



Gaza: Of media wars and borderless journalism

By Lawrence Pintak

January, 2009. Yet again, the disconnect. Yet again, American and Arab viewers are seeing two vastly different conflicts play out on their television screens. Yet again, the media has become a weapon of war.

Add Gaza to Afghanistan, Iraq, the sieges of Jenin and Ramallah, and Lebanon; another conflict that Arabs and Americans see through completely different lenses. More fodder for the stereotypes. More reason each side fails to understand the other. More reason to hate.

As with the 2006 Israeli war with Hizbullah, I spent the first two weeks of this conflict on a family vacation in North America. The domestic U.S. media was, once more, reporting from behind borders built of pre-conceived notions, simplistic explanations and an Americentric view of the world.

Put simply, Gaza was background noise. Yes, it generally made the front page of the newspapers and the main newscasts, but – particularly on television – the humanity, the scale and the context of the conflict were AWOL. Arabs and Israelis were at it again; now let's get back to Obama, the economy and New Year's Eve.

And the carefully-scripted talking points of the Israeli spokespeople who dominated the airwaves made it clear that, yet again, the Arabs deserved what they were getting. Driving through Washington State, I listened to a fawning half-hour interview with an Israeli consul general on a Seattle talk show. In San Francisco, I saw another Israeli official on TV fielding marshmallows from a local anchor. On CNN, it was more of the same. And for the most part, U.S. politicians were working from those same talking points, as a montage on Comedy Central's [Daily Show](#) made so clear. Arabs, or those presenting their perspective, were few and far between.

All the retroactive journalistic soul-searching over official [media manipulation](#), lack of balance in the selection of ["expert" interviews](#) in the lead-up to Iraq, self-censorship ["because of concern about public reaction to graphic images"](#) in the early phase of that war, and ["misguided moral equivalence"](#) in the 2006 Lebanon conflict was, yet again, forgotten.

As in 2006, I returned to the Middle East to find a very different conflict playing out on my television screen. To find Arabs enraged; yet again. To hear people asking how Americans could sit back and ignore the carnage; yet again. More demonstrations against Israel and America, more name calling, more people shaking their heads asking, “Why don’t Americans understand?”

America’s public diplomacy chief offered part of the answer. “Americans are big supporters of Israel, that’s just a fact,” he told a group of Egyptian bloggers in a briefing in the virtual world *Second Life*. But the other half of the reason is that Americans were not seeing the same images that were bombarding Arabs 24/7; the kind of pictures that would melt the heart of the most diehard supporter of Israel. Which was precisely why, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, the Israeli media weren’t showing them to the their own public either.

“Our media is systematically covering up the suffering in Gaza, and there’s only one opinion present in the TV studios – the army’s,” liberal *Haaretz* columnist Gideon Levy told the German magazine *Der Spiegel*.

The world’s television news organizations were all taking the same feed from the Palestinian video agency *Ramattan TV*; the difference came in how they edited the tape.

As in Afghanistan and Iraq and Lebanon, U.S. coverage leading up to the January 19 ceasefire mostly consisted of impersonal wide shots of bombs exploding, interspersed with the occasional fleeting images of bodies wrapped in burial shrouds. Here in the Arab world, television was dominated by heart-wrenching close-ups of dead and horribly maimed infants and young children.

But Arab coverage was not monolithic. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have sought to prevent Hamas from scoring political gains at the expense of the more secular Palestinian authority, while Qatar is leading a Gulf block that equates support for Hamas with support for the Palestinian people. The fault lines have produced a *media war* in the Arab world. “What journalism we have today!” a leading *Saudi columnist* declared in print, charging his colleagues with “marketing the idea that any anger at the Israeli bombardment is unjustified and that any support for resistance is incitement for terrorism.”

The rift is most evident on the broadcasts of the region’s bitter television rivals. Al Jazeera, owned by the government of Qatar, has focused on vivid images of bloodshed accompanied by commentary thick with moral outrage. Rival Al Arabiya, owned by Saudi interests close to the royal family, has chosen to avoid the most graphic footage and take a more measured tone. The contrasting approaches reflect both the very different perceptions of the role of Arab journalism in the two newsrooms and the political rift between their respective patrons.

“Our coverage was closer to the people,” Al Jazeera’s news chief Ahmed Sheikh told me. While he said the channel was “impartial” in that it gave airtime to Israeli officials, “we

are not neutral when it comes to innocent people being killed like this. The camera picks up what happens in reality and reality cannot be neutral,” he said, adding that, as with U.S. network coverage of Vietnam, Al Jazeera showed graphic images to turn public opinion against the war. “The goal of covering any war is to reveal the atrocities that are carried out.”

“We belong to two different schools of news television in the Arab world,” countered Al Arabiya news chief Nabil Khatib, the target of death threats on Islamist websites for refusing to allow the word *shahid* (martyr) to be used on the air to describe Palestinian dead.

“There is the school that believes that news media should have an agenda and should work on that agenda for ideological and political reasons, which is Al Jazeera’s. We are in the school that believes you need to guarantee knowledge with the flow of news without being biased and by being as much as possible balanced,” Khatib continued.

Just days into the conflict, in a linguistic play on the name of Al Arabiya, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah called the channel “Al Ibryia,” which roughly means [The Hebrew One](#). The resulting campaign against Al Arabiya, which Khatib believes Al Jazeera fed, has brought into the open long-simmering resentments between the two channels.

Al Jazeera was “satisfying the mob” and “led a campaign for Hamas,” Khatib told me. “They chose to highlight the dead bodies and bloody scenes in close-up, thinking this will create shock. We were cautious with this out of respecting our viewers and our code of ethics.”

Sitting in the newsroom of Abu Dhabi TV, Director of News Abdulraheem Al-Bateeh said that was all nonsense. “Come on, it’s obvious. Al Jazeera is showing that it is pro-Hamas and Al Arabiya shows that it is pro-Fatah.” His channel, he insists, sits in the middle, in keeping with Emirati government policy. “We are with Hamas on the humanitarian side, but politically we are with Fatah.”

But even in its most sanitized form, Arab coverage is a world away from that seen in the U.S.

Make no mistake, reporting by international news organizations was badly hampered by Israel’s refusal to allow journalists to cross into Gaza and Egypt’s own decision to keep its border with Gaza sealed. But all news organizations were struggling under the same strictures. That doesn’t explain the vivid contrast in coverage between the U.S. networks and those overseas.

And it’s not just Arab, or even European channels like the BBC, that provided coverage different from that seen in the U.S. An American diplomat here in the Middle East told me that he and a colleague were working out in the embassy gym one day with the television on. The embassy gets a feed from Armed Forces Radio and Television, so

diplomats have access to CNN's domestic service. Out of curiosity, they started switching back and forth between CNN domestic and CNN international, the parallel – separately staffed and produced – version of the network seen outside the U.S. “We couldn't believe it,” he recalled. The domestic CNN was dominated by commentary supporting Israeli actions, while the international feed was focused on the devastation on the ground.

Balance is the goal of any quality news organization. But in the U.S., the quest for balance in this complex and highly-charged conflict has sometimes seemed contrived.

Take ABC anchor Charles Gibson's lead-in to a “[children of war](#)” piece on the January 8 *World News Tonight*: “Youngsters on both sides of the border are being killed, injured and traumatized by the fighting in Gaza,” he reported. But is that strictly true? By the day the piece aired, according to [UNICEF](#), 292 Palestinian children had been killed, with hundreds more wounded. The number has since grown. Of the three Israeli civilian deaths at that point, none were children.

Yet American viewers who watched the piece that followed Gibson's lead-in could be forgiven for coming away with the impression that both sides were suffering equally and that, as in Gaza – a ten mile by six mile strip that is one of the most densely populated places on earth – there was nowhere in Israel where one could escape the torrent of missiles. There is certainly no doubt that the last few weeks have been traumatic for Israeli children living in towns near the border, but in the shorthand of U.S. TV news, their suffering and that of Palestinian children in Gaza became indistinguishable.

The contrast between U.S. television and [Al Jazeera English](#) (AJE), the Western-managed counterpart to the Arabic channel the Bush administration loved to hate, could not be starker. After two years of missteps, Al Jazeera English has hit its stride. And until shortly before the January 19 ceasefire, it was the only channel with international reporters on the ground inside Gaza. And since late December, it has been all Gaza, all the time. AJE essentially turned its entire broadcast day over to coverage of the conflict.

In terms of English-language broadcasters, the BBC and CNN International, both of which have a mix of reporters and anchors from around the world, have been doing excellent work from the Israel-Gaza border and beyond. London-based Tim Whewell's in-depth and carefully reported five-and-a-half minute piece, “[The case for war crimes](#),” on the BBC's *Newsnight* is not something likely to have been aired on U.S. television, while Palestinian producers, such as the BBC's [Rushdie Abualouf](#), have supplied a steady stream of original footage and reporting from inside Gaza.

But with its mix of Arab and Western correspondents, news executives from Canadian, British and Arab networks, and access to the regional infrastructure and expertise of Al Jazeera Arabic, AJE is a channel born to cover this conflict.

Two correspondents from AJE were in Gaza when Israel sealed the border in mid-December: [Ayman Mohyeldin](#), an American who started his career as a producer for

NBC and CNN, and Sherine Tadros, a British-Egyptian former staffer at Al Arabiya who was sent to Gaza as a producer but moved on camera when the fighting began. Their reporting has been nothing short of riveting.

But it is the comprehensive nature of the coverage, the seamless integration of news and programming, which has resulted in a body of work that not only brings viewers into the heart of the conflict, but sets the war in its political, geographic and historical context.

Standouts include Sami Zeidan's take-no-prisoners interviews with IDF spokespeople, Kamal Santa Maria's touching conversation with the secretary general of the Swedish Red Cross on the human toll, and "Gaza: The Road to War," a special that took viewers back sixty years.

Whether in the field or in the studio, AJE's coverage has been cool and collected, largely free of the emotion that is often in evidence on its sister Arabic-language network; and the word "martyr," used by Al Jazeera Arabic and many other Arab news organizations to describe Palestinian dead, has not crossed the lips of AJE's staffers.

The overarching title of AJE's coverage, "War On Gaza," telegraphed the channel's perspective – "on" not "in" was a conscious choice. The reporting reflected a distinct attitude; an implicit sense of identification with the Palestinian victims – the civilians, not the Hamas fighters – evident, for example, in a crawl at the bottom of the screen listing the names and ages of some of the more than 300 Palestinian children killed.

But it is an engaged journalism borne of empathy that, to this viewer's mind, stopped short of betraying an overt bias against Israel – much to the disappointment of some Arabs, such as a guest columnist in Qatar's *Ash Sharq* newspaper, who charged that "the English-language channel either consciously or unconsciously is moving within the orbit of the Israeli approach."

AJE's correspondents inside Israel – veterans of the BBC, ITN and CNN – have been aggressive in their approach, as in reporter James Bays' questioning of Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, but they have also not shied away from reporting on the impact of Hamas missiles on Israeli citizens.

The American networks, by contrast, have largely abandoned the Middle East. A few weeks before the Gaza crisis broke [CBS News fired](#) most of the staff of its Israel bureau. [ABC](#) recently cut a deal to use the BBC's reporting from Baghdad so it can strip down its own operation. The evening newscasts of ABC, CBS and NBC together gave just 434 minutes of airtime to Iraq in 2008, according to the [Tyndall Report](#), and there were days in the first two weeks of the Gaza war when the networks did not bother to air a piece on the conflict.

They are, essentially, ceding reporting of the region (and much of the world) to others. Ironically, in the long run, given the U.S. networks' track record in recent years, that may be a good thing – if these alternatives become more available to the average American.

For the moment, BBC America is seen on some cable systems, CNN International cannot be viewed inside the U.S., and, with a few localized exceptions, Al Jazeera English is only available online via [Livestation](#) and YouTube.

The kind of borderless journalism these channels increasingly offer creates the potential to replace the myopic coverage that has fueled misunderstanding since 9/11, staking out space in the uncharted turf between the rival bloodshot lenses of the domestic U.S. and Arab networks.

It is a place where worldviews are not quite so fixed, where audiences are exposed to more than just their own preconceived notions, and where a new definition of balance just might be found.

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