

CNN's Israel Bias Has Been Laid Bare. But CNN Is the Norm, Not the Exception. Jonathan Cook

Western media can never truly report the extent of Israel's criminality because to do so would be to expose their long-running complicity in those crimes

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Leaks from within CNN reveal that for months its executives have been actively imposing an editorial line designed to reinforce [Israel's](#) framing of events in [Gaza](#), to the point of obscuring atrocities by the Israeli military.

The dictates, say insiders, have resulted in senior staff refusing to accept assignments to the region "because they do not believe they will be free to tell the whole story". Others [suspect](#) they are being kept away by editors who fear they will fight the restrictions.

Internal memos insist that stories be approved by the station's Jerusalem bureau, where staff are widely seen as partisans who slant reports in Israel's favour. Palestinian perspectives are tightly restricted.

"Ultimately, CNN's coverage of the Israel-Gaza war amounts to journalistic malpractice," one staffer told an [investigation](#) by the Guardian newspaper.

According to staff accounts, CNN's pro-Israel directives come from the very top - Mark Thompson, a TV executive who was hired from the BBC. Thompson, the Guardian article notes, was remembered by BBC staff for "bowing to Israeli government pressure on a number of occasions" - presumably one of the qualifications that won him the job heading CNN.

It was he who notoriously championed in 2009 the BBC's controversial [decision](#) for the first time not to air the annual fundraising appeal of the Disasters Emergency Committee, which is a group of major British charities, because the monies were going to Gaza after Israeli

bombing had devastated it.

Alongside the unhappiness at CNN, there is reported to be [disquiet at the BBC](#). Staff, including senior presenters, held a meeting last month with Director General Tim Davie, one of Thompson's successors, to accuse the corporation of anti-Palestinian bias.

They expressed concerns about the "dehumanising" language used to describe Palestinians killed in Gaza and the [BBC's failure](#) to cover important stories reported by Al Jazeera and other networks.

A source told the Deadline website that the group of dissenters was surprised by Davie's candour. He is said to have admitted that the pro-Israel lobby "was more organised than Palestinian supporters in its dealings with the BBC".

Skewed Agendas

None of this should come as a surprise.

Middle East Eye has [highlighted](#) the clearly skewed priorities of western news agendas since Hamas broke out of Gaza on 7 October – some 17 years after Israel began imposing a military siege that had already left the enclave barely habitable.

In the carnage that day caused by Hamas' attack – as well as Israel's indiscriminate violent response – some 1,139 people in Israel were killed.

As MEE has [noted](#) previously, the entire western press corps, not just CNN and the BBC, has failed in its basic duty to present a balanced picture of what has been going on over the past four months.

It has also [failed](#) to treat Israeli claims with the scepticism they deserve, especially since Israel has a long track record of being caught out in lies and deceptions.

Paradoxically, given its exposure of concerns at CNN, many of the accusations of journalistic failure levelled at CNN and the BBC could be directed at the Guardian newspaper too – or any other establishment media organisation.

Following Hamas' 7 October break-out, Israel unleashed [a devastating assault](#) on Gaza's population – so far leaving tens of thousands of Palestinians dead or missing under rubble.

Yet all western media misleadingly continue to frame Israel's rampage in Gaza – including the collective punishment inflicted on civilians by denying them food and water – variously as "retaliation", "a war with Hamas", and "an operation to eliminate Hamas".

Western media have also largely avoided characterising as ["ethnic cleansing"](#) the Israeli military's order for Palestinians to leave their homes. As a result, 1.7 million have been trapped in a small area in southern Gaza where they face relentless bombing.

Similarly, there has been almost [no mention](#) of a long-held plan by Israel – which it now appears close to realising – to drive Gaza's population into the Sinai desert, in neighbouring [Egypt](#).

And the same media outlets have refused to connect the all-too-obvious dots that Israel – in

destroying most of Gaza's homes, forcibly shutting almost all of its medical facilities and cutting off food and water, while also demanding international [defunding of Unrwa](#), the United Nations' main aid agency to Gaza - is pursuing an openly [genocidal policy](#).

Israel is making Gaza unlivable, just as Giora Eiland, adviser to the Israeli defence minister, [vowed](#) Israel would do at the outset of its assault: "Gaza will become an area where people cannot live."

When the media do refer to genocide, it is strictly in the context of the International Court of Justice's decision to [put Israel on trial](#) for the "crime of crimes". Even then, the establishment media have largely [minimised](#) the significance of the World Court's ruling, or even spun it as a victory for Israel.

Astonishingly, the ICJ's panel of 17 justices has proven to be far more courageous than western media journalists.

Feeble Whistleblowers

It is notable that, although the Guardian refers to a "backlash" at CNN, the only meaningful evidence for that backlash is a group of journalists airing their grievances anonymously to the Guardian.

The self-professed "fearless truth-tellers" at CNN and the BBC have, by their own admission, exposed themselves as too cowed to report truthfully about Israel's atrocities in Gaza.

It is not journalists and on-the-ground reporting that is shaping the news coverage, they complain. It is well-paid media executives, looking over their shoulders at corporate advertisers, government officials and a pro-Israel lobby tightly networked into both.

The journalists cited by the Guardian are too afraid even to go on the record with their criticisms. They are the very feeblest kind of whistleblowers.

They lack even the minimal courage shown by the 800 US and European officials who [signed](#) a statement condemning their governments for sidelining expert advice and risking complicity in "one of the worst human catastrophes of this century".

Where are the western journalists demanding that Israel stop its campaign of assassinations of Palestinian journalists? Or that Israel end [a media siege](#) that prevents foreign correspondents from reaching a genocide zone unless they are embedded with Israeli soldiers?

Why are journalists [not raising](#) these matters in public, or putting the Israeli government officials they so regularly host on air on the spot by demanding an explanation?

There is also a fundamental misunderstanding demonstrated by the comments CNN staffers have made to the Guardian. One observed: "There's a lot of internal strife and dissent. Some people are looking to get out."

Another noted of the Jerusalem bureau's role that "critical changes - from the introduction of imprecise language to an ignorance of crucial stories - ensure that nearly every report, no matter how damning, relieves Israel of wrongdoing".

But while CNN may be the worst of a rotten bunch, the simple truth is that there are no establishment media destinations where these disillusioned journalists are going to find that they can speak freely about Israel's crimes, let alone about its overarching genocidal goals.

Should they really try to act as truth-tellers, they are most likely to share the fate of [Antoinette Lattouf](#), a journalist fired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for reposting a report by Human Rights Watch on Israeli atrocities.

Lattouf had been the focus of [a pro-Israel lobby campaign](#) demanding her dismissal after she investigated the veracity of a video [purporting](#) to show protest crowds in Sydney chanting "Gas the Jews".

As usual, the story was unquestioningly [reported](#) by much of the western media. Last week, a lengthy New South Wales police [investigation](#) concluded that the audio track had been faked.

Left in the Dark

One of the main criticisms of CNN's coverage under Thompson is that he has insisted on a pro-Israel framing. One management memo states: "We must continue always to remind our audiences of the immediate cause of this current conflict, namely the Hamas attack and mass murder and kidnap of civilians".

According to the insiders, CNN has used Hamas' 7 October attack "to implicitly justify Israeli actions, and that other context or history was often unwelcome or marginalised".

As one staffer observed: "Every action by Israel - dropping massive bombs that wipe out entire streets, its obliteration of whole families - the coverage ends up massaged to create a 'they had it coming' narrative."

But as MEE has detailed previously, it is not just CNN that has been determined to impose a bogus balance that usefully allows it to equivocate over genocide.

For months on end, the BBC and other outlets have revisited the historic horrors of 7 October, all too often at the expense of broadcasting the current horrors of Israel's slaughter in Gaza.

The discovery, for example, of [a mass grave](#) last week in northern Gaza, the victims handcuffed and with signs that they had been tortured before execution, has been buried by the western media.

As Kenneth Roth, head of Human Rights Watch, [wondered](#) in a tweet: "Why isn't this a bigger story?" Who can doubt it most certainly would have been, were the bodies Ukrainian and were Russia, not Israel, in the frame?

Why isn't this a bigger story? "Palestinians demand international inquiry after mass grave found in Gaza. Bodies of Palestinian detainees who were handcuffed, blindfolded discovered in plastic bags near northern Gaza school."
<https://t.co/Ka3waHT0ie>

— Kenneth Roth (@KenRoth) [February 5, 2024](#)

There is a pattern of omitting evidence that contradicts Israel's official narrative, and one that began with the events of 7 October – supposedly the vital, immediate context CNN executives claim needs constantly emphasising as the “cause of this current conflict”.

Astonishingly, for weeks western outlets have refused to report on Israeli media investigations that have re-evaluated the events of October 7 and upended official Israeli claims.

Western audiences have been left completely in the dark.

Since 7 October, Israel and the western media have promoted the story that Hamas burned Israelis alive – apparent savagery that quickly became the chief justification for Israel's genocidal bombing and starving of Gaza's population. But Israeli media investigations strongly [indicate](#) that it was not Hamas but Israel itself that incinerated many of its citizens with tank shells and Hellfire missiles fired by Apache helicopters.

Those reports reveal that Israeli commanders, blindsided by the Hamas attack, invoked the military's notorious “Hannibal directive”, which requires Israeli soldiers to stop Israelis being taken hostage, even if it results in their being killed.

This “mass Hannibal”, as one Israeli commander called it, has been set out [in great detail](#) by veteran military correspondents at the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth.

Similarly, none of the western media have seen fit to report that the Israeli military's own ethics adviser, Professor Asa Kasher of Tel Aviv University, has [called](#) the Israeli military's actions that day “horrifying” and in urgent need of investigation by a state commission of inquiry.

He told Israel's Haaretz newspaper that he suspected the invocation of the Hannibal directive against Israeli civilians, rather than captured Israeli soldiers, was against Israeli law.

Career Suicide

The problem is not just that the western media have acted as one in blanking out persuasive evidence of the crimes Israel committed on 7 October. They have also, again as one, been credulously ascribing particularly barbarous crimes to Hamas on the most tenuous of evidence – unsubstantiated claims that Israel has then been using to justify its genocidal rampage.

That started in the immediate wake of 7 October with allegations that Hamas had variously beheaded babies, hung them from washing lines and roasted them in ovens. These claims were even echoed by the White House.

There is still zero evidence for any of them.

CNN staff are upset that Hadas Gold, one of its reporters in Jerusalem – part of the unit vetting all copy about Gaza – uncritically recycled lies from the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

She described Hamas' denials about the beheaded babies as unbelievable “when we

literally have video of these guys, of these militants, of these terrorists doing exactly what they say they're not doing to civilians and to children".

In fact, no one had seen such videos, least of all CNN. She was simply repeating the falsehoods she was being told by Israeli officials and passing them off as incontrovertible facts. But this abandonment of the most basic of journalistic principles is not restricted to CNN. Most of the western media [hurried to](#) accuse Hamas of murdering and beheading babies.

Caution can safely be thrown to the wind when it comes to claims against Hamas, when no western journalists would ever dare to so recklessly promote evidence-free claims against Israel. They do not need a memo from management to understand that it would be career suicide.

Which is why academic research into coverage of Israel and Palestine always reaches the same conclusion: that media bias against Palestinians is off the charts.

For instance, a study of the BBC's first month of coverage of Israel's attack on Gaza found a complete inconsistency in the language used.

The terms "murder", "murderous", "mass murder", "brutal murder" and "merciless murder" were used constantly to describe, and remind viewers of, the deaths of Israelis on the single day of 7 October. Those [terms were not used once](#) in covering the many weeks of Israel's slaughter of Palestinians.

As ever, the media implicitly confers a legitimacy and legality on Israeli violence, even when it is committing genocide, that Palestinian violence is automatically denied.

Blackout of Hamas

This problem very much infects not just the popular press but the so-called serious, "liberal" media too.

The Guardian has followed the New York Times in not only failing to report on the horrors Israel unleashed on its own citizens on 7 October. Both have also actively promoted the evidence-free claim against Hamas that it carried out "systematic" rape that day, using sexual violence as a weapon of war.

The New York Times [breathed](#) credibility into this claim in a widely shared feature story in late December. The family of the supposed primary rape victim cited by the New York Times immediately [accused](#) the paper of advancing a falsehood and of manipulating them. There were other major discrepancies and inconsistencies in the report.

After mounting internal protests among staff over the poorly evidenced story, the paper has indefinitely postponed an episode of its flagship "The Daily" podcast that was supposed to expand on the Times' original story.

The Intercept [set out](#) the New York Times' dilemma: either "run a version that hews closely to the previously published story and risk republishing serious mistakes, or publish a heavily toned-down version, raising questions about whether the paper still stands by the original report".

Even so, despite these evident weaknesses, the Guardian [regurgitated](#) the Times' story precisely – based on the same discredited Israeli sources.

What makes these misrepresentations of the factual record so easy is the media's exclusive reliance on, and reflexive trust of, Israeli sources.

The Guardian's investigation of CNN, again paradoxically, cites concerns from staff that management has insisted on a blackout of Hamas statements, arguing that anything it says is "inflammatory rhetoric and propaganda" and therefore "not newsworthy".

One staffer noted: "CNN viewers are being prevented from hearing from a central player in this story... It is not journalism to say we won't talk to someone because we don't like what they do."

But this is standard media practice when it comes to Hamas. The BBC and other outlets indicate their inherent ideological bias in appending their governments' self-serving designation of Hamas as "a terrorist organisation". They would never dare describe Israel – quite accurately – as "on trial for genocide by the International Court of Justice".

As former UK ambassador Craig Murray [noted](#), the BBC led their news with an eight-minute segment recycling unevidenced Israeli allegations of involvement by UN refugee agency staff in Gaza with Hamas. The BBC's reporting effectively rationalised the UK government's [decision to defund Unrwa](#), even in the face of an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe there.

It was Channel 4, in an all-too-rare moment of true journalism, that later [showed](#) that the documents sent by Israel to the UK and other governments provided no evidence to back up its claims.

It is precisely the anti-journalistic decision to ignore Hamas' views, as well as sidelining wider Palestinian perspectives, that gives Israel and its lobby groups free rein to spread their own inflammatory rhetoric and propaganda.

All too often, Hamas is pre-judged as guilty, whatever it is accused of. This vilification process even extends to those showing solidarity with Gaza's suffering, including millions who have marched in western cities. They have been repeatedly [labelled](#) and vilified as Hamas supporters.

The Real Pressures

The Guardian offers various explanations for why CNN has failed so dismally to cover properly the slaughter in Gaza. All have an element of truth about them.

CNN is indeed afraid of antagonising the US government and challenging a critical part of its foreign policy agenda.

There are undoubted commercial pressures from advertisers. The Israel lobby can be confident its threats will be taken seriously when journalists face being accused of antisemitism for stepping out of line. And all of these pressures are compounded by the difficulties its journalists face in accessing Gaza.

But what the Guardian does not want its readers to notice is that all of these pressures

apply not just to CNN but to every other corporate media outfit, including the Guardian itself. Which is why the failures are across the board, not confined to one or two broadcasters.

And those pressures are not just current ones. They are there all the time. Which is why the state-corporate media have refused to treat with any seriousness the arguments of leading Israeli and international human rights organisations that Israel is [an apartheid](#), racist state, and one that [systematically oppresses](#) Palestinians.

But even these explanations fail to tell the whole story. The deeper truth is that western commercial media is no more separate from the corporate interests of its advertisers than a state broadcaster like the BBC is from the key interests of the state that funds it. They are integrally tied together.

The large corporations and billionaires that own the media are heavily invested in the arms and fossil fuel industries that require the West's continuing colonial-style, military dominance of the planet and its resources.

Israel has long been the lynchpin of western establishments' control of the oil-rich Middle East, and a testbed for weapons, new technology, surveillance and missile interception systems.

Although it is rarely mentioned, it is western bombs currently devastating Gaza, and it is western-financed technology that protects Israel from retaliation. Without endless western support, Israel would never have been established on the ruins of the Palestinians' homeland. And, without unstinting backing, it would long ago have been forced to make peace with its neighbours.

It is with this context - and only this context - that the media's consistent, predictable and reflexive coverage of the region can be explained. Israel is invariably given the benefit of the doubt, even when its crimes are unmistakable, while the Palestinians are assumed to be committing savagery, even when the evidence is flimsy or non-existent.

The reality is that the western media can never truly report the nature and extent of Israel's decades of criminality. Because to do so would be to expose their long-standing complicity in those crimes.

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