

BRITISH MEDIA AND THE GENOCIDE IN GAZA

Background

Since the beginning of Israel's genocide in October, much of the British media has demonstrated an alarming deference towards Israeli narratives about its war on Gaza, the conduct of its soldiers, and its characterisation of Palestinians killed, whilst underreporting, demonising and mis-portraying Palestinian narratives.

Both subtle and overt media biases have sought to shape the way that the British public perceives events in Gaza. These biases include patterns of selective deployment of information, a skewed reliance on Israeli accounts, and the censoring of Palestinian perspectives. In centring Israel-sympathetic narratives, some media figures and publications have additionally engaged in the dehumanisation of Palestinians and the 'othering' of Palestinians and Muslims in Britain, along with expressions of support for Israeli war crimes.

Sources

Analyses of media output in Britain show overreliance by journalists on Israeli military and government accounts in their reporting on events in Gaza. The Centre for Media Monitoring found that, in TV reporting, Israeli perspectives were referenced almost three times more than Palestinian ones.¹ This is a longstanding problem. According to reports by openDemocracy, citing previously commissioned BBC investigations into its own output,² Israeli perspectives are routinely favoured within coverage. This has been established through analysis of the frequency of spokesperson appearances, the uncritical reliance on Israeli government press statements, and the legitimacy accorded to Israeli accounts above Palestinian ones, among other criteria. This comes despite the long-acknowledged unreliability of Israeli military sources, and the Israeli government's track record of making false or contradictory statements.³

Language

Contextualisation and framing of language also impacts reporting bias. There is a marked discrepancy in characterisations of the suffering of Israeli victims of violence compared to Palestinian victims, and of the justification or contextualisation given to Israeli military violence, compared to that of Palestinian and other Arab combatants.⁴ In terms of suffering, openDemocracy analysis of the first month of the war on Gaza found that terms related to 'murder' were used 52 times by BBC journalists in relation to Israelis' deaths – but never for Palestinians, with terms like 'atrocities', 'massacre', and 'slaughter' likewise rarely, if ever, extended to Palestinians killed.⁵ Analysis also shows that Palestinians are far less likely to be described in family terms, as e.g. fathers, daughters, than Israelis, creating a clear distinction in humanisation of those killed.⁶

It seems evident that such a linguistic framework has been adopted editorially, as was adopted at the New York Times according to a leaked memo in April 2024,⁷ given that reporters are often led to adopt phraseology which is plainly illogical. For instance, a BBC correspondent referred to Palestinian children as 'women and teenage males',⁸ and a Sky News correspondent described the killing of a Palestinian girl as such: "*a bullet found its way into the van and killed a three- or four-year-old young lady*".⁹

¹ Centre for Media Monitoring (March 2024), '[Media Bias: Gaza 2023-24](#)'

² Loughborough University Communications Research Centre, (April 2006), '[The BBC's Reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, August 1 2005 – January 31 2006](#)'

³ Michelle Goldberg (20th October 2023), '[It is Impossible to Know What to Believe in This Hideous War](#)', New York Times

⁴ Philo, Greg, & Berry, Mike (22nd December 2023), '[Media research shows BBC is very far from 'biased against Israel'](#)', openDemocracy

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Najjar, Dana & Lietava, Jan (December 2023), '[Analysing the bias in BBC reporting on Palestine](#)', GitHub

⁷ Scahill, Jeremy & Grim, Ryan (15th April 2024) [Leaked NYT Gaza memo tells journalists to avoid 'genocide', 'ethnic cleansing', and 'occupied territory'](#), The Intercept

⁸ Al Jazeera Media Institute (4th March 2024), '[Monitoring of Journalistic Malpractices in Gaza Coverage](#)'

⁹ Jackson, Lucy & Elliards, Xander (9th January 2024), '[Sky News condemned for report on killed Palestinian child](#)', The National

Legitimisation of Israeli violence in Gaza

Analysis by The New Arab found that UK newspaper coverage also devoted efforts to justifications of Israeli violence in Gaza.¹⁰ 57% of *Telegraph* headlines on the ‘war’ displayed Israeli-sympathetic narratives. For instance, ‘*Civilians in Gaza are terrorist sympathisers, warns Israeli military*’.¹¹ Israeli violence is routinely framed by emotive language of victimhood and narratives of retaliatory self-defence, which generate greater public support for Israel’s actions. This works in tandem with the *de*-contextualisation of relevant historical understandings of the occupation and Palestinians’ legal right to resist. Audience-reception tests show that this framing not only works to deflect blame for acts committed by Israel, but also that such narratives change public understanding of the causes of, and long-term solutions to, the so-called ‘Israel-Palestine conflict’.¹²

Examples of journalistic malpractice

Whilst some of these incidents simply demonstrate poor journalistic standards, others show journalistic malpractice. Some outlets are facing discontent from staff, with accusations made that pro-Israel editorial control has severely limited the type of story, or framing of stories, upon which reporters are able to report.¹³

There are several examples of publication of articles repeating unsubstantiated Israeli accounts. For example, both the New York Times and The Guardian published stories regarding alleged sexual violence by Palestinian factions on or after the 7th October. These stories relied on evidence provided to them by the organisation ‘Zaka’, which outlined claims of rape and sexual abuse in the Kibbutzim. The issue being that Zaka was already treated within Israeli media as an incredible source, with a reputation for “spread[ing] accounts of atrocities that never happened”.^{14 15} This engagement by Western media in so-called ‘atrocities propaganda’, on the back of Israeli sources that have been discredited by Israeli press, is widespread. Similar malpractice allegations can be levelled against outlets which reported a range of unreliable accounts, such as the ‘40 beheaded babies’, also discredited in Israeli media.

Impact of journalistic malpractice

These efforts serve not only to generate support for Israel’s assault on Gaza, but also to provide cover for individual acts constituting likely war crimes or crimes against humanity. For examples, some outlets have unquestioningly repeated Israeli claims that hospitals, schools, or other public infrastructure constitute valid military targets due to the unverified claims that they are ‘ Hamas bases ’.^{16 17}

Biased media reporting also has an impact on domestic affairs. There are examples of outlets which denigrate British Muslims and Palestinians, depicting them as though they represent an insurgent threat to Britain, to democracy, to Jewish people, or some combination thereof. In a piece in the Daily Express, Jewish News Editor Richard Ferrer wrote of a ‘historic Islamic bloodlust’,¹⁸ and Jewish Chronicle Editor Jake Wallis Simons stated on X that ‘much of Muslim culture is in the grip of a death cult that sacralises bloodshed’,¹⁹ while pro-Palestine/anti-genocide protests have been widely described as supportive of Hamas, without substantiation. These views are particularly prevalent in comment sections, where anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic voices are platformed and insufficiently regulated, which further fuel hatred and division at home.

¹⁰ Shehadi, S., et al (22nd March 2024), ‘[In numbers: How UK right-wing media's pro-Israel Gaza war coverage dehumanises Palestinians](#)’, The New Arab

¹¹ Farmer, Ben (22nd October 2023), ‘[Civilians in Gaza are terrorist sympathisers, warns Israeli military](#)’, The Telegraph

¹² Philo, Greg, & Berry, Mike (22nd December 2023), ‘[Media research shows BBC is very far from ‘biased against Israel’](#)’, openDemocracy

¹³ McGreal, Chris (4th February 2024), ‘[CNN staff say network's pro-Israel slant amounts to ‘journalistic malpractice’](#)’

¹⁴ Rabinowitz, Aaron (31st January 2024), ‘[Death and Donations: Did the Israeli Volunteer Group Handling the Dead of October 7 Exploit Its Role?](#)’, Haaretz

¹⁵ Gupta, Arun (27th February 2024), ‘[American Media Keep Citing Zaka - Though its October 7 Atrocity Stories are Discredited in Israel](#)’, The Intercept

¹⁶ Scahill, Jeremy (21st November 2023), ‘[Al-Shifa Hospital, Hamas's Tunnels, and Israeli Propaganda](#)’, The Intercept

¹⁷ For example, see Williamson, Lucy (16th November 2023), ‘[BBC goes inside Al-Shifa with the Israeli Army](#)’, BBC News

¹⁸ Ferrer, Richard (10th October 2023), ‘[Regime-change invasion is surely only hours away and with it the end of Hamas](#)’, Daily Express

¹⁹ Hasan, Medhi (8th October 2023), [[X Post with Screenshot](#)]