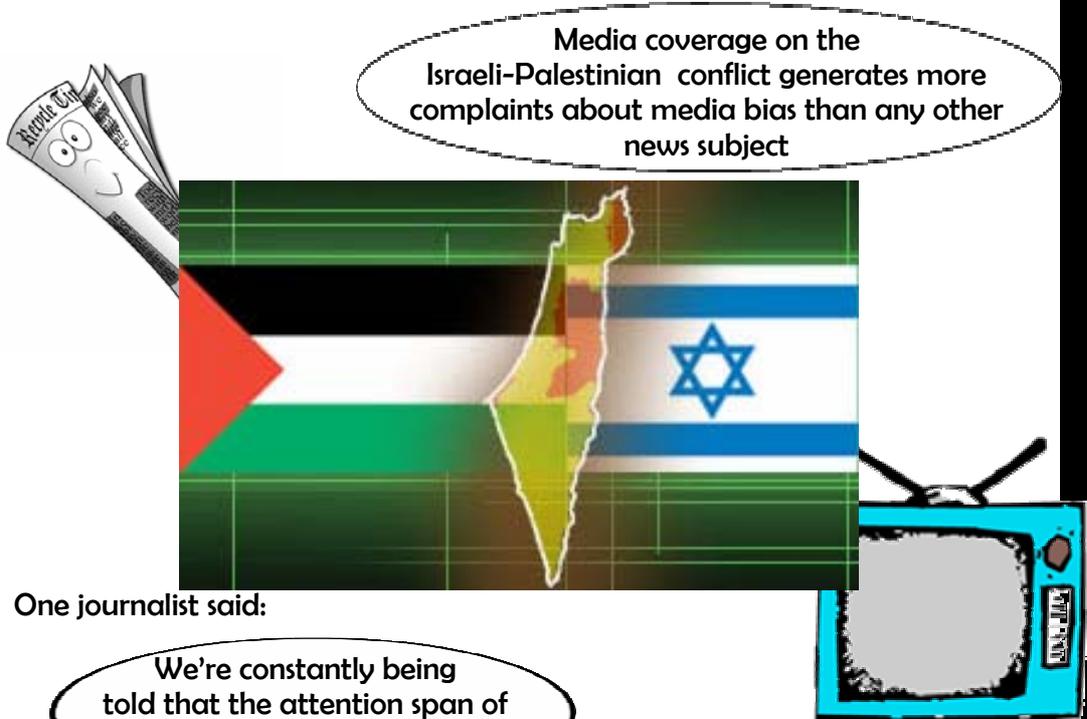


# The media & the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

C A A B U

- ◇ Does the media help us to make sense of the world?
- ◇ Does it sometimes confuse us?
- ◇ Should the media be unbiased?
- ◇ Is it sometimes tricky for the media to avoid bias?



One journalist said:

We're constantly being told that the attention span of our average viewer is about 20 seconds

One journalist was told by his editor that they didn't want any 'explainers'. 'It's all bang-bang stuff,' he said. But can this bang-bang attitude fully explain the shape the news takes?

A key challenge in the production of news is holding the attention of viewers and readers. But often being brief just ends up confusing people. Can the news sustain long explanations? Perhaps not, but a small amount of information can substantially improve understanding.

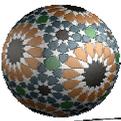
## Reporters in the field vs producers in London

Sometimes producers in London try to set the story against the advice of those on the ground. Do you think people on the ground are more likely to understand what is going on than someone faraway in London?

Apart from death and injury, much Palestinian suffering arises from displacement and occupation – which do not lend themselves to newsworthy events – unlike the deaths of Israelis.

Television news is the main source of information on the Israel-Palestine conflict for about 80% of the population. Yet the quality of what they see and hear is so confused and partial that it is impossible to have a sensible public debate about the reasons for the conflict or how it might be resolved

Greg Philo, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2004



## Many people are bored by the conflict and do not understand it



Is this perhaps to do with the lack of historical context offered in the news? In the first month of the Palestinian uprising or intifada in 2000, out of 3500 lines of text (written down from TV news bulletins), only 17 referred to the history of the conflict. Do you think this is enough to understand why Palestinians might have been staging an uprising?



There are differences between print journalism (newspapers) and broadcast journalism (TV and news). Discuss the different obstacles faced by these form of media in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. You could start with thinking about whether it is easier to explain history in a written article or oral piece? What about the use of visuals? How does the internet feed into the media's ability to cover stories?

## Refugees



Palestinian refugees are the world's largest refugee population. Despite this, the refugee issue is rarely spoken about, and when it is, it is often not explained properly and the Israeli role in the creation of the refugees is glossed over.

In the BBC's country profile of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, for example, the refugee issue is only mentioned once when 'the fate of Palestinian refugees' is described as one of the main stumbling blocks to a final peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

**But where did the refugees come from?** In the fighting that led up to and followed the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, two-thirds of the Palestinians were either expelled or ran away when news of atrocities in other Palestinian villages spread. 400 Palestinian villages were destroyed. The Palestinians hoped to return to their homes as soon as they could. Today, 70% of Palestinians are still refugees.

Do some research and find out if any mainstream outlets include any background or information on the refugees.

## The two sides are often spoken about as if they were equal...

This is a typical example from ITV news

Israelis and Palestinians are on the brink of war tonight after a day of tit-for-tat violence in the Middle East

Sometimes issues can be misrepresented **not through what is said, but through what is left out.**

The 2005 review of the BBC assessing the impartiality of its news and current affairs coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict identified a:

failure to convey adequately the disparity in the Israeli and Palestinian experience, reflecting the fact that one side is in control and the other lives under occupation

They added that:

although this asymmetry does not necessarily bear on the relative merits of the two sides, it is so marked and important that coverage should succeed in this if nothing else

Let's look at what is left out...



## What occupation?

The West Bank and Gaza are known as the Occupied Palestinian Territories because they are occupied by Israel and have been for 40 years – since 1967. For Palestinians, the occupation is characterised by brutality, violence and the denial of their basic rights.

In samples of British students that the Glasgow Media Group study carried out, only 9% in 2001 and 11% in 2002 knew the Israelis were occupying the land – in the first sample more believed the reverse, that Palestinians were occupying the land.

The occupation is rarely mentioned – and when it is, it is often not explored or explained.

## How does the absence of the occupation in a news story shape the story?

When the occupation is not discussed, the impression is created that normal, peaceful day-to-day life is disrupted only when the Palestinians launch an attack.



But for Palestinians in the occupied territories, there is no possibility of a normal and peaceful day-to-day life. There is the day-to-day grind and uncertainty of living under a military occupation. International, Israeli and Palestinian human rights organisations have documented the almost daily violations of Palestinian human rights on the part of the Israelis.

For example, freedom of movement is limited by hundreds of checkpoints which Palestinians have to go through and where humiliation of Palestinians is commonplace. Sometimes people wait hours at a checkpoint, sometimes they are not allowed through. The restrictions on freedom of movement cripple the economy and mean that people cannot reach work places, schools and hospitals.

Without a discussion of Israel's military occupation, developments of Israeli tactics are presented as security requirements. This is the Israeli point of view. The Palestinian point of view is that these tactics are ways to extend and deepen the occupation and are major threats to the security of ordinary Palestinians. This view is rendered invisible by the absence of the occupation in news stories. Palestinians have considerable security concerns themselves – they are without a state whilst Israel is a regional nuclear superpower.

**International law:** Many human rights organisations, international lawyers and the UN have criticised Israeli actions as being against international law. The settlements and the barrier Israel is building in the West Bank, for instance, were both declared to be illegal by the International Court of Justice.



Does the media's widespread neglect to mention when Israeli actions are against international law mean a pro-Israeli bias or can it still claim to be neutral?

Find 4 different newspaper articles and watch 2 news programmes from different channels. Write a list of the ways that these news pieces would be different if the occupation was included as a focus





## Settlements

Settlements are communities for Jews only established in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. They have military and strategic value and are illegal under international law. Israel disputes this, but UN Security Council Resolutions, the International Court of Justice as well as numerous human rights organisations confirm their illegality. Despite this, Israel continues to expand and consolidate the settlements in the West Bank. There are over 400 000 settlers. There are two sets of laws, one for the settlers and one for the Palestinians. Palestinians, who are subject to military law, are forbidden from entering or approaching Israeli settlements or using settlers' roads. Palestinian land is taken by the Israeli military for the building of these settlements and settler-only roads.

The expansion and refusal to dismantle settlements makes a future Palestinian state in the Occupied Territories impossible – this idea that the occupied territories will become an independent Palestinian state is known as the two-state solution – and one that the Israeli government says it supports.



Consider the following definition of settlement in the Guardian online glossary:  
*Since the Six Day War, more than 170,000 Jews have settled in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (which Israelis call Judea and Samaria), most in heavily fortified colonies. Many Jewish people, both religious and secular, believe the territories to be part of the ancestral Land of Israel.*

Would you have included/excluded the same details?

## People

In 1994, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat won the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts in bringing about peace talks. At the time, Rabin was the Israeli prime minister, Peres was the Israeli foreign minister and Arafat was the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation.

Rabin and Peres are often described as peacemakers, whilst Arafat is more often described as an obstacle to peace.



But...

PERES



Palestinians also remember Rabin as the man who cleansed two large Palestinian towns (Ramla and Lydda) in 1948-49, who masterminded the occupation of their lands in 1967, and who spoke of breaking their bones during the first Intifada.

ARAFAT



Peres is described in online BBC articles as “a major player in the peace process” and “a fighter for peace,” Palestinians also see his role in expanding settlements and the fact that he was one of the architects of Israel’s clandestine (secret) nuclear weapons programme.

Taking the BBC as an example, even Arafat’s online obituary does not include the fact he also won the Nobel Peace Prize.

RABIN



What effect does mentioning Rabin and Peres’ peace prize, whilst ignoring Arafat’s have? What about the absence of the other sides of Rabin and Peres’ records, which Palestinians know too well?





## Coverage of Israeli and Palestinian casualties



Israelis and Palestinians both suffer – is their suffering described in the same way? Should it be?

In one week in March 2002 which the Glasgow Media Group study took as a sample, there were 140 Palestinian deaths and Israeli deaths were just under a third of this number. The BBC then gave Israeli casualties more than double the amount of coverage than given to the Palestinian casualties.

Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces	4267
Israelis killed by Palestinians	1025
Palestinian minors killed by Israeli security forces	861
Israeli minors killed by Palestinians	119

The figures cover the time period from September 2000 till September 2007. They are from Btselem, an Israeli human rights organisation.

Most people questioned in the study thought that there were about equal numbers of casualties or more Israeli casualties. Could this misunderstanding arise because of greater coverage given to Israeli casualties?

### What about the nature of the coverage?

The Glasgow Media Group analysis found words such as "murder", "atrocious", "lynching", "savagery", "cold-blooded killing" and "barbaric" were used to describe Israeli deaths, including of Israeli soldiers, whilst they were not used to describe Palestinian deaths.

Given that the Israeli occupation and its military control is quite absent – it is difficult to understand why Palestinians are fighting. Audiences gain an understanding of Israeli motives for violence while Palestinian violence seems senseless.



## Actions and reactions?

The Glasgow Media Group study, looking at a period of intense conflict, found that Israelis are said to be retaliating or responding about 6 times as often as Palestinians. For example:

After a Palestinian attack on a bus in which 10 Israeli settlers were killed:

Israel *responded* with air raids on the West Bank and Gaza

*ITV main news, 12 December 2001*

Israel was

ripping up roads around Bethlehem as part of the on-going fight against terror

*ITV early evening news, 8 March 2002*

Dozens of Palestinians and Israelis have been killed in a relentless round of suicide bombings and *Israeli counter-attacks*

*BBC2, Newsnight, 13 December 2001*



Does this reporting imply that the 'cycle of violence' is propelled more by Palestinian or Israeli action and violence?

The Israelis say they are fighting a war against terror and this is largely how they are presented. The Palestinians say they are fighting a war of liberation against a military occupation—is this presented? What about Palestinian non-violent resistance – is this reported on?



# Spokespeople



In general, Israeli spokespeople are given twice as much time to speak as Palestinians.



On the day of historic Presidential Palestinian elections in 2005, the Frost programme on the BBC chose not to interview a Palestinian. Instead, it interviewed Shimon Peres, a representative of the occupier. He described what Israel expects of the Palestinians without answering for any of Israel's actions impeding the elections. Can you imagine the BBC inviting just a Palestinian spokesman to comment during the next Israeli elections in such a prestigious programme? Would they be politely asked what they would like Israel to do?

Imbalances occurs partly because Israel has a very developed media machine and so is able to supply information and trained speakers to the media, whilst the occupation limits the Palestinians' ability to do the same.

A veteran Middle East journalist for the BBC said:

If you are on a scratchy telephone line you are at a disadvantage. The reason the Palestinians suffer is their limited facilities – the Israelis have more money to spend...The second point is that the occupation limits Palestinians' freedom of access to the media.. Ninety-nine percent of the media is based in Jerusalem. If you have a Palestinian minister and you want him to come to a studio in Jerusalem then he can't or it will take him hours because of the restrictions on the movement of the Palestinians on the roads

According to the BBC impartiality review, the imbalance of power between the Israelis and the Palestinians is "reflected in the journalistic enterprise" – it is easier for journalists to gain access to Israeli spokespeople and Israeli authorities may be in a position to grant or deny permits to access Palestinian areas and spokespeople.



The limitations placed on journalists' movement by the Israeli authorities and the difficulties that media teams have in reaching Palestinian areas are rarely mentioned in coverage. Should they be? Why or why not? Do media corporations have a responsibility to devote the necessary resources to make sure that both sides are properly represented?



According to BBC impartiality review, "a formulaic application" of the doctrines of fairness, impartiality and balance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "could produce coverage which misleads from the outset." Discuss whether you think this is true and how media groups could maintain a commitment to fairness, impartiality and balance without being misleading.