

**The News Media and the Second Intifada:  
Some Basic Lessons<sup>1</sup>**

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The role of the news media in violent conflicts is a major concern in the field of political communication (For overviews see: Bennett & Paletz, 1994; Entman, in press; Livingston, 1997; Knightly, 1975; Mermin, 1999; Strobel, 1997; Wolfsfeld, 1997). One also finds an increasing awareness of the importance of this topic among journalists, commentators and the general public. The massive amount of attention devoted to the role of the media in the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provides a graphic demonstration of this interest.

As one would expect, there has also been a good deal of scholarly and popular attention given to the role of the media in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. Many Israelis, for example, were convinced that the news media were the primary reason for the intensification and continuation of the first *Intifada* that broke out in December 1987 (Cohen & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Wolfsfeld, 1997). If the cameras were taken away, it was simplistically argued, the protests would quickly die out. Many Israelis also felt then (as they do now) that they were being unjustly criticized in the international press for their policies in the territories.

The goal of this essay is to apply some of the knowledge that has been gained from previous research in order to better understand the role of the media in the Second *Intifada*. My own work on these issues began during the War in Lebanon in the early eighties and continued through the first *Intifada*, the Gulf War, the more optimistic period known as the Oslo peace process, and the current round of hostilities. These research projects included interviews with a wide range of leaders, advisors, and journalists from both sides of the conflict as well as content analyses of both local and foreign media coverage. While the results of the most recent conflict are still tentative, there are some preliminary lessons that are worth sharing.

### ***Lesson 1: Adapting to the Needs of the Media***

The first lesson has to do with the increasingly powerful belief on both sides of this conflict that the struggle over the news media can be just as important as the battle on the ground. While the overall influence of the news media on such conflicts remains an open issue (Livingston 1997; Mermin, 1999; Strobel 1997), it is clear that media considerations do have an impact on actors' strategy. Israelis and Palestinians are both very aware that they are playing to an international audience and, as always, there is a major struggle over who should be cast as aggressor and who as victim.

The dependence on the international news media is especially strong for the Palestinians. As the weaker side, the media is one of the only means they have of

convincing other countries to intervene. One of the most powerful roles the news media can play in such conflicts is when they become “equalizers” by allowing the weaker party to enlist the support of third parties. This was certainly what happened in the first *Intifada* in which the Palestinians were extremely successful at placing their plight on the international agenda (Wolfsfeld 1997).

Israel’s major goal on the other hand, is mostly damage control. Media images of Palestinian dead and wounded are a direct threat to Israel’s relations with the United States, Europe, and the rest of the Arab world. The goal for Israel is to convince the world that the Palestinians are using terrorism to obtain what they could not achieve at the bargaining table. Because most Israelis believe that the international press is against them, conventional wisdom holds that no news is good news.

This mutual concern about the news media manifests itself in a number of ways. Perhaps the most macabre is the ongoing contest for visual supremacy in the presentation and promotion of pain and suffering. The early stages of the Second *Intifada* produced two very powerful images in this realm. The first was the dramatic pictures of Mohammed el-Dura being shot and killed as he and his father attempted to shield themselves from the crossfire. The second were the scenes of Israeli reserve soldiers being lynched by an angry Palestinian mob in the city of Ramallah. Each of these scenes became powerful icons for the two societies; leaders from both sides attempted to exploit these images in an effort to demonstrate the enemy’s brutality. Perhaps even more striking is the efforts of some of the victims’ relatives and compatriots to supply the press with terrible pictures of their dead and wounded.

The Israelis and the Palestinians have also set up structures and mechanisms in order to increase their chances of winning the battle over the news media. The Palestinian Authority brought the always-eloquent Hannan Ashrawi back into service as a major spokesperson to the Western news media. The Palestinian opposition movements – especially Hamas and the Islamic Jihad movements - adopted media tactics employed by the Hisballah movement in Southern Lebanon. Filmed interviews with suicide bombers and dramatic footage of attacks on Israel are sent to a wide range of journalists immediately after the incidents. Revealingly, the Israeli news media also sometimes broadcasts these tapes despite the chilling effect these images have on the audience.

Israel has also invested considerable time and resources in finding better ways to win the battle over world opinion. One of the most interesting developments has been the decision to set up a new combat unit composed of “fighting cameramen”. These soldiers carry video cameras into the field with them with the explicit purpose of providing visual evidence to support Israeli claims. Efforts are also being made to insure that soldiers going into territories are given special training in dealing with the news media. These sessions place a special emphasis on the enormous damage that can be done to Israel’s image if acts of brutality are captured on film.

There is also good evidence about the increasing importance attributed to media considerations in planning Israeli military operations. Indeed, such efforts have produced a new term in military parlance: “low signature” operations. The term originates in the field of radar, but has now come to refer to actions that will not be easily captured by the press. Thus, one of the fears of using helicopters against Palestinian positions is that they can lead to extremely damaging pictures that will be shown on international television news broadcasts. Camera crews however are much less likely to capture the moment when individual terrorist leaders are killed off camera.

Another important indicator of this tendency is the growing discussion about the importance of “news cycles”. In the early stages of the *Intifada* an increasing number of public figures in Israel were arguing against any immediate military reaction to terrorist attacks. The logic was that the armed response quickly dominates international news coverage and Israel then loses any international sympathy linked to the initial act of terrorism. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this strategy was the government’s surprising lack of military response to the suicide bombing at the “Dolphinarium Discotheque” in which over twenty young Israelis were killed. It was reported that concerns about conflicting news images were one of the major reasons for the decision to show restraint at that time. Many in Israel believe that this incident was one of the few occasions when Israel did indeed receive a certain amount of sympathy in the international press.

Such considerations admittedly became less relevant as the conflict developed into a continuous cycle of violence in which it became impossible to determine what exactly could be considered a reaction. The ongoing violence between the two antagonists also became less newsworthy over time, especially when the international press began to turn their attention to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on the United States

and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, Israeli and Palestinian leaders continue to struggle over the international news agenda in their attempts to tell their own story.

### ***Lesson 2: Demonizing the Enemy***

The second major lesson is that in both democracies and dictatorships, the news media remain powerful tools for the demonization of the enemy. One of the most significant news routines in this area concerns the ways in which each set of news media deals with casualties. Our own people's deaths are tragic while their deaths are either meaningless statistics or even causes for celebration. Our deaths are considered front-page news. The circumstances of "their" deaths, on the other hand, are of no real interest at all. Apart from a few exceptions, casualties on the other side are mostly mentioned in passing.

A joint study carried out by myself and Mohamad Dajani (Wolfsfeld & Dajani, 2003) examined some of the journalistic routines used by the news media in the two cultures that serve to reinforce hatred towards the other side. There are a number of routines that can directly linked to the assumption that our own victims are a terrible tragedy while the other side's victims are not. Perhaps the most powerful of these routines is the tendency to provide a tremendous amount of coverage to one's own victims and relatively little to those from the other side. A related routine has to do with the personalization of one's own victims. When one's own people die they have names and faces, they have grieving families; they have lives. The media also provides a tremendous amount of detail about how one's own victims were killed. Victims from the other side remain, for the most part, anonymous statistics. The use of dramatic language and visuals further reinforces hatred towards the enemy. The other side is much more likely to die off-camera.

While that study focused on newspaper coverage, television is by far the most powerful tool of demonization. While color photographs of gore in newspapers can also shock, they pale in comparison. The bloody images of the dead and wounded on television are accompanied by the constant screaming of those they leave behind. Some of the worst images and sounds are shown repeatedly, as well as the cries for revenge. A raw and instinctive anger inevitably rises up in even the most tolerant of viewers. Who can remain unaffected by the scenes and sounds of one's people being slaughtered?

The power of these routines comes from the fact that they go unnoticed and unquestioned. It is perfectly natural to grieve over one's own victims and to lack any empathy for the enemy. Nevertheless, these graphic stories provide compelling "proof" of our innocence and the enemy's evilness. The outrage and anger expressed by leaders across the internal political spectrum reinforces the certainty among both populations they are victims of brutal aggression. These emotional news stories serve as a central catalyst for intensifying and perpetuating the cycle of hatred and violence.

It is true that neither Israelis nor Palestinians are completely isolated from outside news. Many Palestinians are exposed to Israeli news on television and radio, and some Israelis occasionally tune in to foreign news stations such as CNN. However, given local prejudices, most people conclude that such broadcasts are biased against them.

There are both similarities and differences in the ways in which the Israeli and Palestinian press demonize the enemy. On the one hand, the gap between a free and controlled press tends to narrow during time of crisis. When journalists in democratic countries "rally round the flag" to confront the enemy, they voluntarily surrender their ability to serve as effective watchdogs (Liebes, 1997). Nevertheless, the coverage of the violence in the Palestinian press is much more graphic, horrifying, and ideological. The media within the Palestinian Authority is fully mobilized for the cause. In the Israeli media, on the other hand, one can find alternative voices. While few in number, some Israeli journalists have made a point of presenting the Palestinian perspective. In addition, Palestinian spokespeople are regularly interviewed on Israeli news programs. Such sessions are often confrontational, but they do provide some Palestinians with an opportunity to make their points against Israel.

### ***Lesson 3: Media and Peace as Awkward Bedfellows***

The third lesson comes from taking a longer-range view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the news media make an extremely important contribution to the cause of war, they contribute almost nothing to the establishment of peace (Galtung, 1998; Gowing, 1997, Manoff, 1998). A central component of the Oslo process was the assumption that trust was best built in stages. Compromises that appeared impossible in 1993, when the first accords were signed, were supposed to become easier after the parties had spent years cooperating with each other. It certainly did not work that way and at least part of the reason for this unfortunate

outcome can be attributed to the Israeli and Palestinian news media (Wolfsfeld, in press).

It is ironic that most news about a peace process focuses on the ongoing conflict between the two sides. One of the most important reasons for this has to do with the media's unvarying need for drama. A peace process is, for the most part, a fairly boring affair. Ongoing negotiations rarely make for riveting news stories. When progress is being made both sides have an interest in keeping such details secret. When talks break down, on the other hand, antagonists are all too eager to turn to the news media in order to blame the other side. This is just one of many media routines that ensure that the public is almost always more likely to hear bad news about a peace process (Wolfsfeld, in press).

The Oslo process was also plagued with violence and these events provided journalists with ample opportunity to return to more traditional modes of reporting. The media's emphasis on drama provided important strategic advantages to peace opponents on both sides. Even a relatively small number of deaths can bring about a major wave of anger against the enemy and increasing calls for revenge. The news media do not initiate the violence, but they can often play an important role in intensifying such conflicts. Perhaps the most apt metaphor is that of the wind: the media can be major catalysts for turning a small fire into a raging inferno.

There is only one area in which one could argue that the media's emphasis on drama worked in favor of the Oslo peace process. The extensive media coverage of the signing ceremonies provided Palestinians and Israelis with real hope that the conflict might be coming to an end. These occasions were carefully orchestrated media events that were designed to provide thrust to the ongoing efforts to bring peace. Such events however were few and far between and almost immediately replaced with new crises.

The inability of the news media to contribute to peace was also demonstrated during periods of calm. Before the outbreak of the Second *Intifada*, for example, Israel enjoyed almost two years of relative quiet with virtually no violence whatsoever. Ongoing cooperation between the two security forces prevented almost all terrorist attacks. There were no banner headlines announcing such successes, no major news stories talking about the many benefits the calm had brought to the area. There were also no in-depth news stories about the "other side", nothing that could

have led to greater understanding or empathy. News about peace is in many ways almost as ethnocentric as news about war.

### **Can the Role of the News Media Change?**

The role of the news media in violent conflicts can perhaps best be understood by remembering Plato's allegory of the cave. In his classic work "The Republic" the Greek philosopher talks about the consequences of having captives tied up in front of a wall for as long as they can remember. Images are then projected off the wall and the people have no other contact with the outside world. The shadows become reality for they are the only reference point the captives have. We too spend a good part of our lives looking at images designed by political and military leaders that are then projected onto an electronic wall by journalists. Many of these shadows represent extremely frightening portrayals of the other side and the natural reactions are fear and the intense desire to strike back. The major danger is that despite the advent of the so-called "global village", most of us remain captives in our own national caves.

It would be a mistake however to conclude that the role of the news media in such conflicts can never change. A rather hopeful example can be found by looking at the case of Northern Ireland. In direct contrast to what has happened with respect to the Oslo peace process, the news media in that area of the world played a much more constructive role in supporting peace efforts (Wolfsfeld, in press). There were at least three major reasons for this difference. First, and perhaps most importantly, there was a high level of political consensus among both Protestants and Catholics in support of the Good Friday agreement. In these types of situations, the news media not only reflect the consensus, they help solidify it. The second reason was that a good deal of the news media in Northern Ireland are "shared media", in that both Protestants and Catholics receive a good deal of their news from the same sources. An important consequence of this is that these media have a commercial interest in bridging the gaps between the two sides. Unlike what happens in the Middle East, citizens are not forced to spend their whole lives in separate caves. A final difference is that the press in Northern Ireland is much less sensationalist. This lowers the level of emotionalism in the news that can be so destructive in such conflicts.

This comparison tells us something about the circumstances under which the news media might also play a more positive role in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. If a broad consensus should emerge in both societies in support of a peace process, the news media could become important agents for reconciliation. In addition, while the

notion of shared media in this part of the world is unrealistic, editors could invite journalists from the other side to contribute both news and editorials. This would certainly provide a wider dialogue between the two societies. Finally, an editorial decision to lower the level of sensationalist coverage in both societies would also make a positive impact by creating a calmer political environment.

Sadly, there is very little reason to believe that any of these changes are likely to take place in the near future. Thus, the news media on both sides will probably continue to play their usual role of fanning the flames of hatred. Those who are looking to confirm their worst fears will have little trouble finding them in the news. People searching for hope, on the other hand, will have to continue to look for it elsewhere.

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