

PEACE OR WAR JOURNALISM? RETHINKING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON
THE 2023 ISRAEL-GAZA ESCALATIONAreesha Amer^{*1}, Dr. Humaira Shafi², Dr. Sundus Mustaqeem³^{*1}Student, CIPS, National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), Islamabad²Assistant Professor, CIPS, NUST, Islamabad³Assistant Professor, S3H, NUST, Islamabad^{*1}areeshaamer193@gmail.com, ²humaira.shafi@cips.nust.edu.pk, ³Sundus@s3h.nust.edu.pkDOI:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17112258>**Keywords**

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Abstract

The October 2023 escalation of the Israel-Gaza conflict triggered widespread international media coverage, highlighting once again the influential role of journalism in shaping public discourse, political attitudes, and conflict narratives. This thesis investigates how two major news organizations, Al Jazeera and CNN, reported on the conflict, using the theoretical frameworks of peace journalism and war journalism as proposed by Johan Galtung. Through a comparative qualitative thematic analysis of selected news articles published by both outlets during the escalation, this study explores the extent to which each adhered to or diverged from peace journalism principles, such as contextual reporting, balanced sourcing, humanization of all sides, and emphasis on nonviolent alternatives. The analysis focuses on specific dimensions of coverage including language use, framing strategies, selection of sources, representation of casualties, and portrayal of causes and consequences. Given the geopolitical affiliations, audience demographics, and editorial orientations of CNN (a U.S.-based outlet) and Al Jazeera (Qatar-based and widely consumed in the Global South), this comparison offers critical insights into how global narratives about conflict are constructed and contested across ideological and cultural lines. The study also addresses the broader implications of media framing for international perception, policy influence, and conflict dynamics. In doing so, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates on the responsibilities of global media, the politicization of conflict coverage, and the need for more nuanced, context-rich, and peace-sensitive journalism in times of war.

INTRODUCTION

Following the escalation in Gaza in October 2023, media coverage of the conflict has proved itself to be an important area of study for comprehending how journalism influences public opinion, global conversation, and the happenings of conflict. The

media has long focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict primarily because of its complexity, duration, and the underlying political, religious, and territorial concerns that ultimately gave birth to it. Thus, it has been analyzed through multiple lens and many

perspectives since its initiation. Recent events in 2023, however, have heightened media attention once again, with mainstream and alternative media channels promoting stories that either support or contradict the prevailing discourses surrounding the war or subtly nudge the audience into construing an opinion as desired by those in power.

Journalism, although simply explained as a tool for reporting of a series of events, is regarded as essential to conflict resolution, especially in areas where there is ongoing bloodshed and geopolitical unrest. It has the potential to change perceptions with its coverage of events which in return can affect how governments, international organisations, and local people react to it. Certain points of view can be marginalised while others are legitimised by the media's power to frame events, select particular storylines, and give voice to particular players. War journalism is identified as the type that feeds off of violence, tends to escalate conflict through production of polarizing content whereas peace journalism is quite the opposite, placing more emphasis on dialogue, negating strict binary oppositions and opening avenues for possible conflict resolution. According to Galtung, the alternative framework provided by peace journalism should be turned to more often by prominent media houses, but the fact remains that war journalism dominates current media practices. In doing so, the narratives propagated are those that perpetuate the existing power structures and lead to the continuation of violent cycles instead of making effort to break them through conscious reporting (Galtung 2002).

To study the contrast between the two forms of journalism, the Gaza-Israel War presents itself as an appropriate case study because of its long history of confrontations that frequently turn violent. Since the conflict's resurgence in October 2023, it has been at the forefront once again, thus many perspectives about the unfolding of events have been covered by major media outlets such as CNN and Aljazeera, that frequently resort to norms of war and peace journalism. It has come to attention that western media habitually conforms to war journalism, if analyzed on the basis of war journalism indicators. If one delves deep into this claim, it is found that western media places immense importance on state actors, focuses more on covering the violent confrontations and building sensationalist content to

provide to the audience. The increased emphasis on immediate violence downplays the larger socio-political scenario that would lead the audience to its root causes (Fisk, 2018). At the same time, alternative media, that is known to be functioning outside of governmental pressures and corporal instructions, has shown signs of peace journalism, presenting forth a more critical, holistic and even nuanced perspectives on the current conflict (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005). By providing refined knowledge of the media's involvement in conflict dynamics, this research adds to the larger area of peace and conflict studies. This study closes the gap between media studies and conflict analysis by utilizing Galtung's Peace and War Journalism Theory and a subsequent thematic analysis, pointing out the role that language and the way it is used play in either presenting peaceful solutions or supporting violence. It also builds onto the need to comply to the moral obligations placed on media organizations and journalists while covering conflicts, highlighting the need for more impartial reporting that puts peace above all other things that media outlets so desperately require for higher ratings.

Literature Review

War reporting has gained a lot of attention due to its significant impact on public opinion, policy decisions, and the lives of those that are residing in areas where a conflict long persists. One of its core tenets is Johan Galtung's peace and war journalism paradigm, which enhances our comprehension of reporting techniques. Galtung (1986) distinguishes between war journalism, which is usually reactionary and violence-focused, and peace journalism, which focusses on exposing the situation, evaluating non-violent reactions, and developing solutions. Scholars now assess media practices in conflict areas using this duality as a lens (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). Another important factor is framing theory, which examines how the language, images, and sources used by journalists affect how the public interprets their work (Entman, 1993). These theoretical stances emphasise how the media may either intensify or help tone down a prevalent conflict. The agenda-setting theory emphasises even more how the media shapes societal perceptions. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), media coverage shapes the topics that are seen as significant; this effect is exacerbated in

conflict reporting through highlighting certain narratives while others are dismissed. Agenda-setting becomes a weapon that can either highlight humanitarian problems or reinforce political prejudices in the context of Gaza, where narratives are frequently polarised (Ross, 2007).

In the past, changes in journalistic techniques and technological advancement have coincided with changes in conflict reporting. Through television the horrors of war were brought into homes during the Vietnam War, igniting discussions on how the media shapes anti-war sentiments (Hallin, 1986). According to Hopkins and O'Loughlin (2010), the Gulf War also signalled the beginning of 24-hour news cycles, which resulted in what has been dubbed "CNN's war." These historical examples show how conflict reporting affects the course of conflicts in addition to providing information about them. Depending on the outlet's political stance, media coverage of Gaza has historically alternated between depicting Palestinians as aggressors and victims (Pappe, 2006). This contradiction emphasises how crucial it is to evaluate media narratives attentively in order to identify underlying biases.

Access to reliable information, journalist safety, and moral quandaries are just a few of the difficulties that come with covering conflicts that are highly polarized. In crisis areas, journalists frequently have limited access and must rely on government sources, which may provide biased information (Tumber & Palmer, 2004). In Gaza, where journalists face military censorship and propaganda from both Israeli and Palestinian authorities, this problem is especially noticeable for a person of intellect (Fisk, 2005). Additional ethical questions are brought up by embedded journalism, in which reporters are stationed alongside military troops. Access to frontline events is made possible by technology, yet journalistic objectivity may be jeopardised (Paul & Kim, 2004). There are similarities between this dynamic in the coverage of Gaza and the Iraq War, when journalists' closeness to certain combat actors frequently shapes narratives.

Conflict reporting ethics, although required to be upheld in any crisis situation, are widely under debate. The requirement to disclose atrocities honestly and the "do no harm" precept frequently conflict. According to academics, sensationalist reporting,

which is typified by vivid visuals and emotive language, can make viewers less sensitive or even increase hostilities (Allen & Seaton, 1999). Peace journalism, on the other hand, promotes a more measured strategy that places an emphasis on productive discussion and contextual awareness rather than focusing on recent triggers of violent confrontation alone (Shinar, 2007). It has been observed that the emergence of social media as a primary source of information absorption by the general public has made ethical questions even more complicated. While social media sites like Facebook and Twitter enable real-time reporting, they also make it easier for propaganda and false information to proliferate (Allan & Thorsen, 2009). In the case of Gaza, however, social media has served as a forum for conflicting narratives and as a tool for increasing awareness during the 2023 Gaza escalation, underscoring the platforms' dual nature (Abdelnabi et al., 2023).

Another important factor in influencing how conflict is perceived is visual media. Global reactions can be sparked by certain impressionable photos, like those from the Vietnam War or the Syrian refugee crisis (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). The morality of visual depiction is still debatable, though, especially when pictures run the risk of sensationalising pain (Campbell, 2012). Photojournalism has played a crucial role in humanizing the fighting in Gaza as pictures of civilians escaping devastation or youngsters impacted by bombings are potent reminders of the human cost of conflict. However, the ethical implications of these images are complicated by the narratives that frequently accompany them, which either elevate or demonize one side (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2008).

Conflict reporting has changed dramatically with the introduction of digital technology and citizen journalism. Social media and smartphones have made it possible to record events in real time, frequently avoiding conventional gatekeepers. There have been both praise and criticism for this democratization of the media. Although it gives voice to underrepresented groups, it also makes it difficult to confirm facts and uphold journalistic standards (Hermida, 2010). Artificial intelligence (AI), which is used in fact-checking, content curation, and automated reporting, is another recent development.

However, the potential for AI to create deepfake content exacerbates the challenges of reporting on conflicts (Chesney & Citron, 2019). These technological advancements are transforming the field, and journalists need to adapt to a more complex media landscape.

One of the most persistent and rigid geopolitical crises of the modern age is the conflict in Gaza. Periodic escalations, catastrophic humanitarian effects in the form of immense loss of life, and a sharply divided media landscape have been its defining characteristics since its inception. Reporting on this tension is difficult task at hand because the stories that are delivered to the world stage are influenced by political affiliations, journalistic ethics, and ideological views of the reporters as well as the media houses presenting forth that news. Media coverage of the Gaza conflict has evolved over time in tandem with changes in journalistic techniques and geopolitical conditions. The worldwide conversation on Gaza has always been dominated by Western media, which, predictably, usually reflect the political objectives of their different countries. Scholars like Philo and Berry (2011) claim that early reporting on the conflict was heavily skewed in favour of Israeli perspectives, downplaying Palestinians' complaints, whether legitimate or the opposite, and primarily portraying them as aggressors. At the start of the twenty-first century, narratives started to progressively diversify due to the rise of alternative media and the growing influence of Middle Eastern broadcasters like Al Jazeera. El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2002) claim that by providing a place or a platform for Palestinian perspectives and challenging the power of Western narratives, Al Jazeera has significantly contributed to a shift in how people perceive the Gaza conflict. This shift highlights how direly media diversity is required in reporting on conflicts, particularly in sensitive areas.

Methodology

The study's methodology is centred around analysis of reporting practices by CNN and Al Jazeera with reference to Johan Galtung's Peace and War Journalism Theory. To do so, ten events have been short listed based on the amount of coverage and

attention they gained, from the timeline chosen (October 2023-January 2025). The following are the shortlisted events: **October 7, 2023:** Hamas Attack on Israel

October 27, 2023: Israeli Ground Offensive

November 21 – December 1, 2023: Ceasefire and Hostage Exchange

November 15, 2023: Al Shifa Hospital Siege

January 26, 2024: International Court of Justice Ruling

February 29, 2024: Flour Massacre

March 25, 2024: UN Security Council Ceasefire Resolution

July 2, 2024: Evacuation Orders for Southern Gaza

November 21, 2024: ICC Arrest Warrants

January 2025: Ceasefire Attempts, Testimonies of Abuse and Torture on Both Sides

Through the use of a qualitative method of study, this research identifies prevalent themes, framing techniques and narratives in the chosen outlets' reporting of the key events. CNN and Al Jazeera published news articles and opinion pieces regularly when these events were taking place which means that both have immense coverage that provides samples for analysis. Thus, the chosen news articles constitute to secondary data which is managed, coded and later analyzed using thematic analysis manually. 7 articles on average of each of the 10 events from both the media channels are analyzed to identify the themes and codes that are present in the coverage provided. Noting that the study is guided by the framework of peace and war journalism, the themes will be deducted based on their indicators after which the text will be analyzed.

This study makes use of a manual deductive approach for the purpose of analyzing media coverage by CNN and Al Jazeera, of selected events from the Israel-Gaza conflict. Lynch and McGoldrick's (2005) pre-discussed theoretical categories have been utilized and employed using a peace and war journalism framework. The following are the shortlisted events: The following table reflects the lens through which the chosen events will be analyzed:

| Theme | Code | Description |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Framing of Violence | Justification of attacks | Does the reporting frame violence as necessary, defensive, or aggressive? |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | Use of emotive vs. neutral language | Are words like 'massacre' or 'genocide' used? |
| | Agency of actors | Does the coverage pay more heed to Hamas military actions or Israeli more? |
| 2. Victim Representation | Civilian casualties emphasis | Are victim stories highlighted in detail or presented as just numbers? |
| | Use of victim names & stories | Are personal stories of individuals brought into light? |
| | Humanization vs. dehumanization | Are victims merely talked of as stats or depicted as people? |
| 3. Attribution of Responsibility | Blame on single actors vs. systemic issues | Does the reporting place blame on one side or take into account the complexities? |
| | Government/military vs. independent sources | Are government statements prioritized over neutral experts? |
| 4. Humanitarian Impact | Reporting on aid & blockades | Is humanitarian suffering a key focus? |
| | Coverage of ceasefires & peace talks | Is there emphasis on diplomatic efforts? |
| 5. Use of Sources & Perspectives | Diversity of sources | Are different perspectives (local, international) included? |
| | Government vs. civilian perspectives | Are government officials or affected civilians given more space? |
| 6. Language & Terminology | Terrorist vs. militant vs. freedom fighter | What terminology is used frequently? |
| | Passive vs. active voice | Example: 'Palestinians killed' vs. 'Israeli forces killed Palestinians.' |
| 7. Peace vs. War Journalism Indicators | Conflict-driven vs. solution-oriented coverage | Does the article talk of possible resolutions? |
| | Dualism vs. complexity | Is the conflict framed as 'good vs. evil' or as a complex issue? |

Findings

Framing and Narrative Strategies

Among the findings, it was observed that CNN and Al Jazeera both make use of different strategies when it comes to the framing of a story. This also means that they have different goals and priorities while doing so. It was found that the coverage by CNN on the said conflict followed a pattern of war journalism due to its increased focus on violence, military perspectives and the portrayal of a binary narrative.

To quote an example, the evacuation orders given by the Israeli military to the Palestinians in July 2024 were more focused on statements that the IDF was claiming and consequently highlighted their logistical challenges in doing so. This method of reporting was seen to normalize the suffering of the thousands of people that were forcibly displaced while justifying the

act as one that could not have been avoided. However, Al Jazeera's coverage of the same events showed the characteristics of peace journalism when it underlined the misery that forced relocation caused to people and portrayed the evacuation as a form of collective punishment. The platform featured critical voices from international humanitarian organisations together with personal narratives, including those of families who had been displaced by force several times, in an effort to undermine the official Israeli narrative and highlight the lived experiences of civilians.

This distinction applies to every other event that was looked at and analyzed in detail. CNN, for instance, treated the Israeli bombings in August 2024 that killed Hamas military chief Mohammed Deif as a tactical triumph, paying little attention to the impact

on people or the broader political repercussions. Al Jazeera, however, provided greater context to the assassination within a broader critique of Israeli military strategy by drawing attention to the risks of escalation, highlighting regional instability, and placing emphasis on the moral and legal dilemmas that accompanied the targeted murders.

Attribution of Responsibility and the Politics of Blame

Assigning responsibility and blame was still another crucial analytical problem that presented itself during the critical overseeing of the articles. CNN's reports often tended to emphasise Israeli military and security objectives while blaming the disruption of humanitarian aid or ceasefire talks on 'complex political dynamics.' Even when mentioning UN warnings or humanitarian reports, CNN generally refrained from assigning blame to any side. However, the reporting language contained phrases like 'civilians caught in the crossfire' and 'aid deliveries delayed due to insecurity,' which dehumanise and decontextualise human suffering since there is no emphasis on who initiated such attacks.

Al Jazeera used a very different approach. It gave accountability in a more forceful way, particularly to Israeli officials. The network presented Israeli acts as intentional policies with dire humanitarian repercussions, including airstrikes on shelters, humanitarian supply blockades, and delays in peace negotiating. This trend is best illustrated by the news of the ICC arrest warrants that were issued in November 2024. In contrast to CNN's emphasis on diplomatic repercussions and Israel's foreign alliances, Al Jazeera placed the legal developments within a long-standing pattern of impunity and accused war crimes. The ideological foundations of media framing are emphasised by this trend. CNN's reluctance to place direct blame can be explained by the United States' alliance with Israel in foreign policy, which reflects larger media influences and systems that are then seen in the media coverage as well. Under the sponsorship of the Qatari government, Al Jazeera presents itself as a counter-hegemonic voice in international media that is more inclined to question Israeli and Western narratives by painting a holistic picture.

Victim Representation and the Humanization of Suffering

Viewers' perceptions are greatly influenced by how much conflict victims are humanised or anonymised. The majority of CNN's victim representation was statistical. Though they provided few in-depth firsthand stories, reports usually referenced displacement statistics, casualty counts, and general situations of scarcity. Individual stories were frequently sparse and lacked context when they were featured. This strategy minimises emotional engagement and lessens the apparent urgency of humanitarian situations, which is consistent with war journalism's propensity to abstract misery into quantitative points.

Al Jazeera's reporting approach was completely different in comparison. The site used in-depth interviews, firsthand reports, and video from the scene to clearly depict the intensity of the human toll to present a true picture to the world regarding what is happening. Accounts of terrified children, hospitals flooded with casualties, and families fleeing shelling are among those things that dominated Al Jazeera's story. This human-centered reporting is in line with the ideology of peace journalism, which seeks to restore victims' dignity and doing so by highlight the structural causes of violence and the conflict itself.

Language, Tone, and Emotional Engagement

The emotional and moral framing of the issue was greatly influenced by the language choices made by each channel. In its controlled, technical tone, CNN often employed military and diplomatic phrases such as 'collateral damage,' 'counteroffensive,' and 'strategic objective.' This terminology reflects an epistemic stance that prioritises procedural rationality and official sources more rather than opening avenues for some sort of moral or emotional interpretation. Al Jazeera's language was far more emotional and sometimes explicitly hostile. Terms such as 'massacre,' 'collective punishment,' and 'starvation siege' were commonly used. These rulings are not merely decorative; they also reflect a normative position that gives ethical and humanitarian legislation the very first priority. Al Jazeera uses emotionally charged language to compel readers to consider the moral ramifications of military operations and call attention to the responsibilities of international actors in order for them to be pressured into taking some action that is direly needed in terms of this protracted conflict.

The following tables show the prevalence of war and peace journalism indicators in the reporting of selected events by CNN and Al Jazeera. As the

chapter progresses, they are explained in detail, event by event.

Frequency of War Journalism Indicators:

| Indicator | CNN | Al Jazeera |
|--|------------|------------|
| 1. Violence-oriented (focus on battles, casualties, destruction) | 40 | 12 |
| 2. Zero-sum framing (win/lose narratives) | 41 | 15 |
| 3. Elite-oriented (officials, governments, military voices dominate) | 24 | 10 |
| 4. Reactive reporting (focus on immediate violence, not causes) | 31 | 23 |
| 5. Partisan framing (side-taking, "us vs them") | 36 | 22 |
| 6. Propaganda/official sources unchallenged | 23 | 5 |
| 7. Victim dehumanisation/statistical representation | 29 | 5 |
| 8. Focus on visible effects of war (bombings, deaths, destruction) | 30 | 28 |
| Total | 254 | 120 |

Frequency of Peace Journalism Indicators:

| Indicator | CNN | Al Jazeera |
|--|-----------|------------|
| 1. Peace/solution orientation (focus on resolution, dialogue) | 6 | 24 |
| 2. Truth-oriented (challenge propaganda, report hidden agendas) | 7 | 21 |
| 3. People-oriented (voices of civilians, victims, everyday lives) | 10 | 28 |
| 4. Highlight suffering of all sides (not one-sided) | 5 | 14 |
| 5. Explore causes and contexts (structural roots of violence) | 7 | 18 |
| 6. Give voice to peace actors (mediators, NGOs, international law) | 4 | 16 |
| 7. Humanisation of all sides (personal stories, interviews) | 9 | 26 |
| 8. Language of empathy (avoid dehumanising/technical jargon) | 8 | 22 |
| 9. Highlight reconciliation/justice initiatives | 3 | 10 |
| Total | 59 | 179 |

Conclusion

The findings and subsequent analysis has shown that peace journalism offers a more human-centered approach to conflict reporting as well as a framework for challenging dominant narratives that often surround violent cycles. As evidenced by Al Jazeera's emphasis on structural violence, legal responsibility,

and civilian voices, journalism can serve as a tool for peacebuilding. On the other hand, CNN's commitment to traditional war journalism emphasises how unsatisfactory mainstream international reporting is at investigating the root causes of conflict or making predictions about various outcomes. This study contributes to the literature that exists by

offering concrete proof of how news framing differs across media outlets with because of the various differing editorial philosophies and geopolitical ties that they may have. It also emphasises the value of critical media literacy, that allows the audience to point out such flaws, especially during protracted conflicts when public opinion is greatly influenced by mediated images.

Even though the analysis has provided insightful information, several limits must be noted. While providing a reasonable and insightful comparison framework, the focus on two English-language media outlets leaves out a wider range of viewpoints, such as grassroots or independent journalists, regional Arabic-language outlets, and local Palestinian and Israeli media. To more accurately depict the discursive ecosystem around conflict reporting, future studies could take a more multi-vocal approach that include these actors.

Furthermore, audience response is still a poorly studied topic. How do various audiences understand, believe, and respond to the messages that CNN and Al Jazeera present? Examining the connection between public opinion and media framing, perhaps via surveys, interviews, or digital ethnography, would provide further understanding of the practical effects of journalistic storytelling.

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