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Covering Gaza: Rethinking Objectivity in Times of Human Tragedies

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Introduction

Reporting from Gaza during Israel's genocidal campaign on the strip, I suggest here, is an undeniable act of resistance against persistent oppression. In fact, I further suggest that a journalist covering the same destruction, death and loss that the people experience and live is a heroic act. Since Israel's war against Gaza began in October 2023, over 100 journalists, mostly Palestinians, have been targeted and killed by Israeli forces. Countless others have endured the devastating loss of mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, husbands, wives and cherished loved ones with no reprieve from the ongoing carnage.

It is not contentious to say that Palestinian journalists bear the weight of their nation's devastation and grief, a consequence of enduring the most prolonged military occupation in modern history. Unfortunately, despite their courageous reporting under such challenging and dangerous circumstances, Palestinian journalists often go unrecognized for their heroic acts by international media organizations; their integrity and professionalism are usually doubted, and their motives are frequently questioned (Murrell 2023), further contributing to their dehumanization, mirroring the dehumanization of their nation.

The Western public and media unfairly discredit and ignore their coverage despite their persistent efforts to convey nothing but the unvarnished truth and harrowing realities they are witnessing and also suffering as victims (De Vega 2023). Despite their efforts, they have been labeled as biased and not objective. Their connections and actions are deemed questionable and need to be flagged before trusting that they are delivering objective coverage (Murrell 2023).

Even Palestinian journalists working for international news agencies, such as AP, AFP or Reuters, rarely receive the professional recognition they deserve. They are viewed as too embedded in the story, relegated to the role of fixers in a conflict where the delicate balance of trust between Western media employers and native non-Western journalists is constantly challenged and repeatedly re-lived (Palmer 2019).

Truthfulness, accuracy and accountability

In these contexts, where journalists are experiencing the same horrors inflicted on their people by a mighty military, questions of objectivity, impartiality, balance and neutrality in journalism become crucial. In the face of military campaigns that have been discussed as war crimes, journalistic values such as truthfulness, accuracy and accountability take on heightened importance. Journalists play a crucial role in bearing witness to these atrocities, shedding light on the truth, and holding the perpetrators accountable, even in the most dangerous circumstances.

I speak from a position of someone who has been deeply engaged with these critical issues and questions. Previously, I explored the work of journalists who cover atrocities caused by

foreign military invasions through my reflective research on coverage of the Israeli occupation forces and their assaults against Lebanon between 1993-2000.

In April 1996, Israel committed a massacre against civilians sheltering in a United Nations center in the village of Qana in South Lebanon, which I reported for Lebanese TV. Even years after witnessing and documenting the Qana massacre, vivid memories of the Israeli act of aggression persist, ingrained in my identity as a Lebanese citizen and journalist. During the sixteen days of the assault on Lebanon, I was stationed in the country's south, reporting on the intensive bombardments. It was then I came to understand the profound impact of journalism in informing, uniting people and rallying support for fellow citizens. I can only think of Gazan journalists now performing the same duties but on a much larger scale.

While fulfilling my duty as a journalist to inform and tell the truth, I found that our nationalistic approach added a heroic dimension to our coverage without detracting from its professionalism. In those days, there was a strong sense of pride among us Lebanese journalists for the 'objective coverage' provided in documenting and reporting the Israeli incursions and occupation of our country. We are now hearing an even deeper sense of pride from Palestinian journalists (The Listening Post, Al-Jazeera English, 6 April 2024) talking about their work. Some of them, such as Wael Al-Dahdouh, Youmna Al Saeed and Motaz Azaiza, have become household names and even icons for others. Young Palestinian boys and girls have followed in their footsteps, talking to us about their lives and situations through various social media platforms.

Having received training as a journalist in both the Netherlands and the UK, I initially considered objectivity as fundamental to my professional ethos, much like others. This belief was reinforced by conversations with colleagues during my research (Harb 2011). However, I later realized that the concept of objectivity is culturally influenced, particularly within Anglo-American journalism. This realization spurred me to delve deeper into alternative perspectives on both objectivity and propaganda.

In exploring the concept of propaganda, I delved beyond its contemporary negative connotations. This led me to examine historical examples such as the propaganda campaigns of the suffragette movement in 1866, church campaigns dating back to the 1600s and efforts to propagate Islam in Far East Asia along the Silk Road through trade. I analysed Lebanese media coverage of the Israeli assaults on Lebanon within the framework of these campaigns and introduced a fresh perspective termed 'Liberation Propaganda' (Harb 2011), as articulated by Fouad Naim, the former TV chairman of Lebanese Public Television, Tele Liban, who referred to it as 'the propaganda of truth'.

Contextual objectivity

To grasp this approach to objectivity, I engaged in discussions with my Lebanese colleagues to gauge the interpretation of the concept and its application in their work. Through these conversations and further investigation, I realized that for them, objectivity entailed presenting facts accurately and thoroughly rather than maintaining strict neutrality. Later on, I encountered a novel concept of objectivity put forth by two Egyptian scholars, Muhammad Nawawi and Adel Iskander, in their book *Al-Jazeera* (2002), in which they coined the term 'contextual objectivity' to describe the channel's coverage of events such as the Afghan War in 2001, the international sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

According to Iskandar and Nawawi (in Allan and Zelizer 2004: 320), such contextualization reveals ‘a situational position, a way by which collectivism among participants within the same “context”—whether cultural, religious, political, or economic—is realized and engaged’. Iskandar and Nawawi state that ‘it is precisely this contextualization that aggravates and complicates the pursuit of “objective” coverage within the news media setting’ (Allan and Zelizer 2004: 320). This interpretation resonated closely with the understanding of objectivity among some Lebanese journalists, including myself.

Initially, the idea of contextual or positioned objectivity faced limited acceptance within the Anglo-American academic community. However, over time, additional studies emerged challenging the traditional concept of objectivity and its association with complete neutrality. Studies such as Durham (2008) pointed out that the reality journalists report in times of crisis is a shared interpretation of reality within the larger social context of the news environment (also see Muñoz-Torres 2012; Fahy 2018; Møller, Hartley and Askanius 2020).

Resistance to the notion of positioned objectivity primarily stemmed from industry professionals and practitioners. Nevertheless, when the Ukrainian war broke out in 2022, the narrative of coverage shifted to match the ‘contextual and positioned objectivity’ that I had argued years before (Harb 2022).

Prior to the war in Ukraine, the journalistic principles of balance and impartiality have been subjected to debate, even within Western contexts. In 2018, The BBC acknowledged employing ‘false balance’ in its reporting on the climate crisis. This approach aimed to present a balanced view by juxtaposing scientific analysis and data with opinions from climate change deniers. Fran Unsworth, the former BBC head of news, issued a statement advising BBC journalists to be mindful of avoiding ‘false balance’ when covering climate-related topics (Carrington 2018).

False balance, which can be detrimental when reporting on climate change, should be similarly avoided when covering human tragedies and atrocities caused by military powers. Just as it is essential to provide accurate and responsible coverage of environmental issues, the same standard should apply when reporting on the loss of innocent civilian lives and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and universities, due to military actions.

Furthermore, in recent years, the debate surrounding impartiality and objectivity gained prominence following the case involving Naga Munchetty. The BBC faced criticism and eventually reversed its decision to reprimand the BBC Breakfast Show presenter for allegedly violating impartiality guidelines. Munchetty had expressed her personal reaction on air to former US President Donald Trump’s remarks, suggesting that four American congresswomen of color should ‘go back...to the infested places from which they came’. (Waterson 2019). This incident prompted a valid question among many UK journalists and civil society organizations: should impartiality extend to issues of racism, and should journalists be restricted from speaking out against and exposing racism directly under the guise of impartiality?

Impartiality, objectivity? A similar question arises in the case of the Gaza war: should journalists be constrained from exposing war crimes and violations of international human rights under the guise of impartiality and objectivity?

Thomas Hanitzsch and his colleagues of international scholars conducted the World of Journalism study (2011a; 2011b), which has provided valuable insights into how journalists perceive their profession and role globally. The research concluded that journalists from various countries view objectivity as a universal value, not limited to Anglo-American contexts. I concur with this perspective. In my interviews with journalists from Lebanon and Egypt, they also expressed a belief in the importance of objectivity. Although the crucial point lies in understanding what objectivity means to them specifically, as their interpretation of the term varies. Journalists in Gaza, in the accounts they provided to international and Arab media, speak of the same. Objectivity is to be factual, accurate, fair and honest, to bear witness and not necessarily neutral.

I remember David Mannion, the former editor-in-chief of ITV, writing in Broadcast Magazine (4 August 2006) and reflecting on his cover of the Lebanon July war in 2006. He argued that expecting a reporter to maintain balanced reporting while standing in the middle of a hospital ward where children, ‘some with arms and legs blown away; others blinded by shrapnel are screaming in fear and agony’, and therefore, witnessing these horrors, is unreasonable. In the midst of chaos and tragedy, the priority, he said, should be on fairness and honesty rather than a rigid adherence to balance. It acknowledges that emotions such as anger can be valid responses to such situations. It is more important for journalists to convey the truth of what they witness rather than striving for an abstract notion of balance.

In the context of the war on Gaza, as is the case in southern Lebanon and in Ukraine, traditional objectivity, I suggest, is unattainable. The only semblance of truth emerges within a positioned or contextual framework.

This perspective is evident in the coverage by Gazan journalists during the Israeli military atrocities, a form of reporting that mirrors the challenges of war journalism in general. When faced with the stark realities of war, journalists inevitably adopt a positioned objectivity, acknowledging the impossibility of detachment of neutrality when confronted with the horrors of conflict (see Adie 1998; 2002; Bell 1998; 2003).

Concluding remarks

Many Western journalists and audiences have long regarded objectivity and impartiality as absolute ideals unaffected by context. However, this mindset should be challenged, as context should indeed shape our understanding of these concepts.

I have consistently advocated for journalists reporting on wars and conflicts to accurately depict the unfolding reality before them. It is crucial for them to use language that communicates the truth, unfettered by the constraints of striving for ‘objectivity’, ‘balance’ and ‘unbiasedness’, especially when facing military aggression, invasions, violations of international human rights law and war crimes (Harb 2023).

We must reconsider the significance and relevance of objectivity and impartiality when reporting on human tragedies caused by destructive forces, regardless of whether they are friends or foes. After witnessing countless wars, it is apparent that absolute objectivity, impartiality and neutrality are not always necessary for quality journalism. In fact, when confronting atrocities and human suffering, they can hinder accurate and meaningful coverage.

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