

Response to Reviewers

Cover Letter

To the Editor,

We thank you and the reviewers for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript, “**Trust and Moral Witnessing in Al Jazeera’s Coverage of the Gaza Conflict (2023–2024)**” (Manuscript ID: [PLACEHOLDER]). We are grateful for the reviewers’ detailed and constructive feedback, which has been invaluable in strengthening our work.

In response to the critiques, we have undertaken significant revisions to address the core methodological and conceptual concerns. The key changes are:

1. **Title and Terminology:** We have changed the title to a more descriptive, scholarly term, replacing “Palestinian Genocide” with “Gaza Conflict.” The term “conflict” is used throughout as a descriptive term for the period of intense violence, allowing the analysis to focus on media framing without embedding a legal conclusion.
2. **Methodological Clarification and Transparency:** We have substantially revised the Method section to provide a detailed, transparent account of our procedures. This includes:
 - Renaming and clearly operationalizing the frame categories (e.g., from “pro-Palestinian” to “Palestinian civilian focus”).
 - Explicitly defining the construction of the “bias score” as a lexical emphasis ratio and detailing the dictionary-based approach.
 - Clarifying that social media engagement metrics are used as a proxy for *audience resonance* within Al Jazeera’s ecosystem, not as a direct measure of epistemic trust, and acknowledging the limitations of this approach.
 - Providing details on data collection, sampling, and inter-coder reliability (Cohen’s kappa scores are now reported).
3. **Theoretical Distinctions and Limitations:** We have more clearly delineated the concepts of epistemic trust and moral authority in the Introduction and Background sections. A new, extensive Limitations subsection in the Method section candidly addresses the study’s constraints, including the single-outlet focus, the interpretative nature of framing, and the significant caveat regarding engagement metrics.
4. **Ethical and Positionality Statements:** We have added an ethical considerations statement, declared no conflict of interest, and discussed researcher positionality in the Discussion section to contextualize our analytical perspective.

We believe these revisions have substantially improved the manuscript’s rigor, clarity, and scholarly balance. Our point-by-point responses to the reviewers’ comments are detailed below.

Sincerely,
The Authors

Response to Reviewers

Reviewer 1

Comment 1: The term "genocide" in the title is politically charged and risks undermining scholarly objectivity without robust legal or empirical justification. **Response:** We agree with the reviewer that the original title introduced a premise that could be seen as prejudicing the analysis. To maintain scholarly rigor and focus the study on media framing rather than legal adjudication, we have changed the title to **"Trust and Moral Witnessing in Al Jazeera's Coverage of the Gaza Conflict (2023–2024)"**. The term "conflict" is used descriptively throughout the manuscript to denote the period and location of violent hostilities. This change is reflected in the title page and all subsequent mentions (e.g., Abstract, Introduction, Conclusion).

Comment 2: The criteria for categorizing articles as "pro-Palestinian," "neutral," or "Israeli frame" are inadequately operationalized. **Response:** We have thoroughly revised our operationalization of frame categories to be more descriptive and transparent. The categories have been renamed and defined as follows in Section 4.3 (Quantitative Measures and Procedures):

- *Palestinian civilian focus:* Articles whose headline and lead center on the experiences, casualties, or statements of Palestinian civilians/NGOs/local officials, using lexicon from a predefined "empathy and casualty" dictionary.
- *Neutral/Multiperspectival:* Articles presenting claims from both sides with equivalent prominence or focusing on international diplomacy.
- *Institutional/Israeli official focus:* Articles where primary actors/sources are Israeli government/military officials, or which adopt official Israeli terminology.

We provide the rationale for this coding scheme and note its basis in established content analysis approaches (Riffe et al., 1998, 2014).

Comment 3: Deriving "trust scores" from social media engagement (shares/comments) is methodologically dubious—engagement does not equate to trust. **Response:** This is a crucial point. We have clarified our use of this metric. In Section 4.3, we now state: "Trust scores were derived from public engagement metrics... as a proxy for *audience resonance*, normalized on a 1–5 scale. We explicitly note that this is a measure of *audience engagement*, not a direct or validated measure of epistemic trust. Its use is based on the assumption that content perceived as credible and compelling within Al Jazeera's audience ecosystem is more likely to be engaged with, though we acknowledge this correlation is not causal and may reflect echo chamber effects." We further discuss this as a major limitation in Section 4.10.

Comment 4: Exclusively analyzing Al Jazeera without a control group weakens causal claims about trust construction. **Response:** We acknowledge this limitation. A new paragraph in the Limitations subsection (Section 4.10) explicitly states: "The study focuses exclusively on Al Jazeera coverage, limiting comparative insights with other media outlets. While this allows for depth, it prevents claims about the uniqueness of Al Jazeera's strategies; future work should incorporate a comparative design." We also frame our contribution more modestly as a "detailed case study" and suggest comparative analysis as key future work in the Conclusion.

Comment 5: Key terms like "moral authority" and "epistemic trust" are used interchangeably without clear distinction. **Response:** We have clarified the distinction between these concepts. In the Background section (Section 3), we now state: "A key distinction underpinning this study is between *epistemic trust*—the credibility accorded to a knowledge source—and *moral authority*—the ethical standing granted

to a witness. While interrelated, the former relates more to perceptions of accuracy and reliability, and the latter to legitimacy and the right to narrate suffering.”

Comment 6: Critical details are missing: the lexicon for "bias scoring" and "empathy-related terms" is not provided; no access to raw data, code, or coding protocols is mentioned. **Response:** We have added significant methodological transparency. In Section 4.3, we detail that the bias score is “operationalized as the normalized ratio of terms from the ‘Palestinian civilian experience’ lexicon to the total count of all conflict-related terms in the article.” We note that the empathy lexicon includes terms like “children,” “family,” “home,” “besieged.” We also now state: “The final dataset and the collection script are available in a supplementary repository to ensure reproducibility.” Furthermore, we report inter-coder reliability scores (Cohen’s kappa = 0.82 and 0.79) in Section 4.4.

Comment 7: Statistical analyses are reported but without effect sizes or confidence intervals. **Response:** We have added 95% confidence intervals for the mean bias score in Table 2 (now Table ?? in the revised manuscript) and its caption. We have also ensured that correlation coefficients (Pearson’s r) are reported with p-values in Table 7 (now Table ??).

Comment 8: The authors do not adequately address their own biases or the political implications of their framing. No statement on funding or conflicts of interest is provided. **Response:** We have added a discussion of researcher positionality in the Discussion section (Section 6): “Researcher positionality and the study’s terminology warrant explicit discussion. The authors approach this topic from a media studies perspective, prioritizing the analysis of discourse and narrative construction over legal or historical adjudication of the conflict.” An ethical considerations statement in Section 4.9 now includes: “The authors declare no direct funding from or conflict of interest with Al Jazeera Media Network or the Qatari government.”

Reviewer 2

Comment 1: Trust scores are derived from engagement metrics, creating circular logic where pro-Palestinian content receives higher "trust" scores because it resonates with Al Jazeera's predominantly sympathetic audience. **Response:** We thank the reviewer for this fundamental critique. We have directly addressed this circularity concern. As noted in response to Reviewer 1 (Comment 3), we have redefined the metric as one of **audience engagement/resonance**, not trust. We explicitly acknowledge the limitation that this measures resonance within an existing audience ecosystem, which may reflect an “echo chamber” effect rather than the broader construct of epistemic credibility. This is discussed in the Methods (Section 4.3) and highlighted as a primary limitation (Section 4.10). We also note in the Discussion that the correlation “does not establish that such framing builds trust with skeptical or oppositional audiences.”

Comment 2: Tone classification lacks methodological rigor. The criteria for these classifications are not sufficiently detailed, and the categories themselves reflect political positioning rather than analytical categories. **Response:** We have completely overhauled the description of our frame classification. The categories have been renamed to more descriptive, analytical labels (*Palestinian civilian focus*, etc.) as detailed in response to Reviewer 1 (Comment 2). Section 4.3 now provides a clear, step-by-step operationalization of how articles were assigned to these categories based on lexical choices and primary narrative emphasis, moving away from value-laden terms.

Comment 3: No comparison with other media outlets, making it impossible to determine whether observed patterns are unique to Al Jazeera or characteristic of conflict reporting generally. **Response:** We agree that a comparative framework would strengthen the study. While adding such an analysis was beyond the scope of this revision, we now explicitly frame our study as a deep, single-outlet case study and acknowledge the limitation of this approach. In the Limitations section (4.10), we state: “The study focuses exclusively on Al Jazeera coverage... it prevents claims about the uniqueness of Al Jazeera’s

strategies; future work should incorporate a comparative design.” We also cite recent comparative work in the Related Work section (Section 2) and propose a comparative computational analysis as specific future research in the Conclusion.

Comment 4: Provide detailed methodology for tone classification and bias scoring, including intercoder reliability statistics and validation procedures. **Response:** We have provided this detail. Section 4.4 (Qualitative Analysis Procedures) now reports: “To ensure rigor, two trained coders independently applied the final coding framework to a stratified random sample of 15% of the articles (n=512). Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen’s kappa, yielding scores of 0.82 for theme identification and 0.79 for source type classification, indicating substantial agreement.” The construction of the bias score is detailed in Section 4.3.

Comment 5: Either remove the term “genocide” from the title or provide rigorous legal/analytical justification for its use. **Response:** We have chosen to remove the term from the title and manuscript, as explained in response to Reviewer 1 (Comment 1). The revised title is **“Trust and Moral Witnessing in Al Jazeera’s Coverage of the Gaza Conflict (2023–2024)”**.

Comment 6: The finding that 67% of articles employ “pro-Palestinian framing” is presented as evidence of trust-building rather than what it actually demonstrates: institutional bias. **Response:** We have reframed this finding. The category is now termed “Palestinian civilian focus.” In the Results and Discussion, we present this as evidence of a consistent *editorial stance* or *narrative priority*. We argue that this consistency is part of how the outlet builds a recognizable brand and moral authority for its target audience, while openly discussing in the Limitations that this stance precludes claims of neutrality. We analyze it as a strategic choice within a solidarity-based journalistic paradigm.

Comment 7: No mention of data/code availability for replication. **Response:** Added. Section 4.2 now states: “The final dataset and the collection script are available in a supplementary repository to ensure reproducibility.”

Comment 8: Table 1 shows June 2024 with 0 articles despite collection through June 2024. **Response:** Thank you for catching this inconsistency. We have clarified the data collection period in Section 4.2: “The dataset comprises 3,412 articles published by Al Jazeera between October 2023 and June 2024...” and added a note to the caption of Table 1 (now Table ??): “The entry for June 2024 shows zero articles because the data collection concluded in early June, capturing articles published up to May 31, 2024.”

Closing Note

We again express our sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their challenging and insightful comments. Addressing their concerns has necessitated substantial revisions that we believe have significantly strengthened the manuscript’s methodological transparency, theoretical clarity, and scholarly rigor. We hope the revised version now meets the journal’s standards for publication and contributes meaningfully to the field of media and conflict studies.