ISLAMOPHOBIA REGISTER AUSTRALIA

WRITTEN BY
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A WAR OF WORDS: PRELIMINARY MEDIA ANALYSIS OF THE 2023 ISRAEL-GAZA WAR

DECEMBER 2023

We acknowledge First Nations peoples as the traditional and continuing custodians of the lands on which this report was produced and publicised. We pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present.

INTRODUCTION

In 1969, critic Michael J. Arlen dubbed the Vietnam war the "Living Room War", to highlight the role television news played in shaping Americans' view of the conflict.[1]

TODAY, WE ARGUE THAT THE CURRENT ISRAEL–GAZA WAR IS THE "INSTAGRAM WAR".

The coverage on social media by news outlets of the war is similarly influencing the Australian public's perception of the war, often using the same approach Arlen bemoaned in news coverage of the Vietnam war more than 50 years ago: "excessively simple, emotional, and military-orientated".

Journalism does not, as Todd Gitlin[2] pointed out, merely hold a mirror up to reality, no matter how much it may like to think it does. It *composes versions of reality.* This is not necessarily nefarious and may even be unconscious, but with every decision of which story to include and exclude, which image to show or not show, which expert to spotlight and which to obscure, even which grammatical choice is made, the public's impressions are sculpted. The way information is presented in the media (the 'frame') significantly influences how audiences interpret and respond to the information.[3] And while the Vietnam War was consumed primarily through televisions in the family living room each evening, the constant presence of smart phones diffuses our experience to one of near permanent

absorption; the latest global research from Reuters found that social media is the main way people of all ages come across news online.[4] We are being guided in certain readings of the Israel-Gaza war continuously, and through its ubiquity, that guidance cannot help but be significant.

We should not underestimate the role news media has in influencing Australian public perception of critical events such as the Israel-Gaza war, and the way these feelings can translate into destabilising and divisive events in Australian communities. It is for this reason the Islamophobia Register Australia ('Register') commissioned this research. Anti-Palestinian racism is a specific type of Islamophobia, and there is a documented alignment of anti-Palestinian sentiment and Islamophobia both pre-dating the current war[5] and during the current war,[6] making anti-Palestinian sentiment a concern for the Register.

Moreso, in the period following October 7, the Register recorded a

1300%
INCREASE IN INSTANCES OF ISLAMOPHOBIA.

The way Australians understand the war and the communities connected to it is shaped in part by the media they consume, and the effect does not stop there. Providing fair, humanising online war coverage of the people involved can impact the way people view each other on the street. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that exposure to media can induce Islamophobia.[7] The Register is concerned with things that are Islamophobic, and things that may cause Islamophobia.

That certain media outlets have demonstrated bias against Palestinians[8] and Muslims[9] is not new, nor unique to Australia; we situate this report within this established body. Covering the Instagram accounts of six of Australia's most followed news outlets, this report provides a preliminary snapshot of the framing of the Israel-Gaza war by arguably some of the most influential news media producers in the country: *ABCNews, The Daily Aus, The Australian, News.com. au, 9News,* and *The Daily Telegraph.* Given the documented importance of consuming news specifically through social media as discussed above (particularly news on the Israel-Gaza war) we chose to focus our analysis on the popular Instagram accounts of these outlets.

Sadly, we fear this war will continue for some time, and as such this is not, and should not be taken as, a definitive analysis of Australian media bias against Palestinians. It focuses only on the Instagram posts of six Australian news outlets between Oct 7 – Nov 7, 2023, and in addition, restricts itself to focus only on the descriptive language choices in the posts, the grammar used in the posts (specifically the voice), and the humanising stories included (defined below). It does not consider other topics such as use of expertise, "bothsides-ism", embedded, correspondent, and local journalists, accepted sources, the experiences of or posts about Australian Palestinians, Israelis, Muslims, Jews or Arabs and their engagement with the war (including local protests), contexts provided, use of music or image selection, or the myriad other areas that could be assessed. These points are all important topics, but it is beyond the scope of this research.
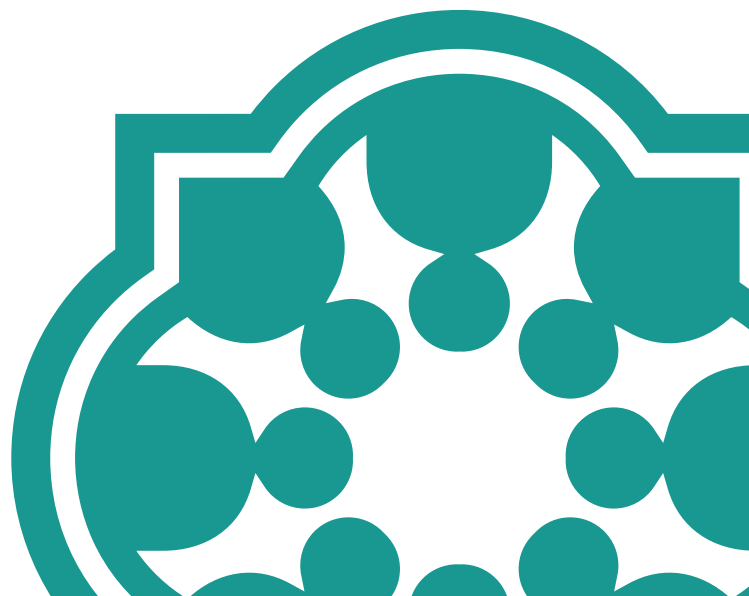
INSTEAD, THIS IS A FOCUSED, INTRODUCTORY ANALYSIS WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL AIM OF LOOKING FOR DISPARITIES IN REPORTING ON THE ISRAEL-GAZA WAR IN SIX OUTLETS,

concentrating on language because it is part of the "covert operations of war", and humanising stories because of the documented impact they have on the way audiences interpret conflict.

As this research is limited to the Instagram posts of the six outlets, this report is also not a definitive account of the outlets' reporting on the Israel-Gaza war, and does not comment on fairness or equality found in any of their other stories on the Israel-Gaza war on their other platforms. The Register intends to complete a more comprehensive analysis of the media coverage of the Israel-Gaza war in 2024. This report is, however, an initial interpretive slice that highlights some common areas of imbalance or inequality in the current reporting, and advises media outlets of blind spots in their approach as they continue to cover the war. We hope the timely release of this report will allow for media outlets to self-correct as their coverage continues.

We highlight that investigating for and asking for "balance" in a war that is greatly imbalanced should cause us all to pause. The act of looking for equality in reporting on a greatly unequal war is itself troubling and noteworthy.

However, the fact that we found instances of pronounced imbalance and inequality against Palestinians in language and stories posted indicates the gravity of the situation, just how unbalanced reporting can be, and the starting place from which we begin. The conclusions drawn in this report are our opinion, based on the information we have analysed.

A note about terminology: what to call the latest escalation in Palestine-Israel is a fraught matter, with no consensus as to the most accurate or fair label. We have followed the practice of the BBC, Reuters, Al Jazeera and others and use "Israel-Gaza war" in this report, but acknowledge the concerns and criticisms of this label. Our use of the term here does not imply our endorsement, and has been chosen for the sake of consistency and simplicity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE ISRAEL-GAZA WAR, LIKE THE COVERAGE OF ANY WAR, IS DELICATE.

The need for delicacy and sensitivity cannot, however, impede minimum standards of balanced or fair reporting.

This report was commissioned after reports to the Islamophobia Register Australia ('Register') of imbalanced, unfair, and dehumanising coverage of Palestinians in the Australian media. Australians rightly brought their concerns to the Register as anti-Palestinian racism is a specific and documented form of Islamophobia. We wanted to assess whether upon careful analysis there was, indeed, unbalanced, unequal, or dehumanising coverage of Palestinians in the Australian media, or if this was just erroneous perception. If there were instances of imbalance, inequality, or dehumanisation, we wanted to then assess where this was happening.

Was it across the board, or restricted to certain outlets? Did certain outlets provide balance or equality in some areas, but not others? To complete this assessment in a timely fashion, we focused on Instagram posts of six popular outlets *(The ABCNews, The Australian, the Daily Telegraph, 9News, News.com.au,* and *The Daily Aus)* during the period of 7 October to 7 November, focussing on three categories of investigation. In recognition of the role social media now plays in Australians' news consumption, we restricted ourselves to Instagram posts, and the fact that this report *only* investigates these three themes on the Instagram accounts of these six outlets must be kept in mind.

KEY FINDINGS

HUMANISING STORIES:

We developed a "humanising test" that required posts to meet at least two of the three below criteria to classify as "humanising" of Israelis or Palestinians:

- provide at least a first name for the person;
- show their face;
- use at least some of their own words (translations or captions were acceptable)

Only one of the six accounts passed the test for Palestinians. Five of the six accounts passed the test for Israelis.

- The *ABCNews* had seven posts about Israelis that passed the test and seven posts about Palestinians that passed the test. The ABC was the only outlet to provide **any** posts that passed the "humanising test" for Palestinians.
- *The Australian* had ten posts about Israelis that passed the test, and no posts that passed the test for Palestinians.
- *9News* had 4 posts about Israelis that passed the test, and no posts that passed the test about Palestinians.
- *The Daily Telegraph* had two posts that passed the test about Israelis, and no posts that passed the test about Palestinians.
- *News.com.au* had one post that passed the test about Israelis, and no posts that passed the test about Palestinians.
- *The Daily Aus* had no posts about either Israelis or Palestinians that met the criteria.

USE OF DESCRIPTIVE WORDS:

The Daily Telegraph, The Australian, and *News. com.au* were demonstrably unbalanced in their use of descriptive terms when reporting on Israel and Palestine.

- *The Daily Telegraph* used descriptive terms such as "gruesome", "murdered", "horrific", "shock", "massacre", "atrocities", "harrowing", "graphic", "terrified", and "brutal" to describe the Oct 7 Hamas attacks on Israelis. It used no similarly emotive descriptive words to describe Israeli attacks on Palestinians.
- *The Australian* used 30 evocative terms to describe the Israeli experience compared to nine for the Palestinians.
- *News.com.au* used two descriptive terms for the Israeli experience ("despair" and "begged") and none for the Palestinian.
- *9News* and *ABCNews* were relatively equal.
- *The Daily Aus* used almost no descriptive terms for either the Israeli or Palestinian experience.

PASSIVE, ACTIVE, AND MIDDLE VOICE:

Five (*ABCnews, 9News, The Australian, The Daily Telegraph,* and *News.com.au*) of the six accounts showed inequality and a lack of balance in their use of the active, middle, and passive voice.

The active voice was more likely to be used when discussing attacks on Israel by all five accounts. The passive voice was used more often to describe what was happening in Gaza than in Israel. The middle voice (a grammatical choice that exists outside the active or passive voice, and which denies even the possibility of an actor causing the event, but instead frames it as a natural, spontaneous occurrence) was never used for any posts about attacks on Israel, and was used by all five accounts when reporting on attacks on Gaza.

- In the only post by *The Daily Telegraph* that spotlights the direct experience of Palestinians in Gaza, *The Daily Telegraph* used the middle voice to describe "bombs falling" on Palestinians. In the same post, *The Daily Telegraph* identifies Hamas as the agent of aggression against Israelis. *News.com.au* also employed the middle voice in their single post on the Palestinian experience of the war. *9News* and *The Australian* employed the middle voice in a story about Gaza.
- *The Australian* used the passive voice in a post to describe attacks on Gaza, while in the same post named Hamas as the attackers of Israel.
- *9News* also used the passive voice to describe an attack on Gaza while using the active voice to describe attacks on Israel in the same post.
- *ABCNews* used the active voice or explicitly ascribed the actor (Hamas, rockets coming from Gaza) to describe attacks on Israel 11 times. *ABCNews* used the active voice or explicitly

ascribed the actor (Israel, Israeli forces) six times to describe attacks on Gaza. It used the unattributed passive voice four times to describe attacks on Gaza, and once to describe attacks on Israel. Significantly, it used the middle voice (which not only does not ascribe an actor, but the verb chosen removes the possibility of an actor) twice in posts on Gaza, and in no posts on Israel.
- *The Daily Aus* was relatively equal and mostly consistent in their use of the active voice when describing attacks by both Israel and Hamas across their 21 posts on the war.

These findings demonstrate a clear lack of equality or balance in the reporting on the Israel-Gaza war across all assessed criteria by some accounts, other accounts demonstrated greater fairness or equality, and some accounts were balanced in some areas of analysis but less so in others to varying degrees. *The Australian, The Daily Telegraph,* and *News.com.au* displayed unequal reporting and a lack of humanising reporting of Palestinians in comparison to Israelis in all three of the assessed criteria. **Significantly, five of the six outlets studied (*The Australian, ABC News, 9 News, The Daily Telegraph* and *News. com.au*) demonstrated an imbalance against Palestinians in their reporting, in at least one of the three categories that were studied.** As we discuss in the below report, this imbalance against Palestinians matters. Such lack of equality dehumanises Palestinians, minimises their experience of the war, obscures Israeli acts of aggression, and threatens social cohesion in Australia.

We urge all media outlets to redress any imbalance they may have, even inadvertently, on the Israel-Gaza war.

LUZAN JABEH
Eight-Year-old Palestinian Child

Fig 1. Atta Jabr, *Luzan Jabeh*, March 05, 2020, photograph, International Committee Of The Red Cross, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/palestinian-women-across-generations-once-dream-now-reality.

METHODOLOGY

We have limited our sample to six news outlets given the condensed time frame we have been operating under and the desire to publish this report while the issue is still timely. This report is an introductory contribution to a broader media analysis, as the Register intends to complete a more comprehensive analysis of the media coverage of the Israel-Gaza war in the near future. Inevitably, this meant some Australian media outlets had to be excluded in this preliminary analysis.

This report therefore focuses on the Instagram accounts of six major Australian news outlets: The *ABCNews, The Australian, The Daily Telegraph, 9News, News.com.au,* and *The Daily Aus.* We did our best to select outlets that spanned across commercial and public broadcaster, legacy media and new media, digital-only and print-based, and national and state-

based media. Given the limited scope of this report, it does not claim to be a definitive analysis, but rather an **introductory analysis with the fundamental aim of looking for disparities in reporting on the Israel-Gaza war across a sample of Australian news outlets.**

The other guiding criterion was the outlet could not be restricted to an individual radio or television program; they needed to incorporate an outlet's suite of news offerings (where applicable). The outlet also needed to have a significant number of followers (selected accounts needed to have more than 100K followers on the outlet's official verified Instagram account). Handles and followers were: @abcnews_au 899K; @thedailyaus 508K; @the.australian 195K; @dailytelegraph 146K; @newscomauhq 179K; @9News 509K.

9NEWS
ABCNEWS
NEWS.COM.AU
THE AUSTRALIAN
THE DAILY TELEGRAPH
THE DAILY AUS

Instagram posts were first categorised into three main categories:

1. posts on Palestine
2. posts on Israel
3. mixed posts

Posts on Palestine included any post with a focus on reporting on Gaza, Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, Australian Palestinians and Muslim communities. Reporting on pro-Palestine marches in Australia were included in that category. Posts on Israel included any posts with a focus on reporting on Israel, Israelis living in Israel, Australian Israelis and Jewish communities, and pro-Israel marches in Australia. Mixed posts included any posts that report on the news without expressive particular focus on either Palestinians or Israelis, posts that had multiple foci in a single post, or posts that discussed external but tangential matters (ie, analyses on external geopolitical players).

After this initial categorisation, posts in each account were further manually broken down into categories of stories on Palestinians and the Palestinian experience in Palestine only (ie, posts on Palestinian communities in Australia were placed in a separate category), stories of Israelis and the Israeli experience in Israel only (posts on Israeli communities in Australia were placed in a separate category), and so on. Posts were then manually and systematically assessed for content.

Manual assessment of each account and post was selected over digital scraping, automated media scanning,

or AI assisted technologies, to ensure we accounted for subtleties of language and presentation. Using a thematic analysis, we were interested in the use of grammar in the posts (specifically, the passive, middle, and active voice), the use of descriptive language (adjectives, attributive nouns, adverbs, metaphors, etc) in posts, and what we called "humanising" stories. As this is an investigation into the reporting styles and choices of the named outlets, we did not analyse the wording of any direct quotes of people interviewed or featured (for example, we did not assess the language of any politicians who were quoted), but we did analyse the words used by reporters featured in videos posted and the wording of all captions (except when directly quoting someone, such as a spokesperson). The analysis was solely restricted to what the six accounts posted to Instagram; we did not assess any stories they linked back to on their primary platforms. We did not count posts about Israeli government spokespeople or Hamas spokespeople in the "humanising test".

Instagram posts were from 7th October – 7th November inclusive. References to specific Instagram posts will be marked by the date they were posted in parenthesis, eg: (Oct 13).

LINGUISTIC AND SEMANTIC DISPARITIES

Use of descriptive words (adjectives, attributive nouns, adverbs, metaphors, etc):

The descriptive words used in reporting on conflict and war matter. Even subtle linguistic changes to word choice have been found to impact how the audience perceives "us" and "them" in war reporting, and even how audiences remember the violence in these stories.[10]

SUCH DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTIC CHOICES ARE THE BRICKS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF AUDIENCE PERCEPTION,

building a scaffold for the ways Israelis and Palestinians are to be understood, are "a semiotic struggle to control the very definition of reality".[11]

Discrepancies between which parties are ascribed which adjectives in war reporting also has precedent in Australian media; reporting on the Iraq war showed stark difference to whom the word "violent" was attached.[12]

The differing use of adjectives in *The Daily Telegraph's* Instagram posts (caption and video narration) warrants attention. Adjectives and descriptive nouns to describe the October 7 attacks by Hamas against Israelis across multiple Instagram posts are strong and evocative: "gruesome", "murdered", "horrific", "shock", "massacre", "atrocities", "harrowing", "graphic", "terrified", "brutal", "horror", and "deadly".

However, **none of the posts reporting on Israel's bombing and ground force offensive on Gaza use similarly affecting adjectives.** Indeed, terms used to describe the Israeli attacks on Gaza over the report's period were noticeably clinical. The posts on Israel's attacks on Gaza, which by the end of the report's period had killed an estimated **10,000 Palestinians,** included **no** adjectives, and instead only the sterile nouns: "counteroffensive" and "military activities". There was one post (Oct 9) that mentioned both Israel and Palestine had "suffered death and destruction", but went on in that post to speak only about Israelis as victims ("Thousands of rockets were launched from Gaza, as fighters were sent in to kill and abduct Israelis with hundreds of civilian men, women and children caught in the crossfires"). Another post states "Gaza is being reduced to rubble", however

that statement is immediately followed by "as both sides launch thousands of missiles". Not only does this not state who has reduced Gaza to rubble, but implies that Gaza being reduced to rubble is the consequence of attacks from "both sides".

Given the Israeli Air Force **states it has dropped 6,000 bombs on Gaza,** it is significant that the word "bomb" was used only once in the *Daily Telegraph's* posts in the context of what Gazans were experiencing, and even then it was used in the passive voice, with no attribution to Israel being the one dropping the bombs (Oct 13). This is even more notable when we consider that *The Daily Telegraph's* posts used the word "rocket" 6 times during the study period, in relation to rockets being fired *at* Israel.

This is a marked disparity in reporting and storytelling that falls short of reasonable balance or equality, and creates the perception that the primary and disproportionate victims in this war are Israelis.

This use of language – stirring and oft-used adjectives for attacks on Israelis with no corresponding adjectives used for attacks on Palestinians who have also died painful and frightening deaths, and a lack of detail of what Palestinians were facing in these attacks and by whom – bolsters a dehumanising and minimising narrative towards Palestinians. The trauma and suffering of Israelis is vividly painted, but in a conspicuous absence of the suffering and trauma of Palestinians. The repeated inclusion of such language towards Israelis and the repeated absence of similar

language for Palestinians renders invisible Palestinians and their experience to *The Daily Telegraph's* significant audience.
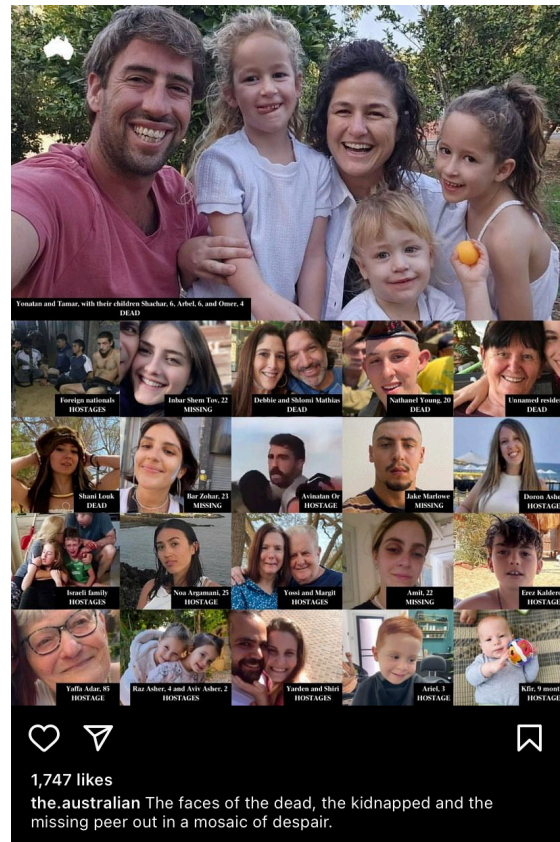

Fig 2. The Australian, *The faces of the dead...*, October 11, 2023, photograph, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/CyNcA5YMxm9/.

Of the 30 posts made by *The Australian* between Oct 7 – Nov 7 on the Israel-Gaza war, the following terms were used to describe what Israelis experienced: "worst attack", "stormed", "rockets showering", "greater threat", "suffers", "surprise", "intense", "more than its fair share", "bloody", "launched without guidance or care", "massacred", "looted", "abandoned", "demolished", "ransacking", "pleading", "terrifying", "butchered", "subdued", "mosaic of despair", "frantic", "pinned down", "hiding", "rampaged", "huddled", "unspeakable atrocities", "widespread panic", "great danger", "worst fears", and "harrowing" (some of these terms were used more than once during the period).

In contrast, "getting worse by the day", "really quite dire", "displaced", "scores", "raged", "pounded", "flattened", "crowded", and "widespread damage" were the terms used to describe the experience of Palestinians in Gaza.

THAT IS 30 EVOCATIVE TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE THE ISRAELI EXPERIENCE COMPARED TO NINE FOR THE PALESTINIANS.

News.com.au had just four Instagram posts relating to the Israel-Gaza war over the month-long study period. Despite there being very few posts on *News.com.au* about the war, linguistic disparities between posts on Israel and Gaza were still present. Of the four posts, two were about the experience inside Israel and Gaza. The one post (Oct 11) about the experience in Israel and of Israelis used the descriptive, emotional terms "despair"

and "begged". **The one post about the experience in Gaza and of Palestinians (Oct 19) contained no similarly evocative terminology.**

In contrast to *The Daily Telegraph* and *News.com.au, 9News* and *ABCNews* presented a more equal use of language in their Instagram posts that presented the direct experience in Israel and Gaza. *9News* used "unprecedented", "shocking",

"attack", "terrifying", "hammered", "traumatised" and "enormous" when discussing the experience in Israel and of Israelis, and "devastation", "innocent", "destruction", "very hard", "plunged", "relentless", and "catastrophic" when posting on the experience in Gaza and of Palestinians.

ABCNews used the following 24 descriptive terms to describe the experiences of those in Israel: "hardest environment", "long and difficult", "difficult mission", "highly complex", "rampaged", "burst over", ''harrowing", "beaten", "distressing", ''spider's web'', ''deadliest'' "slaughtering", "frightening", "fled", "huge rocket attack", "huge volley of rockets", "flock", "fired at", "pretty controversial", "assault", "biggest attack in years", "barrage of rockets", "duck for cover" and "murdered". ABCNews used "impossible decision", ''grim'', ''crammed'', "crisis", "gravely injured", "agony", "dire need", "grieving", "bodies pulled from buildings", "devastating situation", "dead bodies pile up", "assault", "bombardments", "endure", "endless", "hardship", "suffering", "heavy bombing", "deadliest 24 hour period", "increasingly devastating bombardments", "under a barrage", "an unprecedented human catastrophe", "engulfed in flames", and "explosion" (24 descriptive terms) to describe the experience in Palestine (some of these terms were used more than once during the period).

The Daily Aus presented relatively few descriptive or emotive terms for either the Israeli or Palestinian experience in their 21 posts on the Israel-Gaza war. The most common adjective used was "unprecedented" which was regularly used

to describe Hamas' Oct 7 attacks on Israel; "intensifying" was used once to describe Israel's attacks on Gaza.

The seemingly minor linguistic choices covered above impact more than just the immediate reaction of the reader.

Modest linguistic changes in news stories about war can influence the public's support for international policies,[13]

SO THESE CHOICES MATTER.

Beyond governmental strategy, these linguistic discrepancies in the media mould community attitudes about groups of people – about their experiences of war, their suffering, and their humanity. This linguistic analysis did not demand an oppressive accounting of terms, insisting that if the word "brutal", for example, was used for the experience of one group, it must also be used for the other. Our request for equality is not forcing uniformity, particularly when experiences can be demonstrably different. What we do take issue with is the flagrant difference in scale in the use of any adjectives or descriptive terms between the accounts of Israelis and Palestinians by *The Daily Telegraph, The Australian,* and to a lesser extent, *News.com.au,* particularly when considering the considerable difference in casualties. This inconsistency borders on staggering, minimising and concealing the Palestinian reality.

USE OF PASSIVE, ACTIVE, AND MIDDLE VOICE:

Focusing on grammar in this analysis may seem minor or even irrelevant, but previous research has shown the role the active and passive voice can play in reporting on crime,[14] and the role grammar has played in media coverage of previous Israel-Gaza wars.[15] In our analysis of the Israel-Gaza war, "the role grammar plays in the 'covert operations' of war"[16] – specifically the grammatical voice - is instrumental.

In one telling post by *The Daily Telegraph* (Oct 13), the deployment of the passive and active voice stands out. It occurs in the sole story *The Daily Telegraph* posted about the experience of a Palestinian during the study period, which was about an Australian-Palestinian family who was trapped in Gaza after visiting for a holiday. The post references the "bombs falling less than 100m away from where they [the family] are sheltering", and later in the same post also references "#Hamas's brutal attack on an Israeli #music #festival".

Fig 3. The Daily Telegraph, *An Australian Family...*, October 13, 2023, photograph, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/CyUZLkHMtl_/.

Note the word "fall" used when discussing the "bombs falling" on the family. This is particularly significant, as it is what is called "the middle voice", which exists beyond the active and passive voice. Using the word "fell" with "bomb" as opposed, for example, to "dropped" (ie, "bombs were *dropped* less than 100m away), signifies that there was no external agent involved in the bombing at all. If the word "dropped" had been used, even if employing the passive voice without naming the Israeli army (which is still a troubling journalist choice, as the actor is anonymous), there remains an understanding that *somebody* dropped the bombs, even if unnamed.

But **this use of the middle voice by saying the bombs "fell" implies that the bombs fell spontaneously from the sky without human intervention, as if it were a natural phenomenon like snow.** There is no attribution as to where the bombs came from, nor who is responsible for their presence. As Lukin *et al* observe, **"the choice of middle voice is a powerful way of effacing agency, because it denies even the possibility of agency",** and thus even the suggestion of Israel as the agent of the bombs is erased in the mind of the audience.

This is all the more blunt when compared to the grammar and phrasing employed in the same post about "#Hamas's brutal attack on an Israeli #music #festival". Not only is the active voice used, clearly demarcating both agent (Hamas) and victim (Israelis at the music festival), but also the expressive use of the adjective "brutal" is applied, plainly framing the nature of the attacks for the audience. No equivalent adjective was used to frame the bombs "falling" on Gazans.

Consequently, in the *only* post by *The Daily Telegraph* that spotlights the direct experience of Palestinians in Gaza, while the attacks against Israelis are clearly framed for the audience by the use of the active voice and adjectives, so too are the attacks on Palestinians framed – though more surreptitiously – by use of the effacing middle voice, and a distinct lack of description.

A post on *The Australian's* Instagram account (Oct 28) provides a short update on the situation in Palestine-Israel from *The Australian's* podcast *The Front*, by way of a narrated brief video. As with *The Daily Telegraph* discussed above, this post employed notable use of the active and passive voice in its narration. The passive voice was used when discussing attacks on Gaza, such as

"ORANGE FLASHES HAVE LIT UP THE NIGHT SKY OVER GAZA CITY AS AIR STRIKES POUNDED THE REGION".

Despite the grammatical choice made, "orange flashes" and "air strikes" were not events without source.

The use of the passive voice when mentioning "air strikes" that "pounded the region" and the middle voice for the "orange flashes the lit up the night sky" removes and obscures Israel as the source of the attacks, and this is particularly notable when contrasted to the voice used in the same story when discussing attacks on Israelis by Hamas ("A terrorist attack by Hamas forces in southern Israel") that stipulate the actor (Hamas). The positioning of Israel as the greater and named recipient of harm continued, as the number of reported deaths and abductions of Israelis on Oct 7 were stated in the post, but the reported deaths of Palestinians up to the date of the post (Oct 28) were not stated. This omission again reinforces the narrative that not only are Israelis the main victims in the current war, they are the *only* victims in the current war.

Despite having just four posts in total about the Israel-Gaza war for the study period, *News.com.au* **employed different styles of voice when covering Israeli and Palestinian tragedies, which each received one post.**

On Oct 11, an Israeli woman discussed her family members being kidnapped. The post twice attributed the kidnapping to Hamas, once in its video captioning "her family captured by Hamas gunmen" and once in the same post caption "family captured by Hamas". The actor is clearly identified. This contrasts with the post on the experience of a Gazan man (Oct 19), which stipulates, "his own family had been killed" and "his son had *died*". Similar to *The Australian,* the passive voice has been used in a way that omits any mention of who was responsible for the killing of the family. Moreso, saying that "his son had died" is another example of the middle voice discussed above, suggesting that the man's son had

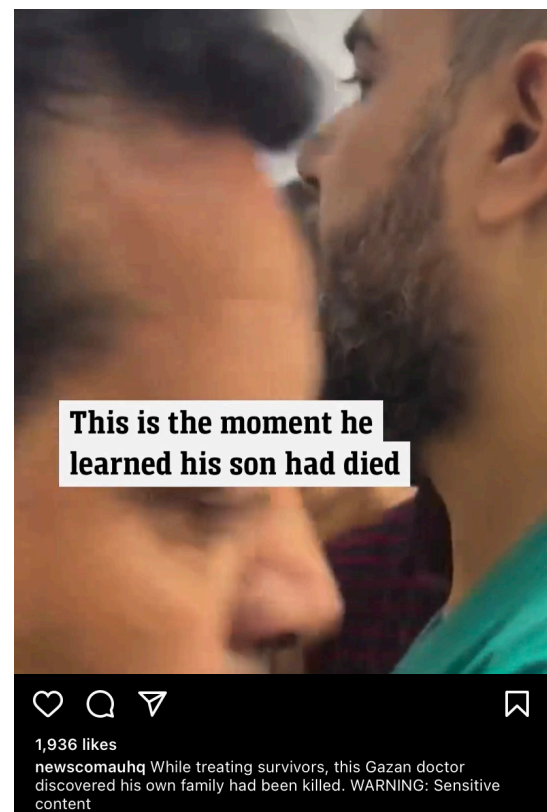spontaneously and inexplicably passed away with no agent involved who caused the death.

Fig 4. News.com.au, *While treating survivors...*, October 19, 2023, video, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CykxfggMRvH/.

Numerically, *9News* had a relatively equal use of the active and passive voice when reporting on events inside Israel and Gaza between Oct 7 and Nov 7 (six uses of the active voice to describe attacks on Israel, five uses of the active voice to describe attacks on Gaza). However, in addition, **there are also two noteworthy posts that use the passive and middle voice when reporting attacks on Gaza. When describing attacks on Israel, however, Hamas, as the actor, is always named.**

In one such post on Oct 12, a reporter provided a compelling account of being at an Israeli hospital when it was hit by Hamas rockets, saying there was "wave after wave of rockets fired by Hamas". The same report by the reporter shared in the post then turns to the situation in Gaza, saying, "Gaza continues to be hit very hard. It is plunged into darkness tonight with its main power source shutting down". This single post neatly demonstrates the way the passive and middle voices are used for Palestinians in contrast to Israelis. Hamas is clearly designated as the actor and initiator ("wave after wave of rockets fired by *Hamas*") of the attacks on the hospital, whereas the passive and middle voices are deployed again for Gaza. **Gaza "continues to be hit very hard", but there is no mention of who is doing**

the hitting (passive voice). The city is **"plunged into darkness with its main power source shutting down", but there is no mention of who shut down the power, implying it happened of its own accord (middle voice).** These are events presented without actors, and in the case of the power source, impromptu occurrences whose origins are a mystery.

ABCNews used the active voice or explicitly ascribed the actor (Hamas, rockets coming from Gaza) to describe attacks on Israel 11 times. *ABCNews* used the active voice or explicitly ascribed the actor (Israel, Israeli forces) six times to describe attacks on Gaza. **It used the passive voice four times to describe attacks on Gaza, and once to describe attacks on Israel. Significantly, it used the middle voice (which not only does not ascribe an actor, but the verb chosen removes the possibility of an actor) twice in posts on Gaza –** once to describe "bombs falling" in the same way that *The Daily Telegraph did* (Oct 13), and once in a post stating "Gaza's only power plant has shut down after running out of fuel" (Oct 12), implying that there

were no external actors blocking fuel to Gaza. It did not use the middle voice when reporting on attacks on Israel.

The Daily Aus was relatively balanced and mostly consistent in their use of the active voice when describing attacks by both Israel and Hamas across their 21 posts on the war. They shepherd the audience into a way

Fig 5. ABCNews, *Hana fled her neighbourhood...*, October 13, 2023, video, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/CyUYmhvvIac/.

GRAMMAR USED IS CHOSEN, AND THESE CHOICES HAVE CONSEQUENCES.

of understanding the parties in the Israel-Gaza war, and **because grammatical choices are more subtle than blatantly calling one side "the victim" or "human", and the other side "the aggressor" and "inhuman", such framing slips passed the audience unnoticed, but kindles a reflexive perception that lingers in the audience's mind long after the app has been closed.**

HUMANISING STORIES:

There is a documented history of humanising and dehumanising certain groups in the media during times of political conflict, crisis, and war.[17] This can take numerous forms, but one important practice is creating (or not) identifiable victims. Studies have shown that media representations of identifiable victims, particularly as individuals, in reports of war or crisis create powerful moments of connection and empathy with the viewer. This contrasts with stories of deidentified masses of people, creating a perception of what Beliker *et al* calls just "an abstract and dehumanised political problem".[18]

Given the established importance of showing identified individuals in such reporting and the impact it has on audiences, we analysed the number of times and ways in which the studied outlets provided "humanising stories" of Israelis living in Israel and Palestinians living in Palestine (that is, for this component, we did not include stories of Israelis living outside of Israel or Palestinians living outside of Palestine) experiences of the war. To be classified as a humanising story, we proposed a "humanising test" which stipulated that the post had to meet at least two of the three below criteria:

- provide at least a first name for the person;
- show their face;
- use at least some of their own words (translations or captions are acceptable; non-word screams or shouts did not count)

OF THE 55 POSTS BY *9NEWS* CONNECTED TO THE WAR DURING THE ONE-MONTH STUDY PERIOD, FOUR POSTS MET THE CRITERIA FOR HUMANISING STORIES ABOUT ISRAELIS IN ISRAEL AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE WAR:

a post on two elderly women hostages released by Hamas (Oct 25), a story about an Israeli hospital hit by Hamas rockets (Oct 12), a post about a grandmother killed in the Hamas attack (Oct 11), and a post on Israeli festival-attendees being taken hostage by Hamas (Oct 9). These posts powerfully demonstrated the broader reality of the Israeli experience of the war through the prism of their individual experiences.

Fig 6. 9News, *A larger hostage deal...*, October 25, 2023, video, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CyzTm_RP-2-/.
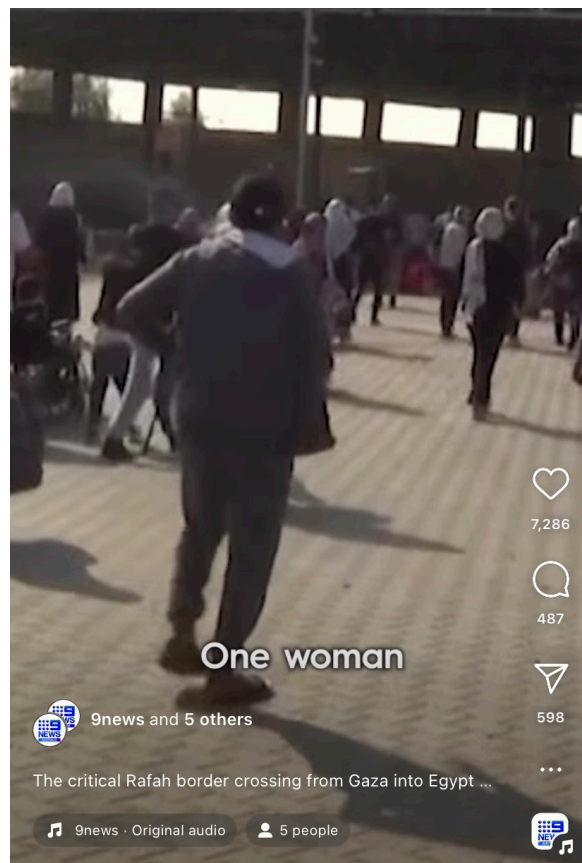
Fig 7. 9News, *The critical Rafah border crossing...*, November 02, 2023, video, Instagram,https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzHwaazPEq1/.

The *9News* Instagram account did not provide one account of the Palestinian experience of war in Gaza that met the above criteria.

The closest a post came was when a *9News* reporter based in Israel mentioned speaking to two women from Gaza (Nov 2). Neither of these women were named, or shown, and the audience did not hear their voices. The four posts made by *9News* that *did* directly report on the situation in Gaza only showed images of bombed buildings and large groups of unnamed Palestinians. Bleiker *et al* points out that "images of individual sufferers [are] particularly powerful because of their explicit emotional appeal". When the individual, humanising stories of the Palestinians are entirely absent, how are they left in the minds of the audience?

During the study period, **The Australian included ten posts that met the "Humanising test" criteria for Israelis in Israel.** The ten posts depicted the individual stories of murder and being taken hostage by, and hiding from, Hamas (Oct 31, 24, 17, 14, 11, 10, 9, 8), as well as a post of two Israeli IDF soldiers getting married on their army base in the midst of the war (Oct 18) and the story of an Israeli man who

says he will need to move south due to the war (Oct 28). Like the posts by *9News*, these posts are affecting accounts of the Israeli experience of the war.

The Australian's Instagram account during the study period did not include one post that met the above criteria of "humanising Palestinians".

The Australian's two stories that did focus on Palestinians during the month of analysis were devoid of any humanising element, and Palestinians were instead spoken about *en masse,* as an indistinguishable crowd with no named individuals, and no accounts of their own experience. Of the two posts on The Australian's Instagram account that directly addressed the situation of Gazans during the one month research period, neither were presented with a Palestinian narrative – one was by The Australian Chief International Correspondent, Cameron Stewart (20th Oct), and one was an unnarrated montage of sourced footage in Gaza (23rd Oct).

It must be noted that the authors of this report do not criticise the decision to include human interest stories of Israelis nor stories depicting Israelis as the victims in specific events. Indeed, we note that there has also been a rise in anti-semitism in Australia in recent months. What this report does argue is that **there was significantly disproportionate posting of human-interest or victim stories about Israelis in comparison to that of Palestinians that goes far beyond any claim of balance or a fair and reasonable account of the current conflict.** Such an imbalance creates a narrative that Israelis are the main victims of this conflict to the followers of The Australian's and 9News' Instagram accounts, which is particularly noteworthy when reported Palestinian deaths were about ten-fold of Israelis during the period of research. **This works to humanise Israelis while dehumanising Palestinians, who are not spoken about as individuals who**

have stories and suffer like Israelis do, but instead are a largely nameless and faceless mass.

Similar to The Australian and 9News, there was a disproportionate number of posts on The Daily Telegraph's account focussing on the Israeli experience compared to that of Palestinians between Oct 7 – Nov 7. Of the stories on The Daily Telegraph's Instagram account during the study period, **two stories passed the "humanising test" for Israelis –** one about a woman killed by Hamas on Oct 7 (Oct 11), and another post about a family taken hostage by Hamas (Oct 14).

NO POST PASSED THE "HUMANISING TEST" ABOUT PALESTINIANS.

Fig 8. The Daily Telegraph, *"Our hearts are broken..."*, October 13, 2023, photograph, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/CyXypNNsUp0/.

The closest one came was about an Australian Palestinian family trapped in Gaza, where an edited quote from the family was included, however the family was not named and their faces were blurred out in the photo (Oct 13). This perhaps was at the family's request, however, *The Daily Telegraph* did not provide an explanation in the post for why their faces were blurred and they were unnamed.

And unlike the posts on *The Daily Telegraph's* account that tell emotional and detailed accounts of the Israelis abducted or killed by Hamas (Oct 11 and Oct 13) or Israelis hiding and frightened in Tel Aviv bomb shelters (Oct 11), there was not one moving biographical post about Palestinians killed by Israeli bombing.

While this tally may seem like nit-picking accounting, the discrepancy is telling and important. It is telling because it betrays an attitude that too often slips through the cracks when reporting on Palestinians, which is that

THE LIVES AND DEATHS OF PALESTINIANS ARE OF LESS RELEVANCE THAN THOSE OF ISRAELIS, AND THUS WARRANTS LESS TIME AND FEWER - IF ANY - NEWS STORIES.

And it is important because prioritising the humanising focus disproportionately on Israelis constructs and reconstructs a dehumanising image of Palestinians. A lack of equivalent attention towards Palestinians on The Daily Telegraph's Instagram account creates an omitted people without a recognisable humanity.

As stated previously, *News.com.au* had just four posts on the Israel-Gaza war during the one-month study period. During that time, **News.com.au included one post about an Israeli that passed our "humanising test",** featuring the name, face, and voiced experience of an Israeli woman whose family had been taken hostage by Hamas. While *News.com.au* did include a story about a Gazan doctor who, during his work at a hospital discovered his own son had been killed, **the story did not pass the "humanising test",** as it did not share either his name or words.

The ABC provided an equal number of posts featuring humanising stories of both Israelis and Palestinians. There were seven posts about the Israeli experience and seven posts about the Palestinian experience that met the criteria for the "humanising test".

The ABC was the only outlet to provide any posts that passed the "humanising test" for Palestinians.

It is worth keeping in mind that while the ABC did have an equal number of humanising posts about Israelis and Palestinians, we question whether an

equal number of stories equates to balanced reporting. Given the number of Palestinian casualties in the current war was about 10 times that of Israelis at the time of analysis, it is worth considering whether the quest for "balance" in humanising stories should take the unbalanced human death toll into account.

The nature of *The Daily Aus* approach to its posts on Instagram does not lend itself to humanising stories, focussing instead on mostly text-based summaries of news events. Thus, *The Daily Aus* account did not post any stories of either Israelis or Palestinians that passed the "humanising test".

CONCLUSION

Richard C. Reuben asked, "Under what conditions does the news media's coverage of conflict lead to constructive or destructive outcomes?"[19]

**THIS QUESTION HAS PROPELLED OUR ANALYSIS IN THIS REPORT.**

THE DISCREPANCIES AND DEHUMANISATION WE RAISE ABOVE IN OUR REPORT ARE NOT MERELY SEMANTIC SQUABBLES; THEY CAN AND DO LEAD TO "DESTRUCTIVE OUTCOMES".

The media's reporting on the Israel-Gaza war matters because it shapes the way the audience views the people involved in the war. It matters **because these perceptions – fostered online - can translate into the way Australians view and treat each other in real life.** And it matters because the Palestinians, who are victims in a war, are being **systematically dehumanised by large and influential parts of the media** to their substantial audiences. When the media is the primary prism through which people understand the war and those within it, it must be held to account.

Similarly, if handled in a fair way, the media's coverage of the Israel-Gaza war could lead to "constructive outcomes" – a better informed public, and an Australian population that grasps the full humanity of the people involved, not just as victims of a war, but as humans who deserve dignity, freedom, and respect.

Beyond the physical war taking place in the Middle East, there is 'a war of words' being played out in the media, informed by factors such as what descriptors, voice and viewpoints are utilised. This directly impacts how the world responds to the physical war in the Middle East, and how communities afar treat each other. It is hoped that this publication may help to encourage greater fairness in the war of words.
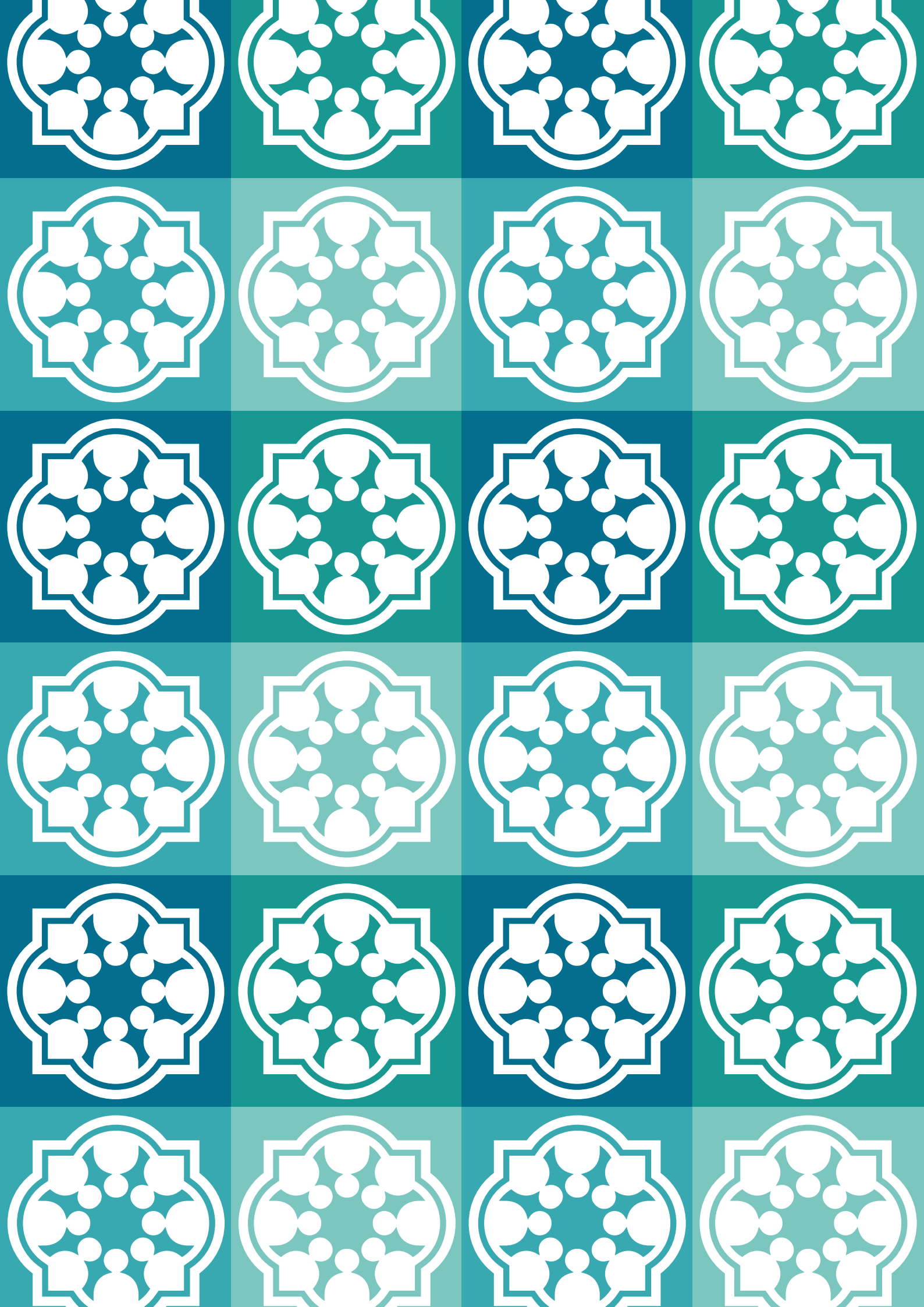
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