Attention Getter:

When the war in Lebanon started, I found myself frozen. I couldn't get off the couch, couldn't speak to anyone, couldn't even process what was happening. It was as if my mind was shutting down, overwhelmed by it all. This might seem normal for someone that is experiencing the war. But here's the thing. I was miles where I could not and would never in any way be exposed to any of the real incidents. Yet, the fear, the panic, the paralysis—it all felt as real as if I were in the heart of the conflict.

I wasn't experiencing the war firsthand. I was experiencing it through my phone—through social media. Every post, every video, every horrifying update felt like it was happening to me. And I know many of you can relate to this. Social media, while keeping us informed, has trapped us in a loop of fear, making it feel like the war is happening right in front of us, even when it's not. This led me to question how social media shapes our perceptions and why it leaves us feeling emotionally drained.

Like many of you, I've been glued to my phone, overwhelmed by the constant flood of war updates, and it has taken a toll on my mental health. It became paralyzing. I began to ask myself not just about the information I was seeing, but why it was affecting me so deeply. As I looked deeper into it, I found that social media's ability to amplify and distort war narratives plays a major role in this overwhelming sense of fear and helplessness.

Main Points Preview:

Today, we're going to explore how social media amplifies war narratives, how misinformation spreads faster than we think, and the psychological toll this constant exposure takes. Lastly, we'll look at steps we can take to protect ourselves from this emotional overload.

Main Point 1: How Social Media Amplifies War Narratives and Bias

Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram have become megaphones for real-time updates, especially during conflict. This allows ordinary people—civilians on the ground—to share what's happening immediately, bypassing traditional media outlets. While this democratizes information, it also opens the door for unverified and sensational content to spread at a rapid pace, often leading to confusion and heightened emotions.

For example, during the 2022 Ukraine war, civilians posted videos of missile strikes and attacks as they happened. These real-time posts on platforms like Telegram and Twitter brought the war closer to people all over the world, even to those miles away, as though they were living through the conflict themselves. But here's the issue: social media amplifies content that provokes emotions, and war-related posts—especially those that shock or evoke fear—are prioritized by algorithms designed to engage users.

Main Point 2: The Spread of Misinformation and Its Impact

Another major issue is the spread of misinformation. When false or exaggerated reports are shared especially in times of war panic spreads rapidly. People often share these posts without stopping to verify if they're true, and this only amplifies the problem.

A clear example of this occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, where misinformation about treatments and vaccines caused mass confusion and fear. Social media platforms were flooded with false claims, which not only created panic but also led to a rise in movements like anti-vax groups. Similarly, during wartime, false reports about attacks, casualties, or political decisions can spread just as quickly, leading to unnecessary chaos and fear.

But it’s not just health crises that are affected. A study from MIT found that false information spreads on social media six times faster than the truth, particularly in times of crisis. Algorithms prioritize posts that provoke strong emotions fear, shock, or anger fueling the rapid dissemination of misleading content. During conflicts like wars, this can lead to distorted narratives and misperceptions about what's really happening on the ground.

But it’s not just about what we see online it’s about how it makes us feel. These constant streams of information real-time war updates, biased news, misinformation don’t just influence how we understand the conflict; they take a significant toll on our mental health. They create a kind of emotional overload that leaves us feeling helpless, anxious, and emotionally exhausted.

And this is where we really start to see the psychological effects of social media consumption during times of conflict. It’s not just the content itself, but the way it’s delivered and how it manipulates our emotions that leads to real trauma.

Psychological Impact: When Media Becomes Trauma

At this point, you might feel like you're about to be bombarded by a list of psychological terms: **Headline Stress Disorder, Secondary Traumatic Stress, vicarious trauma, compassion fade**, and yes, even more daunting concepts like **emotional contagion, cognitive overload, hypervigilance, neurological hijacking, desensitization, psychic numbing**, and **moral injury**. But the reason I’m bringing up these concepts isn’t to overwhelm you with clinical jargon. It’s to show you just how well-studied and real these experiences are. More importantly, it’s to **validate what you might already be feeling** but haven’t quite found the words to describe.

Now, we don't have enough time to dive into all of these because Dr. Zinnia only allowed for a 10-minute maximum speech, which, I'll admit, we're probably going to surpass.

You might be thinking, *"No post can affect me—it's just the news."* But here's the thing: **this is not how your brain works**. Our brains aren't designed to process an endless flood of crisis, conflict, and trauma from a screen. The constant exposure to war and suffering is doing something much deeper than you might realize.

Take **Headline Stress Disorder**, for example. While it's not an official diagnosis, psychologists use this term to describe the anxiety and stress that builds up from being bombarded with negative news. And it's not just a mild discomfort—it's your brain signaling that it's **overloaded**. Your mind is telling you that it's seen too much. *(British Psychological Society, 2015)*.

But that's just the beginning. There's something called **Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)** and **vicarious trauma**. These terms describe what happens when you're exposed to someone else's trauma—when you witness their pain, their loss, and their suffering, even through a screen. You're not just seeing these experiences; your brain is processing them **as if they were your own**. *(Baird & Kracen, 2006)*.

Here's why: our brains are equipped with something called **mirror neurons**. These neurons light up when we watch someone else's emotions—whether it's joy, fear, or devastation. They help us empathize, but they don't distinguish between what's happening to us and what's happening to someone else. So, when you watch a video of a bombing or a family fleeing their home, your brain reacts as if you were **right there**, experiencing that trauma firsthand.

And then there's **doomscrolling**—you've probably heard the term. It's that never-ending cycle of scrolling through bad news, hoping to find some relief, but only getting more anxious. But what

you may not realize is that doomscrolling triggers something far deeper in your brain—it activates your **fight-or-flight response**. This is a survival mechanism that kicks in when we're faced with danger. It floods your body with **cortisol** and **adrenaline**, getting you ready to either run or fight. But here's the problem: your brain wasn't designed to handle this response while sitting on the couch for hours, watching tragedy after tragedy unfold. What was meant to protect you in real danger is now being triggered by images on your screen. (Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020)

This is what **neurological hijacking** looks like. Your body reacts as though you're in the middle of the chaos, even though you're miles away. And the result? **Chronic stress**, anxiety, and, in some cases, **PTSD-like symptoms**. Over time, your brain becomes conditioned to expect fear, and that fear stays with you long after you've put your phone down.

It doesn't stop there. Over time, all this exposure leads to something called **compassion fade**. At first, you feel deeply for the people you see suffering. But as the images of war and pain keep coming, your brain becomes tolerant to them. It shuts down. It's not that you stop caring—it's that your mind **can't maintain that level of empathy without burning out**. You become numb. Detached. It's a coping mechanism, but one that comes at the cost of our emotional well-being. *(The Guardian, 2020)*.

Let me tie this all together with something you might be familiar with the **Stanford Prison Experiment**. In this famous study, ordinary people were placed in roles—some as prisoners, others as guards—and within days, they became consumed by these roles. The guards became authoritarian, and the prisoners felt powerless and traumatized. The experiment was too disturbing it had to be shut down early.

Now think about how social media works. Just like in the Stanford Prison Experiment, we've created a digital environment where we take on **roles**—not as prisoners or guards, but as witnesses to war, tragedy, and suffering. We aren't passive observers anymore. When we watch footage of bombings or casualties, our brains **internalize** that trauma. We don't just see it—we become part of it. The news doesn't stay on the screen; it enters our minds, shapes our emotions, and becomes part of our daily lives.

The Stanford Experiment taught us how fragile the human psyche is when placed in stressful environments. Now imagine that the environment isn't a simulated prison—it's the real-world violence we see every day, bombarding us through our phones, through social media, every minute of the day. *(Britannica, 2024)*.

So, here's the truth: while you may feel like you're "just watching the news," your brain **doesn't know the difference**. The stress, the fear, the trauma—it's all real to your mind and body. The terms I've mentioned—**Headline Stress Disorder**, **vicarious trauma**, **fight-or-flight**, **compassion fade**—aren't just abstract ideas. They're the reality of how social media and news consumption are **affecting our mental health**.

We need to realize that staying informed comes with a cost—a cost we might not even be fully aware of. Our mental health is paying the price for the constant exposure to war, suffering, and tragedy. And while we can't completely escape it, we have to acknowledge how deeply these images infiltrate our minds. Protecting our well-being isn't just about turning off our phones—it's about understanding what's really happening in our brains and taking steps to **mitigate the damage**.

Psychological Impact: The Digital Crowd and Emotional Disconnect

While we've talked about how our brains struggle to process the constant flood of traumatic news, there's something else happening—something more subtle but just as powerful.

It's called the **Digital Crowd Effect**.

Every time you scroll through social media, you're not just seeing the news on your own. You're part of a **digital crowd**. The reactions—likes, comments, shares—they shape how you feel about what you're seeing. And it's more than just reading other people's thoughts. Their emotions—whether it's fear, anger, or hopelessness—start to feel like your own. It's like being in a room full of people, and suddenly, panic spreads. You can't help but get caught up in it. *(Graves & Amazeen, 2021)*.

This is what happens online. The crowd around you, even though they're not physically present, **amplifies your emotional response**. What you're feeling is more intense because of the emotional energy of everyone else. And the more this happens, the more overwhelming it becomes.

But here's where it gets even more complicated: when we're constantly exposed to tragedy, we want to help, right? We want to make a difference. But the more we scroll, the more we realize that there's very little we can actually do. This creates something called **Cognitive Dissonance**. It's that uncomfortable tension between wanting to act and knowing we're powerless. We feel **guilty** because we're just watching, not doing anything. And that guilt stays with us. It feeds into our anxiety, making us feel trapped in this cycle of helplessness.

This leads to something even more damaging **Learned Helplessness**. After seeing so much suffering and feeling like we can't change anything, we stop trying. It's as if our brains say, "What's the point?" We become numb, disengaged, and eventually, we just accept that nothing we do will make a difference. And that's when the emotional exhaustion sets in. We don't just stop trying to help; we stop caring altogether.

And then, there's **Skin Hunger** the need for physical touch that many of us may not fully recognize. Human connection is essential for emotional well-being, yet social media can't fulfill this need. As we spend more time glued to our screens, watching distressing content unfold, we become more isolated from real-world relationships.

This isolation amplifies psychological stress, intensifying feelings of loneliness and disconnection. We might feel "digitally connected," but we are more emotionally detached than ever. Social media exposes us to constant trauma, but without the human contact that helps us cope, our emotional needs remain unmet.

Conclusion

We've explored how social media amplifies war narratives, spreads misinformation, and the psychological distress it causes. While social media can keep us informed, it also comes with significant risks for our mental health."

Social media is shaping how we view and respond to war, but it's also distorting our reality and overwhelming our minds. By understanding how these platforms work, we can take steps to avoid the negative effects and protect our well-being.

There are several ways to avoidfalling for misinformation and reducing distress, incuding: verifying souces, limiting exposure, following reputable accounts, using fact checking tools, and engaging in positive online communities, as we're going to discuss.

1. Verify Sources

Research has shown that **source credibility** plays a crucial role in determining the quality of information consumed. A study published in *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* emphasized that unverified or low-credibility sources are often responsible for spreading misinformation, especially during crises (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). To avoid falling victim to false news, always check whether the source is reputable, such as international news organizations like **BBC**, **Reuters**, or **Associated Press**, which adhere to strict journalistic standards. You can also use tools like **Media Bias/Fact Check** to evaluate the reliability and bias of news outlets.

2. Limit Exposure

Prolonged exposure to negative news, especially during crises, has been linked to **emotional fatigue** and increased psychological stress. Research from *The American Psychological Association (APA)* highlights that limiting exposure to distressing news, particularly through social media, can reduce anxiety and depression (Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020). Setting time limits for consuming war-related content and practicing **digital detoxes** (i.e., taking breaks from media) are effective strategies for maintaining mental well-being. Apps like **Freedom** and **Offtime** can help enforce these limits by blocking access to social media during specific times.

3. Follow Reputable Accounts

A 2020 report by the **Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism** found that following **expert commentators** and **verified sources** significantly reduces the likelihood of encountering

misinformation. Experts such as **journalists**, **researchers**, and **public health officials** on platforms like Twitter often provide real-time, accurate updates. Ensuring the sources you follow are verified and use clear, evidence-based reporting can protect you from biased or false narratives, particularly during times of conflict

4. Use Fact-Checking Tools

In addition to fact-checking websites like **Snopes** and **FactCheck.org**, research from the **International Fact-CheckingNetwork(IFCN)** suggests using platforms like **PolitiFact** and **The Washington Post Fact Checker** to verify the authenticity of posts you come across. A 2021 study in *New Media & Society* found that individuals who used fact-checking tools were significantly less likely to spread false information, particularly during times of crisis (Graves & Amazeen, 2021).

5. Engage in Positive Online Communities

Engaging with **online support groups** and **mental health-focused communities** can provide a buffer against the emotional toll of consuming distressing news. According to a study published in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, connecting with positive and supportive online communities can lead to improved mental health outcomes, reducing feelings of isolation and anxiety during stressful periods (Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014). Platforms like **7 Cups** or online therapy groups offer mental health support through trained listeners, while social communities focused on hobbies or wellness can balance the negative news cycle.

References

Baird, K., & Kracen, A. C. (2006). Vicarious traumatization and secondary traumatic stress: A research synthesis. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, *19*(2), 181–188. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070600791934

British Psychological Society. (2015, May 6). Viewing violent news on social media can cause trauma. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved October 20, 2024, from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/05/150506164240.htm

Cinelli, M., et al. (2020). The COVID-19 social media infodemic. *Scientific Reports*, *10*, 16598. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5

Garfin, D. R., Silver, R. C., & Holman, E. A. (2020). The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak: Amplification of public health consequences by media exposure. *Health Psychology*, *39*(5), 355–359. https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000875

Graves, L., & Amazeen, M. A. (2021). Fact-checking as a method of investigative reporting: Past, present, and future. *New Media & Society*, *23*(2), 485–505. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820946001

Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). Fighting misinformation on social media using crowdsourced judgments of news source quality. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2019-021

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. (2020). Navigating the 'infodemic': How people in six countries access and rate news and information about COVID-19. *Reuters Institute*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/infodemic-how-people-six-countries-access-and-rate-news-and-information-about-covid-19

The Washington Post. (2022). Ukraine war updates spread on Telegram, Twitter as civilians report live from the frontlines. https://www.washingtonpost.com

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, *359*(6380), 1146–1151. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559