinate demonstrations and disseminate information in real time. As a result, the protests demonstrated how social media can function not merely as a communication tool but also as a space where collective identities are formed and sustained, while providing citizens with a direct platform through which to challenge and engage with existing political structures and the status quo in an increasingly digital world (Mulmi, 2025 [11]; Reuters, 2025 [12]).

Many commentators argue that social media played a decisive role in the growth of the movement. Through short-form videos, hashtags and viral content, participants were able to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and directly engage with large audiences. The rapid circulation of protest footage and political commentary contributed to a shared sense of frustration among young people, particularly regarding issues such as political accountability, corruption, unemployment and restrictions on digital freedoms. In this sense, social media acted as a facilitator of mass mobilization by reducing barriers to participation and enabling decentralized forms of organization.

However, other analysts caution against attributing the protests solely to the existence of social media. Similar to the arguments advanced by Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer (2013) [3] in relation to the Tunisian Revolution, social media may be better understood as a facilitator rather than a cause of political action. The grievances that motivated participants - including economic insecurity, dissatisfaction with established political elites and a perceived lack of political representation - existed prior to the emergence of the protests. Social media provided an effective mechanism through which these frustrations could be expressed, shared and coordinated. Consequently, while digital platforms accelerated mobilization and increased the visibility of the movement, they did not create the underlying conditions that gave rise to it. Nevertheless, focusing solely on whether social media caused the protests risks overlooking its broader political significance. Beyond facilitating mobilization, digital platforms also became spaces of political participation and experimentation. Throughout the movement, young Nepalis used online platforms to discuss political issues, debate policy proposals and coordinate collective action. Most notably, participants used digital communities such as Discord to conduct informal votes on potential political leaders, despite these processes lacking formal constitutional authority. While these processes did not carry legal or institutional power, they reflected a growing tendency among digitally connected youth to engage with politics through online spaces and to experiment with alternative forms of representation and collective decision-making (Mulmi, 2025) [11].

This development highlights an important evolution in the relationship between media and political conflict. Whereas traditional media primarily reported on events after they occurred, contemporary digital platforms increasingly shape events as they unfold and provide new avenues through which political engagement can take place. Through algorithm-driven content distribution, protest-related material reached audiences far beyond the immediate participants, generating both national and international attention. At the same time, online platforms enabled young citizens not only to voice grievances but also to actively participate in political discourse, leadership selection and community-building. The media therefore can no longer be understood solely as an observer or transmitter of political conflict. Instead, it has become an active participant in the processes through which conflicts are framed, understood, amplified and, in some cases, politically enacted.

The Nepal Gen Z protests therefore represent a significant example of the transition from traditional journalism to networked digital activism. Much as television transformed public engagement during the Vietnam War and social media facilitated mobilization during the Tunisian Revolution, the Nepal protests illustrate how contemporary media platforms can influence political participation, shape public discourse and redefine the dynamics of collective action in the digital age. More importantly, they demonstrate how digital media has evolved beyond a tool of communication to become a space where new forms of political engagement, representation and leadership can emerge.

2.5 The 'CNN Effect' vs The 'Manufacturing Consent' Theory

The Vietnam War marked a turning point in the relationship between war and the media. It was notable

for the unusually extensive access available to journalists compared with later U.S. conflicts and it was the first major U.S. conflict to receive extensive, near-real-time television coverage in American homes (Belknap, 2002) [4]. Television as a source of information at that point in time can be compared to social media as a source of information now, not because of credibility or reliability concerns, but rather because of the different viewpoints and perspectives one could gain through it. Social media broadens users' horizons by exposing them to various opinions and ways of thinking, thus promoting important, real-time dialogue. Television, during the Vietnam War, worked in a similar manner by bringing the realities of the conflict into American homes and may have contributed to changing public perceptions, although scholars disagree over the extent to which television itself caused shifts in anti-war sentiment. The Vietnam War can be seen as a precursor to the CNN effect; Robinson (1999) [13] writes, 'The phrase 'CNN effect' encapsulated the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events.'

The reason that Vietnam War is considered the precursor for the same can be attested to the fact that it was the first major conflict to receive sustained, near-real-time television coverage, thus opening the door to the existence of 24-hour news media. The 'CNN effect' can even be applied to the Vietnam War to a certain extent through the major response it garnered on domestic audiences through the anti-war sentiments and protests that raged through the country, supposedly, due to the media's take on the conflict. Robinson (1999) [13] further explains that the 'manufacturing consent' theory argues that it is not the media that creates policy but rather that the media is influenced into supporting government policy; he notes the incompatibility of the 'manufacturing consent' theory and the 'CNN effect'. He continues by expanding on the 'manufacturing consent' theory and provides the second version of the theory relating to major elites which claims that news media is mobilized by the previously stated 'elites' who are categorized as members of the legislative, executive or any branch of politics. He also points out that, in this second version, any news media that is critical of policy can only exist through conflict among the elite regarding the policy.

Thus, the question arises whether the response garnered via the news media in domestic audiences during the Israel-Palestine conflict can also be attested to the 'manufacturing consent' theory? Luong, D. & Vu, H. (2022) [5] in their study regarding the US media on the Vietnam War argued that the news media was 'incredibly docile' and favored American policy in Vietnam during the beginning of the conflict, this supposedly shifted after the Tet offensive that is regarded by many as a US loss. Luong and Vu [5] cite Hallin (1986) [14] who observed that the 'dramatic' change showcased by the news media after the Tet offensive can be attributed to the general unhappiness with the war that the populace was facing. Luong and Vu [5] also quote Herman and Chomsky (1988, 172) [6] who wrote, 'As the war progressed, elite opinion gradually shifted to the belief that the U.S. intervention was a 'tragic mistake' that was proving too costly, thus enlarging the domain of debate to include a range of tactical questions hitherto excluded.' Thus bringing with it the question whether the news media 'dramatic' change in attitude towards the conflict can be attested to the populace facing a general discontentment with the war, or whether it was because the media was mobilized by the elites to conform to their opinion of the conflict. And as their opinion regarding the conflict shifted, so did, apparently, the news media which then led to the major response seen in domestic audiences, which blurs the lines between the 'CNN effect' and the 'manufacturing consent' theory.

The 'manufacturing consent' theory can even be linked to the media bias in New York Times' portrayal of the Israel-Palestine conflict observed by Riaz and Chaudhry (2024) [7]. This bias may stem from the

positive U.S.-Israel relations, potentially allowing the U.S. government to influence media narratives to align with its political interests. However, since the basis of the alleged bias itself remains a subject of debate, applying the 'manufacturing consent' theory to this case may only serve to complicate the case further.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose and Design

In order to accurately reach a conclusion in regards to the impact of media on international conflict, this thesis is supported by a survey. The goal of this research paper is to understand and discern the myriad of ways in which mass media, from traditional journalism to television to social media, affects international conflict; as well as the development in how information reaches the hands of the populace. As mentioned in the Literature Review, social media has played a large role in deciding what information reaches the public, especially the youth, as well as how the public reacts to this information. This could be seen in the 2025 youth-led protests in Nepal, which culminated in the resignation of the Prime Minister and a subsequent political transition, as well as in the sentiments expressed after this event. Hence, to gain a better understanding about these themes, the following study has been conducted.

The survey has been designed to test whether the comparable dynamics in regards to media bias, disinformation, the gap between exposure to mass media and the reliance on it and the credibility of various sources actually play a role in the media habits of the youth of today. To achieve the same, a questionnaire consisting of five major sections was rolled out: (i) Demographics, this section was built in order to discern whether certain characteristics like age or gender play any role in how an individual interacts with mass media, (ii) Media Consumption, in order to study the features of the media consumption in regards to the time spent, the sources used and the various conflicts the sample has come across, to help unearth how the sample interacts with and comes into contact with media, (iii) Trust and Credibility, to discern what forms of media the sample is more likely to trust and understand whether more traditional forms of mass media come across as more trustworthy and credible, as well as to understand what factors affect the trustability and credibility of a particular source and if confronted with conflicting findings, which source they would put their trust in, (iv) Media Influence, to understand the manner in which media or news influences their actions and what their first course of action is when confronted with a shocking headline or news article, (v) Misinformation and Media Literacy, this section aims at identifying whether the sample has ever been fed fake news or altered news and their ability to discern fiction from fact, as well as, what solutions they pose to combat this rise in misinformation and to help make media literacy more accessible to the greater populace.

3.2 Sample and Procedure

The survey was distributed digitally and completed anonymously between the 5th and 26th of August. It was filled out by 100 students ranging from Grade 7 to Grade 12 (Ages 12-18). Female students formed the majority of respondents, accounting for 61% of the sample, while students in Grade 10 formed the largest, though not majority, grade-level group at 22%. As a sample drawn for convenience from a single school-age population rather than a randomized or nationally representative panel; the survey does not mean to generalise the results and apply them to the masses. Its purpose is to simply provide a ground level view at how people tend to interact with media and to be seen alongside the literature review presented above. The findings from the survey are discussed in Section 4, connections are drawn between the literature review and the findings in Section 5 and the limitations are recognised in Section 6.

4. Findings

4.1 Media Consumption

Instagram was the single most chosen primary source of news about international events, chosen by 35 of the 100 respondents (35%), followed by YouTube (21%) and Friends and Family (20%). The rest of the options teetered behind with Other gathering 9%, News Websites (BBC, Reuters, etc) 6% and X (Twitter) 4%, while Television (3%) and Newspapers (2%) trailed at the bottom.

The respondents ranged from ages 12–18, with most being 15 (27%), followed by 14 (20%) and 13 (17%). The findings showcase that this younger generation exhibits a general lack of interaction with more traditional forms of media such as newspapers or television. Instead, the survey presents the conclusion that the youth majorly depends on social media or word of mouth for information about international affairs.

This reliance on social media is particularly significant when considered alongside the amount of time respondents spend consuming news. A large proportion of respondents reported consuming news for less than 10 minutes or between 10–30 minutes per day, suggesting that international news is often encountered incidentally rather than through deliberate engagement with lengthy news coverage. This indicates a shift from actively seeking information through traditional news outlets towards encountering news through platforms that are already integrated into young people's daily media consumption.

4.2 Trust and Credibility

The findings regarding trust and credibility reveal a clear distinction between traditional and social media sources. Government sources were the most trusted, with 82% of respondents indicating that they either “mostly trust” or “completely trust” them. Newspapers followed, with 62% expressing either “mostly” or “complete” trust, while news websites such as BBC and Reuters received 55%. This suggests that despite the declining use of traditional media among young people, established sources continue to retain comparatively high levels of credibility.

Table 1: Share of Respondents Reporting 'Mostly Trust' or 'Completely Trust' for Each Source Type
(n = 100)

Source	Mostly/Completely Trust (%)
Government sources	82.0
Newspapers	62.0
News websites (BBC, Reuters, etc.)	55.0
Television	38.0
YouTube	22.0
X (Twitter)	20.0
Instagram	17.0
TikTok	3.0

Social media platforms demonstrated considerably lower levels of trust. Instagram, despite being the most commonly selected primary source of international news, was “mostly” or “completely” trusted by only 17% of respondents. YouTube received 22%, while X (Twitter) received 20%. TikTok demonstrated the lowest level of trust, with only three respondents combined indicating trust in the platform (two “mostly trust” and one “completely trust”). This contrast between frequency of use and perceived credibility is

particularly significant, as the platform most frequently encountered by respondents is not necessarily the platform they consider most reliable.

The factors that the respondents considered important when deciding whether to trust a source further reinforced this distinction. Evidence or sources provided was the most frequently selected factor (83 respondents), closely followed by government sources (80), international organisations (75), professional journalists (68) and verified accounts (67). Comparatively, social indicators such as being recommended by friends, having a high number of followers or accumulating many likes and shares were selected far less often, at 14, 10 and 8 respondents respectively. This suggests that respondents generally associate credibility with professional authority, verification and supporting evidence rather than popularity or online engagement.

4.3 Media and Influence

The findings indicate that the media has a significant role in shaping how young people understand international conflicts. When asked whether media coverage had ever changed their opinion about an international conflict, 35 respondents (35%) answered “Yes”, while 54 (54%) were “Not sure” and 11 (11%) answered “No”. The high proportion of respondents who were uncertain is particularly significant, as it suggests that individuals may not always recognise the extent to which repeated exposure to particular narratives can influence their perceptions.

When asked what influences their opinion about international conflicts the most, social media was the most common response, selected by 32 respondents (32%), closely followed by personal research at 28 (28%) and news reports at 22 (22%). Parents were selected by 10 respondents (10%), while Friends/Family and Teachers were selected by 5 (5%) and 3 (3%) respectively. Furthermore, when presented with breaking news about a missile strike on Instagram, 38 respondents (38%) stated that they would search for another source, while 29 (29%) would wait for official confirmation. Only 2 respondents (2%) said they would share the information immediately. This suggests that although social media is an important source of initial exposure, most respondents recognise the need to verify information before accepting or disseminating it.

However, the survey also demonstrates that the media can influence audiences before verification takes place. A majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social media shapes public opinion about wars, while similar agreement was observed regarding the influence of images and videos, repeated exposure and headlines on perceptions of conflicts. This is reflected particularly in the finding that 53 respondents (53%) either “strongly agree” or “agree” that headlines influence their first impression of a conflict. Therefore, contemporary media may influence not only what individuals believe about a conflict, but also the initial framing through which they encounter it.

4.4 Misinformation and Media Literacy

The findings demonstrate that misinformation is already a significant concern among the surveyed population. AI-generated videos and deepfakes were identified as the most concerning form of misinformation, selected by 45 respondents (45%), followed by biased reporting at 23 respondents (23%) and propaganda at 13 (13%). Edited images, fake headlines, false statistics and fake eyewitness accounts were selected less frequently. This highlights the growing concern surrounding digitally manipulated content and its potential to influence perceptions of international conflicts.

Despite this concern, respondents displayed varying levels of confidence in their ability to identify misinformation. 61 respondents (61%) described themselves as “moderately confident”, while 19 (19%) considered themselves “very confident”, 15 (15%) “slightly confident”, 2 (2%) “extremely confident” and

3 (3%) “not confident at all”. Verification practices were also inconsistent: 41 respondents (41%) said they verify information “sometimes”, 32 (32%) “often” and 18 (18%) “always”, while 9 respondents (9%) did so rarely or never. This suggests a gap between awareness of misinformation and the consistent application of verification practices.

The survey also revealed that only 37 respondents (37%) had received formal education on media literacy or identifying misinformation, while 38 (38%) were unsure and 25 (25%) had not received such education. Despite this, 67 respondents (67%) either agreed or strongly agreed that schools should include media literacy in the curriculum. When asked about the most effective measure for reducing misinformation, better media literacy education was the most selected response at 30 respondents (30%), followed by government regulation at 24 (24%) and stronger moderation by social media companies at 20 (20%). This suggests that respondents recognise misinformation as a problem requiring a combination of education, regulation and greater responsibility from digital platforms.

5. Discussion

Taken separately, the literature review in Section 2 and the survey findings in Section 4 speak to very different agendas. The former focuses on the influence of media on international events and discussions about various theories surrounding this influence and the latter focuses at this influence of media at a more grassroots level and instead of the influence of media on national institutions or the public as a whole, it considers how individuals are affected by the several forms of mass media. Read together, however, several points of connection emerge, both corroborating and complicating the theoretical frameworks discussed above.

Firstly, the survey's evidence on first exposure, 50% via social media and 27% via friends and family, reflects the person-to-person information sharing described by Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer (2013) [3] during the Tunisian Revolution and later seen in the 2025 Nepal Generation Z protests discussed in section 2.4. Just as Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer [3] argue that social media functioned as a facilitator of the Tunisian protests rather than their cause, the survey suggests social media functions as a way in which information diffuses among adolescents rather than a source that they put their complete trust in. It is indispensable because of its reach and speed, but, as Section 4.2 shows, it is the least trusted category of source in the entire survey. This distinction between a medium's mobilizing power and its perceived credibility may help explain how movements like Tunisia's and Nepal's could be organized so effectively through platforms that their own participants might not otherwise describe as reliable news sources.

Furthermore, the finding that repeated exposure to a media headline made it more believable was the statement that the respondents agreed with most strongly (72%) in the survey. This finding can be interpreted alongside the 'Manufacturing Consent' framework discussed in Section 2.5, particularly its emphasis on how repeated and structurally reinforced narratives can shape public understanding. Robinson (1999) [13] and Herman and Chomsky's (1988) [6] account of elite influence highlight how institutional and political structures can shape the information presented to audiences and, over time, influence the range of narratives available to the public. This can be compared with the gradual, elite-led reframing of the Vietnam War after the Tet Offensive described by Luong, D. & Vu, H. (2022) [5].

Finally, the survey's near-consensus support for platform removal of false wartime content (91%) sits somewhat uneasily alongside their preference for media literacy education over government regulation as the single most effective anti-misinformation measure (30% versus 24%). The removal of content can involve both platform-level moderation and government regulation. This distinction is consistent with the

differing perspectives of the 'CNN effect' theory and the 'manufacturing consent' theory. Robinson (1999) [13] identifies the 'CNN effect', which highlights the potential for real-time media coverage to influence public opinion and place pressure on political decision-makers, implying a degree of public capacity to interpret and act upon media content. The 'manufacturing consent' framework, by contrast, emphasises how institutional, economic and political structures can shape the information environment and constrain the range of narratives presented to audiences, so that influence is experienced largely from the top-down. Respondents appear to want both outcomes at once: they want harmful content removed, which implies confidence in top-down intervention, while also wanting to be equipped, through education, to evaluate content for themselves, which implies a preference for bottom-up resilience. The survey cannot resolve which of these impulses would dominate in practice, but it does suggest that, for this cohort at least, the CNN effect and manufacturing consent are not experienced as mutually exclusive frameworks so much as two available and simultaneously desired modes of response to the same underlying problem.

6. Limitations

As referenced in Section 3.2, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of both the survey and the wider literature review. Recognising these constraints is essential to appropriately contextualise the study's conclusions and identify areas that could be strengthened through future research. The survey was completed by 100 respondents drawn from a single school and the sample was not evenly distributed across gender, with female students comprising a disproportionately large proportion of respondents (61%), although grade-level representation was comparatively more balanced, with Grade 10 forming the largest, though not majority, group at 22%. A sample of this size and composition, gathered through convenience sampling rather than random or stratified selection, cannot be assumed to represent the media habits of adolescents more broadly, even within the same age group, city or country.

Consequently, findings such as the relatively low levels of trust reported for TikTok and Instagram, or the high level of trust reported for government sources, may reflect the particular social, educational and demographic context of the respondents rather than a pattern that can be generalised across youth audiences. As acknowledged in Section 3.2, the survey was not intended to be representative of the wider population. Nevertheless, this limitation restricts the extent to which the findings presented in Section 4 can be interpreted as reflecting Generation Z media consumption more broadly.

The survey relies entirely on respondents' self-reported assessments of their media habits, confidence and susceptibility to misinformation rather than on objective measures of behaviour. For example, the finding that 61% of respondents considered themselves "moderately confident" in identifying misinformation reflects their subjective perception of their own media literacy rather than a demonstrated ability to distinguish genuine information from fabricated or misleading content.

This also indicates a social desirability bias, whereby they selected responses perceived as more responsible or socially acceptable. For instance, participants may have overstated their tendency to verify information before sharing it or understated their reliance on, or trust in, sources perceived as less credible, such as TikTok or Instagram.

The literature review in Section 2 draws primarily on English-language academic scholarship and focuses on four case studies: the Vietnam War, the Tunisian Revolution, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the Nepal Generation Z protests. While these cases provide a useful cross-section through which to examine the transition from traditional to digital media, they cannot capture the full diversity of ways in which media has shaped international conflicts and political movements.

Furthermore, the reliance on predominantly Western and English-language academic sources may itself introduce a degree of framing bias into the analysis – an irony not lost on a paper that examines the concept of media bias extensively. Conflicts in which access to independent media has been severely restricted, or in which non-English-language scholarship and journalism dominate the discourse, are not substantially represented within the review.

Similarly, the two primary theoretical frameworks employed - the CNN Effect and Manufacturing Consent - were developed primarily with reference to American and Western European media systems. While both remain useful for analysing the changing relationship between media, public opinion and political power, their applicability may be more limited in political and media environments that operate under significantly different institutional, cultural or technological conditions.

7. Implications and Extensions for Future Research

Building on the theoretical discussion in Section 2, the survey findings presented in Section 4 and the limitations outlined in Section 6, this section considers the broader implications of the study and identifies areas in which future research could address the gaps and constraints identified. While the present research provides insight into the changing relationship between media, public perception and international conflict, the rapid evolution of digital technologies and the limitations of the current study highlight the need for further investigation.

1. Future research would benefit from surveying a larger and more demographically balanced sample, ideally drawn from multiple schools, regions or countries. This would allow researchers to examine whether the patterns identified in the present study - particularly the divergence between platform usage and platform trust - remain consistent across different social, economic and political contexts.

A cross-national comparison would be particularly valuable. The comparatively high level of trust in government sources identified in this survey, at 82%, may be influenced by the specific political and social environment of the respondents and cannot be assumed to apply universally. Levels of institutional trust are likely to vary considerably across political contexts, which may, in turn, influence how individuals evaluate information from governments, traditional media organisations and social media platforms.

This would also build upon the arguments made by Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer [3] regarding the importance of political context in shaping the effects of social media, allowing future research to examine whether similar technologies produce different outcomes under different political conditions.

2. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design by surveying the same cohort of respondents at multiple points in time. This could be particularly valuable during a major international event or conflict, allowing researchers to observe changes in media consumption, trust and perceptions as events develop. For example, respondents could be surveyed before, during and after sustained exposure to a particular international event. Such a design would allow researchers to investigate whether repeated exposure to a narrative is associated with changes in its perceived credibility, rather than relying solely on respondents' self-reported beliefs regarding the effects of repetition. This would provide a more direct means of examining the pattern suggested by the finding that 72% of respondents agreed that repeated exposure to a media headline could make it appear more believable.

3. To address the limitations associated with self-reported data, future research should consider supplementing survey instruments with behavioural and qualitative methods. Behavioural tasks could involve presenting respondents with a mixture of genuine, misleading and AI-generated content and

measuring their ability to identify each accurately. This would provide a more direct assessment of media literacy than relying solely on respondents' confidence in their own abilities.

Qualitative methods, including focus groups and semi-structured interviews, could further explore the reasoning underlying respondents' media choices. In particular, they could help explain why individuals may frequently encounter international news through platforms they explicitly distrust, or why respondents support both institutional intervention against misinformation and greater individual responsibility through media literacy.

Such methods would therefore move beyond identifying what respondents believe or report doing and instead investigate why they hold these attitudes and how they make decisions when confronted with conflicting or potentially misleading information.

4. As a relatively recent and still developing case, the 2025 Nepal Generation Z protests would benefit from a more extensive and dedicated case study. Future research could incorporate interviews with participants, analysis of digital communication and organisational structures and a closer examination of how political participation occurred across online and offline spaces.

A comparative analysis with the Tunisian Revolution could also be particularly useful if both cases were examined using consistent theoretical criteria. Such research could investigate whether social media primarily functioned as a facilitator of pre-existing political grievances, as argued by Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheaffer [3] in relation to Tunisia, or whether the contemporary digital environment created a more substantial and distinctive space for political participation.

8. Conclusion

This research examined how the evolution of media – from traditional journalism and television broadcasting to contemporary social media – has influenced the ways in which international conflicts are communicated, interpreted and, in some cases, politically experienced. Through an examination of the Vietnam War, the Tunisian Revolution, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the 2025 Nepal Generation Z protests and alongside primary survey data on young people's media consumption and perceptions, the research demonstrates that developments in media technology have transformed not only the speed at which information travels, but also the relationship between audiences, political narratives and conflict itself.

The case studies demonstrate that media influence cannot be understood as a uniform or automatic process. During the Vietnam War, televised coverage brought the realities of a distant conflict directly into domestic spaces and became part of broader debates surrounding public opinion and political decision-making. The Tunisian Revolution demonstrated the capacity of social media to facilitate communication and collective mobilisation, while also reinforcing the importance of underlying political and social conditions. The Israel-Palestine case highlighted the continued importance of framing, representation and narrative power, while simultaneously demonstrating the difficulty of identifying and defining media bias. Finally, the Nepal Generation Z protests illustrated how contemporary digital platforms can extend beyond the role of communication tools to become spaces through which political participation and collective action can themselves be organised.

The survey findings add an individual-level dimension to these broader developments. Most notably, the research identified a clear divergence between exposure and trust. Respondents frequently encountered international information through social and interpersonal networks, while simultaneously expressing substantially greater trust in government sources, newspapers and established news organisations than in

the social media platforms through which they were often first exposed to events. This suggests that the political influence of social media cannot be assessed solely through whether audiences consider it credible. Its influence may instead lie in determining what individuals encounter first and which narratives enter their broader information environment.

The findings regarding framing and repetition further reinforce this conclusion. A majority of respondents reported that headlines influence their initial impression of a conflict, while 72% agreed that repeated exposure to a headline could make it appear more believable. This suggests that media influence may operate even where audiences remain conscious of the potential unreliability of particular sources. Individuals may actively seek verification while still having their initial perceptions shaped by the narratives, images and language to which they are repeatedly exposed.

The research also highlights the increasingly significant challenge posed by misinformation and synthetic media. The fact that AI-generated videos and deepfakes were identified as the leading misinformation concern among respondents demonstrates a shift in the nature of the problem. Media influence is no longer limited to decisions regarding which real events receive attention or how they are framed; increasingly, the authenticity of the apparent evidence itself may be uncertain. At the same time, the inconsistency between respondents' confidence in identifying misinformation and their reported verification practices suggests that awareness alone is insufficient to ensure effective media literacy.

Taken together, these findings complicate a simple understanding of audiences as either passive recipients of media narratives or entirely independent evaluators. Contemporary audiences operate as networked participants: they receive, interpret, share, challenge and, at times, produce information themselves. However, this participation takes place within information environments shaped by algorithms, institutional power, political interests and repeated exposure.

This also suggests that the CNN Effect and Manufacturing Consent should not necessarily be understood as competing explanations of media influence. The CNN Effect highlights the potential for media visibility and public response to exert pressure from the bottom up, while Manufacturing Consent emphasises the capacity of governments, elites and powerful institutions to shape the information environment from the top down. The findings of this research suggest that both processes can operate simultaneously within the contemporary media landscape. Digital platforms have expanded opportunities for grassroots communication and mobilisation, but they have not eliminated inequalities in political, institutional or communicative power.

Ultimately, the transition from traditional journalism to social media represents more than a technological shift. It has transformed the conditions under which international conflicts become visible, the speed at which narratives emerge and spread and the extent to which audiences can participate in the circulation and interpretation of information. However, greater participation has not necessarily produced greater understanding. The same technologies that allow individuals to challenge dominant narratives and organise collective action can also amplify misinformation, reinforce existing biases and fragment public understanding of complex conflicts.

The central conclusion of this research is therefore that the media does not simply report international conflict. It increasingly shapes the conditions through which conflict is encountered, interpreted and responded to. As algorithmic curation and generative AI become further embedded within the production and distribution of information, understanding the relationship between media, political power and audience agency will become increasingly important. The continued evolution of these technologies

makes further research into media literacy, algorithmic influence and the changing nature of political communication not only valuable, but necessary.

References

1. A. Robertson, "Connecting in Crisis: 'Old' and 'New' Media and the Arab Spring", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2013, 18 (3), 325-341. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161213484971>
2. A. Dhillon, "Social Media & Revolution: The Importance of the Internet in Tunisia's Uprising", Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection, 2014. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1938
3. G. Wolfsfeld, E. Segev, T. Sheafer, "Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2013, 18 (2), 115-137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161212471716>
4. M. H. Belknap, "The CNN Effect: Strategic Enabler or Operational Risk", *Parameters*, 2002, 32 (3), 100-114. <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2104>
5. D. Luong, H. Vu, "The US Media on the Vietnam War and Beyond", in J. O. Hearn-Branaman and T. Bergman (Eds.), *Journalism and Foreign Policy: How the US and UK Media Cover Official Enemies*, Routledge, 2022, 148-163. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003162964-10>
6. E. S. Herman, N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon Books, 1988. https://files.libcom.org/files/2022-04/manufacturing_consent.pdf
7. H. Chaudhry, M. Riaz, "Ethical Dilemmas in Media Coverage of Israel-Palestine Conflict: Analysis of the New York Times", *Migration Letters*, 2024, 21 (S11), 72-83. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382946091>
8. M. Amer, "BBC and New York Times' Coverage of the May 2021 Israeli Onslaught on Gaza: A Critical Discourse Analysis", *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 2022, 12 (5), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v12n5p1>
9. B. H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, Beacon Press, 2004. https://library.uniteddiversity.coop/Media_and_Free_Culture/The_New_Media_Monopoly-Ben_H_Bagdikian.pdf
10. N. J. Kressel, "Biased Judgments of Media Bias: A Case Study of the Arab-Israeli Dispute", *Political Psychology*, 1987, 8 (2), 211-227. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791301>
11. A. R. Mulmi, "From Streets to Discord: How Nepal's Gen Z Toppled a Government", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 24 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/09/nepal-gen-z-topple-government>
12. Reuters, "Why is Nepal's 'Gen Z' Protesting", *Reuters*, September 8 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/why-is-nepals-gen-z-protesting-2025-09-08/>
13. P. Robinson, "The CNN Effect: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy", *Review of International Studies*, 1999, 25 (2), 301-309. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097596>
14. D. C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, Oxford University Press, 1986. https://cuttersguide.com/pdf/Vietnam/pdf/Daniel_C_Hallin_-_The_Uncensored_War__The_Media_and_the_Vietnam.pdf