

## Debate

William Lafi Youmans

# The press and Gaza

Restrictions, censorship and the hazards of war reporting

**Abstract:** During wars, states' militaries are strategic communicators seeking to manage public perception, yet in times of war they also have greater command over press access, making them something like referees. In war time, the pre-existing legal protections given to the work of news media are often relaxed in the name of emergency exceptionalism and as jurisdictional gray areas arise in theaters of conflict. Israel has moved further in limiting media access in times of escalated conflict, most recently the war on Gaza that started following the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israeli military bases and communities around the enclosed strip. This essay overviews Israel's press policies, military censorship regime and the response of western news organizations, as well as the repression of Palestinian reporters and Al Jazeera. It further asks whether Israeli's press controls have any impact on news reporting.

**Keywords:** Israel, Gaza, war reporting, press freedom, journalist safety

The issue of press access to war zones has long been contested. In the US it was heightened after the Vietnam War, which was captured more visually through photojournalism and broadcast. The political establishment believed that brutal images from the war, along with rising American casualties, turned US public opinion against the military. That is, at least, the official history, but has become the basis of a new conventional wisdom that every military effort includes an informational front, and the enemy is not only the adversary in combat, but anyone who influences the public to oppose the war in question. States engaged in military actions since the 1970s have sought to exercise further control over journalists to ensure they do not undermine the war efforts. They often cite the security of military operations and media personnel as rationales for keeping

media restrained in the theaters of combat. This of course presents something of a conflict of interest. During wars, states' militaries are strategic communicators seeking to manage public perception, yet in times of war they also have greater command over press access, making them something like referees, as well. In wartime, the preexisting legal protections given to the work of news media are often relaxed in the name of emergency exceptionalism and as jurisdictional gray areas arise in places where there are conflict.

The mechanisms of press control became more sophisticated over time. Taking the lessons from the Vietnam War, the British enacted a strict press pool system during the Falklands War with Argentina in 1982. It restricted access to representatives of media who would have to share their work materials, notes and recordings, with other members of the press. This highly restrictive system was adopted by the United States military in its first war with Iraq in 1990-1991. US news media protested the severe limitations and sued in response, citing the first amendment of the US constitution. With the US's Afghanistan and Iraq invasions in the early 2000s, the military in consultation with news agencies developed an embed program that allowed reporters to ride-along with fighting units. This gave journalists greater access to war zones, but critics said it compromised their independence by putting them in a position to experience the war through their sponsor and protector's vantage point.

Israel has faced similar pressures around balancing press freedom with its desire to manage public opinion around its policies. Israel had its own negative press moments in its bloody invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s and crushing repression of the Palestinian *intifada*, a widespread uprising, later that decade. Both events cost Israel a great deal of public goodwill internationally. Then in the 2006 war on Lebanon, Israel suffered what was widely seen as a military defeat in its failure to destroy Hezbollah, its stated objective as it devastated Lebanon again. Israel saw the 2006 war as catastrophic for its public image. Since then, Israel has moved further in limiting media access in times of escalated conflict, most recently during the war on Gaza that started following the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israeli military bases and communities around the enclosed strip. Hamas, and other Palestinian factions and militants, killed hundreds of Israeli soldiers, hundreds more civilians and took hostage some 240 people of all ages. Israel laid siege on Gaza, closed off its borders, bombed it from the air and invaded it with tens of thousands of soldiers. Gaza is home to 2.5 million people and has the land size of Philadelphia. This resulted in a grave toll for Palestinian civilians in Gaza, leaving tens of thousands dead and injured, hundreds of thousands displaced and facing famine. The intensity of the October 7th attack and the Israeli war on Gaza were unprecedented in the history of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and have also brought about new levels of restrictions on and violence directed at the press.

Israel limited access to Gaza and enforced a military censorship regime

Israel does not codify free press rights in any body of a binding law, though there are some customary traditions and common law that Israel's free press advocates and outlets can invoke. Supreme Court decisions are more advisory than true judicial review, meaning the government complies as a matter of custom rather than constitutional mandate.<sup>11</sup> While press freedom is encouraged by the Basic Law, a quasi-constitution, there are strict measures that limit news media. For example, to publish a newspaper requires a permit. Military censorship, including prior restraint, is legally mandated, and results in the blocking of hundreds of stories and alterations of thousands of articles and news packages. In 2017, for example, Israel's Military Censor »refused to publish 271 articles in 2017 – more than five a week – and partially or fully redacted a total of 2,358 news items submitted to it for prior review« (FISHER 2018). Israel journalists occasionally circumvent censors by leaking censored stories to be published abroad and then citing their reporting as the source. Despite the strict controls, the Israeli press is rather robust and critical.

Israel's press restrictions however expanded dramatically since the Gaza war began. Israel sealed off Gaza immediately, barring reporters from entering. This was a controversial measure that news media organizations from around the world protested. As for the reason, Natasha Hausdorff, director of UK Lawyers For Israel, appeared on Sky News's *The World with Yalda Hakim* in February 2024 to claim Israel bans international journalists from Gaza for their own safety. Others cite security justifications.

Israel, with Egypt's acquiescence, so thoroughly barred media entry to Gaza that news professionals wrote an open letter of protest, a rare action in a profession known to avoid advocacy. More than 50 journalists demanded Israel and Egypt allow »free and unfettered access to Gaza for all foreign media« (ТОВИТТ 2024). Signers included reporters with UK and US news sources, such as BBC News, Sky News, ITV News, Channel 4 News, CNN, NBC, CBS and ABC. Sky News's special correspondent Alex Crawford claimed to have »spent the bulk of the past nearly five months busting a gut to get into Gaza« but had no luck thanks to the crossing closures. The letter's signatories did not seem impressed by the safety reasoning. They asserted that as news institutions with rich experience operating in war zones, and in Gaza specifically, they were well-equipped to handle this story.

11 That said, the Supreme Court's decisions on the reasonableness of parliamentary actions carried traditional weight, so much so that the Knesset's legislation striking down the court's power to declare government actions »unreasonable« in early 2023 was followed by months of massive protests, the largest in Israel's history.

Israel did allow press access in the form of embeds with Israeli military units, adopting its closest ally's program in the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions twenty years prior. The difference is that Israel has nearly complete control over Gaza's borders thanks to Egypt's complicity in its rule over the one crossing over which it presides.<sup>2</sup> The US could not seal Afghanistan and Iraq's borders in the way Israel did with Gaza. Reporters like Crawford did not feel embedding with the Israeli forces would facilitate independent reporting. The military »chooses the route, area to head to, how long you are in situ and basically what the journalist gets access to and who they talk to or if they can talk to anyone at all.« (SHERWOOD 2023) Press freedom organizations have criticized the Israeli government's »strict conditions« on embedded reporters, »including the requirement for reports to be submitted for review before publication and the prohibition of interaction with Palestinians«. Thus, when journalists who embedded produced reports that did not give voice to any Palestinians, it was by the design of the Israeli government. That said, there were exceptions. In November, embedded reporter Secunder Kermani's report for Channel 4 (UK) included an interview with a Palestinian in Gaza (OLSTED 2023).

The military censors claim jurisdiction over a wide array of subjects. The US news outlet *The Intercept* obtained a memo issued by Israeli authorities, »operation ›Swords of Iron.« Israeli Chief Censor Directive to the Media« (KLIPPENSTEIN/BOGUSLAW 2023). Signed by the Brigadier General Chief Censor Kobi Mandelblit, the guidelines lists eight topics that are »not allowed for broadcasting« and require prior approval for publication: hostages, military operations, intelligence about »the enemy,« weapons systems, rocket attacks, cyber-attacks, visits by senior officials in combat zones and any details and information from Security Cabinet meetings. The wording of the memo is broad and often ambiguous. The entry on intelligence, is explained by a single sentence: »Any intelligence concerning the intentions and capabilities of the enemy.« It is not clear whose intelligence in particular, for example, or what even constitutes intelligence, which is often a mixture of sources, including publicly available information. Violating these restrictions could be grounds for losing press credentials, facing criminal prosecution or even being closed down or banned, in exceptional cases. When the Israeli government's press office distributed media credentials to over 2,800 international journalists, it required they accede in writing to the censor's authority as a stipulation. While the censor role is presented as a technical one oriented around security, *Haaretz* reported that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu put pressure on the office to limit coverage of certain events out of political concerns (TOV 2023).

2 Egypt denies the press ban is entirely due to their discretion. When questioned about this in late October »a senior Egyptian official said it was the Israeli military stopping journalists from entering« (RUFO/GRITTEN 2024).

Despite there being growing public awareness about Israel's censorship regime, too often western media were not transparent about the extent to which they complied. Nor did they readily declare which stories had been cleared with military censors. It was revealed that CNN internally mandated that all reporting on the Gaza war be checked through the Jerusalem bureau, which operates subject to the censor's requirements (BOGUSLAW 2024). Thus, stories developed out of the Washington, DC bureau could still be effectively made to comply with this censorship regime (GRIM 2024). This issue became entangled in internal debates about news organizations' coverage of Gaza. Reports indicated that senior CNN figures like Christiane Amanpour were displeased with the network's handling of the war (BOGUSLAW/THAKKER 2024). A leaked recording of a meeting in London documented her expressing »distress« with the internal protocol and how it led to »changing copy.« She saw a clear »double standard,« when it came to Israel coverage. Elsewhere, a CNN employee noted that due to this internal system of clearing stories through Jerusalem, certain terms got stricken from coverage: »war crime« and »genocide,« for example. Furthermore, evasive framing was inserted: »Israeli bombings in Gaza will be reported as ›blasts‹ attributed to nobody, until the Israeli military weighs in to either accept or deny responsibility.« There was also overt deference to official Israeli sources. They added that »[q] uotes and information provided by Israeli army and government officials tend to be approved quickly, while those from Palestinians tend to be heavily scrutinized and slowly processed« (BOGUSLAW 2024). Other news organizations purposefully kept sensitive stories away from the censors by working them through bureaus outside of Israel.

CNN did disclose that stories were checked by the censors in packages based on the work of embedded reporters. For example, CNN's Jeremy Diamond, normally a White House correspondent, reported from Gaza as an embed in an Israel Defense Forces unit. News presenter Becky Anderson introduced the package with the following caveat:

»Journalists embedded with the IDF in Gaza operate under the observation of Israeli commanders in the field, and are not permitted to move unaccompanied within the strip. As a condition to enter Gaza under IDF escort, outlets have to submit all materials and footage to the Israeli military for review prior to publication« (OLMSTED 2023).

This was more or less boilerplate language for the embed reports. Interestingly, it does not use the term »censor« even though it is in the formal title of the Israeli military's office overseeing media reporting. On a few occasions, CNN clarified when the censors did not review reports and explicated that it retained editorial autonomy. On January 9, 2024, the anchor specified that in this case »CNN did not submit the final report to the IDF and has retained editorial control.« The embed stories are pretty overt in terms of press-state relations, and therefore require such a disclaimer. However, with stories that CNN's Jerusalem

bureau simply cleared, it was not apparent to what extent they were made to comply with the censors' directives. A Nexus Uni search turned up no non-embed stories that mentioned submission to the Israeli military for prior review. A CNN spokesperson said that running stories past the Jerusalem bureau »has no impact on our (minimal) interactions with the Israeli Military Censor – and we do not share copy with them (or any government body) in advance. We will seek comment from Israeli and other relevant officials before publishing stories, but this is just good journalistic practice« (BOGUSLAW 2024). It is worth noting that other networks, like ABC News, failed to disclose their compliance with the military censors in their embed reports (OLSTED 2023). Others, like the BBC, clarified that the network kept editorial control though a section of the report depicting Israeli forces was reviewed by the censor (RUFO/GRITTEN 2024).

As of March 2024, there had only been one highly visible report by a western reporter from inside Gaza who did not embed with the Israeli military. CNN's chief international correspondent Clarissa Ward, based in London, was able to enter Gaza with a medical unit from the United Arab Emirates. It was the exception that proved the rule. Ward called the brief journey into Gaza »a window into the war zone, but only a small one« (TOBITT 2024). Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's international editor, said about his rich experience covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, »[n]ot being on the scene makes reporting much harder. In war reporting, nothing beats using your own eyes and ears« (SHERWOOD 2023).

Press freedom advocacy groups tried to push Israel for better access. The British human rights group ARTICLE 19 (2024) pressured Israel to let international journalists into Gaza in order to boost independent reporting, calling the restrictions an »all-out assault on freedom of expression«. The Supreme Court of Israel ruled against an Israeli Foreign Press Association (FPA) suit to force the government to allow journalists into Gaza. The FPA resorted to using the courts after the military and national government ignored its previous pleadings. The government's case was that limitations on press access were »justified on security grounds,« both the countries' as well as the reporters' since they »could be put at risk in wartime.« The government maintained that allowing western news media in Gaza would »endanger soldiers by reporting on troop positions, and that it was too dangerous for Israeli personnel to be present at the border to facilitate press entry to Gaza.« FPA had in the past found better luck with the Supreme Court. In 2008, the Court ordered the government to allow reporters into Gaza during the 2008-09 Gaza operation, which was much smaller in scale than this most recent bout (SENGUPTA 2008). The government stalled in complying. Journalists only gained access during the ceasefire, however. The court naturally did not see the decision as precedent. That said, in subsequent Israel invasions and bombardment campaigns in 2012 and 2014, Israel allowed reporters to pass into Gaza through the Erez crossing (SHERWOOD 2023).

## The plight of Palestinian media workers

While these exclusions led western news media agencies to rely further on Israeli government information, it also made them even more dependent on the network of Palestinian reporters, photographers, cameramen, fixers and stringers in Gaza. As the open letter cited above claims, »There is intense global interest in the events in Gaza and for now the only reporting has come from journalists who were already based there« (ТОВИТТ 2024). The letter connected the absence of international press with the perils facing Palestinian media workers, who have paid a heavy price for their work in near-impossible conditions.

The Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), a leading organization advocating for reporters' safety, issued a statement on June 4, 2024, that the number of killed media workers in Gaza made this »the deadliest period« the CPJ recorded since it started tracking in 1992. In the first 6 months since Israel's bombing campaign and invasion of Gaza started, the count of journalist fatalities ranges from CPJ's estimated 107 on the conservative end to as high as 140 according to Palestinian organizations (CPJA 2024). CPJ estimated that Palestinian reporters made up 75% of newsgatherers killed worldwide in 2023. This far outpaces the 18 Palestinian journalists that Israel killed in the two decades between 2001–2021. Another open letter signed by 36 news executives expressed solidarity with Palestinian journalists »in their call for safety, protection, and the freedom to report« (ТОВИТТ 2024). Besides the physical violence against reporters, Israel stepped up its arrests and detentions of Palestinian reporters in both Gaza and the West Bank. Between October 2023 and June 2024, Israel arrested 41 Palestinian journalists in the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza, while the Palestinian Authority arrested 3 (DAOUD et al. 2024). It must also be noted that the Hamas government in Gaza offers no formal protections for press and has a record of repressing civil society, including media and social media publishers.

Since international media outside of Arabic news outlets did not have much of a presence in Gaza, they relied upon stringers and fixers, while reporting from afar. Stringers are media workers who write or produce raw stories that media organizations supplement or edit, whereas fixers simply help reporters without co-authorship or co-production, though they may arrange interviews, interpret or translate, or chauffeur and can otherwise impact the reporting. As Lindsay Palmer described in her book *The Fixers. Local News Workers and the Underground Labor of International Reporting* (2019), international reporting by western news media agencies would be impossible without them, yet their work remains largely invisible and under-appreciated. They are the soft infrastructure of foreign reporting, and have only become more crucial as international reporting budgets have declined dramatically for newspapers, magazines and broadcast.

Stringers, fixers and freelancers from Gaza work under grueling conditions that test them physically, emotionally and professionally. Besides taking on the obligation of reporting on events that directly bear on them personally and their families, suffering through the most trying circumstances during shortages of food, water, shelter and electricity, they are expected to maintain an impartiality that even the most seasoned reporters would struggle to retain. The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, for example, focused coordinated efforts on getting food and blankets to reporters in Gaza (YOUNES 2024). Gaza's media workers are given no reprieve from the months and months of service to local, regional and foreign news outlets. Sky News's special correspondent Alex Crawford noted that media organizations rarely keep the same reporters in a war zone for too long »to allow for recharging, recovering and allowing fresh eyes and minds on events which are physically and mentally exhausting and debilitating« (ТОВИТТ 2024). Had international news organizations been operating in Gaza, there would have been far less pressure on local reporters, producers and cameraman to work past the point of exhaustion. Even if the pool of media workers had not been diminished by killing, injuring, detention and the many pressures to flee for safety, it is not clear they would ever have been trusted enough to drive western media coverage. Despite their heroism performing their jobs against insurmountable conditions, there is a tendency by western news media not to see them as trusted and impartial, but as news producers whose work product often needs verification or re-contextualization from afar.

## Silencing Al Jazeera

Al Jazeera (AJ) was one of the few global news media institutions to have a significant reporting presence in Gaza before October 2023. They were well-positioned to report on Israel's military campaign against Hamas and the impact on Palestinian civilians. The Qatar-based news organization has long proven to be critical of Israeli policies and Israel has considered the network a journalistic nuisance, at best, for the country. Yet, Israel allowed AJ to report and broadcast within the country, until recently. How AJ has fared since the October 7th attack is in many ways emblematic of the array of challenges facing newsgatherers in Gaza.

Al Jazeera personnel were not spared the violence that took so many other journalists' lives. In December, AJ's Gaza bureau chief Wael Al-Dahdouh and his cameraman Samer Abu Daqqa were covering an Israeli airstrike on the Haifa School in Khan Younis. While they were reporting from the scene, an Israeli drone strike hit the school again, injuring both of them badly. They were clearly identified with their PRESS vests on, standing near broadcast equipment. Al-Dahdouh was able to flee in search of medical help, but ambulances could not



reach the cameraman, who was bleeding badly. Al Jazeera stated that this was yet another example of Israel »systematically targeting and killing journalists« (JEFFERY 2023). Al-Dahouh previously lost four direct family members to Israeli attacks. The following month, Israel killed one his remaining children, himself a journalist. Hamza al-Dahdouh also worked with AJ as a reporter and cameraman. He was in a car with other reporters in an area Israel declared to be a safe »humanitarian zone.« Freelance journalist Mustafa Thuraya was also killed while a third, Hazem Rajab, was maimed (KHALIL 2023). Israel said the attack was »directed by troops« on the ground because the reporters were operating »a drone, posing a threat to our soldiers.« The *Washington Post* published video footage from Thuraya's drone prior to the attack; it showed the recording was made for journalistic purposes and had no military relevance (RSF 2024). Drone images were often used by Palestinian cameramen and others to show the scale of destruction. Then in February, an Israeli drone strike seriously injured two AJ journalists, reporter Ismail Abu Omar and photojournalist Ahmed Matar. Struck while they travelled by motorcycle, they were dressed in their protective PRESS vests (CPJb 2024).

Israeli spokespersons claimed these attacks on AJ were not intentional. Mark Regev, senior adviser to Prime Minister Netanyahu, claimed »Israel does not deliberately target journalists.« He called it a »ridiculous« accusation since »we're the only country [in the region] that actually enshrines the free press« (KHALIL 2024). The timing of these attacks was suspicious. Israel's communication minister Shlomo Karhi had been seeking to remove AJ from the country starting in late October 2023. Karhi told Israel's Army Radio, »[t]his is a station that incites; this is a station that films troops in assembly areas ... that incites against the citizens of Israel.« He called it »a propaganda mouthpiece« (REUTERS 2023). One issue he faced was that the legal mandate was unclear. Finally, the Knesset passed an emergency law in April giving authority to the government to block foreign news media that undermined national security. Acting on this new law, Israel shuttered AJ's makeshift office in Israel, but it went even further. They confiscated the network's equipment, ordered the channel off of Israeli television providers and sought to block its websites, all more extreme steps than Israel had ever taken against AJ (GOLDENBERG/GAMBRELL 2024). The ban was only to be for 45 days, but was renewable. A district court reviewed the measure, as was required by the legislation. It read classified briefs submitted by government agencies and agreed that AJ compromised the government's war efforts by broadcasting troop positions and serving a propaganda function for Hamas. However, the judge ruled that since AJ had no chance to legally challenge the ban, it should be shortened to 35 days from the 45 closure that was ordered (SHARON 2024).

## Biases in western media coverage?

Is it possible that Israeli press restrictions resulted in a more preferential coverage for the Israeli government, or did it backfire? Initial research into US news media coverage of Gaza reveals an undeniable pattern of pro-Israel bias. A review of major newspapers by Adam Johnson and Othman Ali (2024) exposed a dramatically lop-sided picture by the most highly regarded press institutions in the country. In *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*, »Israeli« or »Israel« generally got far more mentions in news stories than »Palestinian« or variations thereof, »even as Palestinian deaths far outpaced Israeli deaths.« Strong, condemnatory adjectives like »slaughter,« »massacre« and »horrific« were almost exclusively applied to the murders of Israeli civilians. When it came to headlines about children killed or injured, there was very little mention of young Palestinian victims – only two out of more than 1,100 news articles published from October 7 to November 25, a period in which the Israeli military killed 6,000 children in Gaza.

In a series of numbers-driven infographics about US newspapers, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Mona Chalabi illustrated data showing how major newspapers devalued Palestinian lives (CHALABI 2023). She drew a chart revealing that *The New York Times* gave disproportionately more attention to Israeli than Palestinian deaths between October 7 and October 22, 2023. On average, every one Israeli death merited one news article, a one-to-one ratio. However, that was a rate four times greater than for Palestinian deaths. The results were also similarly imbalanced in *The Washington Post*. *The Wall Street Journal*, however, was far more imbalanced: for every 17 Palestinians killed, there was only one mention of Palestinian deaths. The implication was that an Israeli's death was simply more newsworthy than a Palestinian's.

Television news did not fare any better. In a study I conducted of the Sunday morning news talk shows on NBC, CBS, ABC and FOX, I found similar patterns in guest discussions about Gaza (YOUMANS 2024). While these shows are somewhat niche forums for elite political chatter and do not hold the outsized news influence they once did, they still draw larger audiences than cable television and are influential at framing debates that play out in subsequent news media. They eschewed traditional norms of balance. Shows like *Meet the Press* (NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), *This Week* (ABC) and *Fox News Sunday* (FOX) overwhelmingly featured far more pro-Israel than pro-Palestinian guests. Therefore, it was no surprise that the framing around Gaza aligned far more with pro-Israel talking points during the more than 50 shows that I analyzed from October 8, 2023 to mid-January 2024. Surprisingly, the dominant drivers of this one-sided discourse were US officials and spokespeople, such as Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and White House National Security Spokesman John Kirby.

There have been incisive media critiques highlighting patterns in the use of language that evince bias. One stream of criticism has focused on the gap between active and passive framing that tends to highlight on one hand, and obfuscate on the other, agency, and therefore responsibility. This manifests often in headlines. When Hamas carries out an attack, it tends to be reported in active voice; when Israel does it is usually presented in the passive voice. This is not a new observation. Nathan Robinson, writing in 2018, noted there was an unusual pattern in news reports about Israel: »People seem to die violently, but nobody ever seems to kill them.« An even earlier media critique made this same observation in 2001 (FRAITEKH 2001). Johnson and Ali (2024) highlighted a passive headline from *The New York Times*, to exemplify this trend. In what they called the »Times’s most sympathetic profile of Palestinian deaths in Gaza,« a report from November 18, the headline still hid the perpetrator: »The War Turns Gaza Into a Graveyard for Children.« Even when Israel is identified in a headline, the headline is written so that it is a »blast,« a »bomb,« or some other inanimate object that is assigned responsibility. In this example from June 8, 2024, »Israel Rescues 4 Hostages in Assault That Killed Scores of Gazans,« it is an »assault« that killed Palestinians.

Despite the overwhelming tenor of these findings, it is difficult to conclude that Israel’s press restrictions were the main or only cause of this editorial bias. Second, it is likely that other explanations are more powerful. For one, the literature on media and foreign policy finds that mainstream news organizations tend to reflect their own government policy preferences, and are indexed to the range of views among political elite (BENNETT 1990). Third, perhaps Israel’s policy limiting news media access to Gaza exacerbated a preexisting editorial imbalance that features the overrepresentation of Israeli perspectives and underrepresentation of Palestinians. This suggests that even if American reporters were running free in Gaza, the editorial dynamics around the politics of news would have still resulted in the same sorts of patterns these studies measured. Related institutional patterns suggest that systematic imbalance was inevitable. For example, CNN conducted zero interviews with Hamas as of June 2024. The network never announced a formal ban on Hamas officials. To not conduct a single interview with a key partisan in a war that has undoubtedly been the story of 2023 and 2024, while running countless with Israeli leaders and spokespeople, is an editorial choice disconnected from the question of access. It is arguably an irresponsible one, assuming they never tried to obtain one. CNN’s blackout of Hamas went even further. CNN’s internal guidance prohibited use of any video footage by Hamas »under any circumstances unless cleared by [...] senior editorial leadership« (MCGREAL 2024). There was no such directive concerning footage the Israeli government supplied to the network.

## Conclusion

As a result of Israel's policy to deny press access to Gaza, the thousands of reporters who descended on Israel in October 2023 were limited to reporting on Gaza from the outside and to seek out local freelancers, fixers and stringers who could assist them virtually at great personal risk. This policy incentivized news outlets to embed with Israeli forces as the only real option to depict what was happening in Gaza on their own. Israel cited journalists' safety as justification for the exclusion, an assertion news organizations did not accept. And yet, Israel managed to kill and injure scores of Palestinian reporters and other media workers who were unembedded in Gaza. Perhaps Israel legitimately could not guarantee their safety, however, the real threat was the nature of its bombing campaign.

Despite the severe limitations on news reporting, the public has been able to draw upon non-traditional sources that supplement traditional news media reporting, such as NGOs, social media producers and inter-governmental agencies (like the United Nations) to try to understand what was happening in Gaza. These do not make for a perfect substitute for professional journalism in its idealized mold, with its method of triangulation, use of reliable sources and basic commitments to fact-checking. Still, many in western publics were able to feel immersed in the war even from a distance because of the supply of uncensored images and sounds they could access from non-journalists on the ground. Thus, US public opinion on the war, especially among younger generations, shifted much more rapidly towards criticism of the war than did news coverage and editorials. These remained too anchored to the views of the political elite, overall, and too compliant with the desires of the censors.

## About the author

**William Lafi Youmans**, born in 1978, is a Visiting Associate Professor in Residence at Northwestern University in Qatar and an Associate Professor at George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs. Youmans wrote a book, *Unlikely Audience: Al Jazeera's Struggle in America* (Oxford UP), about the Qatari news network's efforts to gain a share of the news market in the United States. He is directing a documentary film about Alex Odeh, a Palestinian American activist who was assassinated in Orange County, CA in 1985. Contact: [wyoumans@gwu.edu](mailto:wyoumans@gwu.edu)

## References

- ARTICLE 19: Israel and Palestine: Allow international media access to Gaza.  
In: *Article 19*. 25 January 2024. <https://www.article19.org/resources/israel-and-palestine-allow-international-media-access-to-gaza/> (6 June 2024)
- BENNETT, W. L. (1990). Toward a theory of press-state. In: *Journal of Communication*, 40(2), 103-127.
- BOGUSLAW, DANIEL: CNN runs Gaza coverage past Jerusalem team operating under shadow of IDF censor. In: *The Intercept*. 4 January 2024. <https://theintercept.com/2024/01/04/cnn-israel-gaza-idf-reporting/> (6 June 2024)
- BOGUSLAW, DANIEL; THAKKER, PREM: In Internal Meeting, Christiane Amanpour confronts CNN brass about »double standards« on Israel coverage. In: *The Intercept*. 1 March 2024. <https://theintercept.com/2024/03/01/cnn-christiane-amanpour-israel-gaza-coverage/> (6 June 2024)
- CHALABI, MONA [@monachalabi] (2023): The New York Times has consistently mentioned Israeli deaths more often than Palestinian deaths... [Instagram], published on 19 October 2023, online at <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cyl9HR7O4ap/?hl=en> (6 June 2024)
- CPJa: Journalist casualties in the Israel-Gaza war. In: *Committee to Protect Journalists*. 5 June 2024 <https://cpj.org/2024/05/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/> (6 June 2024)
- CPJb: Al-Jazeera reporter, cameraman, critically injured by Israeli drone strike in Rafah. In: *Committee to Protect Journalists*. 13 February 2024. <https://cpj.org/2024/02/al-jazeera-reporter-cameraman-critically-injured-by-israeli-drone-strike-in-rafah/> (6 June 2024)
- DAOUD, DOJA; MANDOUR, MOHAMED; MIGUEL, IGNACIO; CULEBRAS, DELGADO; ALSHARIF, SAMIR: Arrests of Palestinian journalists since start of Israel-Gaza war. In: *Committee to Protect Journalists*. 5 June 2024. <https://cpj.org/2024/06/arrests-of-palestinian-journalists-since-start-of-israel-gaza-war/> (6 June 2024)
- FISHER, ALYSSA: Israel Censored A News Story Every 4 Hours Last Year. In: *Forward*. 6 July 2018. <https://forward.com/fast-forward/404928/israel-censored-a-news-story-every-4-hours-last-year/> (6 June 2024)
- FRAITEKH, EMADEDDIN J.: American media vocabulary, use of passive voice exacerbate Israeli-Palestinian imbalance. In: *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. 2001, July. <https://www.wrmea.org/2001-july/american-media-vocabulary-use-of-passive-voice-exacerbate-israeli-palestinian-imbalance.html> (11 June 2024)
- GRIM, RYAN: CNN and the IDF Censor. In: *The Intercept*. 4 January 2024. <https://theintercept.com/2024/01/04/cnn-idf-censor/> (6 June 2024)
- GOLDENBERG, TIA; GAMBRELL, JON: Israel orders Al Jazeera to close its local operation and seizes some of its equipment. In: *Associated Press*. 5 May 2024.

<https://apnews.com/article/israel-aljazeera-amas-gaza-war-eba9416aca82f505ab908ee60d1de5e4> (6 June 2024)

JEFFERY, JACK: Israeli strike on school kills Al Jazeera cameraman in southern Gaza, network says. In: *Associated Press*. 15 December, 2023.

<https://apnews.com/article/gaza-dahdouh-aljazeera-conflict-journalism-b17e6f5c5d987e4f834a0cc3fdco43de> (6 June 2024)

JOHNSON, ADAM; ALI, OTHMAN: Coverage of Gaza war in the New York Times and other major newspapers heavily favor Israel, analysis shows. In: *The Intercept*.

9 January 2024. <https://theintercept.com/2024/01/09/newspapers-israel-palestine-bias-new-york-times/> (6 June 2024)

KHALIL, SHAIMAA: Al Jazeera bureau chief's son Hamza al-Dahdouh among journalists killed in Gaza. In: *BBC News*. 8 January 2024 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67905566> (6 June 2024)

KLIPPENSTEIN, KEN; BOGUSLAW, DANIEL: Exclusive: Israeli Military Censor Bans Reporting on These 8 Subjects. In: *The Intercept*. 23 December 2023. <https://theintercept.com/2023/12/23/israel-military-idf-media-censor/> (12 July 2024)

The highly unusual, English-language order for the Gaza war breaks from the secretive and informal way IDF censorship normally works.

MCGREAL, CHRIS: CNN staff say network's pro-Israel slant amounts to >journalistic malpractice<. In: *The Guardian*. 4 February, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/feb/04/cnn-staff-pro-israel-bias> (6 June 2024)

OLSTED, EDITH: Why are CNN, ABC, and NBC reporters embedding with the Israeli military? In: *The New Republic*. 25 November 2023. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/why-american-reporters-embedding-israeli-110000733.html> (6 June 2024)

PALMER, L. (2019). *The fixers: Local news workers and the underground labor of international reporting*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

REUTERS: Israeli communications minister seeks shutdown of Al Jazeera bureau. In: *Reuters*. 15 October 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-communications-minister-seeks-shutdown-al-jazeera-bureau-2023-10-15/> (6 June 2024)

RSF: RSF files third complaint with ICC about Israeli war crimes against journalists in Gaza. In: *Reporters Without Borders*. 27 May 2024. <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-files-third-complaint-icc-about-israeli-war-crimes-against-journalists-gaza> (6 June 2024)

ROBINSON, NATHAN: Israel and the passive voice. In: *Current Affairs*. <https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2018/05/israel-and-the-passive-voice> 15 May 2018. (11 June 2024)

RUFO, YASMIN; GRITTEN, DAVID: Journalists call for foreign media access to Gaza in open letter. In: *BBC News*. 28 February 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68423995> (6 June 2024)

- SENGUPTA, KIM: Israel ordered to allow journalists into Gaza. In: *The Independent*. 31 December 2008. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-ordered-to-allow-journalists-into-gaza-1219795.html> (6 June 2024)
- SHARON, JEREMY: ›Close connection between Hamas and Al Jazeera,‹ Tel Aviv District Court finds. In: *Times of Israel*. 5 June 2024. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/close-connection-between-hamas-and-al-jazeera-tel-aviv-district-court-finds/> (6 June 2024)
- SHERWOOD, HARRIET: ›Hugely frustrating‹: international media seek to overcome Gaza ban. In: *The Guardian*. 12 December 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/12/hugely-frustrating-international-media-seek-to-overcome-gaza-ban> (6 June 2024)
- TOBITT, CHARLOTTE: ›Let us into Gaza‹: 55 UK and US foreign reporters urge Israel and Egypt to lift news blockade. In: *Press Gazette*. 28 February 2024. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/gaza-journalists-foreign-correspondents-israel-egypt-access/> (6 June 2024)
- TOV, MICHAEL HAUSER: Israeli chief military censor complains of pressure and threats of dismissal From Netanyahu. In: *Haaretz*. 29 November 2023. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-29/ty-article/.premium/israeli-chief-military-censor-complains-of-pressure-threats-of-dismissal-from-netanyahu/0000018c-1b7d-dd4b-a38c-1f7f489c0000> (6 June 2024)
- YOUMANS, WILLIAM: The Sunday Talk Shows on Gaza: A Study in Media Bias. In: *Arab Center Washington DC*. 31 January 2024. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-sunday-talk-shows-on-gaza-a-study-in-media-bias/> (6 June 2024)
- YOUNES, LYLIA: ›Think of It as a Genocide of Journalists‹. In: *The Nation*. 18 January, 2024. <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/palestine-journalists-syndicate-interview/> (6 June 2024)