

Are U.S. Newspapers Biased Against Palestinians?

Analysis

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A study released last month by [416Labs](#), a Toronto-based consulting and research firm, supports the view that mainstream U.S. newspapers consistently portray Palestine in a more negative light than Israel, privilege Israeli sources, and omit key facts helpful to understanding the Israeli occupation, including those expressed by Palestinian sources.

The largest of its kind, the study is based on a sentiment and n-gram analysis of nearly a hundred thousand headlines in five mainstream newspapers dating back to 1967. The newspapers are the top five U.S. dailies, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Headlines spanning five decades were put into two datasets, one comprising 17,492 Palestinian-centric headlines, and another comprising 82,102 Israeli-centric headlines. Using Natural Language Processing techniques, authors of the study assessed the degree to which the sentiment of the headlines could be classified as positive, negative, or neutral. They also examined the frequency of using certain words that evoke a particular view or perception.

Key findings of the study are:

- Since 1967, use of the word “occupation” has declined by 85% in the Israeli dataset of headlines, and by 65% in the Palestinian dataset;
- Since 1967, mentions of Palestinian refugees have declined by an overall 93%;
- Israeli sources are nearly 250% more likely to be quoted as Palestinians;
- The number of headlines centering Israel were published four times more than those centering Palestine;
- Words connoting violence such as “terror” appear three times as much as the word “occupation” in the Palestinian dataset;
- Explicit recognition that Israeli settlements and settlers are illegal rarely appears in both datasets;
- Since 1967, mentions of “East Jerusalem,” distinguishing that part of the city occupied by Israel in 1967 from the rest of the city, appeared only a total of 132 times;
- *The Los Angeles Times* has portrayed Palestinians most negatively, followed by *The Wall Street Journal*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, and lastly *The New York Times*;
- Coverage of the conflict has reduced dramatically in the second half of the fifty-year period.

While a number of analyses examining how some news outlets have covered the conflict

were published in recent years, they were limited to particular events, such as the First Intifada or Operation Cast Lead. The latest study, authored by Usaid Siddiqui and Owais Zaheer, provides a much broader vantage point.

“We wanted to examine this issue in a much larger timeframe. I think it helps us understand different patterns in the coverage across time, and gives us a lot more information that people cannot simply dismiss or deny,” Siddiqui said.

“The role of the news in framing and rendering the subjects of stories is a powerful influencer in agenda-setting and constructing narratives,” Zaheer said.

The relationship between the news and politics, as well as the resultant narratives, has been the subject of a plethora of literature. As Hayden White noted in his 1980 work for *Critical Inquiry*, “narrative in general, from the folk tale to the novel, from annals to the fully realized ‘history,’ has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority.”

Four years later, in “Permission to Narrate,” Edward Said pointed out that even as Palestinians were supported by the legality, legitimacy, and authority of international law, resolutions, and consensus, which is the case until this day, U.S. policymakers and media outlets simply refused to “make connections, draw conclusions, [and] state the simple facts.” This refusal remains a mainstay of U.S. media and politics, including a rejection of the central truth that the Palestinian narrative “stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine.”

But, “facts require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them,” Said added, and in the U.S. “where Israeli propaganda seems to lead a life of its own,” the facts do not fit the narrative newspapers like those examined in the study have propagated.

Nearly thirty-five years since Said’s seminal work, the numbers revealed in the study unambiguously support his view with a quantitative edge, showing a consistent and systematic bias against Palestinians. It is consistent because it spans five decades, and systematic because the coverage has repeatedly responded to the need of Israel to justify its occupation as it metastasized over the years. For instance, assessing the frequency of certain words per decade, the study found correlations with the stated policy goals of both Israel and the U.S. There was a similar decline of mentions of the occupation, Palestinian refugees, and East Jerusalem, in addition to the portrayal of Palestinians in a negative light, in line with U.S.-Israeli policy goals.

One of the most glaring omissions committed by the newspapers analyzed in the study can be deduced from the dramatic decline of coverage since 1993, when Palestinians and Israelis initiated the now-defunct peace process. According to the study, “between 1967 and 1992, there were an average of 1,200 headlines” covering both datasets, “while only 700 on average in the period since.” This decline can be reasonably attributed to how U.S. newspapers have since presented Israelis and Palestinians: as equals engaged in negotiations, often portrayed in the media using the “both sides” frame. But this frame “deprives readers of context” that is central to understanding the occupation, the study notes. There are two sides, one is an occupying power, Israel, and the other languishes as its occupied subject, Palestine. The notion of a “process” between “both sides” has only served

to obscure the reality that there is no peace.

Another evident obfuscation concerns the siege of Gaza. Now in its 11th year, the blockade of the Gaza Strip earned low mentions in either datasets of the headlines examined in the study. Meanwhile, use of the word “ Hamas ” is among the top ten words used in the Palestinian-centric headlines, even though the Islamic movement was only founded in 1987. This obfuscation of the situation in the Gaza Strip, which Hamas has governed for little over a decade, often led readers to associate the besieged territory with terrorism and violence.

In addition to lobbying efforts by pro-Israel partisans, recent shifts in U.S. policy toward Palestine can also be traced to the biased coverage and evident omissions the study confirms. Whether it is the attempt to dismantle the United Nations Reliefs and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), or the tacit recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital by relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, these policy shifts have been informed by the consistent omission of the facts in U.S. newspapers.

“ It’s not just the Trump administration. We do not see a deeper push back on issues like UNRWA because coverage of Palestinian refugees has been systematically censored,” Zaheer said.

Broadcast media in the U.S. is also guilty of efforts to omit Palestinian voices.

In one instance, during Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, examining only a sliver of the 51-days assault (June 29 and July 10), CNN broadcasted 28 appearances of Israeli public officials and laymen, while granting nearly 40% less appearances to Palestinians officials and laymen, a total of 16 appearances. The blatantly disproportionate coverage caused a controversy at the time, prompting CNN to release a statement insisting its coverage was fair. Explaining this imbalance, author and former journalist Marda Dunsky told PolitiFact that it was caused by an “ accessibility issue ”: advocates of Palestinian perspectives are neither readily available nor have the capacity to navigate the U.S. media landscape.

Forward to November 2018: Marc Lamont Hill, a Temple University professor and former CNN commentator, spoke at a United Nations event commemorating the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. In his remarks, Hill urged the international community to “ free Palestine, from the river to sea,” referring to historic Palestine. Taking the remark out of context, pro-Israel organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) condemned Hill as an anti-Semite. The ensuing campaign by the ADL led CNN to cave under pressure and to respond by firing Hill, one of its popular commentators.

In the aftermath of Hill’s incident, another media personality shared the story of his firing from CNN International on Twitter: Ahmed Shihab Eldin. In 2015, Shihab Eldin was about to travel to Atlanta, the home of CNNI’s headquarters. But, before arriving, Shihab Eldin received a call from the Director of Programming who had hired him:

“ the higher ups have weighed in... and we have to rescind our offer,” the Director told Shihab Eldin. “ The closest answer I could get on record after a lengthy meeting was [that] I was ‘ politically exposed,’ whether it was my Palestinian origins or my fact-based writings that criticized the Israeli gov [sic] in the past,” Shihab Eldin said on Twitter.

Considering the study findings, what the firing of Hill and Shihab Eldin reveals is that the issue is hardly a matter of accessibility, whether in broadcast or print news. The truth, as Said observed, is that when an honest criticism of Israel is expressed, the result can be catastrophic.

“One small index is the fact that the Anti-Defamation League in America and the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee have each published books identifying Israel’s ‘enemies’ and implying tactics for police or vigilante action,” he added in “Permission to Narrate.”

Such tactics have grown more vicious over the past thirty years, with Canary Mission, a website dedicated to portraying advocates of Palestinian rights as anti-Semites, as the latest iteration. As Siddiqui said,

“calling colonialism or occupation by their own names is something out of bounds for many news outlets.”

But the tide seems to be turning. Last week, Rashida Tlaib, the first Palestinian-American Congresswoman was inaugurated into the 116th Congress. Tlaib is among an emerging progressive contingent that has challenged the long-established rules of the media and politics game regarding Israel. She has endorsed BDS and will lead a congressional trip for newly sworn-in members to Palestine, countering the trip traditionally offered by AIPAC. Appearing in a traditional Palestinian Thobe, Tlaib was sworn into Congress amidst a wide-reaching campaign on social media celebrating her Palestinian heritage and culture. As researcher and activist Hanna Alshaikh [noted](#),

“while the Palestinian-American community, [and Palestinians broadly have] historically been rendered invisible or pushed to the sidelines, Tlaib has pushed back, proudly entering the halls of Congress.”

The growth of the Palestine solidarity movement, the election of Tlaib, and the numerous resources available to the newspapers examined in the study beg the question whether these and other news outlets will continue to tarnish their record by their evident disregard of the Palestinian narrative, and the facts about Palestine.

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