

THE PRESS, THE PUBLIC, AND MODERN WAR

Central questions in contemporary media and war



SOME CONTEXT

I am mainly a scholar of the mediation, ethics and phenomenology of war, focused on the experience of journalists.

So I ask a lot of questions about why people who do 'media work' in wars do it, how they do it, and what it feels like to do it.



IN THIS TALK

A brief tour of (some) of the questions that scholars in the field of media and war are preoccupied with, and some of the basic ideas that underlie the field.

Media and imaginaries

Witnessing

The problem of distant suffering



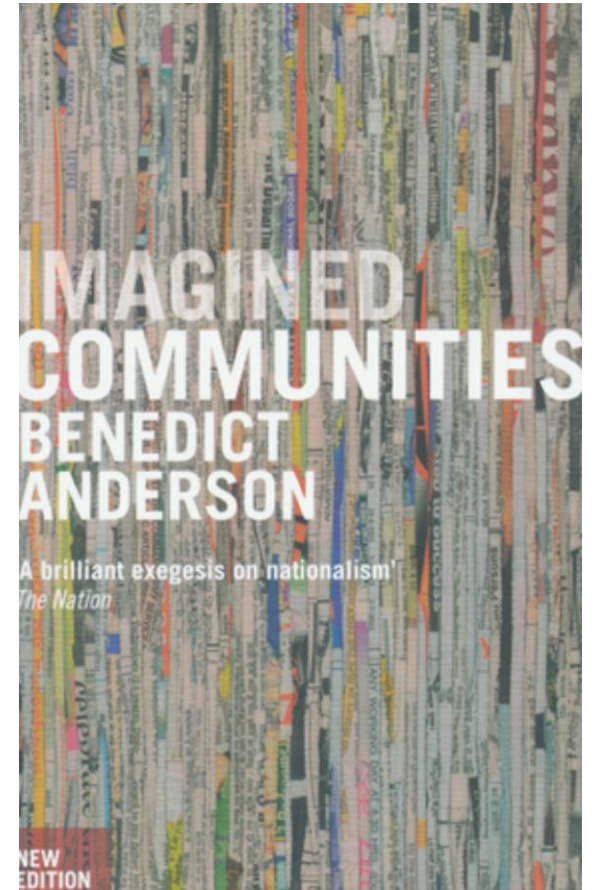
IMAGINARIES

The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined. Man is no Aristotelian god contemplating all existence at one glance. He is the creature of an evolution who can just about span a sufficient portion of reality to manage his survival, and snatch what on the scale of time are but a few moments of insight and happiness. Yet this same creature has invented ways of seeing what no naked eye could see, of hearing what no ear could hear, of weighing immense masses and infinitesimal ones, of counting and separating more items than he can individually remember. He is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach.



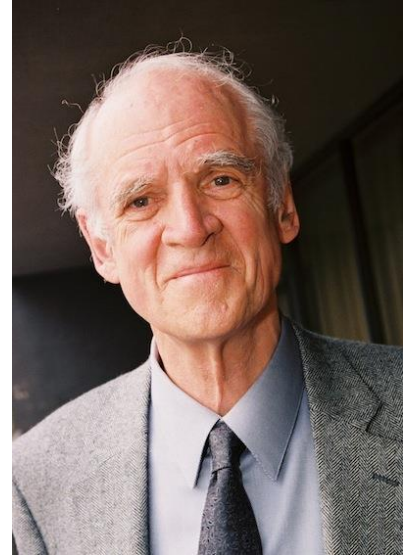
“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion

[...] all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”



Anderson, Benedict. "Imagined communities." (1983).

I have several times used the term *social imaginary* in the preceding pages. The time has come to make what is involved a little clearer. What I'm trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

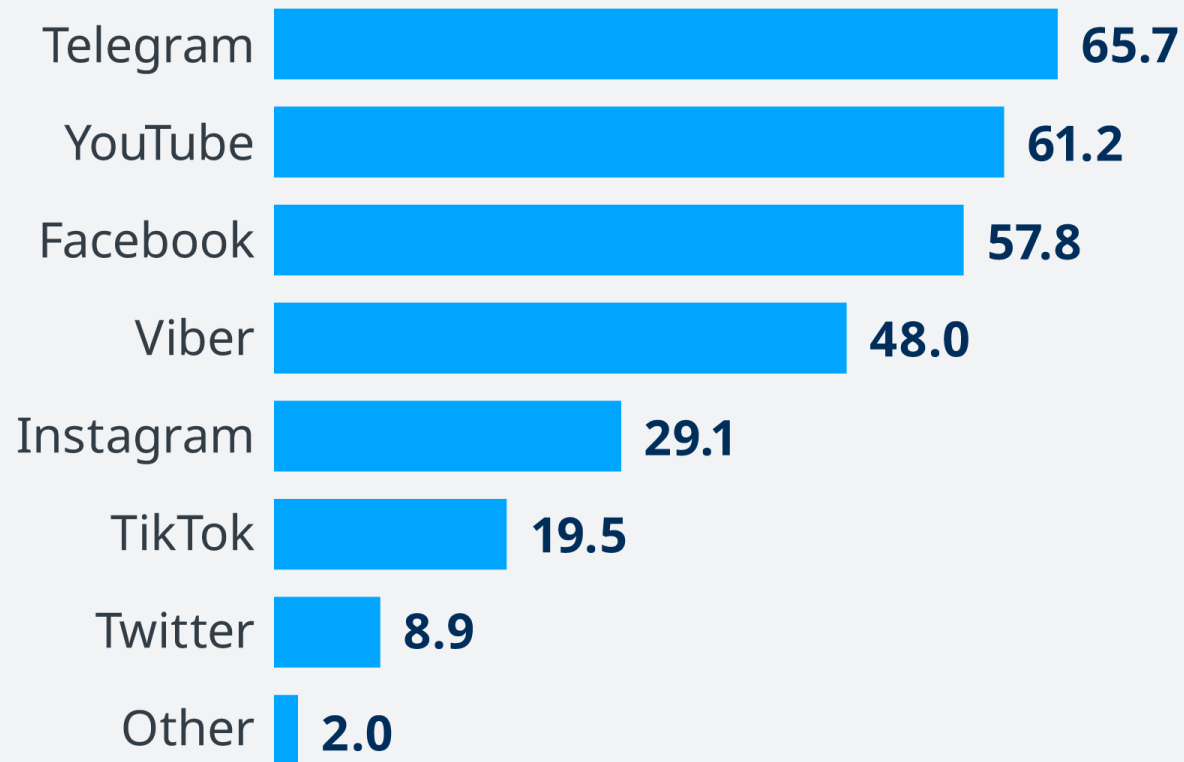


Taylor, Charles. "Modern Social Imaginaries." *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 91–124.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-91>. [p.106]



Majority of Ukrainian internet users get their news from Telegram

Where Ukrainians read news online (in percent)



Imaginaries point us to one of the reasons why 'media' matters when thinking about wars and other kinds of violence.

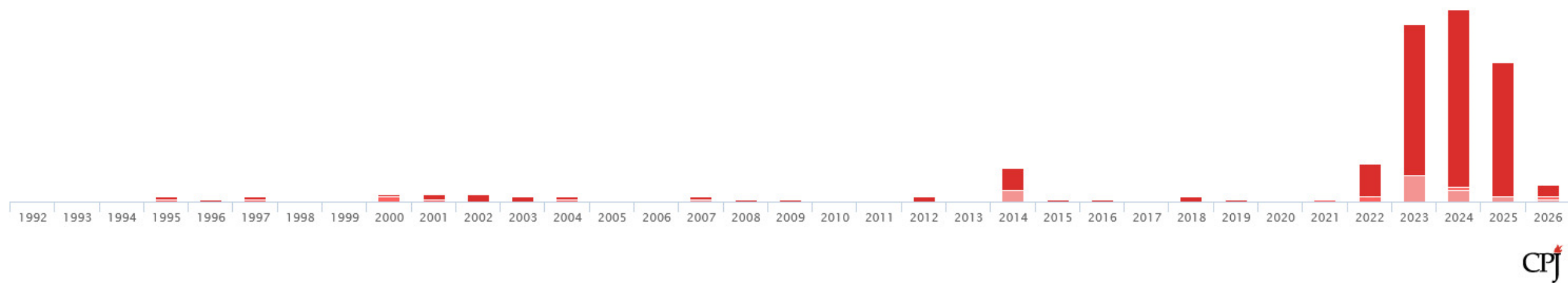
When we imagine conflict,

- **we (may) imagine ourselves as part of an affected community**
- **develop a moral/normative view of how it should be understood**
- **and a sense of the obligations we have towards others.**

As you might expect, this matters politically.

279 Journalists and Media Workers Killed in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Ukraine

between 1992 and 2026 / Confirmed as work-related or Suspected as work-related



“humanitarian service delivery and media coverage may impede warring parties’ efforts to harm the general civilian population, or assist efforts to concentrate them in collectivities [..] and journalistic coverage of troop movements and encounters could thwart the tactics of field commanders [Bell, 1998; Hawkins, 2011; McLaughlin, 2016], or humiliate them in the eyes of valued audiences. [...] Journalistic reporting could lead to accountability and possible retribution for illegal actions taken by combatants.”

Sutton, R., & Stupart, R. (2024). The Identity Work of Journalists and Humanitarians in South Sudan’s Protection of Civilians Sites. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 18(1), 81–98.

WITNESSING

“To witness an event is to be responsible in some way to it.”

Peters, John Durham. “Witnessing.” *Media, Culture and Society* 23, no. 1 (2001): 707–23.



FAMINE,

AFFLU
ENCE,

FOREWORD BY BILL AND MELINDA GATES

AND
MORALITY

PETER SINGER



POSITIVELY CONCEIVED,

The obligation to bear witness amounts to an obligation to *communicatively assist* those who are known to be suffering, and those who one might reasonably believe will come to suffer similarly in future.



NEGATIVELY CONCEIVED,

The obligation to bear witness amounts to an obligation to avoid complicity in ongoing suffering or the reasonably foreseeable creation of new sufferers.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF WITNESSING?

DIRECT ACTION

We can compel others to act.

DENIAL OF IGNORANCE

We can deprive others of a defence of ignorance

EPISTEMIC RESISTANCE

We can deny perpetrators the power to erase the knowledge of atrocities. We can keep an archive alive.

RECOGNITION

There is some hard-to-pin value to having someone even just recognise an injustice as an injustice



meanwhile, dotted alongside these charred locations are unharmed, populated and functioning 'Arab' settlements. In some locations, the distance between a destroyed Fur village and an 'Arab' village is less than 500 meters.

Kailek town itself was attacked and burned with considerable force by Jenjaweed and GoS forces on several occasions between mid-February and 08 March 2004. Today, Kailek is completely destroyed with virtually no complete buildings left in the entire town area. All items of value have been stolen and personal possessions are scattered all over the place, bearing a somber testimony to the swiftness and violence with which people were attacked and dislocated.

Security

There is a strong and visible presence of the Jenjaweed in the entire region between Kass and Kailek, as well as between Kass and Abruminoa, the last village before Shattaya. Upon entry into Kailek town, a considerable number of armed Jenjaweed fighters approached the mission, accompanying the GoS police formally in charge of security in the town. While the tone between the UN and Jenjaweed/GoS was cordial, there were a number of well-armed young boys displaying a very belligerent attitude towards the IDPs despite the presence of the mission. Observing interactions between

¹ WFP could not participate in the mission.

DISTANT SUFFERING



The vulture and the little girl – Kevin Carter, 1993

Whether representations of the suffering of others can get us to care and to act in solidarity is in fact a very hard problem.

**There are competing views on
the issue.**

We get compassion fatigue

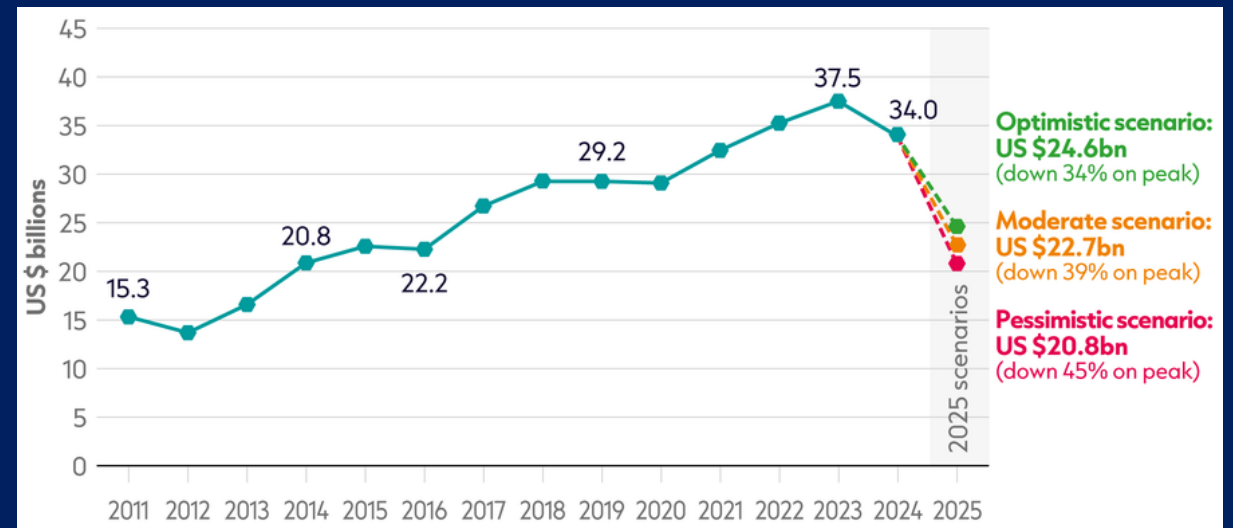
[Susan Moeller]

After a while, we become too used to seeing suffering and we cease being able to be moved by it. This can lead to audiences not caring, and media needing to find new and more spectacular instances of suffering.

Moeller, Susan D. *Compassion fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. Routledge, 2002.

We in fact do care [David Campbell]

By all gross measures (levels of donations and amount of suffering media in circulation), we *do* care more about suffering others as representation of suffering increases.



We don't in fact
really encounter
suffering anymore
[Jacques Ranciere]



While there might be more representations of suffering out there in general, we actually see very little of it. Media has economies of taste and decency (Chouliaraki, 2009) that filter it all out.

Chouliaraki, Lillie. "Witnessing War: Economies of Regulation in Reporting War and Conflict." *The Communication Review* 12, no. 3 (2009): 215–26.

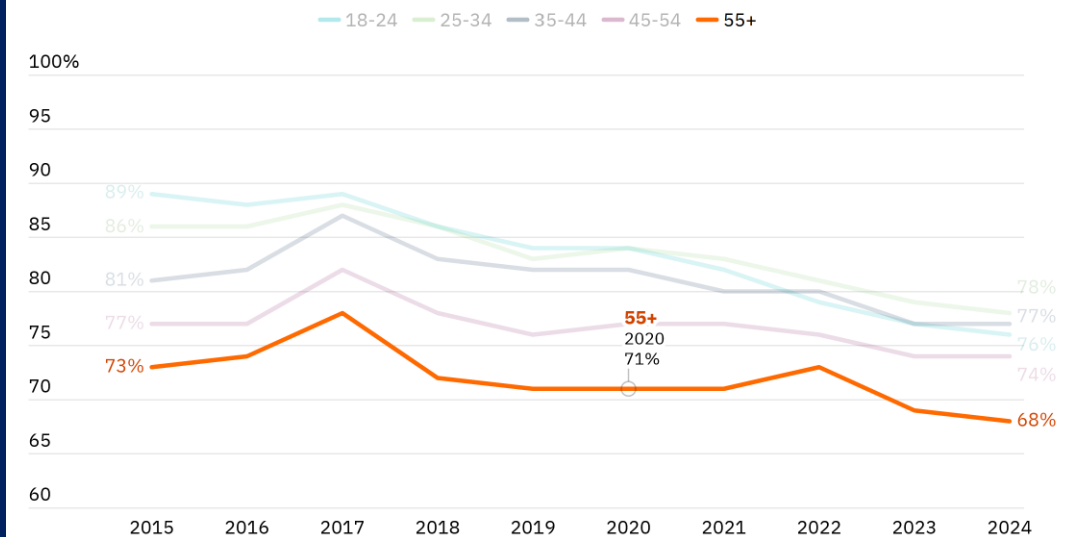
We turn away from seeing suffering where we can [Reuters Institute]

Many of us increasingly turn away from news media in general.

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/people-are-turning-away-news-heres-why-it-may-be-happening>

Proportion who got news online in the last week

Selected Markets.



Q3. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news? Please select all that apply.

Data from 17 markets tracked since 2015: UK, US, France, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Spain, Japan, Brazil, Australia, Ireland, Poland, Czech Republic, Portugal, Austria, Netherlands.

Source: Digital News Report.

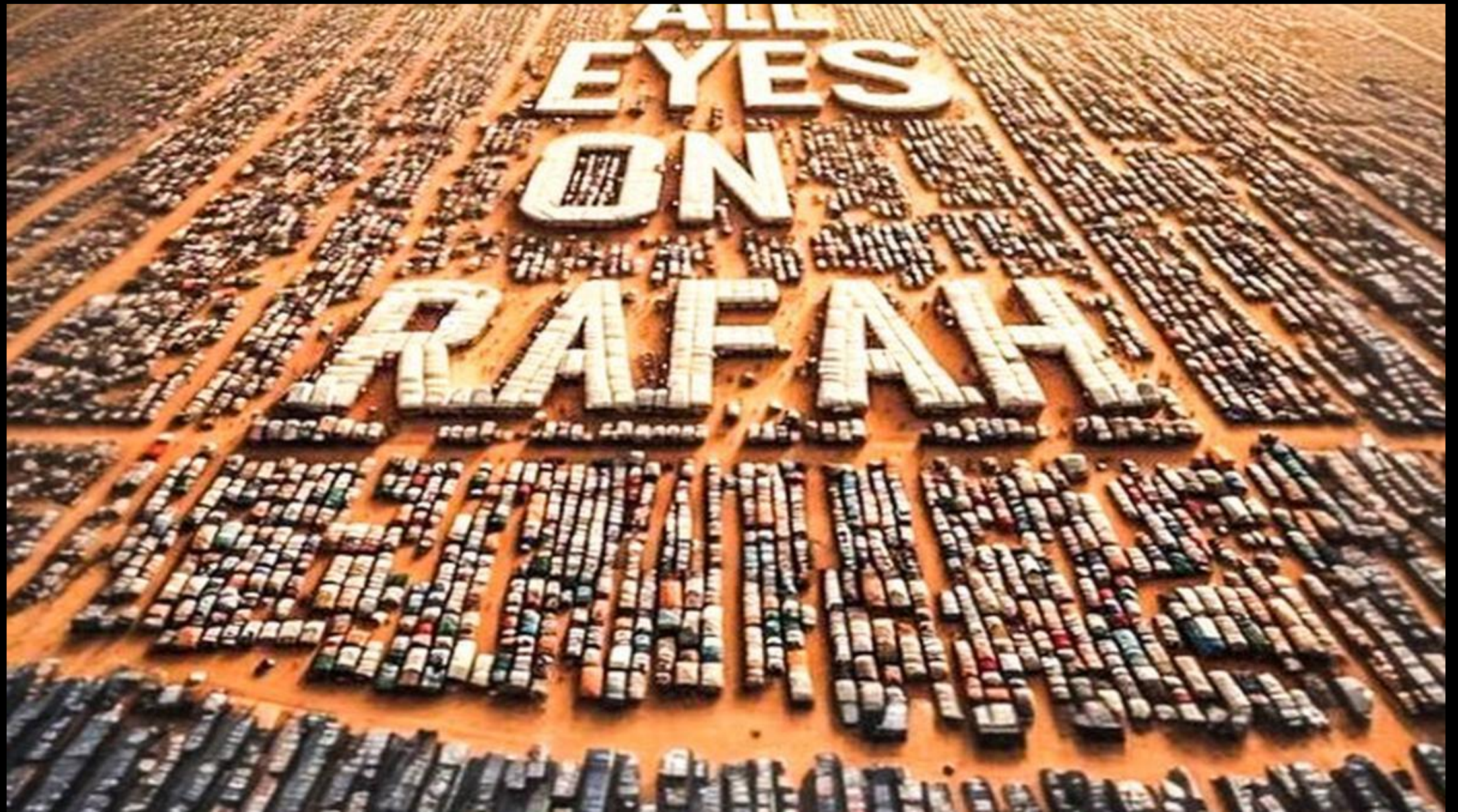
[Get the data](#) • [Embed](#)

**Ultimately (and this is
unsatisfying), it's complicated.**

**But the belief that solidarity is *possible*
animates people to risk their lives to
represent suffering.**

THANK YOU.







MOVING TARGETS HAVE MET THEIR MATCH.

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