Covering the Intifada:

How the Media Reported the Palestinian Uprising

Jul 1, 2003

In-Depth Reports

INTRODUCTION

The appalling violence between Israelis and Palestinians that began in September 2000 has been one of the most painful episodes in the history of the modern Middle East. People on both sides, and many outsiders, had hoped that the famous handshakes on the White House lawn in 1993 that sealed the Oslo agreements marked the beginning of the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Now those hopes seemed to have turned to ashes.

For Israel, the pain of dashed hopes was compounded by the sense that much of the world blamed it for the breakdown and looked upon the Palestinians as the victims. Some Israelis accused the international news media of bias against Israel. On the other side, however, some Arabs insisted it was they who were the victims of unfair coverage. Noting that they were criticized from both directions, news organizations tended to read this as proof of their objectivity, a plausible inference that was not necessarily well founded.

To assess the coverage, I have undertaken this study on behalf of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. It has been designed in collaboration with the Institute's director, Robert Satloff. It examines seven national news outlets: the New York Times, the Washington Post, and five television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox). The television coverage examined is limited to the main nightly news broadcasts, which are a fixed ritual on the three older networks. Neither CNN nor Fox has an evening news program exactly equivalent to those of the older networks, but I have done my best to select the closest analogue.

Because it was beyond my ability to study two years of news reports, Dr. Satloff and I selected ten critical moments in the unfolding of this conflict, or the "al-Aqsa intifada," as it is sometimes called. For each of these, I have studied the news reports over a five-day period, generally beginning two days before some highlight event occurred and continuing until two days afterward. We make no claim that these were the ten most important moments, since such a determination would have no particular relevance to the purposes of the study. Our goal was merely to take a manageable slice of these two years for examination. We might have taken fifty days at random, except that we wanted to make sure to choose days on which the Middle East tragedy was indeed in the news. (The Times and the Post carried at least one story from the area almost every day, but the television news often carried nothing about it except on those days when the conflict heated up.)

To avoid inadvertent prejudice resulting from our selection of events, we tried to select a mix of occasions, including some on which the main story was about diplomacy and others when it was about violence; some on which most of the victims were Israeli and others on which most were Palestinian. Our chosen episodes are "front loaded," that is, weighted toward the earlier part of the conflict. This is in part because there was so much drama at the outset, in part because the early reportage set a tone for much that followed, and in part because this study has taken a while to produce (being originally designed earlier in the intifada).

For the fifty selected days, I have read carefully all news stories relevant to the Arab-Israeli conflict that appeared in

the two newspapers. To examine the television coverage, I viewed each broadcast (thanks to the facilities of the Television News Archive of Vanderbilt University) and, in addition, read transcripts of the broadcasts.

Beyond the care I tried to take in examining the material, this study has no formal methodology. I find quantitative media analysis almost invariably unpersuasive. The number of times that a given term or thought appears in news reports is easy to count, but what does it prove? My "methodology" is common sense. I am aiming to assess accuracy, fairness, and balance. These are values that lie at the heart of the American practice of journalism. My goal was to judge whether the news organizations met these standards, and, if they failed, then to assess how often and how severely. If only one or two of a journalist's many stories fall short, not much should be made of it; no one is perfect (not even media critics). Yet, if a journalist or news organization repeatedly fails in the realms of accuracy or fairness, then this amounts to a serious lapse of professionalism.

Where I have spotted a story that I believe merits criticism, I cite it and explain what I think is wrong. In most cases, I refrain from commenting on editorials, columns, or explicit opinion pieces, even though I have read many opinions with which I disagree. My concern in this study is not to counter such opinions but to judge whether the newspapers and networks I have examined have met the highest standards of their profession. In a few cases, however, I have noted erroneous assertions of fact within editorials, and in one case what seemed to me an absurd supposition.

Much more often, I criticize editorializing within news stories, that is, reportage that seems strongly colored by the journalist's opinions. In addition, as I shall explain more in the body and the conclusion of the study, I believe I uncovered some systemic problems endemic to the asymmetry of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that have derogated from the quality of the coverage of these tragic events.

One obvious flaw in my method is the familiar dog-that-did-not-bark problem. Just as news organizations are often criticized for not reporting good news, so my analysis focuses on instances of dereliction on the part of journalists rather than on the many informative stories in which I found nothing to fault. Like others who study political events, I rely heavily on the accounts of reporters from whose knowledge and skill I benefit. That they often have to work in hazardous conditions makes me all the more indebted to them.

Lastly, I must address the question of my own standing to judge. I do not claim to come to this subject as a dispassionate neutral. I am a Jew and a supporter of Israel. By the last term I mean that I strongly uphold Israel's right to exist (which I believe is a central question of the Arab-Israeli conflict), not that I necessarily agree with every action of each Israeli government. I do not consider that disagreement with, or criticism of, Israeli policy is tantamount to being "anti-Israel." Israelis themselves are often raucous in their own political disputes. Yet, obsessive or one-sided criticism of Israeli policies may reflect a deeper animosity to the state.

I do not believe that my strong support for Israel's existence prevents me from producing a rigorous analysis. As individuals and citizens, news reporters have opinions and political allegiances, yet this does not make it impossible for them to meet standards of accuracy and fairness. Likewise, I have made every effort not to be overmastered by my predilections, but rather to carry out this study with a discipline of reason, objectivity, fairness, and, of course, fidelity to fact. Readers will judge my success or failure at meeting those standards.

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