

BBC and New York Times' Coverage of the May 2021 Israeli Onslaught on Gaza: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

The latest Israeli onslaught on Gaza in May 2021 demonstrated the pivotal role of the international media as an influential source of knowledge-gaining, agenda setting, and opinion shaping for various social groups and audiences. Based on theoretical constructs and analytical tools drawn from *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough, 1992, 1995), this study aims to analyze how the *New York Times* and the *BBC* covered the Israeli onslaught on Gaza during May 2021. I examine the main topics and key linguistic structures the two influential media outlets use in constructing Palestinian and Israeli actors and their violent actions and how such coverage contributes to the construction of a particular ideological representation of the events. The results show that the two media outlets mainly served Israel's justifications and interests at the expense of Palestinian narrative and rights through the conflation of two main topics in their representation of the Israeli onslaught on Gaza. The Israeli war was constructed as a war against Hamas, and not against the Palestinian people. They depict the onslaught as a retaliation to Hamas's rockets. Furthermore, the human and material losses inflicted by Israel on Gaza were framed along the lines of "there are victims on both sides". The two topics reduce Israel's moral and political responsibility for the massive losses in human life and destruction inflicted upon the Palestinians in Gaza. This study shows the potent role of news media in framing, legitimizing, or delegitimizing political actors and their actions and maintaining power asymmetries between different political groups.

Keywords: news coverage, New York Times, *BBC*, Israel, Gaza, May 2021 onslaught, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Journalists do not operate in a vacuum, and their work cannot be an isolated activity. Journalists are social actors who often cope with and respond to political, ideological, cultural, and professional contexts and determinants. As we all know, in real-life settings, and especially during particular historical moments, journalists construct meanings, report events, express viewpoints including their own, and depict imaginings using a repertoire of linguistic and other resources. They significantly participate in how news consumers perceive certain events and realities locally and internationally. Therefore, news reportage has always served several purposes simultaneously and operated within certain social or political force(s) or dynamics.

News texts do not constitute honest recordings of the reality 'out there' and they are far from being unbiased. Journalists are inherently selective and subjective as they make deliberate choices about what information to include or exclude, which lexical and syntactic elements to describe news actors and events, how to present and organize information in news texts, and which socio-political, cultural, or professional values they embark on in writing about or evaluating such actors and events (Amer, 2008). These choices necessarily conjure up particular perceptions of social groups and bear the ideological imprints of the producers of these news texts and the institutions in which they operate.

Mass media play a critical and salient role in the dissemination and inculcation of people's social values, belief systems, and ideologies, and at the same time, they are profoundly pivotal in constructing, influencing, or challenging people's perceptions, opinions, and representations of 'Other' social groups and polities. In this context, media practitioners are not detached from the collective socio-political and ideological contexts in which they function. Said (1981, p. 45) succinctly put it:

[T]he media are profit-seeking corporations and therefore, quite understandably, have an interest in

promoting some images of reality rather than others. They do so within a political context made active and effective by an unconscious ideology, which the media disseminate without serious reservations or oppositions.

In times of war and global or local tensions, the role of media becomes more defining and crucial in giving a platform for dominant discourses to hold sway over less powerful ones or become the sites and instruments of political and social struggle and resistance to these dominant discourses. Malkawi (2001, p. 22) stated that:

Media text functions as a window through which we can view the world and live the events as real. It has the power to influence readers by all means since it is an effective mechanism for affecting individual perceptions of reality. By analyzing the media text ideologically, we are able to see the debates in society through text.

Correspondingly, journalists are often confined in their coverage of social events by institutional, political, or ideological constraints and considerations which entail producing discourses that construe reality through the lens of their top managers and decision-makers or through a version of reality which journalists subscribe to. Therefore, the lexical, grammatical, or other selections made by journalists from a whole range of structures are often not arbitrary or conventional, but they are motivated by institutional, ideological, or political conditions and determinants. The language of news can never be ideologically 'neutral', rather, each word used in the news accounts for a 'two-sided act' and is conditioned by whose word it is and for whom it is meant, and that the meaning of a certain word is constantly negotiated through the reciprocal relationship between the addresser and the addressee (Orimogunje et al., 2016, p. 14).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how the influential US newspaper The New York Times (henceforth NYT) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (henceforth BBC) covered the Israeli onslaught on Gaza in May 2021. It identifies the discursive strategies and linguistic resources used by the NYT and BBC and their contribution toward a particular representation of the political actors and events. The NYT and BBC are two of the world's leading media outlets whose coverage of the Middle East conflict receives serious attention and scrutiny from politicians, policy-making circles, entities, and national and international actors. Over the past decades, many empirical studies highlighted patterns of pro-Israel bias in the coverage of the NYT and BBC (Jackson, 2021; Philo & Berry, 2004; Nashashibi et al., 2016; Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014; Viser, 2003; Zelizer, Park, & Gudelunas, 2002). Therefore, this study is significant, as it concentrates on observing any similarities, shifts or divergences from previous research results on how the two media outlets represented the Palestinians and Israelis during the most recent violent attack by Israeli against the Palestinians in Gaza. This study, therefore, critically examines the linguistic structures, contexts, dominant formulations, and ideological implications that define, inform, or influence their discourses during this watershed moment, and how other alternative formulations of events are backgrounded or excluded.

In order to analyze the coverage of the NYT and BBC of the May 2021 aggression on Gaza, this study draws on the conceptualization of Critical Discourse Analysis framework (henceforth CDA), especially concerning representation, ideology, and power, and makes use of analytical tools and linguistic structures that prove essential for the analysis of the coverage of these two prominent media outlets.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been one of the most pivotal, intractable, and compelling political issues in the international political arena. As put by Tasserou (2021), reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to be a focal point for the international news media which has been attuned to developments taking place in this endemically turbulent region of the Middle East (see also Philo & Berry, 2011; Wolfsfeld, 2018). The Gaza Strip, in particular, has an area of 365 sq. km. and a population of over 2 million Palestinians. It has been under a suffocating siege by the Israeli occupation since 2006 when the Palestinian Hamas movement secured a landslide election victory. Since then, the tiny enclave witnessed four major Israeli military onslaughts, the most recent of which was in May 2021, which lasted eleven days from May 10–21.

This last major Israeli escalation against the Gaza Strip came after tensions and confrontations that took place in East Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque. It started when Jewish settler groups backed up by the Israeli army and police tried to evict and confiscate the property of Palestinian residents in Sheikh Jarrah's neighbourhood in East Jerusalem provoking protests in Al-Aqsa Mosque which were brutally repressed by Israeli occupation forces injuring 350 Palestinians (Anadolu Agency, 2021). The Palestinian resistance groups in Gaza gave an ultimatum to Israel to withdraw its troops and security forces, and police from the Al-Aqsa Mosque and to stop attacking worshippers by 6 p.m. on May 10th. At that hour, the Palestinian factions began firing rockets against targets inside Israel proper.

The Israeli aggression on Gaza and Palestinian responses garnered much world media attention, intense

diplomatic activity and protests worldwide condemning the Israeli occupation army's brutalities and airstrikes against Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip. The United Nations reported that "Israeli attacks killed 260 people in Gaza, at least 129 civilians, including 66 children. Local authorities in Gaza said that 2,400 housing units were made uninhabitable, over 50,000 units were damaged, and over 2,000 industrial, trade, and service facilities were destroyed or partially damaged" (Human Rights Watch, August 2021). Israeli unlawful army airstrikes targeted civilians, and destroyed high-rise buildings, businesses, homes, and civilian infrastructures leaving wanton damage and destruction that caused lasting harm to the population in the Gaza Strip (Human Rights Watch, August 2021). Palestinian armed factions responded to the Israeli occupation's airstrikes by firing thousands of rockets into Israeli-held territories leading to the death of 12 Israelis, including two children and a soldier.

2. Theoretical Background

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been one of the most common theoretical and methodological frameworks in analysing media discourse, especially in unraveling discourses of bias, hegemony, and misrepresentation of socio-political groups (Amer, 2012; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2001). CDA is a discourse analysis approach that seeks to critically relate the analysis of textual and discursive structures and practices to the larger social, politico-historical and ideological contexts and structures which reside in, frame, or reproduce these textual and discursive practices and elements. Therefore, CDA has taken as its subject matter the study of the intertwined linkages between language use and social power, inequality, and domination.

Blommaert (2005) underscores the significant potential of CDA in its emphasis on unravelling the implicit dimensions of power and its effects, sensitizing awareness of discourse as a site of power, domination and inequality, advocating a dialogic interaction between linguistic analysis and other social-scientific enterprises, and finally taking the analyses of institutional discourses and settings as its research foci into the relationships between language, power, and social processes and structures.

For Wodak (2001), CDA critically examines how social power, inequality, and control can be expressed, legitimated, enacted and/or challenged in text and talk. Put differently, CDA concerns itself with laying bare all those discursive elements responsible for invoking domination, exploitation, and control as indexed and exercised in language by dominant social groups. Kress (1990, p. 85) put it aptly:

CDA practitioners have the larger political aim of putting the forms of texts, the processes of production of texts, and the processes of reading [text consumption], together with the structures of power which have given rise to them, into crisis.

Such an approach to discourse analysis holds a consistent position in favour of those dominated groups. It serves as a monitor that seeks to dissect all elements of hegemony, discrimination, and bias implicit in the discourses of dominated socio-political groups (van Dijk, 2001).

Probing into the *BBC* and *NYT* discourses from a CDA perspective and framework does emphasize the potent relationship between language and power, domination and ideology. It underscores the key role language plays in producing, perpetuating, and naturalizing socio-cognitive and political attitudes and perceptions about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Therefore, a critical analysis of these two media outlets' coverage is essential in exposing, denaturalizing, and questioning the often taken-for-granted attitudes, opinions, and perceptions about this conflict. A characteristic feature of CDA is its principal concern with ideology and how it encodes and sustains domination and unequal power relations. Wodak (2001) correctly observes that one of the primary objectives of CDA is "to demystify discourses by deciphering ideologies" (p. 10). Hence, this study seeks to expose the ideologies which provide for the sustenance and dominance of specific discourse(s) on the Palestinians through identifying and critically examining the linguistic and discursive realizations of the ideologically motivated construction of Palestinian and Israeli actors and their actions during the May 2021 attack on Gaza.

2.1 Language and Ideology

In a critical analysis of the dialectical relationship between discourse and social power, the study of how ideology and ideological implications can be expressed, reproduced, or contested in language use is of essential import and has been established in critical discourse studies. The notion of language as a material form of ideology and as a site for ideological structures and processes has been investigated (cf., Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1998). Fairclough (2003) holds a critical view of ideology as a modality of power, as "representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination, and exploitation" (p. 9). Fairclough (1992) views ideologies as constructions of reality,

including the material world, social relations, and identities which are internalized in the forms and meanings of discursive practices. These discursive practices help sustain, restructure, and transform relations of power and domination. He points out that ideologies rooted in discursive practices become highly effective when they become ‘common sense’ and naturalized in the language.

Van Dijk links ideology to a socio-cognitive discourse-analysis framework, for instance, in the production and reproduction of racism (1998). Ideologies are the socio-cognitive systems that select, regulate, and organize the collective social attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge, i.e., social cognitions in line with specific group interests and goals. According to van Dijk, maintaining power in modern societies relies not so much on coercion and physical force, but it is persuasive and ideological. In this regard, van Dijk (1995) points out that discourse is the preferred site for the explicit articulation, transmission, and communication of ideological positions. Again, he conceives ideologies as both cognitive and social for they function as a conduit connecting the mental representations and processes that underlie both discourse, on one hand, and the social practices, formations, and interests of social groups and structures, on the other.

Van Dijk (1995) argues that such a conceptualization of ideology provides the link for macro-level analysis of social groups and structures and the micro-level examination of individual interactions and discourse. For instance, feminist, racist, or anti-racist attitudes may be expressed ideologically through overall propositions and systems which define and regulate such discriminatory or anti-discriminatory social relations as well as through particular discourse structures such as intonational variations, particular syntactic structures, wording, or topic selection, which may bear the imprint of ideological meanings. Van Dijk (1993) contends that more than other elite discourses, the media, including daily newspapers, play a significant role in defining the ethnic situation and constructing an ideological, interpretive framework that allows members of the dominant group to understand and control ethnic events and relations. This influential role of the media, aided by their often exclusive control of the symbolic resources, is essential for formulating public consent by choosing preferred facts and creating or reinforcing specific meanings and opinions. Van Dijk (1993) posits that “media texts are ideological icebergs, of which only the tip is visible to the reader” (p. 256).

2.2 *The NYT and BBC: Two Influential Gatekeepers*

This study takes as its main subject of analysis the coverage by the *NYT* and the *BBC*, which are prominent *gatekeepers* in the U.S. and Europe respectively, where their articles often appear on the pages of other media outlets and are read by millions of people around the world.

2.2.1 *The New York Times*

This study focuses on the coverage by the *NYT* as it is one of the most influential newspapers in the U.S., and enjoys a reputable national and international standing. Cotter (2003, p. 416) holds that the *NYT* functions as the “newspaper of record” for society, and news printed by the *NYT* “often finds its way into discussions by policy-makers and politicians, meaning that it effectively sets (or follows) the national agenda for public discussion.” Bagdikian (2004, p. 135) points out that the reason for his frequent citation of the *NYT* both as a credible source and a failed source is that:

[I]t is the only national newspaper for the general audience and has more than 250 print and broadcast news organizations that subscribe to its services, most of which use news or syndicated columnists from the *New York Times* daily. For these reasons, when the *Times* succeeds or fails it has a disproportionate effect on most of the other printed and broadcast news and, of course, on the American public.

Along these lines, Friel and Falk (2004, p. 2) hold that the *NYT* “occupies such an exalted place in the political and moral imagination of influential Americans and others as the most authoritative source of information and guidance on issues of public policy.” The *NYT* is a place where readers expect to receive reliable information and well-informed opinions about events and issues that are important to them. In this way, the *NYT*’s coverage of a significant event, such as the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, is likely to gain serious attention from U.S. policy-making circles and political and economic elites. It is very likely to play a significant role in the transmission and promotion of information about the Middle East conflict. It may, therefore, exercise an active role in shaping or influencing U.S. foreign policies and public opinion about this event.

2.2.2 *BBC*

British Broadcasting Corporation (*BBC*) is the world’s leading public service broadcaster provided in more than 40 languages and to roughly 120 million people worldwide (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Established under a Royal Charter, and headquartered in London, it publicly financed the broadcasting system in Great Britain, and held a monopoly on television in Great Britain from its introduction until 1954 and on radio until 1972

(Encyclopaedia Britannica). According to the *BBC* website, the *BBC* World Service broadcasts to the world on radio, TV, and online, providing news and information in 32 languages and it is funded by a government grant (*BBC* website, 2022). The *BBC* is the world's oldest national broadcaster, and the largest broadcaster in the world by the number of employees, employing over 22,000 staff in total, of whom approximately 19,000 are in public-sector broadcasting (*BBC* Group Annual Report and Accounts 2020/21). The *BBC* World Service is an international broadcaster owned and operated by the *BBC*, with funding from the British Government through the Foreign Secretary's office. *BBC* World service provides news and analysis in more than 40 languages. In 2015, the *BBC* website put the number of *BBC*'s global audience at 308 million for 2014/2015 (*BBC* Media Centre, 2015).

3. Methodology

The analysis in this study benefits from methodological orientations and analytical categories within the broader Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, mainly in light of the theorizations of Fairclough (1992, 1995). It aims to examine the coverage by the *New York Times* and the *BBC* of the May 2021 Israeli assault on Gaza by answering the following questions:

- 1) How did the *New York Times* and the *BBC* cover the May 2021 Israeli onslaught on Gaza?
- 2) What linguistic features did the *New York Times* and the *BBC* employ to represent the Palestinian and Israeli actors and actions during the May 2021 Israeli onslaught on Gaza?

The study mainly focuses on various layers of discourse by attending to the choices journalists make when constructing and evaluating political actors and their violent actions. Attention is paid to a number of key linguistic resources at the centre of the *BBC*'s and *NYT*'s representation of actors and events during the attack on Gaza. These representational resources include semantic features such as topics, presupposition, implication, and formal and rhetorical textual features such as transitivity, lexical selections, and metaphor. Given that quoting sources is a distinctive feature of news, examining which sources are commonly quoted in texts and how they are used to construct political actors and events is significant for the study.

In order to see the wood for the trees and since one text understandably does not include all instances of the categories and patterns of representation, I will first attempt a general characterization of major discursive strategies and global themes—macropropositions (Note 1)—in the data using illustrations from the news texts. Then, I will conduct a linguistic analysis of news reports involving micro- and macro-level analyses by drawing on Fairclough's (1992) analytical framework. Wherever necessary, I will relate the linguistic and discursive realizations of the newspaper discourse to their political, socio-cultural, and ideological contexts.

The text corpus of this study includes all news reports published over the whole month of May 2021 that specifically focused on Israel's attack against Gaza during that month. Texts were available on the web-based search source of ProQuest, and also, the researcher manually collected all available news texts using a Google engine search in order to ensure that I have all texts published on the May 2021 events were compiled. The compiled texts formed a total of 28 news reports published by the *New York Times*, and 25 news reports published by the *BBC* during the same period, thus bringing the total study corpus to a total of 53 news texts subjected to critical discourse analysis.

4. Analysis

The analysis shows that the coverage by the *NYT* and *BBC* of the May 2021 attack on Gaza involved the conflation of several topics reflecting a rather nuanced treatment of the Israeli aggression on Gaza in May 2021 that mainly served Israel's justifications and interests at the expense of Palestinian narrative and rights. Further, while the coverage by the two prominent media outlets appeared to be attuned to Palestinian grievances highlighting the impact of Israel's attacks and devastation, criticism of Israel's attacks was generally couched in a carefully and attenuated language that lacked properly presenting the situation in the context of Israel's military occupation, colonization, and siege. In contrast, the Palestinian armed resistance was largely constructed as an equal force that caused similar levels of destruction, fear, and death among Israelis. Israel's airstrikes and attacks were presented as responses to Palestinian factions' rocket fire, thus adopting Israel's justifications for attacking Gaza. In what follows, I will discuss the main topics underlying the treatment of the Israeli aggression on Gaza and how such topics are realized in various linguistic structures and features.

4.1 *The Façade of Equivalence: Israel's Conflict with Hamas*

A prominent topic that emerges in the reports of both the *NYT* and the *BBC* is the consistent framing of the events as a conflict between Israel and Hamas, with the latter being referred to as an 'Islamist militant group'. This equivalence was manifested in paying attention to the use by both sides of arms in targeting the other side

and in reporting on the effects of the war on both sides, meaning that the victims on both sides were presented with a similar amount of coverage and emotive presentation. The destruction and devastation caused by Israel in its aggression on Gaza and the huge number of Palestinian deaths and injuries were comparably treated with the Palestinian resistance's rocket fire against Israel-held territories and the much smaller number of Israeli casualties. This has the function of mitigating Israel's responsibility for the wanton destruction and havoc it afflicted on the Palestinian people in Gaza and presenting the death and destruction on both sides as the unfortunate and inevitable cost of war. This reporting pattern spares Israel from being subjected to moral scrutiny and judgement for the far greater destruction and death it inflicted on innocent Palestinians. Let us consider several extracts from the two media outlets while bearing in mind that the space limitations of this paper make it untenable to include all instances of this theme.

The New York Times (NYT)

Extract 1 from an *NYT* report showcases this systematic representation of Israel's aggression on Gaza, whereby it is constructed as a conflict between Israel and Hamas, with the latter being blamed for its rocket fire and attacks against Israel. It is worth noting that the situation is referred to as 'conflict' and a 'campaign against Hamas', and not as a deliberate onslaught on the Palestinian people living under siege and occupation. This formulation of the events aims to put the onus on Hamas and the Palestinians, while Israel is presented rather positively as being in a predicament where it has to respond to Hamas's attacks and where civilians are caught in the middle.

Notice how the situation is formulated in that Hamas, which is referred to as a 'militant group' that rules the Gaza Strip, is constructed as initiating the 'violence' by firing thousands of rockets at Israeli cities and towns thus it is held responsible for the violence, while Israel is represented as responding to the rocket fire. While the report mentions the Israeli targeting of Palestinian civilian sites, it foregrounds Israel's position that it was not deliberate, but the attacks were intended against Hamas' military targets.

Extract 1

The Toll of Eight Days of Conflict in Gaza and Israel

The violence has intensified over the past eight days as diplomatic efforts have stalled and **Israel has scaled up its bombing campaign against Hamas.**

The war is being fought on multiple fronts. According to the Israeli Air Force, Hamas, **the militant group** that rules the Gaza Strip, **has fired more than 3,300 rockets toward Israeli cities and towns, killing at least 10 people.** Israeli forces and settlers have killed 20 Palestinians during unrest in the West Bank, a Palestinian human rights group said. And a wave of mob attacks hit at least one mixed Arab-Jewish city in Israel.

But the worst devastation is in Gaza, a densely packed coastal enclave of about two million people. **Israeli forces** have struck homes, refugee camps, medical facilities and other buildings.

Israeli officials have said the assault is aimed at destroying Hamas's ability to make and launch missiles and a network of underground tunnels used by Hamas to move people and equipment. But the strikes have killed at least 212 people, including at least 61 children, according to local health authorities, drawing international condemnation (*NYT*, 17 May 2021).

The extract here constructs Israel's actions as aimed at Hamas, as in 'Israel has scaled up its bombing campaign against Hamas', and as the report indicates that it was Hamas's rocket fire, not the Israeli occupation's attacks and killings of civilians that are largely problematized and presented as the trigger of the conflict. Quoting first the Israeli sources to refer to the number of '3,300 rockets' of Hamas, the designation of Hamas as 'the militant group', and the Israeli military aim at 'destroying Hamas's ability to make and launch missiles and a network of underground tunnels used by Hamas' all seem to paint a negative picture of Hamas and exaggerate its power, and present Israel as acting in self-defense. Such construction of events goes in line with the Israeli narrative and version of events without putting such construction to task, or equally quoting Palestinian sources offering counterarguments or refutations to Israel's claims. The report failed to cite other sources stating that many rockets did not reach Israeli-held territories or fell in open areas, and that 90% of these rockets were intercepted by Israel's iron dome anti-missile defence system (CNN, May 18, 2021; Washington Post, May 12, 2021). This made many of these rockets ineffective, which was evidenced in the number of Israelis killed or wounded.

Here it should be noted that reporting on the number of people killed and wounded mainly on the Palestinian side in this extract does not necessarily affect this one-sided presentation of the situation in which Hamas and by extension the Palestinians are blamed for initiating the 'conflict'. The construction of events in a way that is favourable to Israel is evidenced in the lexical references attributed to the Israelis and Palestinians. The Israeli

participants are attributed lexical references such as “Israel”, “Israeli Air Force”, “Israeli forces”, “strikes”, “scaled up”, “campaign”, and “onslaught” which are collective official references that may give legitimacy to the actions carried out by Israelis. This justification of the Israeli actions is readily communicated, especially when it is contrasted with the lexical reference to Palestinians as “the militant group”, “launch missiles” and “a network of underground tunnels”.

BBC

A similar formulation of the events can also be found in a report by the *BBC* that frames the situation in terms of Palestinian rocket fire, which draws Israeli military responses.

Extract 2

The outbreak in violence began after weeks of rising Israeli-Palestinian tension in occupied East Jerusalem that culminated in clashes at a holy site revered by both Muslims and Jews. **Hamas, which controls Gaza, began firing rockets after warning Israel to withdraw from the site, triggering retaliatory air strikes.**

How has the violence spiralled?

In the early hours of Monday, **Israel conducted dozens more air strikes on the Gaza Strip, after Palestinian militants fired barrages of rockets at southern Israeli cities...** The conflict is now in its second week, with little sign of a ceasefire. **Israel says** most of those killed in Gaza are **militants** and that any civilian deaths are unintentional (*BBC*, 17 May 2021)

As one can clearly notice, Hamas is being foregrounded as initiating the violence and triggering the Israeli ‘retaliatory air strikes’ which exempt Israel from being blamed for its attacks and destabilizing the area. Note here that the report constructs the situation as ‘Hamas... began firing rockets...’. Further the use of specific expressions, such as “*Palestinian militants*” indicates that Israel’s main target is the militants only, which contradicts the realities on the ground with massive destruction to civilian infrastructure, including homes, high-rise buildings, medical facilities, police stations, and other facilities and hundreds of Palestinian civilians killed and wounded. The reference to Hamas as a ‘militant’ and ‘controls Gaza’ evokes quite negative evaluations of Hamas and delegitimizes the Palestinian actions, including the resistance’s responses to fend off Israel’s attacks. Further, it legitimizes Israel’s action as necessary to eliminate the Palestinian threats by whatever means. Note that this construction of Israel’s responses to Hamas’ action is stated in the second half of the report in ‘Israel conducted dozens more air strikes on the Gaza Strip, after Palestinian militants fired barrages of rockets at southern Israeli cities.’ The report described the bombing campaign targeting Hamas as ‘retaliatory’ to stress that Hamas initiated the violence, and that Israel is put in a defensive position by responding to the Hamas’s rocket fire.

In this respect, the repeated reference to Hamas as an ‘Islamist militant group’ throughout the news reports would contribute to an overall delegitimizing characterization of Hamas as a ‘terrorist group’ attacking innocent Israelis and causing instability in the whole region. Readers could infer that Israel is a victim under attack from everywhere, so any Israeli reaction is validated and regarded as self-defence. Thus, the selection of words and the voices shows that Israel’s explanations and construction of events are clearly dominant, while Palestinian explanations are rather absent or meekly present in a way that does not affect the interpretive framework for events from the *BBC*’s perspective. In other words, such formulation serves Israel’s interests and presents it as a victim of Palestinian violence and attacks.

In the *NYT* and *BBC* reports, Hamas is being foregrounded as starting the ‘war’ and triggering the Israeli response, which exonerates Israel from shouldering blame and responsibility for the situation. Thus, it is obvious that the two media outlets practice manipulation through their formulation of the situation and their linguistic selections. The events and the ideas transmitted through the two media agencies carry their own presumptions, attitudes, evaluations, and linguistic expression. In all respects, the analysis of the representation of the Gaza war of 2021 points to this theme of putting Hamas on an equal footing with Israel, whereby the Israel’s aggression is represented as a war against Hamas that triggers the Israeli validated response, and not against the Palestinians, and this is certainly how Israel wished its aggression to be seen.

The reoccurrences of such expression throughout the news would make it familiar to the reader that Hamas is a terrorist group causing instability in the region. This serves to convey the perception of Israel as a victim under attack from everywhere, so any reaction is validated and regarded as self-defence.

4.2 The Façade of Objectivity: Victims on Both Sides

The main topic that emerges in the data analysis is that the two media outlets gave seemingly equal attention to

the effects of war on the two sides and in reporting on the victims on the two sides. While there were admittedly Israeli deaths and some level of destruction resulting from Palestinian rockets, the Palestinians in Gaza experienced a scale of destruction and number of deaths and injuries due to the Israeli occupation's use of large-scale military force and struck far greater than that sustained by the Israelis. Characterizing the situation along the lines of 'victims on both sides' would likely eclipse Israel's culpability for the huge Palestinian death toll and devastation to the Palestinians in Gaza as well as the contexts of its occupation, siege and violations of international law and human rights. Nowhere in the reports was any reference to the Palestinian people entitled to self-defense.

Let us consider the following extract, which illustrates this seemingly objective treatment of the events on the group.

Extract 3

The violence rocking Gaza, Israel and the West Bank has left scores dead

After another night of intense bombardment by Israeli forces, **Palestinians and Israelis on Friday surveyed a landscape marred by violence that has spread from the West Bank to Israel to Gaza and back to the West Bank**, leaving scores dead, mostly Palestinians.

Most of the death and destruction **have occurred** in Gaza, the already impoverished territory controlled by the **militant Palestinian group Hamas**, where officials said more than 120 people **had died**, including 31 children, scores of buildings **were destroyed**, and electricity water was running critically short.

More than 2,000 rockets have been fired at Israel from Gaza this week, and eight Israelis, including a soldier, have been killed, Israeli officials said on Friday (NYT, 14 May 2021).

It is useful to note the measured calculated language that fails to pin responsibility down on Israel as the occupying force that caused wanton destruction and massive human rights violations and deaths among the Palestinians, especially in Gaza. Here the situation is treated as an unfortunate state with suffering and victims on both sides. Note the reference to Israel's massive attacks and destruction as 'a landscape marred by violence' which seems to equally treat 'Palestinians and Israelis' as victims of the situation, and fails to apportion responsibility for the Israeli occupation state for its attacks in Gaza, expulsions, settler attacks, storming of Islamic sites and other measures.

Further, the last paragraph in this extract highlights Palestinian resistance's responsibility for rocket fire indicating that these 'more than 2,000 rockets' draw Israel's attacks. Note mentioning the number of rockets fired, which seems to accentuate the violent Palestinian attacks and presents Israel as a victim and hence justified in its responses. This is especially so when the Palestinian actor is referred to as 'the militant Palestinian group Hamas' which is an unfavourable evaluation of the Palestinian movement. It is significant to mention that the reporter did not also state that many of these rockets fell in open areas or were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome Air Defense System, as Israeli officials claim that the Iron Dome stopped 90% of the rockets, and that Israeli civilians have well-protected safe rooms and shelters. This is manifested in the much smaller number of Israeli casualties during the conflict standing at 8 Israelis. This is starkly contrasted with the Palestinian side, which has no military know-how to intercept Israeli missiles, where most airstrikes hit targets without any interception, and many people in Gaza have no access to safe rooms or shelters. Many Palestinian civilians took refuge in United Nations schools, which they too were bombed. This also shows the large number of Palestinian civilians killed during the attacks, as there was nowhere safe in Gaza.

One can notice a selective process of making salient specific actions and downgrading other events from appearing in the reports, thus highlighting certain aspects of the situation, which construct the situation favourable to Israeli interests and explanations. The transitivity selections used in this extract largely mitigate Israel's actions while highlighting Palestinian actions. The reporter's decision to use the middle (Note 2) voice in 'have occurred' and 'have died', the nominalization (Note 3) 'violence', and the passive structure 'were destroyed', rather than an active clause structure all leave negative Israeli agency for the deaths and destruction unspecified or at least make it invisible. Imagine if the event had been alternately formulated using the active clause structure to highlight the Israeli action, for example, "Israel killed 120 civilians, including 31 children, destroyed dozens of buildings, and caused great destruction and death in Gaza." (cf. Fowler, 1991; Fairclough, 1992; van Leeuwen, 1996).

Such linguistic references associated with Israel's actions are less emotive and do not typically evoke a script of violent military actions, thereby "[t]he potential entity to be impacted through the action, has been suppressed" (Lukin, Butt, & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 66). In other words, these verbs seem to mitigate Israeli actions than would

be when using loaded verbs typically used in this context, such as ‘killed’, ‘occupied’, ‘attacked’, ‘inflicted’, and ‘bombarded’, among others. Israel’s negative actions’ backgrounding is contrasted with the specific reference to the rocket fire coming out from Gaza and the specific number of Israeli deaths. Here it needs little argument to point out that such choices are not arbitrary but ideologically motivated in attaching weight to certain propositions to create particular ideological effects.

Such linguistic features are substantially ideological in reproducing a general discourse that aligns with the Israeli message that they only target Hamas rather than all Palestinians because Hamas fires rockets into Israel. The Israelis are to be viewed as having an imperative national assignment to respond to Hamas violence, and not in terms of a discourse that focuses on Israel as a brutal occupying power that attacks defenseless civilians and targets a national resistance that defends its people and their rights to freedom, independence, and self-determination.

4.2.1 Treatment of Children

The façade of objectivity is realized in how the *NYT* and *BBC* treated Palestinian and Israeli children who were killed during the 11 days of intensive attacks on Gaza in May 2021, which saw 67 Palestinian children killed in Gaza and 1 Israeli Jewish child killed, and one Palestinian child living in Israel proper. The reportage on the children killed during Israel’s assault fits a construction of events along the lines of ‘there are victims on both sides’ and ‘this is the unfortunate cost of war. To illustrate, while no one condones the killing of children, simply treating them as casualties of war without giving the suitable weight and enough attribution of the murder of children to Israeli occupation aims to mitigate the awful crimes committed against Palestinian children. They were killed at a ratio of 67 Palestinian children to 2 Israeli children, one of them is a Palestinian child living inside Israel proper. The disparity in the number should have been reflected in the treatment of the victims emphasizing their deaths and the perpetrators, but it was not treated as such in the two media outlets, as illustrated below.

New York Times

While the *NYT* went to some length to report on the Palestinian children killed during the conflict, providing images of those children and mentioning names, ages, and faces, the *NYT*’s reportage was carefully crafted so as not to assign direct responsibility and blame to the Israeli occupation forces. A case in point in this construction is the *NYT*’s report on the Palestinian children killed in this war published on May 26, as the *NYT* attempted to humanize the Palestinian children killed during the Israeli war on Gaza and included the faces, names, and ages of many of those children killed, and the emotional responses of their parents or relatives. For instance, the lead to the main report on the children killed in the May 2021 war said,

Extract 4

When asked to describe how they felt, many [Palestinian] parents answered with a simple “It’s God’s will,” their voice often reduced to a whisper, the words conveying resignation. They said their children had wanted to be doctors, artists and leaders.

“I’m in disbelief,” said Saad Asaliyah, a taxi driver from Jabaliya, who lost his 10-year-old daughter. “I try to calm myself by saying it was God’s will for her to go.” (May 26, 2021)

While the *NYT* went to some length reporting on the emotional reactions of the Palestinian parents who lost their children in Israel’s war, the *NYT* persistently refrained in its report from condemning Israel for the wilful killings of those children or that Israel’s action violated the international law and human rights.

The same report gives prominence to the Israeli position first, which frames Israel’s actions in terms of self-defense and assigns blame to Hamas for the deaths of the Palestinian children for provoking Israel into bombarding the heavily crowded areas of Gaza and implicitly taking the civilians including children as ‘human shield’, a quite common Israeli army’s allegation against the Palestinian resistance; at the same time, the reporter distances herself from this position which blames Israel by framing it as ‘Israel’s critics’, without mentioning those critics, e.g., international rights organizations, and as ‘evidence’, thus toning down the severity of accusation as simply a position held by those critical of Israel.

Extract 5

Israel blames Hamas for the high civilian death toll in Gaza because the group fires rockets and conducts military operations from civilian areas. **Israel’s critics** cite the death toll **as evidence** that Israel’s strikes were indiscriminate and disproportionate (*NYT*, 26 May 2021)

The report failed to highlight other valid explanations which squarely put the responsibility and blame on Israel

for the murder of these children, including the perspective of international law and international humanitarian law, which prohibits using lethal force in heavily crowded civilian areas. Nowhere in the report is there any mention of the Israeli aggressive military actions against Palestinian civilians. The reporter shifted the focus from Israel's violation of international law to highlight Israel's claim of Hamas's responsibility and toned-down counterclaims of disproportionality and indiscriminate attacks. In the same vein, the report also brings in the story of the Israeli child killed by the shrapnel of an astray Hamas's rocket; it was interesting that the reporter quoted the child's mother as saying that her son once said to his classmates that 'Not all Arabs are bad' and 'I said they are don't want to kill us... I eventually convinced them.' (*NYT*, 26 May 2021).

BBC

The *BBC* had a similar treatment pattern of Palestinian children and the Jewish child killed in the May 2021 aggression. While there was an attempt at humanizing Palestinian victims by mentioning names, faces, emotional responses, and grief of their families, the *BBC* fell short of directly blaming Israel for the killings. It similarly presented those killings as 'victims on both sides', and as some unfortunate situation that civilians found themselves in, and no blame or responsibility was assigned to Israel. Let's consider the *BBC*'s main report on Palestinian and Israeli children killed in the May 2021 conflict.

Extract 6

Israel-Gaza violence: The children who have died in the conflict

Of the 219 people who have been killed in Gaza, at least 63 are children, according to its health ministry. Of the 10 people killed in Israel, two children are among the dead, the country's medical service says.

When an Israeli strike hit al-Wihda street in central Gaza City early on Sunday, at least 13 members of the extended al-Kawalek family are believed to have been killed, buried in the rubble of their own home. Many of the victims were children, with one said to be as young as six months.

"We saw nothing but smoke," one of the surviving members of the family, Sanaa al-Kawalek, told Felesteen Online. "I couldn't see my son next to me and I was hugging him, but I could see nothing."

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) described the bombing as "abnormal" and said the civilian casualties were unintended. A spokesman said air strikes had caused a tunnel to collapse, bringing houses down with it (*BBC*, 19 May 2021)

In extract 6, note the use of the middle voice in the headline in the word 'died', which leaves unspecified the party responsible for the deaths of the vast majority of the children, as the report states 63 children were Palestinians, and two children were Israelis. Using the middle [ergative] voice rather than the active clause structure masquerades Israel's responsibility for killing those children. Note that the reader would have a different conceptualization of the situation were the headline written using an active clause structure that said 'Israel-Gaza Violence: Israeli forces kill 63 Palestinian children in Gaza'. Note that the last paragraph in the extract injects the Israeli army's position to justify the killings, without questioning this position, or offering other alternative positions that question the army's justification of killing the al-Kawlak's children. That is, the media outlet failed to counterbalance the Israeli perspective with other alternative accounts that frame the situation within the context of Israeli military occupation and its causal effect on acts of violence committed by both Israelis and Palestinians.

Choosing to focus on a seemingly objective and balanced treatment of the victims on both sides and equal presentation of the victims seems to tone down the far greater and more destructive and lethal Israeli destruction and devastation wrought on the Palestinian people, and this is directly related to the broader contexts of discourse production and reception. It has ideological implications in terms of not only constructing a dominant representation of the situation by which Hamas' actions are seen as unjustifiably engaging in violence against Israel, but it also entails the attribution of causal agency, blame, and responsibility largely to the Palestinians. De-emphasizing Israeli actions, on the other hand, may be seen as argumentatively necessary for it may have the function of sparing Israeli actions and policies from being subjected to the same scrutiny and moral judgment as that of the Palestinians, and deflects attention from its illegal occupation and suffocating siege of Palestinian territory.

Similarly, it is important to see how both media outlets construct the situation in the news headlines. They persistently constructed the events in terms of 'violence', 'strife' or 'conflict' between 'Israel' and 'Hamas'. Such construction carries the ideologically driven position of the two media outlets and serves Israel's interests and position. The persistent representation of Israel's aggression on Gaza along the lines of a conflict between Hamas or Gaza and Israel, mostly by the *NYT*, presents the two sides as two seemingly equal sides to the conflict

with equal powers. It may give the impression that Gaza is a sovereign state with comparable power.

This dominant pattern of representation gives the impression that this war is directed against Hamas and fails to construe Israel as an occupying power, as defined under international law, which has been besieging the Gaza Strip since 2007 and has repeatedly waged wars against the tiny enclave over the 15 years. This representation agrees with what Philo and Berry (2011) found in their study that the Israeli war was presented as ‘being directed only at Hamas, and this is certainly how Israel wished it to be seen’ (p 155). That is, constructing the situation as a fight against Hamas, which is consistently referred to as a ‘militant Palestinian Islamist group controlling Gaza’ favours Israel’s justifications and ignores Palestinian representation that emphasizes the contexts of Israel’s occupation, siege, and aggression targeting the Palestinians in Gaza and drives Israel’s actions in the region.

Similarly, the frequent reference to Israeli onslaught on Gaza as ‘violence’ and ‘Israel-Gaza conflict’ takes away from understanding the situation as an attack by an occupation regime targeting a people under population. As one can see in the headlines of the *NYT* and *BBC*, this veneer of objectivity ignores the realities on the ground and the incomparable wanton damage that the occupation caused the Palestinians in Gaza. That is, the set of lexical references used by the *NYT* and *BBC* to characterize the situation serves the Israeli rationales and narrative used to justify its actions and policies vis-à-vis the Palestinian people. It eschews the historical facts and political contexts allowing a better understanding of the conduct of the two sides in the conflict.

Table 1. News headlines in *NYT* and *BBC*

<i>NYT</i> Headlines	<i>BBC</i> Headlines
1. Israel vs. Hamas (<i>NYT</i> 18 May 2021)	1. Israel-Gaza violence dominates Arab media (<i>BBC</i> 12 May 2021)
2. Grief Mounts as Efforts to Ease Israel-Hamas Fight Falter (<i>NYT</i> 18 May 2021)	2. Israel-Gaza violence : The children who have died in the conflict (<i>BBC</i> 19 May 2021)
3. New Political Pressures Push U.S. and Europe to Stop Israel-Gaza Conflict (<i>NYT</i> , 19 May 2021)	3. Israel-Gaza : Rockets hit Israel after militants killed (<i>BBC</i> 13 May 2021)
4. As Israel-Hamas Cease-Fire Holds, Gazans Survey Wreckage (<i>NYT</i> 30 May 2021)	4. Israel: Jewish and Arab mobs spread violence (<i>BBC</i> 13 May 2021)
5. Israel and Hamas Fighting Raises Questions about War Crimes (<i>NYT</i> 19 May 2021)	5. ‘We cannot sleep’: Mothers caught in the Israel-Gaza conflict (<i>BBC</i> 14 May 2021)
6. U.N. Secretary General Calls for Israel-Hamas Cease-Fire (<i>NYT</i> , 20 May 2021)	6. As it happened: Diplomacy fails to halt Israel-Gaza fighting (<i>BBC</i> 17 May 2021)
7. Israel and Hamas Agree to End a Brief War That Reverberated Worldwide (<i>NYT</i> 20 May 2021)	7. Israel reinforces Gaza border as conflict rages on (<i>BBC</i> 14 May 2021)
8. Blinken Will Seek to Bolster Cease-Fire Between Israel and Hamas (<i>NYT</i> 24 May 2021)	8. Israel-Gaza violence : Calls to protect civilians as conflict endures (<i>BBC</i> 17 May 2021)
9. The Toll of Eight Days of Conflict in Gaza and Israel (<i>NYT</i> 17 May 2021)	9. Gaza-Israel conflict in pictures: 11 days of destruction (<i>BBC</i> 21 May 2021)
10. After Years of Quiet, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Exploded. Why Now? (<i>NYT</i> 15 May 2021)	10. Israel-Gaza: Israel and Hamas ‘close to ceasefire deal’ (<i>BBC</i> 20 May 2021)
11. The violence rocking Gaza, Israel and the West Bank has left scores dead (<i>NYT</i> 14 May 2021)	11. Israel-Gaza ceasefire holds despite Jerusalem clash (<i>BBC</i> 21 May 2021)

Both *NYT* and *BBC* presented the two sides to the conflict as equal in power and exacting similar damage on the two sides. That is, the Palestinian resistance was able to cause damage to Israeli cities in similar proportions to the Israeli attacks on Gaza. References to Palestinian casualties are toned down and there is clearly a lack of reporting about the extent of violations against Palestinians including targeting children, women, paramedics and journalists. This reporting pattern spares Israel to be subjected to moral scrutiny and judgement for its crimes against the Palestinian civilians and infrastructure in the besieged Strip.

4.3 Silenced Voices: Lack of Legal and Historical Context

Any media treatment of the events on the ground requires historization of the decades-long Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as it helps to ensure that the readers have an informed understanding of the actions of both sides and have a broader perspective on the structural causes and origins of this longstanding conflict. In the absence of contextualization of the current Israeli aggression, it is most likely that readers would be constrained, or even misled, in how they approach the situation and understand the roles and actions of the various participants in it.

The analysis shows a tendency to weigh up particular contextualization of events over others. In particular, the

Israeli narrative was given more space and prominence than the Palestinian one. The two media outlets generally favoured a representation of the situation in terms of Israeli and Palestinian contested narratives and claims over the land and holy places over a historicization of the events concerning Israel's ethnic cleansing, colonization, military occupation and siege. Let us consider the following extract from a *NYT*'s report on May 20 which is symptomatic of the way the events were historicized in the newspaper's coverage, which totally eclipses the context of Israel's occupation and ethnic cleansing:

Extract 7

Even with the pause in fighting, the underlying causes of the conflict remain: **the dispute** over land rights in Jerusalem and the West Bank, **religious tensions** in the Old City of Jerusalem and the absence of a peace process to resolve the conflict. Gaza remains under a **punishing blockade by Israel and Egypt** (*NYT* 20 May 2021).

It is worth noting here that the *NYT* presented the underlying causes of the conflict in terms of 'dispute' between Palestinians and Israelis over land rights in Jerusalem and the West Bank, which ignores the historical facts of Israel's occupation of the eastern side of Jerusalem following the 1967 war, and more recently favours the Israeli claim that the homes of the Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah's neighbourhood are subjected to a legal case and to be evacuated. Further, the Israeli ongoing attempts to Judaize Al-Aqsa Mosque and divide it temporally and spatially between Muslims and Jews are referred to as 'religious tensions' which again adopts Israeli claims and policies. Note further that the suffocating and illegal siege imposed by the Israeli occupation state on the Gaza Strip is constructed as a 'punishing blockade' by Israel and Egypt, which partly exonerates Israel from taking full responsibility for it.

The use of the epithet 'punishing, drawn from the domain of bad behaviour discipline, would give rise to the idea that Gazans did what they deserved punishment for something they did. This is especially so, when Hamas and other Palestinian factions are consistently negatively referred to as 'militant groups'. The reader would have a different reading of the situation in Gaza if the blockade was referred to as 'illegal', 'suffocating', 'inhumane', or other adjectives that squarely hold the Israeli occupation legally, morally and politically responsible for the Gaza blockade. The historical references used in this extract highlight Israeli propaganda and explanations, while there was a failure to counterbalance this position with Palestinian explanations and the international law which questioned this Israeli occupation's formulation of events. That is to say, other alternative explanations, which frame Palestinian actions as a political struggle for self-determination, seem to be given scant attention by both the *NYT* and the *BBC*. Philo and Berry (2004, p. 245) correctly note that:

The absence of key elements of Palestinian history makes it difficult to understand their perspective. Their actions could appear without context and in consequence they may be seen as 'initiating' the trouble... the fact of the military occupation and its consequences is crucial to an understanding of the rationale of Palestinian actions.

One sees a similar pattern in the following extract from a *BBC* report providing an interpretive framing of events in terms of the Palestinian attack which draws violent Israeli responses. Palestinian violent action is foregrounded and framed as an attack against Israelis, while Israeli violent action is presented as retaliation to Palestinian attacks. This formulation largely adopts Israeli official definitions and justifications for Israeli military actions in Gaza. First, note that Palestinian resistance in Gaza is referred to as 'militant groups' who are 'firing rockets into Israel since Monday night' and that 'Israel has responded by hitting targets'.

The lexical choices assigned to the Palestinian side are worth noting as they commonly carry negative overtones and evaluations of Palestinian actors and actions. The Israeli side is referred to as 'Israel Defence Forces (IDF)' which imbues an overtone of formality and credibility when contrasted with the ascriptions to the Palestinian side. Alternatively, the reader would have a different perception and reading of the actions of both sides where the Israeli side was referred to as 'Israel occupation forces' or the 'Israeli military'.

Extract 8

Militant groups in Gaza, run by the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, have been firing rockets into Israel since Monday night, and **Israel has responded** by hitting **targets** in the territory.

On Thursday morning, **the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) said** about 1,500 rockets had been fired from Gaza **into Israeli cities** since hostilities escalated at the start of this week.

The health ministry in Gaza says that more than **400 people have been injured** there since the conflict began, in addition to the **67 who have died** (*BBC*, May 13, 2021).

The negative overtones associated with the Palestinian side are found in the transitivity choices and participant roles assigned to the Palestinian and Israeli sides respectively. Note that the Palestinians are assigned an active clause structure in ‘militant groups...have been firing rockets into Israel’ with the Palestinians taking on the negative ‘agent’ role and ‘action’ process ‘firing’, and a delineated circumstance ‘into Israel’, thus highlighting negative Palestinian agency. This comes in marked contrast with the toned-down language associated with the Israeli side, for example, in the use of the word ‘targets’ which projects the Israeli army as a professional one hitting ‘specific’ entities, a formulation that conforms with the presentation of Israel’s is fighting Hamas only, not the people of Gaza, which stands in contrast with Hamas’s targeting of “Israeli cities”. Note also the use of the agentless passive structure ‘400 people have been injured’ and a middle voice ‘died’, thus shifting the attention and leaving unspecified from the agent responsible for the killing and wounding of people. This subjective formulation of events that projects Israel in a defensive position having no choice but to respond to ‘1,500 rockets’ contrasts markedly with a formulation of events that assigns a negative active clause structure assigned to Israel as, for example, ‘Israeli occupation forces killed 67 civilians and wounded 400 others’. Here it needs little argument to point out that such choices are not arbitrary but are ideologically motivated in attaching the weight to certain propositions create particular ideological effects, largely in favour of the Israelis and unfavourable to the Palestinians.

The differential treatment of Palestinian and Israeli violence and victims is congruent with the examples that Herman and Chomsky (1988) provide in their ‘propaganda model’ about the US media’s dichotomous treatment of people abused by friendly or enemy regimes. They show that abuses committed by friendly regimes are toned down and receive minimal attention whereas abuses of enemy regimes receive intensive US media coverage and are couched in highly emotional language. They relate this discrepancy in the treatment of worthy and unworthy victims to the fact that:

This bias is politically advantageous to U.S. policy-makers, for focusing on victims of enemy states shows those states to be wicked and deserving of U.S. hostility; while ignoring U.S. and client-state victims allows ongoing U.S. policies to proceed more easily, unburdened by the interference of concern over the politically inconvenient victims (p. 20).

We can see in the two prominent media outlets that it was Hamas’s rocket fire that was largely problematized and presented as the cause of the ‘conflict’, not the larger political and historical contexts of Israel’s occupation, colonization, colonial settlements, and suffocating siege on Gaza. This construction of the Gaza war of 2021 emphasizes that the Israeli war is as a war waged against Hamas which triggers Israeli validated responses, and not a war against the Palestinians; this certainly goes in line with Israeli statements and arguments that it is engaged in a punishing campaign against Gaza’s militants. At the same time, Palestinian rationales and justifications in explaining their political and military actions are largely ignored or backgrounded.

In a related vein, it is worth noting that the coverage of the *NYT* and *BBC* failed to highlight the international legal perspective in relation to Israel’s measures in occupied Jerusalem and Sheikh Jarrah, nor to Israel’s attacks on Gaza, including its targeting of homes and residential buildings, the indiscriminate killing of Palestinian civilians, including dozens of children, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, in clear violation of international humanitarian law, human rights, and the laws of war. The analysis shows that the *NYT* and *BBC*’s coverage during the study period did not refer to any reports by human rights organizations or international legal references documenting these violations.

4.3.1 News Sources: A Process of Framing

The inclusion of certain voices and the exclusion and silencing of other voices as well as the functions these voices provide underlie a process of inculcating readers with particular views and realities and orienting their subjectivities to perceive events in particular ways, especially for a conflict that is determined as much by public opinion and rallying up support to one side or another as by what happens on the ground. As an essential component of news reportage, journalists draw on other voices and news sources as a strategy to enhance the credibility of the reportage and sometimes to convey a dramatic, vivid live broadcast of the events taking place. Bell (1991) points out that a quotation “adds to the story the flavour of the newsmaker’s own words” (p. 209). It was particularly noteworthy that the *NYT* and *BBC* drew to a large measure on Israeli sources, mainly army spokespersons, to report on and provide interpretations of the events and justifications for Israeli military actions, thus emphasizing Israeli rationales and positions. At the same time, they failed to counterbalance Israeli perspectives with other alternative accounts which frame the violence within the context of Israeli military occupation and Palestinians’ rights and/or international law position. Further, Palestinian voices were mainly used to give eyewitness accounts of what was happening on the ground, emotional responses of ordinary

Palestinians describing their grief or shock, and health authorities reporting on the numbers of deaths and injuries.

Extract 8 above, for instance, illustrates this pattern of using news sources in a manner that foregrounds Israeli rationales and explanations. Note that the statement by the Israeli army was used to explain and frame Israeli military actions and confirm the subjective formulation of the events presented by the reporter in the previous paragraph. No Palestinian sources were used to counterbalance the Israeli army's claims or to offer a different perspective on the event. The Palestinian source represented in the Palestinian Ministry of Health was only used to report the number of Palestinian casualties.

As it is rather untenable to list all news sources in the whole corpus of texts in this study due to space limitations, let us take a closer look at the news sources used in this *BBC* report published on May 13, which has a word count of 1,141 words, and from which extract 8 was taken. One can clearly see this persistent pattern of using news sources that foregrounds Israeli actions and explanations and scantily refers to Palestinian sources. Table 2 below lists the news sources used in this report which generally points to the larger proportion of the presence of the Israeli sources used for purposes of commenting on events, framing events, accounting for Israeli actions and evaluating Palestinian actors and events. The Palestinian sources, however, were fewer in number and they were mainly used to report on events, but not to explain Palestinian responses or offer a counter argument to the Israeli one. There was a noticeable absence of the Palestinian news sources; for example, there was a complete absence of any reports or statements from Palestinian factions, mainly Hamas, except for the highly negative generic reference 'militants in Gaza'. Note also that the quoted Israeli sources are institutional, authoritative figures which add up to the veneer or formality, credibility and news worthiness of these sources and the content of their statements. In addition, the Palestinian sources were placed in the lower positions of the report and only after the Israeli statements and explanations were well established, thereby leaving the impression that they were not of equal significance in news value to the Israeli ones.

Table 2. News sources in a *BBC* report

Israeli News Sources	Palestinian News Sources	Other News Sources
- Israeli police	- The health ministry in Gaza*	- AFP news agency
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*	- Palestinian Authority	- United Nations Secretary
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*	- militants in Gaza	General António Guterres
- Mr. Netanyahu*	- health officials*	- US President Joe Biden
- Israel Defence Forces (IDF)*	- [victims] their 14-year-old cousin,	- US Secretary of State,
- Israel	Ibrahim	Antony Blinken
- The IDF*		- A Russian foreign ministry
- the defence and security		statement
correspondent of the Jerusalem Post		- Hamas

Note. * Number of times quoted.

The noticeable preponderance to foreground the Israeli sources and their statements indicates how the reporter treats the events, as he seems to attach more weight to the Israeli official account of the events and his comments seem to back this account, as clearly indicated in extract 8 above. Henry and Tator (2002) posit that quotations can be an effective linguistic strategy for news producers who quote sources which legitimize a particular worldview that they identify with while legitimately claiming that they are merely relaying what has been said.

This pattern is also seen in extract 9 below from another *BBC* report which shows how Israeli army sources were included to provide the interpretation of the eyewitness statements, thus weighting in the Israeli perspective. Reported speech or what Fairclough terms 'discourse representation', i.e., "how the speech and writing of others are embedded within media texts" (1995, p. 75) is ideologically significant not only for what is being quoted but also for which voices are used as newsworthy and credible news sources. Missing from this account is an international law perspective or human rights groups to explain or comment on the incident.

Extract 9

When an Israeli strike hit al-Wihda street in central Gaza City early on Sunday, at least 13 members of the extended al-Kawalek family are believed to have been killed, buried in the rubble of their own home.

Many of the victims were children, with one said to be as young as six months.

"We saw nothing but smoke," one of the surviving members of the family, Sanaa al-Kawalek, told

Felesteen Online. "I couldn't see my son next to me and I was hugging him, but I could see nothing."

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) described the bombing as "abnormal" and said the civilian casualties were unintended. A spokesman said air strikes had caused a tunnel to collapse, bringing houses down with it (BBC 19 May 2021).

This rather meek presence of Palestinian voices may point to what Thiesmeyer (2003) calls *a discursive act of silencing* which she postulates as "a process that works best when disguised, that is, when it displaces the silenced material using another discourse, or conceals or filters the unacceptable material through a discourse that is more acceptable" (p. 2). This construction of events as partly reflected in the pattern of news sources used in the coverage would have a bearing on the overall construction of situation; it diverts attention from seeing other aspects of the reality of the occupation, Israeli army's brutalities, violations of human rights and international law, the political context of occupation and siege; that is, it precludes opportunities to see the violence as a 'political' phenomenon that has structural causes driving the actions of the Palestinians in particular.

5. Conclusion

The critical discourse analysis showed that there were no significant differences between the *BBC* and the *New York Times* in their coverage of the May 2021 Israeli onslaught on Gaza. Several salient themes emerge, and their linguistic realizations have been identified, which point to the ideologically driven construction of the situation by the two influential media outlets. More specifically, the theme of equivalence emerges from the analysis as the *NYT* and *BBC* consistently framed the Israeli onslaught on Gaza as a conflict between Israel and Hamas and that there are victims on both sides which eschews the far greater number of Palestinian civilians killed and destruction caused by the Israeli onslaught. Also, while the two media outlets an apparently equal attention to Palestinian and Israeli casualties, which may give the veneer of objectivity to their reportage, this has the function of damping down Israeli occupation's moral, legal and political responsibility for the wanton destruction and deaths it afflicted on the Palestinian people in Gaza.

The results of this study support several studies that highlighted a pattern of bias in favour of the Israeli narrative and perspectives in American and British news media. This reporting pattern spares Israel to be subjected to moral scrutiny and judgment for its wanton crimes against innocent Palestinians by presenting the situation as the unfortunate and inevitable cost of war. The contexts of Israel's occupation, siege, brutalities and violations, colonization, and ethnic cleansing were largely missing in the reportage, while the situation was presented as the two sides having competing claims to the land and holy sites. The textual manifestations, especially the lexical references to Israelis and Palestinians, the transitivity selections, and the quotation patterns used by the two media outlets reveal that the *NYT* and *BBC* were largely in favour of Israeli rationales and perspectives at the expense of both a Palestinian perspective and the international legal perspective on the Israeli actions.

Any media discourse reflects the ideological interests of those in powerful positions. The events and the ideas transmitted through news media carry their philosophies, presumptions, attitudes, and linguistic expressions. Much research in Critical Discourse Analysis has revealed the potent influence of the news media in maintaining power asymmetries between different socio-political groups (e.g., Bishop & Jaworski, 2003; Martin Rojo & van Dijk, 1997; Teo, 2000). This study shows how journalists legitimize, frame, or validate actions and opinions during the coverage of events and manipulate the cognition and knowledge of the target audiences when reporting war events. This necessitates putting to task the principle of "objectivity" in the news which is often claimed as central to news media. Here it should be remembered that journalists are not detached from the political and professional environment in which they work. This entails that news treatment of any event is necessarily shaped and influenced by the cultural values, social practices, and ideological beliefs of these journalists and their cultural and institutional environment. White (2006, p. 37) reasons that:

Contrary to any claims to 'objectivity' on the part of the media industry, news reporting is a mode of rhetoric in the broadest sense of the word – a value laden, ideologically determined discourse with a clear potential to influence the media audience's assumptions and beliefs about the way the world is and the way it ought to be.

As the analysis of this study shows, the journalists of the *NYT* and *BBC* were highly selective in how they constructed events and actors and in patterns of exclusion and inclusion, over-reporting and underreporting and persistently maintained a particular ideological representation of the war on Gaza.

Therefore, the emancipatory potential of this study can be realized by aiming to sensitize readers' awareness of possible hegemonic and manipulative uses of language, which can be either explicitly stated or implicitly

assumed in the potent discourses of the *NYT* and *BBC* and similar ones. Vaughan (1995) aptly points this notion out:

It is important for ordinary citizens to empower themselves through education to analyse language used to explain war, to realize when they are being manipulated, to see the entwining of language choices and political/social issues, in order to make better choices (pp. 62–63).

Ultimately, the study aims to effect a change in the way the readers think about, interpret, and perceive highly sensitive events, especially on the question of Palestine, by providing analytical tools and resources by which they critically examine the discourses of influential news media and similar discourses.

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Notes

Note 1. Van Dijk (1988) uses the term macroproposition to refer to a process of subsuming information and propositions on a sentence or clause level under higher level topics by means of three summarizing macrorules: deletion, generalization, and construction.

Note 2. 'Middle' voice is the type of clause which is used to represent an action with no external agency, as opposed to 'effective' voice which involves construing actions as caused by external agency, thereby allowing for a choice between active or passive. Lukin, Butt and Matthiessen (2004) hold that the 'middle' voice is an effective way of concealing agency.

Note 3. Backgrounding or suppressing agency can also be realized by the process of *nominalization* which involves turning processes into a noun or a nominal group (cf. Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen 1999).

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