

Complicity and Duplicity in Mainstream U.S. Media

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Abstract

Current U.S. newspaper coverage of the conflict between Israel and Gaza perpetuates a pattern of foregrounding and privileging Israeli interests and lives over those of Palestinians. This skew in coverage has been documented in mainstream U.S. media for decades. New is how such pro-Israeli war journalism or “textbook coloniser journalism” infiltrates coverage of seemingly unrelated topics, hinders informed and complicated public discussion, and fuels increased racist attacks and polarization in the United States. Such bias is the antithesis of ethical reporting and contributes to global enmity that feeds violent conflict.

Key words: free speech/press, war/peace journalism, media ethics, feminism, democracy

In December 2023, Stanford University (California) hosted a discussion on “navigating the fog of war” focused on media coverage of the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” (Kekauoha, 2023). Sharing the perspectives of a visiting “Middle East correspondent,” the story enumerated some of the complexities of covering an ongoing, deeply entrenched and polarizing conflict, including how to contextualize, what relevant history to include, and the value of reporting by individuals inside as opposed to outside the conflict. Yet, the story itself lacked nuance from the start. Its asymmetrical headline named the conflict the “Israel-Hamas War,” as if Hamas were the location of the fighting.

Throughout the United States, media coverage of the conflict followed its established pattern of foregrounding and privileging the Israeli narrative and sometimes overtly denigrating Hamas, Palestinians, and Arabs generally (Ross, 2003; Ross 2006; Johnson 2024; Krishnan 2024). One quantitative study published in January 2024, reported significantly disproportionate coverage of Israeli deaths that included repeated use of the terms “horrific,” “slaughter,” and “massacre,” emotional labels not applied to the vastly larger and continued killing of Palestinians, particularly women and children (Johnson, 2024). U.S. reports on the war also gave greater coverage to antisemitic assaults in the United States than to attacks on Muslims or Arabs. “The result is that the three [major U.S.] newspapers rarely gave Palestinians humanizing coverage,” something one Al Jazeera opinion column labelled “a textbook case of colonizer’s journalism.” (Krishnan, 2024).

Such imbalance is nothing new in western media. Less well known is how it affects, and infects, coverage of seemingly unrelated topics. In one less controversial example of

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how pro-Israel bias skews U.S. news media coverage of breaking news, a recent Associated Press story ran under the title, “Penn president resigns amid backlash to testimony on antisemitism.” (Levy, 2023). The December 2023, story was a follow-up to testimony given by University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill, President Claudine Gay of Harvard, and President Sally Kornbluth of MIT before a Republican-led U.S. House of Representatives committee. The hearing gave these leaders of higher education “a chance to answer and atone for the many specific instances of vitriolic, hate-filled antisemitism” on campus, according to Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-N.C), chair of the committee (emphasis added) (Anderson, 2023). Afterward, Magill was forced to resign.

A month later, Harvard’s president followed Magill, forced out based on illogical and often unsubstantiated claims. “And then there was [only] one,” as the Chronicle of Higher Education reported (Hicks, 2024).

The sin for which these administrators were forced to atone; giving thoughtful answers based on accurate readings of the U.S. Constitution to loaded questioning about Israel.

Without pausing for breath, faculty, administrators, and trustees of the three renowned universities rushed to publicly condemn their presidents for comments that “enabled and encouraged antisemitism and an environment of harassment and fear.” (Penn President Responds to Backlash Over Testimony on Antisemitism, 7th December 2023). A feeding frenzy of U.S. lawmakers, including some in the White House (though not President Joe Biden), played fast and loose with the facts to pile condemnation on the presidents for fueling hatred, violence, and even genocide (eg. White House, Lawmakers Criticize University Leaders, 6th December 2023; White House Blasts University Presidents, 6th December 2023; University Leaders Hammered After Congressional Hearing, 7th December 2023; College Presidents Under Fire After Dodging Questions, 6th December 2023; White House – But not Biden – Rips University Presidents, 6th December 2023; US University Presidents Face Firestorm Over ‘Evasive’ Answers on Antisemitism, 7th December 2023).

No less than in the televised 1940s hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (see. ‘Have you no decency?’ McCarthy: American Experience, 8th February 2024) and the infamous Salem witch trials before them, the determination that those called before the House committee were guilty came long before the proceedings. “The antisemitism we’ve seen on your campuses didn’t come out of nowhere,” Rep. Foxx said. “There are cultures at your institutions that foster it because you have faculty and students who hate Jews, hate Israel, and are comfortable apologizing for terror.” (Anderson, 2023).

In the click-driven, conflict-driven culture of U.S. media, initial coverage failed entirely to report or seek comments that might bear witness to the fact that the three presidents before the committee, and therefore “charged” with the ineradicable letter A of Antisemitism, number among the fewer than 30 percent of presidents of top research universities who are female. (Gay was also the first Black president of Harvard.) Moreover, the top research universities I inhabited for three decades bore almost no resemblance to the

bastions of vitriol and unfettered hatred committee members described. Today's universities favor coerced conformity over public disagreement. As do our media.

Mainstream coverage failed to indicate that the House hearing, like so much that today passes as government "action" without media critique, misused the power of Congress to harass private citizens working at private institutions to provide a grandstand for committee members. Coverage gave prominence to representatives' heated words that failed to make the constitutionally foundational distinction between expression and action, between what is speech protected by the First Amendment and what is punishable as harassment, intimidation, threat or violent action.

Follow-on reporting was little better. Ten days after the hearing, the Washington Post headlined a news story filled with editorializing with the notion that "Criticism of Harvard's president is growing. Some see race as a factor." (Natanson, 2023). Such a statement in the deeply race-divided United States barely deserves breath, no less press. To support this broad claim, the story focused on a single wealthy Black alumni donor who asserted, with no evidence, that Gay (whose credentials are deep) was hired to advance Harvard's diversity goals.

Another news report opened with a few paragraphs about Magill's resignation before moving on to focus on Rep. Elise Stefanik's (R-N.Y.) pointed questioning during the hearing. Magill's responses delineating the vital distinction between punishable conduct and protected speech were, in the unattributed words of the story, seen by "many" as "attempts at nuance [that] came off as weak-kneed and legalistic equivocations." (Stripling et al., 2023).

Surely foundational legal principles are more than nuance. Fundamental democratic distinctions are far more than legalistic equivocation. Surely the vast space the U.S. Constitution carves between the strongly protected free and unfettered speech to be encouraged in a democratic society and violent action is as essential and meaningful as the difference between, say, involuntary manslaughter and first-degree murder. Surely newspapers should know and report that difference rather than fall into lockstep accord with the loudest voices in Congress and the nation.

Little can be gained by detailing the many failures of U.S. media coverage, but it is important to note how reporting placed a story about U.S. universities in the context of the latest Israeli-Gaza war, interviewed several Jewish students (but not a single identified Palestinian), and relegated a clear statement of the applicable law from a well-known constitutional law scholar to the end. Continuing reference to the ongoing war and lawmakers' commentary about it color a wide array of media stories and make clear that there is but one version of Israel that is newsworthy. Today in the United States (as was true two and six and eight decades ago), mainstream media have little to no room for full, fair, accurate, and multifaceted reporting of issues involving Israel. Critique of Israeli actions or enlightened concern for their victims in Gaza and the West Bank – as well as inside their own borders – find their place almost exclusively in niche media, the rare opinion piece, or

buried at the end of lengthy stories.

Suffice to say that this former journalist, peace scholar, and widely published legal expert is appalled and deeply distressed. Coverage that skews and vilifies, that misrepresents facts to amplify hate, stir anger, and engender distrust has real-world consequences. Too many of our lawmakers here in the United States and around the world understand this. They use it strategically for political gain. History teaches us to be wary. Media's active support or silent complicity with the HUAC hearings made clear that no one is immune from fomented hatred and the violence it begets. Only the targets and the dates seem to change.

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