



YouTube's Impact on Palestinian Digital Rights during the War on Gaza



April 2024





7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media

**Position Paper on YouTube's Impact on Palestinian Digital Rights
during the War on Gaza**

Contact Us:

info@7amleh.org | www.7amleh.org

Tel: +972 (0)774020670

Find us on Social Media: 7amleh    

Executive summary

As Israel launched the war on Gaza following the 7th of October, viewers of YouTube around the world started to notice a wave of advertisements on the platform from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, urging viewers to stand by Israel's actions against Hamas. Many of the videos in these advertisements featured highly graphic imagery and alarming statements. They were clearly designed to trigger strong emotional reactions from viewers. Forthcoming press coverage documented that a number of these videos violated Google ad policies, and many were subsequently removed.

While researchers have been analysing YouTube's political ads [for over a decade](#), a search on Google Scholar reveals zero published pieces focusing on the use of advertising as propaganda during war on the platform. Our research sets out to interrogate YouTube's policies and practices focusing on the platform's compliance with human rights due diligence and its impact on Palestinian digital rights following the 7th of October.

This research was achieved with an analysis of the dissemination of war propaganda on YouTube during the war on Gaza, in addition to discriminatory actions and demonetisation of accounts that have also taken place on the platform. The methodology involves desk research and qualitative and quantitative analysis of data as published by Google's Ad Transparency database, as well as a short review of content creators who experienced de-platforming or demonetisation in the months after the attack. This research includes:

- A literature review of YouTube's policy and practices; advertising transparency; and human rights violations.
- An interview with a reporter who analysed the Israeli Foreign Ministry's YouTube ads.

The research findings reflect that YouTube policies and practices are not aligned with freedom of expression nor protection from incitement towards hatred and violence. One of the main findings is that content moderation failure led to the platforming of extremely contentious advertisements that contributed to the incitement of hatred and even violence against Palestinians. Ongoing demonetisation practices also suggest that freedom of expression remains unprotected by YouTube's current community guidelines; an increase in violations reported since the 7th of October also builds on previous [Zamleh research](#) that identified YouTube policies as having deleterious effects on freedom of expression and the sharing of information surrounding Palestinian lives, which this research notes is regardless of whether the publisher or creator is themselves Palestinian.

Background

YouTube is an American online video-sharing platform that was founded in 2005 and bought by Google in 2006, who in turn is run by their parent company Alphabet, one of the most profitable companies on the planet. In an online ecosystem growing increasingly populated by social media networks and algorithm-powered video platforms, YouTube has dominated as the go-to source online for long-form video content. It has more than [2.7 billion monthly active users](#) and is one of the world's most popular news sources, challenging the traditional monopoly of mainstream media; news, however, is not the most popular format on YouTube. According to [Google's own data from 2016](#), the top four content categories watched by YouTube users are comedy, music, entertainment/pop culture, and "how to" videos. It is viewed by people of all age groups and has a sister app and website called YouTube Kids which provides material solely for under 13s.

Google's revenue model for YouTube includes YouTube ads, a highly profitable area of the business; Q4 advertising revenue for YouTube reached \$9.6 billion, a figure that had built momentum across 2023. YouTube offers [diverse video advertising formats](#) which advertisers can utilize to engage audience, from skippable in-stream ads that appear on videos, to non-skippable in-stream ads and bumper ads which are designed to make impactful statements in seconds. Those ads are usually created as organic videos uploaded to YouTube and later promoted as advertisement material, or are created through Google ads. While there is extensive analysis of YouTube ads, particularly when it comes to marketing research, there is scant research on their use during war as propaganda or messaging tools.

Anyone can buy up YouTube ad space - including governments and organisations - though they'll face two limitations: cost and guidelines. Cost is not generally transparent and research has to rely on estimates from marketing websites, such as a widely [touted number of \\$0.010 to \\$0.030](#) as the general cost per view for an ad. YouTube ads also have to comply with advertising policies which broadly cover prohibited content, prohibited practices, restricted content and features, and editorial and technical policies.

Ad requirements for YouTube specify that there should be no negative events or imagery, including:

- Violent and criminal content that references graphic violence, weapons, and illegal activity
- Assets that include mentally-distressing, disturbing, repulsive, or gross content; or scary content related to injuries, death and decay

It also prohibits inappropriate content, examples of which include: bullying or intimidation of an individual or group; racial discrimination; hate group paraphernalia; graphic crime scene or accident images; cruelty to animals; murder, self-harm; extortion or blackmail; sale or trade of endangered species; and ads using profane language.

For the purpose of this research paper, we will be interrogating these prohibitions as well as how Google moderates advertisements appearing on its video platform as exhibited during the unfolding war in Gaza. As the findings reveal, it is one thing for a platform to have community guidelines that respect every individual's inalienable right to freedoms and protections, and another thing for that platform to moderate said guidelines effectively.

Methodology

This research is qualitative exploratory research that aims to scrutinise YouTube's policies and discriminatory practices focusing on the platform's compliance with human rights due diligence and its impact on Palestinian digital rights following the war on Gaza. This includes an in-depth analysis of war propaganda dissemination, content moderation bias and discriminatory actions such as the demonetization of content in the context of company policies, as well as international law and human rights. We will analyse data as published by Google's Ad Transparency database. There is also a review of content creators and news reporting that covered the deplatforming of Palestinian or pro-Palestinian voices following October 7th.

Research Problem and Objectives

Evaluating YouTube's advertising standards and policies on content demonetisation in terms of their alignment with international human rights, particularly regarding the dissemination of war propaganda and the impact on Palestinian digital rights.

Advertising War:

YouTube's Ad Policies and Whether They Comply With Human Rights Standards

In a matter of days following October 7th, the Israeli Foreign Ministry's YouTube account began producing videos it promoted as in-stream video ads across the platform. Many of them are available to watch on YouTube as organic posts, as video advertisements may either be selected from existing YouTube videos or videos created in Google Ads. Users in Europe quickly began to post on social media how they were being targeted with unusual content about Hamas, often using graphic language and/or imagery.



According to current Google Ads Transparency Center data, around 200 ads have been promoted by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' YouTube account since the 7th October, promoted in October with the last ad having been shown on 27th October. The Center allows the public to see where a video was targeted geographically. It was the primary tool used in this research to quantify the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' ad strategy.

Video title	Views as of 21/2/24	Number of ads created from this video	Caption	Where the video was targeted
Hamas Declared War Against Israel	539,560	2	<p>Armed Hamas terrorists infiltrated into Israel via a ground invasion and started going door to door slaughtering innocent Israelis.</p> <p>Hundreds of Israeli civilians, including children and women, have been killed or injured, and Israeli hostages have been taken.</p> <p>This is a war and Israel will take every measure necessary to protect our citizens against these barbaric terrorists.</p>	France, Germany, Netherlands and Europe

<p>Babies Can't Read The Text In This Video But Their Parents Can</p>	<p>1.1m</p>	<p>23</p>	<p>Infants and toddlers can't read the text in this video, but their parents can.</p> <p>40 babies were murdered by Hamas terrorists.</p> <p>We know you'd do everything you could to keep your children safe.</p> <p>That's what we plan on doing.</p>	<p>UK, Switzerland, Germany, US, France, Belgium, Netherlands</p>
<p>1,300 Innocent Victims</p>	<p>3.4m</p>	<p>41</p>	<p>1,300 innocent women, children, and the elderly fell victim to evil.</p>	<p>Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, United Kingdom, Netherlands, United States</p>
<p>Israeli Father Reacts To His 8 Year Old Daughter's Fate</p>	<p>11k</p>	<p>12</p>	<p>"When we found out that Emily was dead we went yes and smiled, because that is the best news of the possibilities I knew. "</p>	<p>Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, United Kingdom, Netherlands, United States</p>
<p>1,300 Innocent Victims</p>	<p>3.4k</p>	<p>6</p>	<p>1,300 innocent women, children, and the elderly fell victim to evil.</p>	<p>Belgium, US, UK, Germany, France</p>
<p>Bring Our Kids Home</p>	<p>4.6m</p>	<p>8</p>	<p>There are terrified Israeli children, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, being held hostage by Hamas terrorists in Gaza right now.</p> <p>They are afraid. They are alone. They need us.</p> <p>Bring. Them. Home.</p>	<p>UK, France, US, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium,</p>
<p>Autopsies of the Bodies</p>	<p>6.6k</p>	<p>2</p>	<p>Viewer discretion advised.</p> <p>We interviewed the experts who conducted autopsies on the bodies of Hamas massacre victims.</p> <p>"We never imagined in our worst dreams that we would need to handle many hundreds of samples, of decayed samples, of burned samples, of samples of fingernails with polished nails of young girls."</p>	<p>Germany, France</p>

What if it was Your Loved Ones?	1.5k views	7	N/A	Belgium, France, Germany, UK, Netherlands, Switzerland, US
Over 200 Kidnapped by Hamas	1.6k	7	N/A	

Two ads in particular were widely criticised online. One was based on a children’s bedtime story, although Google emphasised the ad had been appropriately labeled, ensuring [it wasn’t appearing alongside made-for-kids content](#). Appearing to the backdrop of rainbows and unicorns, the ad’s text said: "We know that your child cannot read this. We have an important message to tell you as parents. 40 infants were murdered in Israel by the Hamas terrorists (ISIS). Just as you would do everything for your child. We will do everything to protect ours. Now hug your baby and stand with us." This video had been seen [1.1m times according to figures from the YouTube channel, accessed on the 18th of February](#). The in ad language of, "Stand with us", directly asked viewers to support Israeli military action, something which Google did not perceive as incitement to violence, a human rights violation.

Another video that was successfully published as an ad in October, but now no longer appears in the Ad Transparency Center, included a video titled [Crimes Against Humanity](#) which stated: "They are committing the most horrific crimes against humanity. Slaughtering babies. Crimes against humanity. Brutally murdering and kidnapping the elderly, young children, innocent men and women, mercilessly raping women. The world has never been silent about such crimes against humanity. The world cannot be silent now." Images in this ad included body bags and the apparently unconscious body of a hostage half-naked in the back of a truck. Several other ads at the time repeated the phrase "Hamas = ISIS." In addition to violating the dignity of the Israeli hostage in the truck, the conflation of Hamas and ISIS, alongside the incendiary language, made a misleading characterisation of the conflict in Israel and Palestine and its history to viewers, presumably to again mobilise support for Israeli military action.

It is clear much of this content violates Google’s own guidelines, notably [those on violent and graphic content](#). Politico analysed what they called Israel’s "sweeping social media campaign in key Western countries to drum up support for its military response against the group" with a focus on ads containing "brutal and emotional imagery of the deadly militant violence in Israel". At the time of reporting (October 17th) it tracked 75 ads from the Israeli Foreign Affairs Ministry’s YouTube account which had been directed mainly towards France, Germany, the US and the UK. 50 ads in English were directed to EU countries.

After Politico reached out to Google about the nature of the videos, Google removed around 30 of the ads; Politico noted this means there is no public record of such ads running for several days on the platform, as these videos got deleted from the Ads Transparency Center. This prevents any member of the public, as well as human rights advocates, from investigating such videos or holding the platform to account, violating our right to information and transparency.

Google told Politico it didn't allow violent language in their ads, nor gruesome, disgusting or graphic images or accounts of physical trauma. Politico observed that some of the videos were still available on the YouTube channel following their reporting, but with warnings. It is clear that Google failed on two counts here; firstly, to effectively moderate advertisements that broke their guidelines before they were published, and secondly, they failed to effectively moderate organic videos that should have appeared with graphic content warnings prior to Politico's scrutiny.

An anonymous spokesperson from Israel's Mission to the EU told Politico: "We would never post such graphic things before. This is something that is not part of our culture. We have a lot of respect [for] the deceased," adding that "war is not only on the ground."

Then, a few days later, independent British journalist Sophia Smith Galer **published additional findings** into how different countries had been targeted, using Semrush, an analytics platform for discovering marketing insights, to investigate how much the Israeli government may have spent on YouTube ads. Semrush has previously been **used in investigations** by think tanks such as the Center for Countering Digital Hate to research ad campaigns on YouTube, as it shows additional information beyond what is available in Google's Ads Transparency Center. As Semrush subscription costs at least \$130 a month, making it an expensive tool that is not necessarily accessible to internet researchers; Semrush is also not public about how it calculates its estimates, beyond stating it uses its "**own machine-learning algorithms** and trusted data providers". Ahrefs, a competitor to Semrush, has previously revealed that its estimate of Search Volume was in fact only accurate for **60% of keywords it studied**, suggesting that these tools can give inaccurate results.

Semrush estimated that the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs spent \$7.1 million on YouTube ads, with almost all of that investment heavily targeting France, Germany and the United Kingdom. This specific targeting towards those three countries was completely unclear from the Google Ads Transparency Center, which fails to show to which degree a country is targeted. It also fails to show other targeting data, which would have included a viewer's demographic group, interests, hobbies and online behaviour. Keeping this information private violates the right to information access which members of the public should enjoy.

During her investigation, Smith Galer also observed a number of videos appeared and disappeared in the Ads Transparency Center, suggesting that videos were being removed as ads either by the account holder or by YouTube, in line with the disappearance of videos cited in the Politico report.

The findings demonstrate that harmful video content was successfully promoted as advertising material, bypassing Google's advertising content moderation system, and was able to remain there for hours, if not days, before being removed. Google has previously [said the following about their content moderation when it comes to ads](#): "Our enforcement technologies use Google AI, modeled on human reviewers' decisions, to help protect our users and keep our ad platforms safe. More complex, nuanced or severe cases are often reviewed and evaluated by our specially-trained experts. We take action on content that violates our policies." Our findings suggest that more human moderators need to be assigned, especially to accounts deemed repeat offenders.

It is impossible to confirm the Semrush spend number independently, though the geographic targeting appears consistent with the anecdotal social media reaction of users in the allegedly most-targeted countries; the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' head of digital, David Saranga, [spoke to Reuters](#) at the end of October following scrutiny over graphic ads appearing on games played by children. He revealed that since October 7th, they had spent \$1.5 million on internet advertisements and defended the content, saying "we want the world to understand what happened here in Israel. It's a massacre." This number may, or may not, include their YouTube spend; other spending areas included websites and online video games.

Smith Galer said: "Internet researchers should not have to rely on external, expensive and likely inaccurate analytics tools to attempt to hold one of the biggest technology companies in the world to account. Google demonstrated here that it was incapable of stopping problematic ads from being monetised, and yet bars anyone from journalists to human rights experts from investigating further. Whatever the true figure is when it comes to what Israel spent, Google undoubtedly made a profit from many ads even though they allegedly broke their guidelines, and also frustrated research attempts to track ads they had monetised by removing deleted ads from their library."

When asked whether she believed the ads violated human rights, Smith Galer said: "The videos that were promoted by this YouTube account did not show the realities of war in an impartial manner, as we entrust news media to do; it used this content provocatively and asked European audiences to stand by Israeli actions. With hindsight, at the time I am saying this, this essentially meant asking them to stand by the death of tens of thousands of civilians in the war against Hamas."

Google states in its advertising policies that it does not allow ads that promote hatred, intolerance, discrimination or violence. The graphic content, aligned with the emotive wording and bidding to stand by Israel's actions, could be interpreted as incitement to violence. Across international human rights law and domestic legal systems, provisions allowing for freedom of expression carry restrictions in cases of incitement to violence or hatred. The 30 ads removed in the Politico investigation possibly violated these and other human rights, but Google's lack of transparency on what ads were removed and their exact reasons for such removal prevents any accountability, further damaging their compliance with international human rights standards.

War Talk:

Organic YouTube platforming (and deplatforming) of war criticism

The War on Gaza has been defined by vertical video; similar to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, platforms that prioritise smartphone-friendly vertical video, such as TikTok and Instagram, have become central to the production and distribution of information about the war. Creators and journalists in Gaza who have been commended on their ability to keep reporting throughout bombardments, such as Plestia Alaqad and Bisan Owda, accumulated their followings primarily on Instagram, where audiences then shared their content further.

That being said, creators - especially international observers - have openly discussed both the war and consequential penalisation from YouTube for doing so. AboFlah, a YouTuber in Kuwait with nearly 37 million subscribers, [said that he had his video](#) titled "What happened in Palestine?" deleted and that he was also given a warning strike by the platform.

When a YouTube channel violates a community guideline, the user receives an email informing them their account has received a warning which should explain what content was removed, which policies it violated (for example harassment or violence), how it affects the channel, and what the user can do next. Ensuing violations lead to a first, second, and third strike unless the platform decides the violation was so egregious it warrants action such as a complete termination of the account. Users are able to appeal all of these actions, and the strikes only have sway if violations are all committed within a 90 day period; a third strike means permanent account removal.

Other creators, like Richard Medhurst, a creator based in the UK, [described his videos](#) being age-restricted and removed along with guideline strikes and demonetisation over his videos - actions which he speculates were all connected to his content on the war in Gaza. Masteroogway, another creator with 6.24 million subscribers who is based in the United States, also shared a video saying [he had been demonetised by YouTube](#) following publishing a video about a friend of his who was stuck in Gaza and whose mother had been killed by an airstrike.

A trend amongst these videos is that creators regularly highlight they are not sure which video, or what specific language or imagery used in the video, was responsible for the community guideline violation. If users are not being informed of the reasons behind violations, as the creators suggest in these videos, that is not in line with information on the YouTube website. The platform should consider better outlining violation reasons before withholding individuals' right to freedom of expression.

Another trend that has emerged on YouTube content surrounding the war has been the implementation of warnings on news video content, as seen in one [example from](#)

Uncivilized Media. A video posted by the channel about how the Algerian revolution can shed light on the war in Gaza appears to avoid showing blood or gore, but carries a graphic or violent imagery content warning advising viewer discretion. This kind of restriction is notably absent from YouTube's own platform policy guidance on violent or graphic content, making it impossible to understand how a video may acquire such a label and how to avoid doing so. Elsewhere, YouTube describes these viewer discretion notices as 'restrictions', suggesting that these warnings do have an impact on views and engagement. This directly contrasts with the Israeli Foreign Ministry's success in promoting content that was actually graphic, suggesting that moderation is not treating different groups equally and is acting discriminatorily.

When videos are removed or restricted, this can affect the creator's account in terms of engagement and therefore monetisation; advertising revenue suffers as a result, damaging the creator's ability to make content sustainably long term.

It is worth noting that Palestinians themselves cannot engage in ad revenue earning; **YouTube has locked out users from Palestine** from its revenue-sharing program. YouTube's Partner Program, which allows users to make money on YouTube, **is available in 137 countries**, including users from neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and even Israel. This means that only users residing outside of the occupied Palestinian territory may monetise content that is about Palestine, inevitably restricting Palestinians' own ability to tell their own stories and thus impeding on their freedom of expression.

YouTube's own data, released in March 2024, also suggests that it removed more content than usual during the period of the war; between October 2023 and December 2023, **YouTube removed over 20 million accounts**. This is double the amount of accounts removed when compared to the previous quarter, and by far the highest account removal number in the last few years. The vast majority of removals account for 'spam, misleading and scams'; hateful abuse sits at just 0.5% of total removals, and misinformation at 0.9%. While YouTube also removed the most videos it ever has in a given quarter - 9 million - this number is consistent with the platform's trend rate in video removal. 355,975 of these videos were appealed, and 29,360 were reinstated.

Whilst the above data is interesting, it is also vague; it is impossible to discern which regions these accounts were based in, there is no searchable anonymised database in which researchers can observe more closely what specific content was removed and why, and the grouping of violations into broad names like 'misinformation' means particular threats or human rights concerns cannot be identified. Given the extremely high number of video removals, this is alarming from a human rights perspective, as it is impossible to confirm whether YouTube was overly censorious or not.

Conclusion

Several highly subscribed creators have spoken of being demonetised or experiencing YouTube strikes following their criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza. Without a clearer understanding of what their violations were, YouTube risks inhibiting users' freedom of expression; not only do these platform actions limit the reach of existing content, but they also deter users from posting in the future. Applying content restrictions around graphic or violent content without a clear online resource detailing why this happens and how to avoid it also fails to grant users their fundamental human right to freedom of expression.

This is in sharp contrast to the moderation witnessed with the Israeli Foreign Ministry's account, in which problematic, graphic content was able to be published as advertisement material, and amplified to audiences around the globe - and in which the ad transparency center of one of the biggest companies in the world failed to live up to its name, obscuring deleted videos and preventing information access to members of the public, to researchers, and to anyone who may wish to hold YouTube to account.

Recommendations for YouTube:

- Uphold their terms of service in a non-discriminatory manner, and ensure that their activities do not contribute to incitement to violence against Palestinians, nor inhibit their freedom of expression.
- Maintain deleted ads on the Google Ads Transparency Center, including those that were removed for violating Community Guidelines, perhaps appearing with user warnings.
- Add information and visibility on which countries were targeted by advertising and to what degree they were targeted, which is a statistic that is currently missing from the Center but available on pay-to-use marketing analytics platforms.
- Publish transparency reports of community guidelines violations and removals in greater detail, including editorial information on spikes in removals to highlight instances of hyper-surveillance during war and conflict.
- Give additional information in the Community Guidelines enforcement database, namely geographical data, specific information regarding violative content, and the inclusion of more sub-groups within the broader themes like 'hateful abuse' and 'misinformation'.
- Bring in greater transparency around why content is demonetised.
- Make the appeal process more user-friendly, and not onerous explorations of in-platform web pages.
- Allow Palestinians to monetize their content on YouTube.

Contact 7amleh:
info@7amleh.org | www.7amleh.org

Find us on social media : **7amleh**

