

The Link

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The Coverage — and Non-Coverage — of Israel-Palestine

**by * The New York Times * Associated Press
* Los Angeles Times * San Francisco Chronicle
* NPR * ABC * CBS * NBC**

By Alison Weir

In the fall of 2004, we visited the Palestinian Territories.
Such a simple statement, and such a complicated reality.

Let me try again...

In the fall of 2004, we visited a large, open-air prison. A prison whose guards keep people out, when they choose to, as well as *in*, humiliating and violating those they dislike; a prison into which the jailers periodically shoot and send regiments of destruction; a prison full of mini-prisons and convoluted rules that change with the wind. A complicated, teeming prison in which there are wedding festivals and dancing; where babies laugh and the tea is flavored with mint and sage; and where desperation silently waits.

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About This Issue

Alison Weir and Daniel Okrent were friends and student journalists in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Up until the end of May, Okrent was ombudsman for The New York Times; Weir is executive director of If Americans Knew.

This past April Weir met with Okrent who was preparing a column on the Times's coverage of Israel/Palestine. She gave him a 23-page report, along with approximately 40 pages of documentation showing the sharp disparity in how Israeli and Palestinian deaths are reported in the "newspaper of record."

In this issue of The Link Weir tells what resulted from that meeting. She also reports on how other leading news outlets cover the Palestine/Israel conflict.



Alison Weir

Alison came to our attention back in 2003. In October of that year, after participating in a debate at the University of California at Berkeley, she received a death threat on her answering machine warning her and her coworkers not to be in their office at 2 p.m. the next day. At 1 p.m. on that day, Weir went to her office, escorted by Berkeley police who first had made a sweep of the building and neighborhood. She was still there, without police protection, at 2 p.m.

We are pleased to welcome Alison Weir to the pages of The Link.

Our books and videos are listed on pages 14-15.

John F. Mahoney
Executive Director

(Continued from Page 1.)

In fall, 2004, my daughter and I traveled to Palestine—to the West Bank. And the Israeli guards let us in. But then we went to Nablus, a historic and ancient city in the northern sector of the West Bank. We stood in the crowded line full of women, men, and children waiting to pass through the double turn-style gate into this interior, mini-prison, until it was our turn, and as we walked, one at a time, through that lonely, eerie twenty feet, the soldiers' guns trained on us, the soldiers waved us back. "You are not allowed in," they pronounced, and ignored our protests and our American passports.

But later we found a back way in, over the hills, and then we saw a little of what they didn't want us to see, and heard about the rest. We visited Balata refugee camp, one of the dense communities around the West Bank and Gaza created by the 1948 *Naqba*, the "Catastrophe," when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced off their land with the creation of Israel. These refugee communities are often on the outskirts of town and bear the major brunt of Israeli invasions. Their residents are among the poorest and most desperate in Palestine, and they contain pockets of resistance to Israeli military occupation.

We talked to a man in his late twenties who had recently adopted nonviolent methods of resistance. He told us that he used to have a group of close friends—about eight other guys that he'd grown up with. They would always hang out together, joke around. When Israeli forces launched a major invasion into Balata and Nablus—100 tanks descended on the area in April 2002—many joined the Palestinian resistance. One by one all these friends have been killed, and now "Sami," as we'll call him, was the only one still alive.

We learned that Israeli forces in armored vehicles periodically invaded Ba-

lata, occupying homes and shooting residents without provocation. While sometimes there were small numbers of Palestinian men with guns trying to resist these invasions, often there was no armed resistance at all. In many cases there were only kids throwing stones at these invading vehicles. The Israeli soldiers would then shoot these kids. The main street down which these Israeli armored vehicles would drive was bullet riddled and teeming with children. We also interviewed two old ladies whose home had occasionally been taken over by Israeli soldiers, who would then shoot out the windows at the people below. We saw a cemetery where children played—it was one of the few open spaces in this dense community—and people described how Israeli soldiers would taunt the children. Several kids had recently been killed there.

We were told of an incident that had occurred approximately two weeks before. There had been another of these regular Israeli “incursions” down the main street. The vehicles had stayed there for twenty minutes, asserting their control, and there had been no resistance against them. At one point an Israeli soldier poked his gun out the porthole of his vehicle, aimed at a boy nearby, and pulled the trigger. The boy, who looked to be about 13, was shot in the lower abdomen with a metal bullet coated by rubber. A Reuters photographer had photographed this incident, and an Associated Press cameraman had filmed it. We were told that the video of the incident had been sent to the Associated Press bureau in Jerusalem, and that it had been erased.

We were shocked. On what possible basis could this footage not be considered newsworthy? We decided to look into this incident further. In Balata there was a handful of international peace activists, members of the International Solidarity Movement, who were there to act as witnesses, and who attempted to intercede nonviolently in instances of aggression in order to reduce the violence in the conflict. Several of these people, an American woman and a British woman, had witnessed this event and described it to us in detail. They had recorded the number of the Israeli armored vehicle, and had written down the names of the two photographers who had filmed the incident. We talked to both photographers, who confirmed the facts. We found the hospital where the boy was still being treated, interviewed the boy himself, his father, his older brothers, and the doctor who had treated him. All the facts confirmed what we had been told. The boy was named Ahmed, and it turned out that he was actually 14, though he looked considerably younger. He had been shot with a rubber-coated steel bullet, which had penetrated his bladder. He had undergone an operation, and was still recovering.

The boy told us he was afraid of Israeli soldiers. He

showed us a scar on his leg, where he had been shot previously. While we were in the hospital, we came across several other kids who had been shot. One had a fractured femur. He said he hadn’t even been throwing stones, but that next time he would. Another boy had been shot in the chest. The doctors had barely saved him. Another boy, a visitor, showed us a scar at the corner of his mouth and missing teeth from when he had been shot. We had a camera along and filmed all of this.

After a few days we returned to Jerusalem.

Again, this sounds so deceptively simple. We made our way through armed Israeli checkpoints, rode in crowded vehicles that were stopped by Israeli police, wondered when or if we would be harassed. When we arrived in Jerusalem, we went straight to the AP bureau. We discovered that it was in a large building in the Israeli section of Jerusalem that appeared to house most, maybe all, of the major U.S. news bureaus. We went up to the 8th floor, still carrying our packs, and entered the AP office.

We walked up to the bureau chief, Steve Gutkin, and asked him about this incident and why the tape was erased instead of broadcast. He became flustered and said he wasn’t allowed to say anything, that AP requires its Corporate Communications office to respond to all requests for information. Later, when we returned to the U.S., we phoned AP Corporate Communications and asked Jack Stokes, director of media relations, about this incident. I told Stokes about what I had learned, and asked him whether AP had indeed erased this video, and, if so, why. He said he would look into this and get back to me with the information. When I phoned him a few days later, he said that he had looked into it, and that this was “an internal AP matter” that he could tell me nothing about.

In other words, AP had video footage of an Israeli soldier specifically and intentionally shooting a young Palestinian boy who was not attacking them, and they erased it. I don’t know how often they do this.

But back to the West Bank, and Steve Gutkin. My daughter and I run a small organization that focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian issue and, in particular, studies how it is covered in the American media. We were there to present our research into this topic at a conference in Ramallah, as well as to gather more information. Extremely disturbed at what we were discovering about AP news coverage, we decided to investigate further. Months earlier I had heard that AP had a bureau in Ramallah in the West Bank, but when I had phoned AP in Washington, DC, and New York about this, no one seemed to have heard of it. AP receptionists kept trying to look it up, and then would give me the number for the Jerusalem bureau, saying that

was the only one listed.

We traveled to Ramallah, phoned a Palestinian agency, and asked if there was indeed an AP bureau in the city. They said there was, and gave us the phone number. We called this and were readily given directions to the bureau. When we arrived, we found a fully-staffed, professional bureau. While the Jerusalem bureau had appeared to be largely, perhaps exclusively, staffed by Israelis and Jewish Americans, this office appeared to contain journalists of Palestinian ethnicity.

We spoke to the bureau chief at length, and to his associate, an on-camera female reporter. They described how their news process worked. They and other correspondents throughout the Palestinian territories would cover events that took place in the area, then send their reporting to writers in the Jerusalem bureau, who would write the actual article. For example, while we were there, they received a phone call from a correspondent in Nablus. This time a 12-year-old boy had been killed. The boy, Bashar Zabara, had been throwing stones toward Israeli forces approximately 300 meters away. He had been shot in the throat with live ammunition. The bureau chief immediately phoned the Jerusalem bureau with all the details. Journalists in the Jerusalem bureau would then write up the story and send it out to the many worldwide papers that subscribe to AP's services.

The fact that everything reported by the West Bank bureau was vetted by the Jerusalem bureau flagged our attention. AP Jerusalem was the bureau that had recently erased footage of a similar incident. We asked the Ramallah bureau journalists if they could send out wire stories themselves. They said no, that all reports went through the Jerusalem bureau.

I remembered the Ramallah bureau chief's name from having occasionally seen articles with his byline in the past. Confused, we asked him if he ever wrote news sto-

ries himself. He said no, that he always called the information into Jerusalem, and that they then wrote the stories there.

We were surprised—and concerned—to learn that the bylines and datelines of stories were being misrepresented in this way. Given the ethnic nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the fact that the ethnicities live and suffer in two different (if neighboring) locations, both the location and ethnicity of journalists writing about the conflict are particularly relevant. While it is certainly ap-

propriate to give full credit to journalists who gather information for a story, we felt that it was highly misleading that stories with a Palestinian byline and West Bank dateline were being written by Israeli and Jewish correspondents living in Israel—that one ethnic group in the conflict actually wrote news stories purported to be by reporters from the other ethnic group in the dispute.

If such a situation is for some reason necessary, it would seem important to disclose this fact with more accurate attribution, perhaps in the form of a byline reading "Reporting by ..., Written by ..."

Instead, we have articles containing, at least occasionally, a spin that I suspect the authors cited in the byline would be displeased to see, much less to receive credit for writing.

Later, back in the U.S., I looked up AP coverage of the 12-year-old who was shot in the throat while we were in the Ramallah bureau—the report the bureau chief phoned in to Jerusalem while we watched.

I found no story. Apparently, the Jerusalem bureau had not sent out a story on the incident. I did find an AP photo on the internet [reproduced on this page], but could not find a single American publication that had printed it—perhaps because there was no connecting story.

Also, I saw that AP Jerusalem had sent out no reports about any of the children with shattered bodies that we



Bashar Zabara, 12, killed by Israeli soldiers in Nablus, Nov. 1, 2004. —AP/Nasser Ishtayeh Ishtayeh

had visited in the Nablus hospital, despite the on-the-scene presence of paid AP journalists.

WHY ISRAEL/PALESTINE MATTERS TO US

I had first begun looking into news coverage of Israel-Palestine four years before this visit to the Palestinian territories. I was the editor of a small newspaper in California. I had never studied this conflict before, and knew almost nothing about it. When the current uprising began in the fall of 2000, however, I became curious about it and decided to follow the news more carefully. As I did this, I noticed that news reports seemed to be largely written from an Israeli point of view. Israeli sources were quoted first and far more frequently than Palestinian ones, for example. I began going on the internet to find more information, and was astounded at what I discovered. For months I followed events closely, increasingly drawn in by the immense disparity between the information I was reading from the foreign press and international websites, and the narrow sliver I was receiving from American media.

Finally, I decided to travel to Gaza and the West Bank as a freelance journalist in February and March of 2001. I traveled independently and alone, and was shocked at the devastation I found, and at the depth of human tragedy. I returned with a sense of obligation to tell other Americans the facts I was discovering, and about our connection to them. I founded an organization called If Americans Knew to provide this information to the public, as well as to undertake a systematic study of U.S. media coverage of Israel/Palestine.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been one of the most significant sources of global instability for over fifty years. It is the core conflict in the Middle East and is intimately connected to the “war on terror;” to the situations in Iraq, Iran, and Syria; and to America’s disastrously deteriorating relationship with the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims. In the “Holy Land” itself, it is the cause of continuing tragedy and daily misery, and according to a number of historians, in 1973 it came close to plunging the region—and perhaps the world—into a nuclear exchange. Many analysts feel such a possibility continues.

While the majority of the American public is unaware of this fact, American taxpayers are primary funders of Israeli actions.

More American tax money goes to Israel than to any other nation on earth—over \$10 million per day.

In addition to this, approximately \$3 billion of Ameri-

can tax money goes to Egypt every year (per capita, about one-twentieth the amount Israel receives). This funding was appropriated as part of an arrangement whereby the Egyptian government would largely refrain from opposing Israeli actions, so this money, too, could be considered in the total amount paid out annually on behalf of Israel.

While the amount of money dispersed to Palestinian organizations is significantly smaller than the above two categories, amounting to approximately \$0.23 million per day in 2004, this, too, should be included, bringing the yearly total to over \$9.7 billion.

In sum, then, over half of all American tax money sent abroad is connected to Israel/Palestine. In fact, a report commissioned by the U.S. Army War College estimates that the total financial cost to Americans of support for Israel over the years has been about \$1.6 trillion.

In addition to this massive financial connection, American citizens are also significant players in this conflict through our government’s critical role in representing Israeli interests in the international arena. In the United Nations alone, for example, the U.S. has exercised its veto 39 times on behalf of Israel.

For all of these reasons, it is essential that Americans be fully and accurately informed on Israel/Palestine, without bias in either direction.

STATISTICAL STUDIES

To determine how well the American media are fulfilling this critical function, our organization has undertaken the laborious but essential task of conducting statistical studies of media coverage of this issue. Our methodology is to examine clear, significant categories that are as impervious as possible to subjective bias. It is our view that the media’s job is to report as accurately as possible the facts on a topic. Indications about the extent to which the press is accomplishing this can be objectively measured.

Specifically, we look at the extent to which certain media outlets—e.g., The New York Times or ABC World News Tonight—cover the deaths of Israelis and Palestinians in the conflict. This approach allows meaningful statistical analysis that would be impossible in a qualitative study and provides a yardstick that allows us to determine whether media demonstrate even-handed respect for human life, regardless of ethnic or religious background.

We decided to count the number of reports of deaths for each side during a given period, and then compare these to the number of people actually killed. It is our view that deaths among both populations are equally

tragic.

Fortunately, reliable data for both populations is available from the widely respected Israeli human rights organization, B'Tselem (go to www.btselem.org for a full analysis of their findings).

In our studies we only include Israeli deaths directly caused by the actions of Palestinians, and vice versa. In addition to analyzing coverage of all deaths, we specifically examine reporting on children's deaths. These tragedies represent an especially human side of the uprising, and one that lies outside of most people's views of acceptable violence in armed conflict. The killing of children is especially repugnant to most people, and these deaths elicit extreme disfavor for those responsible for them. Therefore, we felt that studying how the media covered children's deaths would be particularly significant.

In spring 2005, we completed studies of *The New York Times*, the "newspaper of record," and three of the major television network evening news shows, *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News*. Not only are these news media the major sources of information for millions of Americans around the country, they are also the windows through which editors and producers of smaller newspapers and broadcast news stations throughout the nation view the conflict and gauge the accuracy of their own coverage. Their significance in forming Americans' views on Israel-Palestine cannot be overemphasized.

For each of these media outlets we examined coverage of deaths over two separate year-long periods. First, we analyzed coverage for the first year of the current uprising, September 29, 2000 through September 28, 2001. This period was selected for study in order to evaluate viewers' and readers' first impressions, which are crucial as they continue to try to make sense of the conflict. Coverage of this year set the context within which all subsequent reporting on the conflict is viewed, forming viewers' and readers' opinions as to who was initiating the violence and who was retaliating.

Second, we studied the coverage for 2004 to discover whether the patterns we found for the first year had continued, diminished, or increased several years into the intifada.

We looked into two types of reporting on deaths. The first and major focus of our study was on timely/specific reports and mentions of deaths; e.g., "four Palestinians/Israelis were killed yesterday." It is this ongoing reporting of deaths that provides people with their impression of a conflict. We also counted follow-up stories, so that, in theory, numbers of death reports could surpass

actual number of deaths, giving percentages that exceed 100 percent. We were surprised to find that this frequently occurred – but only for one population.

Secondarily, we examined cumulative reports, e.g., "The violence has left 200 Palestinians dead" or "200 Israelis have been killed in suicide bombings." While we believe that such summaries of deaths can provide useful information, especially when numbers for both populations are given in the same report (which, sadly, rarely occurred), it was our view that such mentions are not the equivalent of 200 individual reports on each of these deaths, and needed to be enumerated in their own, separate category.

For *The New York Times* we studied prominent reporting on deaths – i.e. deaths reported in headlines/lead paragraphs – and then conducted a month-long sub-study on deaths reported in the entire article. (Interestingly, we found that the patterns discovered in our study of prominent reporting essentially held true.)

For the television networks we studied transcripts of the full newscasts in addition to introductions by anchors.

Our findings are disturbingly decisive as they reveal a pervasive pattern of distortion. For every time period, for every news source, for every category except one, one population's deaths were covered at significantly higher rates than the other – in one case 13 times greater. The favored population was the Israeli one. We found that the only category in which Palestinian deaths were reported at similar rates to Israeli deaths was cumulative reports – "200 Palestinians/Israelis have been killed" – and this only during the first months of the first year. After that, even cumulative reports disproportionately covered Israeli deaths over Palestinian deaths.

In addition, we were startled to find that not only was daily reporting profoundly skewed, but that in 2004 not a single network even once reported the kind of full, two-sided cumulative report one would expect to be a regular feature of news coverage: the number of people killed among both populations since the intifada had begun.

Let us look at what was going on, and then at how this was reported.

In the first year of the current uprising, Sept. 29, 2000 to Sept. 28, 2001, 165 Israelis and 549 Palestinians were killed. In 2004 – a period that the media reported as a period of decreased violence – 107 Israelis were killed and 821 Palestinians. In other words, the media were using a highly Israeli-centric index for measuring calm/violence. As I will show later, this is common.

This pattern was found to be even greater for children

killed in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. In the first year, 28 Israeli children and 131 Palestinian children were killed. In 2004, eight Israeli children and 176 Palestinian children were killed. In other words, during our second study period, over 22 times more Palestinian children were killed than Israeli children.

Many people have reverse impressions of these death rates and of their trends. Perhaps even more significant, many Americans believe the chronology of deaths in this conflict to be the opposite of its reality. A survey two years after the intifada had begun found that 90 percent of respondents either had no idea which children were killed first in the conflict or thought them to be Israeli children, despite the fact that at least 82 Palestinian children were killed before a single Israeli child—and that this killing of Palestinian children had gone on for three and a half months before a single loss of life occurred among Israeli children. The single largest cause of these Palestinian deaths was gunfire to the head.

Our studies show why so many Americans have such diametrically incorrect impressions.

In the first year of coverage, The New York Times headlines and first paragraphs reported on Israeli deaths at a rate almost three times greater than Palestinian deaths. This 2.8 to one ratio was the closest to parity that we found in all of our studies. Perhaps that is why some pro-Israeli groups allege that the Times is “pro-Palestinian.”

ABC, CBS, and NBC covered Israeli deaths at rates 3.1, 3.8, and 4.0 times greater, respectively, than they covered Palestinian deaths.

What does this mean for people who relied on these sources for their understanding of the conflict? One of the most noteworthy aspects of this type of coverage is that it creates an illusion that roughly the same number of Israelis and Palestinians have died in the conflict: all of the media outlets reported similar numbers of deaths on both sides. ABC reported on 305 Israeli deaths and 327 Palestinian deaths. The Times reported on 197 Israeli deaths and 233 Palestinian deaths in headlines and first paragraphs. CBS and NBC both reported on more Israeli deaths than Palestinian deaths. Hence, they were all giving the impression of balanced coverage of a balanced violence during a time when 3.3 times more Palestinians were being killed.

For children, the disparity in coverage was even larger for all four outlets.

The New York Times reported prominently on Israeli children’s deaths at a rate almost 7 times greater than Palestinian children’s deaths.

Significantly, we found that while the number of New York Times prominent reports on Israeli children’s deaths, through follow-up stories, exceeded 100%, prominent reports on Palestinian children’s deaths represented a small fraction of the number actually killed.

As a result, Times’s coverage gave the impression that more Israeli children were killed than Palestinian children during a time when 4.7 more Palestinian children were actually killed.

Most of the networks were even worse: ABC reported Israeli children’s deaths at a rate 13.8 times greater than Palestinian children’s deaths, CBS at a rate 6.4 times greater, and NBC at a rate 12.4 times greater.

Again, we saw a pattern among the networks in which there were numerous follow-up stories on Israeli deaths, while only a small fraction of Palestinian deaths were being similarly covered:

In 2004, these distortions were amplified.

The New York Times reported prominently on overall Israeli deaths at a rate 3.7 times greater than Palestinian deaths, and on Israeli children’s deaths at a rate 7.5 times greater than Palestinian children’s deaths.

ABC, CBS, and NBC reported Israeli children’s deaths at rates 9.0, 12.8, and 9.9 times greater, respectively, than Palestinian children’s deaths.

A chronological graph of actual and reported deaths can be found on our website www.ifamericansknew.org. In all four news outlets (The New York Times, ABC, CBS, NBC) for both years of study, Palestinian deaths were reported along a curve that closely resembled the Israeli death rate, when in reality the actual curve for Palestinian deaths is far higher and slopes upward far sooner. This provides a striking illustration of the difference between the reality, in which deaths are heavily concentrated on one side, and the impression created in the major American media of a balanced conflict.

In our one-month sub-study of deaths reported in full New York Times articles (as opposed to the headlines and lead paragraphs), we found that the disparity in reporting grew even greater. The number of Palestinian deaths that were reported increased when the entire articles were studied—ten Palestinian deaths were reported for the first and only time in the last two paragraphs of articles—but we found that reports of Israeli deaths increased also, and at an even greater rate, due to the repetition of reports on Israeli deaths that had occurred in previous days.

Regarding Times’s coverage of cumulative totals, information that would have at least somewhat ameliorated the above misimpressions, we found that The Times had

never reported numbers for both populations side by side within the first paragraphs or headlines of articles. (Cumulatives were defined as reports summarizing deaths over a period of time greater than one week.)

Once in 2004, the paper reported a partial (e.g., for a shorter period of time than the entire intifada) cumulative figure of Palestinian deaths. Such a cumulative, however, without corresponding statistics for both populations, does little to enlighten readers on the comparative deaths among all people in the region.

In our month-long sub-study of full articles, The Times did mention full cumulative counts of fatalities for both populations side by side twice: once in paragraph 14 and once in paragraph 20 of an article.

The networks, also, rarely provided full two-sided cumulative reports, and partial two-sided cumulatives were only rarely given. Instead, we found that it was far more common for the networks to report one-sided cumulatives. These, whether full or partial, make it more difficult for the viewer to make a comparison and draw conclusions on the relative levels of violence. In fact, such one-sided cumulatives may at times do more to obscure understanding of the conflict than to enhance it. For example, ABC's March 22 report was typical: " Hamas has killed hundreds of Israelis over the years." We're not told over how many years, or how many hundreds. We're also not told how many Palestinians have been killed during this period—probably at least three times more.

The networks' full one-sided cumulative reports display an interesting pattern. All three networks reported full cumulatives of Palestinian deaths without corresponding numbers for Israelis in the first few months of the uprising, but quickly discontinued this practice. As the conflict continued, we found that cumulative reports of Israeli fatalities often provided information on extensive periods of time—frequently back to the beginning of the uprising or even before, while cumulative reports of Palestinian deaths tended to cover far shorter periods of time—often only weeks. Thus, similar numbers of deaths were frequently reported in these cumulatives, despite the fact that throughout the conflict Palestinians have been killed in substantially larger numbers than Israelis.

"BALANCE"

This phenomenon of achieving a deceptive appearance of reportorial "balance," achieved through actual enormous *imbalance*, was documented first by analyst Seth Ackerman of the media monitoring organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).

Ackerman conducted a study of National Public Ra-

dio's coverage of Israeli and Palestinian deaths during the first six months of 2001, and entitled his report "The Illusion of Balance." Ackerman found that NPR, which was being accused by Israel partisans as being "pro-Palestinian," had in reality reported Israeli deaths at a rate almost two and a half times greater than Palestinian ones, and Israeli children's deaths at rates almost four and a half times greater than Palestinian deaths. (For his study, Ackerman considered each reported death only once. If follow-up reports had been included, it is possible that the disparity would have been even larger.)

Moreover, Ackerman's study included an additional and extremely interesting category: a comparison of reports on deaths of armed combatants among both populations. He found that while an Israeli civilian victim was more likely to have his or her death reported on NPR, Palestinians were far more likely to have their deaths reported if they were security personnel than if they were civilians. Such distortion, of course, gives the impression that the Israelis being killed are civilians, and that the Palestinians being killed are armed fighters. The reality is that large numbers of civilians are being killed on both sides, and that far more Palestinian civilians have been killed than Israeli civilians.

Such distortion on a national scale often grows even greater on a local level, as news stories are cut to fit smaller editorial holes and editors choose which to place on front pages.

For example, a six-month study of the San Francisco Chronicle's coverage of children's deaths during the first six months of the intifada found that they had reported Israeli children's deaths at a rate 30 times greater than Palestinian children's deaths.

A similar study by Stanford professor John McManus of media monitoring organization Grade the News found that San Jose Mercury News front-page headlines had reported on Israeli deaths at a rate 11 times greater than Palestinian deaths. McManus found that during this period AP headlines had featured Israeli deaths at twice the rate they reported Palestinian deaths.

We have not yet conducted a formal study of the Los Angeles Times's coverage. In several cases it has run important stories that were omitted from The New York Times, and overall its coverage appears less distorted. Yet, one evening in February 2005, a breaking news report on their website stated that a suicide bombing had "shattered a months-long period of relative calm..."

I phoned the foreign desk immediately—there was still time to correct this story before it was published in the following day's print version—and pointed out that this alleged "months-long period of relative calm" had in

reality been a time of particularly high Palestinian casualties. The preceding months had included the killing of 170 Palestinian men, women, and children and the wounding of 379 more.

I was told that the story said the calm was “relative,” and therefore would not be modified. Not only did the next day’s paper contain this highly false statement, the LA Times refused to print a single op-ed or letter to the editor correcting it, despite receiving many. By the way, the story carried a double byline. I looked into the reporters and found that one was a neophyte to the Middle East, while the other was an Israeli whose son was about to join the Israeli military.

REACTIONS FROM THE MEDIA

How have these news organization responded to such studies?

In our reports we write: “Given that the media have a desire and a responsibility to cover this topic accurately, we provide these reports in the hope that our analyses can assist them in achieving this goal.” In our conclusions, we use almost the identical words that we used in one of our very first studies: “We assume that the San Francisco Chronicle is as disturbed as we have been to find these shortfalls in its quest to provide excellent news reporting to its readers. Now that it has been alerted to these distortions in its Israel-Palestine coverage, we encourage the Chronicle to undertake whatever changes necessary to provide accurate news coverage of this vital issue.”

Sadly, it appears that the Chronicle was indeed as disturbed as we were – but not at the distortion we had documented. Rather, indications have been that the paper was only disturbed that the profound flaws in their coverage were being exposed; there seems to be little interest in remedying the situation. Numerous phone calls to editor Phil Bronstein to present our findings in person remained unreturned. When we had the opportunity to ask Bronstein about it at a community forum, he publicly promised he would meet with us to discuss our findings. However, he has continued to refuse to meet with us.

It is interesting to note that Bronstein got his start at the San Francisco Jewish Bulletin, where one of his early journalistic exposés was on American corporations participating in the international boycott of Israel (Congress, following Israel’s directions, had made such financial pressure on Israel illegal).

Despite the Chronicle’s lack of interest in our findings, several local organizations and many individuals have found them important and have distributed thousands of

summaries of our report throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. We have presented our findings to a variety of Bay Area Rotary Clubs, at libraries, schools, and college campuses, and have discussed them on a number of radio programs. In addition, thousands of people have read our report online.

Other editors around the country have been more open to meeting with us. The reception has been mixed. Some editors of smaller papers were extremely surprised at the number of Palestinians actually being killed, and clearly had no idea that their coverage was so distorted. Their frequent conclusion – that the wire services that they subscribe to for international news stories bore much of the blame for this distortion – no doubt holds some validity.

The New York Times, unable to use the same excuse, instead has tried to ignore our evidence. An April 24, 2005 column by Public Editor Daniel Okrent on the Times coverage of Israel/Palestine, published a week after we had presented our findings to him in detail during a lengthy face-to-face meeting, omitted all mention of our two-year study of The Times’s coverage, the forty-plus pages of documentation we provided, and our significant findings. He did mention our organization, however, in a statement misrepresenting our views.

Interestingly, during the meeting in which we presented our findings, Okrent had asked us what we felt was the cause for the Times distortion, and how we would fix it.

We gave two answers: that figuring out where their system had broken down was up to them. They are the only ones who know the internal workings of the Times newsroom and thus are the best equipped to discover what is wrong.

At the same time, I told Okrent that I wondered how diverse their team of editors and reporters working on this issue is. Since Israel’s purpose and avowed identity is as “the Jewish state,” I commented that it seemed to me there should be approximately equal numbers of Jewish journalists and Palestinian/Arab/Muslim journalists, as well as journalists without ethnic connections to either side – perhaps African-American, Asian-American, or editors and reporters from other non-involved ethnicities .

He responded that there were insufficient numbers of Arab-American or Muslim-American journalists to balance out the many Jewish reporters in this country, and ignored the suggestion that people of other, neutral ethnicities be involved in covering this issue.

In his subsequent April 24, 2005 column, Okrent claimed that we had suggested that if insufficient

Arab/Muslim reporters could be found to balance Jewish reporters, then Jewish reporters should “be taken off the beat.” Okrent said that he found this “highly offensive.” I was shocked to see this misrepresentation of our meeting. If Americans Knew is opposed to discrimination in all its forms; proposing exclusion of any person based on ethnic or religious background is the antithesis of our philosophy. Moreover, there are many journalists of Jewish descent (several mentioned in this article) writing honestly and accurately on this subject (as on others), who bring valuable expertise and ability to their reporting. The last thing I would want would be to exclude such people. Rather than suggesting that any group be excluded, we had actually suggested that the Times *include more* ethnicities.

Outraged at his misrepresentation, I phoned and wrote The Times several times asking that a correction be published. Finally, at the bottom of his next column he stated I felt he had misrepresented our meeting, and added, “... interested readers can find her critique at www.ifamericansknew.com.”

Interestingly, analysis of the space allotted to the “two sides” in this follow-up column shows more lack of balance. While Okrent juxtaposes If Americans Knew with a pro-Israel organization, and exudes the manner of one taking neither “side,” he gives the highly pro-Israel organization 206 words, most of them high up in the column, and If Americans Knew only 44, at the end, again without informing readers of our detailed study.

As I responded in a letter to the editor, not published, this is a differential of approximately five to one (not even including the additional factor of placement), and an excellent index of the Times “balance” on this subject.

In a conversation with Times Deputy Foreign Editor Ethan Bronner, I was surprised to find Bronner similarly stating that it was impossible for The Times to find Arab or Muslim-American journalists to report on Palestine: he said that “...there aren’t hundreds of Arab or Muslim-Americans journalists in America.” I have no idea how many Arab-American or Muslim-American journalists there are (or how many Jewish-American journalists). All the Times needs to balance its Jewish reporters in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, however, is two. I don’t know how many editors serve on The Times’s foreign desk, but I suspect that attaining some approximation of balance at this level as well would also entail low single digits. We’re not talking armies of journalists here.

(A longer report on my communications with The Times is available on our website.)

WHAT IS CAUSING THE DISTORTION?

One of the most common responses to our studies is a question: what is causing this distortion? This is an extremely important question, since solutions require that the cause of a problem be correctly diagnosed. Answering it accurately and with precision will require further study, and, given sufficient resources, perhaps this is something we will undertake in the future. We encourage others to investigate it as well.

Following are some possible factors to be studied.

1. Do statistical or contextual patterns explain why Israeli deaths are covered more frequently? For example, do Israeli deaths occur in spurts, while Palestinians die more frequently but in smaller numbers, making the instances less newsworthy?

Analyses of the data on deaths suggest that there are no such patterns. There were cases where small numbers of deaths on the Israeli side resulted in headlines, and large numbers on the Palestinian side did not. Similarly, as we’ve stated above, civilians are being killed among both populations, children on both sides.

Still, more detailed work on this question would be valuable. Analyses along the lines of Seth Ackerman’s work in examining which deaths among both populations are being reported would be useful in clarifying coverage patterns.

2. Is there a vicious cycle of reporting at work? If the type of distortion our studies revealed on the media is not new, then journalists may have developed a particular mindset on this issue based on years of flawed reporting, which then influences how they themselves cover it.

Many journalists follow the news avidly, media reports providing their contextual understanding of Israel-Palestine. Editors who have neither studied the issue nor visited the region feel they are experts on it, and may find it hard to believe that coverage which is in line with the news they view on television and read in The New York Times is distorted. Conversely, accurate facts and reports that don’t fit this preconceived paradigm may be rejected.

3. How significant is the fact that American correspondents tend to live exclusively in Israel? In some cases (perhaps many or most cases), their partners and spouses are Israeli, as, at times, are their children. One of ABC’s major correspondents in the region, Martin Fletcher, is an example.

As noted above, bureaus are in Israel, and are largely staffed by Israelis. It is probably not surprising that these journalists are filing articles from an Israeli-centric per-

spective. It is important to note, however, that this intimate knowledge of the region they're covering may bring valuable depth to their reporting. On the other hand, the lack of journalists with this kind of first-hand life experience reporting from the Palestinian Territories may account for the massive imbalance we have found in news coverage. While reports from Palestinian journalists could help to counter this lack, the fact that these reports are being screened and edited by journalists living in Israel can be expected to diminish the balance such reporting could otherwise have provided.

4. Along these lines, to what extent is personal bias involved in creating the distortion we've found?

Journalists, like other people, possess prejudices and preferences, loyalties and allegiances. Early conditioning, family pressure, and received narratives are difficult to put aside. Such biases may color, intentionally or unconsciously, one's writing or editing on a subject.

An article entitled "Jewish journalists grapple with 'doing the write thing,'" in the Nov. 23, 2001 Jewish Bulletin of Northern California looked into this question, interviewing journalism students about how they would cover Israel. Its findings were inconclusive. Some students felt they would cover Israel impartially, some didn't. The Bulletin described one of the latter, Uzi Safanov: "'I'm a Jew before being a journalist, before someone pays me to write,' he said. 'If I find a negative thing about Israel, I will not print it and I will sink into why did it happen and what can I do to change it.' Safanov said that even if he eventually wrote about negative incidents that happen in Israel, he would try to find the way 'to shift the blame.'"

Another also spoke of the need to protect Israel: "'On campus there is already so much anti-Israeli sentiment that we have to be careful about any additional criticism against Israel,' said Marita Gringaus, who used to write for Arizona State University's newspaper. 'This is our responsibility as Jews, which obviously contradicts our responsibilities as journalists.'"

Still another felt that her background would inescapably affect her reporting, the Bulletin reporting: "...Meyers feels a loyalty to Jewish values. 'It doesn't matter if you are a journalist or in another profession... Our Jewish values influence every aspect of our lives. Nobody can be totally objective because we all come with our own perspective, our own biases, and that is going to come through in the writing.'"

On the other hand, there are numerous excellent Israeli and Jewish journalists reporting on this issue accurately. Some Israeli reporters regularly file investigative stories on Israeli abuses in the occupied territories. Simi-

larly, some of the student interviewees in the Jewish Bulletin article stressed the importance of reporting honestly and without prejudice. For example, one student said, "Journalists have to realize the importance of unbiased reporting, the fairness of portraying both sides. They are not supposed to be agencies."

5. How large a part do outside pressure and proactive news dissemination play in shaping news coverage?

Partisan groups are known for organizing phone-calling and letter-writing campaigns; boycotts have been organized against NPR and the LA Times, alleging that their coverage was "anti-Israel." An off-the-record comment made by the editorial page editor of a large metropolitan daily is noteworthy: "We write our editorials for our Jewish readers." Has there been a view that Israel is a "Jewish" subject, and that articles should be tailored to a particular, expected readership that these editors think holds a monolithic view on this subject? While pro-Palestinian groups are also beginning to organize media campaigns, these are still far smaller—an editor quoted in an article in *American Journalism Review* estimated them at one-tenth the activity level of pro-Israel efforts.

Similarly, how significant is lobbying by the Israeli government and pro-Israel organizations?

Israel makes great efforts at influencing the American media. The Israeli government employs such high-powered public relations firms as Howard J. Rubenstein Associates and Morris, Carrick & Guma to promote its version of events, and there are numerous think-tanks such as the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), the Middle East Forum, and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy actively disseminating information beneficial to Israel. Again, Palestinian officials and partisans are making similar efforts, but their activities are currently far smaller, their financing a fraction of that being mobilized on behalf of Israel, and they entered the game late.

6. To what degree do financial considerations of the "corporate media" influence news coverage?

Advertising and consumer pressures of the type noted above, interlocking business arrangements, and the quest for profits all need to be examined. The dynamics of these and the degree to which they're operative on Israeli-Palestinian coverage are unclear, particularly since coverage of Israel-Palestine so often reveals patterns of reporting that seem to lie outside the expected ratings-driven paradigm.

For example, reporting on Israel's killing of Rachel Corrie, a beautiful young American whose actions are

seen by many around the world as extraordinarily heroic, would likely have increased viewership and sold newspapers. Yet reports on this incident were minimal and follow-up stories virtually nonexistent. Similarly, footage of Israeli soldiers shooting at the cross on the Church of the Nativity and taking pot shots at a statue of the Virgin Mary would, no doubt, have generated considerable audience interest. These stories still went unreported.

7. Finally, to what extent do the views of owners/management set the agenda for coverage?

Mortimer Zuckerman, at various times the owner of U.S. News & World Report, The Atlantic, and The New York Daily News, is passionately pro-Israel and is known, in general, for imposing his views on news content. A plethora of other owners/publishers/executives express similarly strong views, sit on pro-Israel boards, exhibit patterns of giving to Israeli organizations, etc. How significant is this factor? Do such individuals set general or specific policies for their news staffs, and if so, how are they manifested?

Without further study it is impossible to know which of the above factors, possible additional factors, or combinations are creating the situation we find today. What is less complex, are the results.

SHAPING COVERAGE

Several San Francisco Chronicle reporters and writers who had occasionally written about Israel/Palestine have been let go, transferred or demoted.

The experience of veteran Chronicle journalist Henry Norr is a case in point. Norr was fired in 2003 after he took part in an anti-war demonstration. Norr, who reported on technology, not on the war, had participated in the demonstration on his own time. He contested his firing and ended up winning a substantial out-of-court settlement from the Chronicle. Norr had also been active on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He suspects that his activities regarding Palestine, rather than his participation in the demonstration, were the underlying cause of his firing.

In July 2002, Norr wrote about an Intel factory constructed illegally on Palestinian land from which Israel had ejected the Palestinian owners. In a radio interview with Amy Goodman of Democracy Now after his firing, Norr described the Chronicle's reaction to the story, which had received a great deal of criticism from the Israeli lobby: "...I was told this was an inappropriate topic and I wasn't supposed to write such things anymore."

Norr went on to discuss a vacation-time trip during which he and his wife participated in nonviolent protest

activities in the West Bank. When he returned to work, he described his trip to colleagues:

"I put together a little lunchtime presentation and slideshow, a little discussion of what I had seen and observed and heard. And apparently management didn't like that very much. Apparently there was somebody who attended that presentation ... [who] reported to management that I made anti-Semitic remarks and so on, which is really a big joke. I mean, I'm Jewish by background and I don't think I'm the least bit anti-Semitic. However, I'm deeply opposed to the policy of the Israeli government."

Less than a year later Henry Norr was out.

Such veiled but firm management policies don't appear unique.

John Wheat Gibson, a former journalist who worked as a reporter and journalism instructor for a number of years before finally leaving for a different career, found a similar pro-Israel climate at Cox Newspapers, one of the nation's top newspaper chains, with 17 daily newspapers, including the Atlanta Constitution and 30 non-daily papers around the country: "As a journalist in the 1970s," Gibson recalls, "I found that a rigid bias against objective reporting and in favor of Israel was a prerequisite for employment with a daily newspaper in the Cox chain. I never understood why, since I saw no evidence the major advertisers in the media market were Zionists."

My own personal experiences with newspaper chains have been illuminating.

A few years ago a reporter from the Gannett newspapers planned to do an article about me and *If Americans Knew*, which had just begun operating. Gannett is one of the largest news outlets in the nation, with 102 daily newspapers in the United States, including *USA Today*, the nation's largest-selling daily newspaper, for a combined daily paid circulation of 7.6 million readers. Gannett also owns a variety of non-daily publications and *USA WEEK-END*, a weekly newspaper magazine of 22.7 million circulation delivered in more than 600 Gannett and non-Gannett newspapers. As if this weren't enough, Gannett also owns and operates 21 television stations covering almost 20 percent of the country.

Needless to say, a Gannett article about our fledgling organization was quite exciting. He interviewed me at considerable length about my experiences in the West Bank and Gaza, sent out a photographer to take pictures of me at home, and directed her to Fed Ex them immediately.

Then we waited. After a few months, I e-mailed him to ask if I'd missed the piece. He e-mailed back, no I had-

n't missed it. The article had been shelved: "... the top guy here feels like the story is 'missing' something." The article, apparently, is still on the shelf.

At the other end of the newspaper chain spectrum is a small company in Rhinebeck, New York. A reporter from this chain also wrote an article about us. To his surprise, his boss axed it. Despite his protests, the piece was never published.

Killing such stories carries significance beyond simply suppressing the specific information they contain. Perhaps of even greater importance, it sends a very clear message to journalists about what one may report, and what one may not, if one is to get ahead in American journalism.

This article has only scratched the surface of the distortion, omission, and suppression I have come across as I have looked into press coverage of Israel and the Palestinian territories over the past four and a half years. Some of the other recent stories that haven't made it into the American media consciousness include:

— A story about the 1967 Israeli attack on an American ship, the U.S. *Liberty*, has been in the works at Nightline for over a year; surviving crew members have been interviewed, the Naval officer who blew the whistle on the cover-up on this attack was filmed a year ago. It, too, is still on the shelf.

— A report describing the harsh treatment of over 300 Palestinian youths being held in Israeli prisons was distributed by AP only on its international wire. In other words, it went to the U.K., Europe, Asia, South America — all over the world. The only place it didn't go was the United States. I read it on an Israeli newspaper website. When I asked AP spokesman Jack Stokes why this report was considered newsworthy in Norway but not in New York, Stokes said that not all stories are sent out on all newswires; AP editors use their news judgment in making these decisions.

— A potentially explosive piece by investigative journalist and author Stephen Green exposing the fact that some of the nation's top officials have been repeatedly investigated for spying for Israel fizzled. No newspapers picked it up, no wire services sent it out, no television stations reported it.

— A letter to the national headquarters of the Presbyterian Church threatening to torch Presbyterian churches across the country — while worshipers were inside — unless church leaders changed their position opposing Israeli human rights violations was barely reported. There was nothing on CBS, nothing on CNN, nothing on PBS, nothing on NPR. Not a single major newspaper notified readers of this threat.

There are multitudes of such stories.

In 1904 Joseph Pulitzer warned: "Our republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public spirited press with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself." Over 100 years before Pulitzer's words, our forefathers similarly considered an informed population such a fundamental necessity for our democracy that they established freedom of the press in the very first sentence of the Bill of Rights.

Yet today, time after time in meeting with editors and publishers responsible for informing Americans fully and accurately on Israel-Palestine — one of the world's most destabilizing, tragic and longstanding conflicts — we have found people too partisan, too ambitious, too neglectful, too fearful, or too jaded to fulfill their profoundly important responsibilities.

It is critical that we repair our faltering press.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to grave events in the world — and in our nation — today. The United States is currently fighting a war against Middle East "terror" that contains neither temporal nor geographic limits. Our population is being whipped up to fear and oppose an entire religion and untold millions of people whose ethnicity make them "enemies." Our security is threatened, our children are in peril, and our national morality is up for grabs.

It is urgent that Americans become informed. It is urgent that we share our information with others, that we require honesty and accuracy from our media, and that we affirm the principles that make the world safe for all people.

We cannot wait for others to do this. ■

To Our Readers

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- AJPME, **Beyond the Mirage: The Face of the Occupation** (2002, VHS, 47 minutes). Israeli and Palestinian human rights advocates challenge misconceptions about the Occupation and Palestinian resistance to it. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- DMZ, **People and the Land** (1997, VHS, 57 minutes). This documentary appeared on over 40 PBS stations before pressure was brought to ban it. (See our Dec. 1997 *Link*, v. 30, #5, now available on our website at www.ameu.org.) **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- Howard Film, **The Loss of Liberty** (2002, VHS, 53 minutes). Updated account of Israel's 1967 attack on the *USS Liberty*. **AMEU: \$20.00.**
- Jones, R., **500 Dunams on the Moon** (2002, VHS, 48 minutes). Palestinians, expelled in 1948 from Ayn Hawd, see their village turned into an Israeli artist colony. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- Jordan S., **Dispatches: The Killing Zone** (2003, VHS or DVD, 50 minutes). British correspondent Sandra Jordan reports on the violence by Israeli occupation forces against international aid workers and reporters in the Gaza Strip. Includes the bulldozer killing of Rachel Corrie. Widely shown on British TV, this powerful documentary has been shown on only a few public access channels in the U.S. To promote its distribution, AMEU is offering it for **\$10.00**. Please circle format choice above.
- Longley, J., **Gaza Strip** (2001, VHS or DVD, 74 minutes). A disturbing look at the effect of the occupation on the children. **AMEU: \$25.00.** Please circle format choice above.
- Masri, M., **Frontiers of Dreams and Fears** (2002, VHS, 58 minutes). This documentary has appeared on several PBS stations across the country. It focuses on two Palestinian girls growing up in refugee camps in Beirut and Bethlehem. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- Middle East Council of Churches, **Disabled for Palestine** (1993, VHS, 21 minutes) A doctor shows cases of Palestinians who have been maimed for life by Israeli bullets, beatings, and tear gas. **AMEU: \$10.00.**
- Moushabeck, M., **Anatolia: The Lost Songs of Palestine** (2001, CD, 52 minutes). **AMEU: \$12.50.**
- Munayyer, F. & H., **Palestinian Costumes and Embroidery: A Precious Legacy** (1990, VHS, 38 minutes). A rare collection of Palestinian dresses presented with historical background and commentary. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- NEF, **Peace, Propaganda & the Promised Land** (2004, VHS or DVD, 80 minutes). Excellent analysis of how the U.S. media slants its coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. **AMEU: \$25.00.**
- Pilger, J., **Palestine Is Still the Issue** (2002, VHS or DVD, 53 minutes). Candid assessment by an award-winning journalist of why there has been no progress towards peace in the Middle East. **AMEU: \$25.00.** Please circle format choice above.
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Room 245, 475 Riverside Drive
New York, NY 10115-0245