

REPRESENTATION OF PALESTINE AND ISRAEL CONFLICT BETWEEN BBC AND AL JAZEERA NEWS

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Abstract: This article seeks to explore the influence of the nation-state context on the coverage of the 2023 Palestinian-Israeli conflict by BBC and Al Jazeera English. BBC was chosen as a representation of mainstream Western global media, whereas Al Jazeera English represents a counter-flow category of global news media. Through a qualitative discourse analysis focusing on the initial phase of the conflict, differences in portrayal between BBC World News and Al Jazeera English were identified. The analysis a clear divergence in the transitivity as well as naming and referential strategies between the BBC and AJE.

Keywords: BBC, Al Jazeera, Palestine, Global News

GLOBALISATION OF THE MEDIA AND THE NATIO- STATE

The globalization of media is leading to the deterritorialization of news content, fundamentally altering the role of journalists, especially foreign correspondents. In the field of news media and journalism studies, the concept of global journalism has emerged. Elfriede Fursich (2002: 59) highlights that global journalists within global media are not merely "international journalists reporting foreign news from a national perspective," but are instead news professionals working for transnational media conglomerates, producing content for a global audience. This shift challenges traditional journalistic frames of reference, particularly at the national and local levels (Fursich, 2002: 59).

Despite the globalization of news media, the influence of the nation-state remains significant, with media institutions largely impacted by domestic contexts, whether through legislative measures or societal and cultural norms (Nossek, 2004: 345). Hillel Nossek (2004: 346) observes that media organizations function within a broader network of societal institutions, which in turn influences and is influenced by other social entities. Consequently, journalists' and editors' decisions regarding foreign events are still heavily influenced by the broader cultural and domestic environment..

BBC WORLD NEWS

The concept of 'impartiality' has served as the guiding principle for the BBC since the inception of its international broadcasts in 1932 through the Empire radio service. The agreement accompanying the BBC Royal Charter explicitly states that the corporation "must do all it can to ensure that controversial subjects are treated with due accuracy and impartiality in all relevant output" (Yoshiko, 2007).

This commitment to impartiality has shielded the BBC from governmental control. However, it does not imply immunity from state interference. Despite being recognized for editorial independence in the BBC Royal Charter, the Charter requires renewal by the British government every decade. This places the corporation in a precarious position, particularly towards the end of its term when critics may influence its direction (McPhail, 2010). Curran (2002) elucidates that the period leading up to Charter renewal often sees heightened

sensitivity of the BBC to government and establishment views (p. 195).

While the focus of this article, BBCWN, broadcasting to a global audience, operates on a commercial basis funded by advertising and subscription, it has yet to turn a profit and relies on assistance from the domestic news-gathering operation. In 2001, BBCWN was brought under the same umbrella as the government-funded BBC World Service, although it retained its commercial status. It received support from the BBC's domestic news-gathering division, such as content supplied by BBC News 24.

AL JAZEERA ENGLISH

AJE, the second channel of Qatar's network, was launched in November 2006 (Powers, 2012: 23). Many international news scholars have characterized AJE as a credible alternative counterforce to more established global networks such as the BBCWN and CNN International (CNNI). This sentiment is echoed by its Managing Editor Tony Burman, who articulated AJE's focus on covering more of the developing world in an effort to "reverse the flow of information," which predominantly emanates "from the main capitals of the world" in the Western context (Barkho, 2011).

Despite receiving funding from the state, Al Jazeera maintains its claim of operating independently of the Qatari government (Allan, 2006), with Qatari royals consistently asserting that they refrain from interfering with the channel's editorial decisions (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003). This perceived autonomy, uncommon among Middle Eastern media companies, has bolstered Al Jazeera's credibility with its audiences. However, critics often view such claims of independence skeptically (Da Lage, 2019), particularly given that Al Jazeera's board of directors is chaired by a member of the royal family, Sheikh Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani, who formerly served as the Qatari

Deputy Minister of Information (Miles, 2010; Zayani, 2008).

While there is evidence indicating that Al Jazeera has faced direct pressure from its sponsor, several media scholars argue against the notion that the Qatari government directly interferes with the network's operations or that it functions as a mouthpiece for Qatar's foreign policy (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003; Zayani, 2008). Supporting this argument is the observation that Al Jazeera's editorial policy sometimes conflicts with Qatar's foreign policy objectives. For instance, while the network airs viewpoints from political dissidents critical of various Middle Eastern governments and scrutinizes their human rights records, the Qatari government maintains friendly relations with most regional countries (Zayani, 2008). Olivier Da Lage (2019) highlights that while the Qatari government may listen to complaints regarding Al Jazeera, the Emir occasionally expresses "unconvincing" disapproval of particularly contentious broadcasts.

METHODS

The methodology employed in this study adopts a critical approach to language in news, drawing on Roger Fowler's seminal work "Language in News" (2013), which emphasizes the role of linguistic structures in shaping news content. Fowler argues that news should not be seen merely as 'facts about the world', but rather as a construction of 'ideas', 'beliefs', 'values', 'theories', 'propositions' or 'ideology'. The term 'discourse' is utilized in a broad sense, referring to statements in general or specific groups or types of statements (Philo 2007: 179).

The analysis of sentence construction is rooted in the concept of transitivity, which elucidates the relationships between participants in a news report and how actions are represented in the text (Richardson, 2017). This analytical framework examines various aspects including the process and participants in sentences, the agency of sentences, the usage of

nominalizations, sentence connections, as well as the utilization of active/passive voice and negative/positive sentences (Fairclough, 2003).

Data for this study were collected from online news articles published by the BBC and Al Jazeera during two critical periods of the Israel-Palestinian conflict: October 7th to October 13th and November 12th to November 18th. These time frames were selected due to their significance in capturing pivotal events, significant developments, or escalations in the conflict dynamics. By focusing on these weeks, the study aims to conduct a detailed analysis of media coverage during key phases of the conflict, shedding light on how the BBC and Al Jazeera navigate and report on critical moments. This scrutiny of news coverage within defined periods aims to uncover potential variations in framing, emphasis, and agenda-setting, providing insights into how the media interpret and respond to crucial occurrences. Thus, the chosen time frame serves as a deliberate strategy for a focused exploration of the media's role in shaping perceptions during specific incidents within the broader timeline of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

In total, 208 online news articles from the BBC and 372 from Al Jazeera were collected for analysis, focusing on all news releases from both outlets from the onset of the prolonged conflict triggered by the first Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. This article subjected 10 news articles from the BBC and 10 news articles from Al Jazeera to Critical Discourse Analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

BBC

The analysis of the post-election protest coverage reveals a clear divergence in transitivity, as well as naming and referential strategies between the BBC and AJE.

As demonstrated below, during the first week of the conflict, Palestinians were referred to as 'Palestinian militants' and 'Hamas militants'.

*"Just hours later, their social media pages are now flooded with desperate people trying to find loved ones, after **Palestinian militants** stormed the festival and opened fire as part of a huge surprise attack on Israel."* (9 October 2023)

*"Where were the **Israel Defense Forces**, in those long hours as **Hamas militants** roamed at will around communities near Gaza, some are asking."* (10 October 2023)

*"Israel is still reeling from Saturday's surprise attack by **Hamas militants**, who killed at least 1,000 people and wounded many more."* (10 October 2023)

The BBC described Israel's attack on Gaza as 'retaliation'.

"He was due to perform surgery on Saturday - the same day Hamas militants launched a deadly attack in Israel." (10 October 2023)

"Retaliatory Israeli air strikes have killed more than 700 people in the Gaza Strip, local authorities say." (10 October 2023)

Interestingly, a month after the attack, the BBC's terminology regarding Hamas changed. Hamas is no longer described as 'militant,' but simply referred to as Hamas.

From the beginning of this war on 7 October, when a surprise attack launched by Hamas killed around 1,200 people, mostly Israeli civilians, it has said reaching the hospital is one of its main targets. (17 November 2023)

Israel's latest siege and military operation began following Hamas's brutal 7 October attack, when the group - which is banned as

a terrorist organisation by the UK, US and other powers - killed around 1,200 people and took more than 230 people hostage, according to Israeli authorities. (18 November 2023)

“Since then, Israel has carried out a relentless bombing campaign in Gaza, which is governed by Hamas, killing at least 11,078 people, including more than 4,500 children, according to Palestinian officials.” (12 November 2023)

AL JAZEERA

Al Jazeera however adopts a different lexical choices. Hamas attack on Israel is described as “a deadly” and “multi-pronged attack”.

“At least 232 people have been killed and 1,600 wounded in the Palestinian enclave of Gaza during Israel’s retaliation after a deadly multi-pronged attack by Hamas forces into Israel, the health ministry says.” (7 October 2023)

“The growing casualty toll on Saturday came after the Palestinian group running the Gaza Strip launched the largest attack on Israel in years, infiltrating areas in the south of the country following a barrage of thousands of rockets fired from the besieged territory.” (7 October 2023)

The Israeli attack is described as 'devastating' and 'relentless'.

“Israel has waged a devastating bombing campaign and ground incursion in the besieged Gaza Strip since October 7, killing at least 11,000 Palestinians, more than a third of them children, Gaza officials say.” (12 November 2023)

“Israel has promised to eliminate Hamas in response to its October 7 attacks in the south, which killed about 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials.” (12 November 2023)

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis reveals divergences in the usage of lexical and referential terms between the BBC and Al Jazeera during the 2023 Palestinian-Israeli conflict. While the BBC exhibits a negative tone towards the attacks by Hamas and Palestinian groups, Al Jazeera appears to glorify Hamas's attacks on Israel.

Interestingly, the BBC's referential choices regarding Hamas changed a month after the war, coinciding with a period when Gaza was heavily bombarded by Israel, resulting in thousands of deaths. It is intriguing to note whether these changes in lexical choices may be attributed to the evolving landscape of world society's stance towards Israel, characterized by massive protests against Israel's attacks worldwide.

The BBC seems to provide more contextual coverage of Israeli attacks on Gaza, whereas Al Jazeera tends to portray Israel's attacks in a negative light.

In its endeavor to compete with well-established Western global news media outlets, AJE must set itself apart through distinct editorial and organizational policies, differing from networks such as CNNI and BBCWN. This editorial stance inevitably influences the storytelling approach of individual journalists and shapes their perception of newsworthiness (Archetti 2010, 580). During the 2023 Palestinian-Israeli conflict, AJE aimed to offer alternative perspectives compared to Western news channels, striving for a less overtly pro-Western interpretation of events.

BBCWN, on the other hand, faces less significant competitive pressures from global news networks in shaping its coverage of international events like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Despite being commercially operated and not funded by license fees or taxpayers' money, BBCWN heavily relies on the BBC's news-gathering operation, primarily catering to domestic audiences. Consequently, news packages are tailored with the British audience in mind before being disseminated globally. Moreover, intense competition with commercial channels in Britain necessitates prioritizing the engagement of domestic viewers, as failure to do so could jeopardize its funding.

In the broader context of textual analysis, it is questioned whether discrepancies in reporting on the 2023 war merely reinforced preexisting opinions and attitudes among global audiences (El-Nawawy and Powers 2010). Hafez (2008) argues that modern broadcasters often target specific societal segments, relying on cultural norms and political narratives to contextualize international events. This phenomenon, termed the 'balkanization of global news' by Powers and El-Nawawy (2010), involves broadcasters catering to audiences with similar ideological leanings, echoing Huntington's (1993) "clash of civilizations" theory, where Western and Islamic media propagate 'us-versus-them' narratives.

However, the global news landscape, characterized by the coexistence of Western and non-Western players in 24-hour news markets, fosters a diversity of ideas and perspectives (Thussu 2007). These results indicate that there are more differences than similarities in global news coverage between established Western media corporations like BBCWN and newcomers like AJE.

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