

## **Biased Judgments of Media Bias: A Case Study of the Arab-Israeli Dispute**

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*Since the birth of the Jewish state in 1948, hundreds of commentaries on media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict have been driven by a desire to demonstrate unfair media bias—either against Israel or against the Arab states. This paper presents a brief overview of these articles; it differs from prior literature reviews inasmuch as it focuses upon the charges of partisan critics. The paper's goals are (1) to review, categorize, and evaluate these accusations, (2) to distinguish between the normative, conceptual, and empirical issues involved in judgments of media bias, and (3) to suggest an overall vantage point from which we may most usefully view the debate over media unfairness with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict.*

*Among other things, the paper argues that:*

*1. The media ought not rely upon "evenhandedness," "balanced content," or "middle-of-the-road politics" as guidelines for coverage of the conflict.*

*2. "Scientific," content analytic studies of media bias have obscured the centrality of values and political orientations in judgments of unfair coverage.*

*3. While the media do have an obligation to adhere to certain journalistic norms and standards, it is difficult—if not impossible—to invoke these norms without making normative and conceptual judgments.*

*4. Structural constraints predispose the mass media toward certain types of coverage. Sometimes, limitations in media capabilities produce coverage favorable to Israel and sometimes they produce coverage favorable to the Arabs.*

*5. Judgments of media bias rest upon three social psychological processes: a general, cognitive confirmatory bias in judging evidence, a tendency for deeply involved partisans to have a wide latitude of rejection, and a*

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*tendency for partisans to perceive (and misperceive) media stimuli in accordance with their overall views.*

*6. Media criticism may also be understood as a partisan, political tool.*

**KEY WORDS:** Middle East; media bias; mass communications; content analysis; social judgment; international conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the birth of the Jewish state in 1948, hundreds of commentaries have appeared on American media coverage of the Arab-Israeli dispute. Each time the conflict flares anew, more articles turn up in both academic journals and popular publications. Not surprisingly, most critiques are driven by a desire to demonstrate bias—either against Israel or against the Arab states.

On one hand, a barrage of articles accuse the American press of engaging in “adversary journalism” against Israel and, in some instances, of turning the Jewish state into the “scapegoat of the world media” (e.g., Isaac, 1980; Feith, 1980; Alexander, 1982; Peretz, 1982b; Podhoretz, 1982; Chafets, 1984). On the other hand, an even larger number of articles charge the American media with inequitable pro-Israel and anti-Arab biases (e.g., Baha el-Din, 1971; Suleiman, 1961, 1974; Asi, 1981a, b; Said, 1981).

To some extent, this apparent contradiction can be explained by noting the dates of the accusations. Israel supporters seldom objected to coverage prior to the (1973) Yom Kippur War; their discontent peaked during the aftermath of the (1982) Lebanon War (Peretz, 1982b; Podhoretz, 1982; ADL, 1982; Chafets, 1984). Arab supporters, however, expressed particular dissatisfaction with coverage of the (1967) Six Day War (Adams, 1971; Suleiman, 1970, 1974; Baha El-Din, 1971; Asi, 1981a). Although pro-Arab writers, for the most part, continue to view the media as anti-Arab, they have grown somewhat more satisfied with coverage during the past decade (Ibrahim, 1974; Shaheen, 1980; Asi, 1981b). Still, the dates of the accusations offer only partial guidance since coverage of the same events, on many occasions, has drawn denunciations from both sides.

Conflicting accusations have led many fairminded readers to throw up their hands in despair, concluding that little of value can be distilled from the voluminous writings on this topic and that our knowledge of Middle East media coverage lies in disarray. Others optimistically have interpreted conflicting bias charges as evidence of media equity, balance, and impartiality. In other words, if both Arabs and Israelis consider the Western media biased against them, then, the media *ipso facto* must produce reasonably unprejudiced coverage.

This paper presents a brief overview of articles charging the American mass media with unfair bias in coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Kressel

(1983) offered a more detailed review of journalistic and empirical studies on media coverage of the conflict; Asi (1981a) also reviewed numerous empirical articles on this topic. The present study differs from prior efforts insofar as it focuses upon the perspectives of partisan critics. The paper's goals are (1) to review and categorize accusations of bias, (2) to distinguish between the normative, conceptual, and empirical issues involved in judgments of bias, and (3) to suggest an overall vantage point from which we may most usefully view the debate over media bias.

### Pro-Arab Criticism of the American Mass Media

Since pro-Arab perspectives on American media coverage have been changing over the past decade, it is not a straightforward matter to identify the elements of a mainstream pro-Arab critique. Moreover, different Arab supporters have highlighted different issues. Nonetheless, most accusations of anti-Arab media bias have included some combination of the following points.

1. The American mass media consistently present unbalanced coverage; this bias shows up as *a disproportionate number of unfavorable references to Arab states, their leaders, and their actions. Similarly, bias is evident in a disproportionate number of favorable references to Israel.* Although present in news articles, the imbalance is most blatantly apparent in editorials, features, and cartoons. Although some pro-Arab writers have acknowledged a move toward balance in press coverage during the past few years, none have argued that the American press is no longer biased against Arabs (Suleiman, 1965, 1970, 1974, 1975; Farmer, 1968; Terry, 1971, 1974, 1975; Asi, 1981a, b; and many others).

2. The American media paint *a blatantly distorted and untrue picture of the Arab-Israeli conflict.* Frequent citations of false images in the media include (1) Jewish settlement made the desert bloom but Palestinian Arabs left the land untended, (2) Zionism is a basically liberal philosophy, (3) Israel is the underdog in the Middle East, (4) Palestinians are terrorists, (5) Jews did not force Palestinian Arabs to leave their homes in 1948 but instead urged them to stay, (6) the Arab-Israeli conflict, at bottom, stems from Arab anti-Judaism (Suleiman, 1965, 1974; Said, 1981; Shaheen, 1981).

3. The media present *too much coverage of Israel and too little of the Arabs;* this leads to greater familiarity and, hence, partiality toward Israel (Padelford, 1979; Asi, 1981a; Weisman, 1981a, b; and many others).<sup>2</sup>

4. Conspiracy, editorial bans, and other barriers have made it *impossible or extremely difficult for pro-Arab views to appear in print in the United*

<sup>2</sup>Some social psychological research supports this notion that mere familiarity and exposure can lead to increased liking; see, for example, Zajonc (1968).

*States* (Raspberry, 1973; Suleiman, 1965; Ward, 1969; Baha El-Din, 1971; Adams, 1971). Some Arab commentators object to the prominence of Jews in media professions, claiming that this destroys the chances for fair coverage. Also, pro-Arab writers frequently complain that their views are denied fair consideration; instead, pro-Arab opinions are delegitimized by labeling them as anti-Jewish.

5. *Cultural insensitivity, stereotyping, and racist imagery* predominate in American media coverage of the conflict (Suleiman, 1970; Baha El-Din, 1971; Shaheen, 1979, 1980; Cooley, 1981; Said, 1981).

6. The American mass media use *double standards* when judging actions of Israel and the Arab States. For example, critics have argued that Palestinian attacks against Israelis generally are labeled “terrorist” while Israeli bombings of Arab villages are called “retaliatory” (Suleiman, 1965, 1970; Cooley, 1981; Said, 1981; Weisman, 1981a).

### Pro-Israel Criticism of the American Mass Media

By nearly all accounts, the Jewish state had little about which to object in mass media coverage of the conflict prior to 1973.<sup>3</sup> After the Yom Kippur War, however, many pro-Israel authors perceived an erosion of support for Israel. During the late seventies and early eighties, pro-Israel critiques of the media grew in frequency and severity. Unlike pro-Arab writings which often had appeared in academic form, pro-Israel commentaries mostly involved impressionistic accounts focusing upon coverage of specific events. Still, a mainstream pro-Israel critique of the mass media might include some combination of the following elements:

1. Since the Yom Kippur War, the American mass media have moved away from their formerly objective treatment of the conflict. In recent years, the media have made *disproportionately unfavorable references to Israel and disproportionately favorable references to Arabs*. This new imbalance shows up in the orientation of news and feature stories, the positions of editorials, the imagery of cartoons, and other ways.

2. In their efforts to present more “evenhanded” coverage, many journalists have distorted the truth and painted a *badly flawed and inaccurate picture of the Arab-Israeli dispute*. According to pro-Israel writers, the distorted image has several common components: (1) overplaying Arab moderation, e.g., saying Sadat attacked Israel in 1973 in order to lay the groundwork for peace; (2) portraying Arab institutions in terms more palatable to American readers, e.g., calling the Saudi political system a “desert democracy”; (3) whitewashing the PLO and downplaying its ter-

<sup>3</sup>Immediately following the Six Day War, some pro-Israel writers began to complain about very unfavorable coverage in some “leftist” publications but, for the most part, these objections did not concern mainstream media (e.g., Forster and Epstein, 1974).

rorism; (4) portraying Israel as more militaristic and less committed to peace than the Arabs; (5) devoting disproportionate attention to Israel's activities on the West Bank; (6) getting many facts wrong in coverage of the Lebanon War (Rubin, 1975/1976; Isaac, 1980; Feith, 1980; Hadar, 1980; Blitzer, 1980; Barlas, 1981; ADL, 1982; Peretz, 1982b; Podhoretz, 1982; Baum, 1982; Sidorsky, 1982).

3. *Political barriers of various sorts bar American journalists from presenting objective reports* about the conflict. The most severe objection of this sort holds that Western reporters operate under fear of terrorist reprisals (Chafets, 1982; Wall, 1982; Peretz, 1982a; Timmerman, 1983). Other critics have charged that reporters, in order to maintain access to Arab countries, must write stories acceptable to their hosts.

4. *The mass media, to some degree, have started to display anti-Jewish tendencies.* This prejudice shows up in several ways: (1) invidious stereotypes about Jewish control of the media and government; (2) vulgar anti-Jewish imagery, particularly in political cartoons; (3) declaration of Jewish group interests as illegitimate; (4) collusion of anti-Israel partisans with traditional anti-Jewish activists (Podhoretz, 1982; Volkman, 1982; and others).

5. *The mass media, especially television, emphasize the vivid and the concrete; these emphases have resulted in unfavorable coverage of Israel in recent years*—particularly in the Lebanon War. The bias stems from broadcast media's inability to deal adequately with historical, background, and longterm forces; for example, the attacking army in any war, however just, seems evil through the lens of TV cameras particularly suited for capturing rubble and dead bodies. Thus, viewers of television coverage of the war in Lebanon did not learn the truth about the invasion (Roeh, 1981; Miller, 1982; Peretz, 1982b; ADL, 1982).

6. The mass media employ *double standards* in deciding what to cover and how to judge Israel and the Arabs. Numerous pro-Israel writers (e.g., Alexander, 1982; Podhoretz, 1982) have cited coverage of the massacres at Sabra and Shattila as evidence of double standards. They have asked why equally voluminous and condemnatory coverage was not given to similar massacres in the past committed entirely by Arabs. Moreover, they have argued that Israel's indirect involvement received stronger condemnation than the direct involvement of the actual Christian murderers. Podhoretz (1982) sees employment of double standards as pervasive and regards their use as one defining characteristic of media anti-Semitism.

### Biased Research on Media Bias

The critiques of media coverage offered by pro-Arab writers and pro-Israel writers contain some structural similarities. Both groups cite: (1) un-

balanced and disproportionately unfavorable coverage, (2) distorted and untrue media portrayals of the conflict, (3) prejudice and stereotyping, (4) employment of double standards, and (5) various unfair political and organizational barriers to an objective coverage. In addition, pro-Arab commentators have highlighted quantitative underrepresentation in media coverage. Pro-Israel writers have discussed limitations inherent in the media themselves—such as broadcast media’s weakness at handling contextual background.

One simple truth goes a long way toward explaining the curious literature on media bias. Differing perceptions about media coverage are linked *inextricably* to disagreements over facts and interpretations concerning the conflict itself. Although certain relatively minor issues may be agreed upon regardless of political orientation, it is impossible to conceive of a situation in which Arab partisans, Israel partisans, and the unaligned would agree on judgments of bias.

Since each side would readily offer its own scholars to resolve disagreement, there is no sense in leaving the question to the experts. This limitation applies equally to middle-of-the-road or neutral experts; there is no reason to believe they have a monopoly on political truth.

### The Problem with “Scientific” Studies

In much research on Middle East media coverage, “scientific” approaches have obscured the centrality of normative and political issues. After reviewing several studies of media bias on matters not related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, content analysis methodologist Klaus Krippendorff (1980) concluded that most such studies “suffer from the lack of defensible criteria” for determining bias. This problem clearly underlies most quantitative, content analytic studies of media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Typically, studies addressing the bias question have rested upon one or the other of two fallacious assumptions:

1. Fair coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict would tell the version of the story accepted by oneself.

2. Fair coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict would say half nice things about the Arabs and half nice things about the Israelis.

Neither assumption is compelling. In the first instance, the problem is obvious. In the second case, one need only imagine problems in using the principle to cover, say, Stalin; should the mass media have reported 50% favorable items about the Soviet leader and 50% about his victims? Should half the *New York Times* editorials have supported Stalin and half opposed him? Or should they have remained neutral?

In numerous content analytic studies of media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, these difficulties have been ignored (Suleiman, 1965, 1971, 1974, 1975; Terry, 1971, 1974, 1975; Padelford, 1979; Asi, 1981a; and others). Most frequently, pro-Arab researchers have conducted the studies. They usually have started by citing the range of Arab charges against the American mass media—conspiracy, double standards, lies, racism, etc. Then, without explaining the critical difference between these accusations and the accusation of unbalanced (or unfavorable) coverage, the studies claim to have resolved the bias question scientifically.

Researchers in this area seldom have been explicit about their definitions of bias but, usually, the operational definition is based on one or more of the following criteria:

1. Widespread negative imagery about Arab states, leaders, and customs,
2. A disproportionate number of negative utterances about Arab states, leaders, and customs,
3. A disproportionate number of positive utterances about Israel,
4. Overwhelming editorial support for Israel's case in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Samples of mass media coverage are then subjected to formal content analysis. In concluding sections, studies finding *unfavorable* coverage claim to have demonstrated *unfair media bias* and the need for the media to mend their ways. Quite clearly, no such conclusions can follow from these studies. Content analytic studies explore what messages the media send; they cannot assess the validity or fairness of these messages.

Studies of textbook coverage of the Middle East have suffered from the same problem (e.g., Al-Qazzaz, 1975; Griswold, 1975; Perry, 1975; Kenny, 1975). One study (Abu-Laban, 1975) even claimed that "content analyses of school textbooks . . . indicate that at both the formal and informal levels, pressure has been exerted to influence (sic) a predominantly one-sided approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict." How content analysis made this magical leap of inference was not explained.

### **The Proper Role for Empirical Studies**

Although content analytic studies do not get us very far in discussions of media bias, they do add significantly to our empirical knowledge about media coverage of the conflict. For instance, studies have investigated (1) changes in media favorability and attentiveness toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, (2) differences between broadcast and print media, (3) differences among various newspapers and among the networks, (4) changes in

favorability and attentiveness to various sub-issues of the conflict, (5) changes in favorability and attentiveness to various leaders and countries in the conflict, (6) journalists' criteria for coverage of events in the conflict, (7) coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict in comparison to coverage of other international conflicts, (8) political orientations of media professionals, (9) case studies of how dramatic events have been covered, (10) the relationship between media coverage and public opinion, and a host of other topics. To the extent that these studies have focused upon empirical issues (e.g., favorability) and avoided the confusion of scientific measurement with normative judgment (e.g., of unfairness), they have been able to expand our empirical knowledge about media coverage of the conflict.

Kressel (1983) reviewed quantitative studies of media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict in detail. According to that literature review, several empirical generalizations emerge about coverage:

1. The mass media send a picture of the conflict heavily dominated by dramatic events.

2. During the 1970s, the Middle East emerged as the most frequently covered foreign policy story in the American mass media.

3. As a rule, favorability of the American mass media has paralleled the favorability of the United States government policy—whatever it has been at various times.

4. From the birth of Israel until very recently, the American mass media favored Israel in coverage of the conflict. Israel's relative advantage, however, was diluted by the bulk of coverage which was overwhelmingly nonpartisan or middle-of-the-road.

5. From 1972 through the end of 1982, at least, media support for Israel declined steadily. Over this same period, there was a dramatic rise in media support for Palestinians.

6. During war years, coverage was most favorable to Israel in 1967 and 1948, less favorable in 1956 and 1973, and least favorable in 1982.

7. Regarding editorials in five major newspapers between 1972 and the end of 1982, the *Wall Street Journal* was most favorable to Israel, the *New York Times* came next, followed by the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The *Christian Science Monitor* was least favorable, by far. During the previous decade, the order was similar, except that the *New York Times* came first, followed by the *Wall Street Journal*.

Other empirical conclusions of this sort have been drawn from well-designed quantitative studies of media favorability. An error occurs when authors and critics attempt to derive normative conclusions from these studies.



### Untruths, Double Standards, Slants, and Journalistic Norms

The question arises whether all investigations of bias regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict are flawed inherently. To answer this question, we must consider separately various types of media criticism.

For editorials, features, news analyses, and cartoons, the problems of observer values and perspectives are most obvious. Charges of bias in these categories nearly always indicate mere disagreement. Two types of commentaries are useful here: (1) identification of exertions of partisan influence upon editors and (2) identification of racist imagery and invidious stereotyping. Beyond this, debate about bias in editorial positions might focus more fruitfully upon the issues of the conflict themselves.

When critics consider news coverage, however, they validly may identify violations of generally accepted journalistic standards in news reporting. For example, it is possible to document straightforward errors of fact. During the Lebanon War in 1982, reporters regularly cited inflated casualty figures from PLO sources without proper attribution (ADL, 1982; Peretz, 1982; Cody and Ramati, 1982; Muravchik, 1983). While this sort of critique provides a useful check on media tendencies to violate their own standards, it is limited, by its nature, to documentation of short-term errors and cannot lead to a clearcut assessment of overall media bias. (See, for example, the interpretation by Morris (1982). Whether one judges errors of fact to be incidental or fundamental depends upon one's overall orientation to the conflict.

In general, agreement between observers becomes more difficult as the unit of media under consideration becomes larger; it is relatively easy to agree retrospectively about particular errors of fact, say, in a single broadcast. It is much more difficult, however, to agree about overall coverage of an event or series of events. On the Lebanon War, for example, it probably can be said that journalists sometimes broke with generally accepted standards in ways that were unfair to Israel; similarly, the media often broke with professional standards during the Six Day War in ways that were unfair to Arabs. One's opinion on *overall* coverage of either event, however, still depends upon political partisanship and values.

On the other hand, critics might investigate the styles and language of news coverage. For example, when disagreements exist, do partisan tones creep into the reporting of the position of either side? For example, when both sides express their positions, is one side typically said to have "suggested new directions for progress in peace talks" while the other is said to have "declared its stance"? Empirical research has shown that partisan

language in news coverage of the Middle East occurs infrequently and is diluted by a great deal of neutral coverage. Still, Kressel (1983), using Terry's (1974) data, has found some evidence for correlation between a newspaper's editorial stance and its subtle slants in news coverage.

Another accusation holds that the media's choice of events for coverage reflects unfair bias. For example, concentration on controversial Saudi domestic practices (e.g., "Death of a Princess" telecast) angers many Arab supporters. Similarly, concentration on the Israeli military and Israeli treatment of Arabs on the West Bank strikes many Israeli partisans as unfair. Since the media's greatest power probably lies in its ability to set agendas (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), these concerns are understandable. However, choice of events for coverage always depends upon news judgments of reporters and editors; these judgments, in turn, inescapably derive to some degree from values and political perspectives.

In addition, editors legitimately make judgments about what their readers would find interesting. One such criterion was pointed out by Raab (1982) in an attempt to explain anti-Israel double standards in judgments of newsworthiness. He cited the media's "theory of discontinuity; otherwise known as man-bites-dog." In other words, since the media perceive Israel as a basically democratic and just society, its misdeeds are newsworthy; for the Arabs, the opposite is true. This criterion, itself, reflects Raab's political orientation but it does point out additional difficulty in discerning bias. Thus, in the final analysis, selection of events for coverage must rest upon political orientations and values as much as on journalistic norms.

Both sides frequently have charged that the media use double standards in judging the conduct of Israel and the Arab nations; this issue cannot be addressed scientifically. For example, pro-Israel commentators have claimed that Israel's indirect role in the massacre at Sabra and Shattila was scrutinized by the media with a fine-toothed comb while many similar massacres in Syria and Lebanon, more or less, have been ignored. Also, Israelis have argued that the mass media treated them more harshly than the Lebanese Christian perpetrators of the massacre were treated. Arab supporters might reasonably retort that the analogy to other massacres is invalid, that the facts are different, or that Israel's injustices against the Palestinians, at bottom, were more extreme. Alternatively, Arab supporters could concede the point in the particular instance and, then, hurl counter-charges of anti-Arab double standards in other cases. To say the least, debate would be unlikely to proceed fruitfully.

Similar problems weaken charges that the media fail to provide proper context for individual events. To be sure, some media provide *more* contextual and background information than other media; television and radio generally provide the least. However, the decision about *which version of*

*context* to present remains dependent, by definition, upon political perspective and values. For example, pro-Israel commentators desired more historical background to explain why Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982; they claim Israel was portrayed as an invading power without any justification. Yet, regarding the 1973 Yom Kippur War, few Israel supporters would have desired a lengthy description of the justification for the Arab attack—certainly not by a reporter at all sympathetic to the Arabs.

Some writers have pointed out, sensibly, that television prefers nonanalytic, vivid scenes (Roeh, 1981); others have charged that war coverage almost never captures the political context of events (Miller, 1982). Television's emphasis on simple, exciting, and vivid scenes worked against Israel in the Lebanon War; it probably led to more positive coverage during the 1967 war.

### **Organizational and Political Barriers to Fair Coverage**

To some extent, journalistic investigations and organizational studies of media behavior can shed light on barriers to free debate on the Arab-Israeli conflict in the United States—particularly by uncovering exertions of illegitimate influence. If accurate, investigations of terrorist constraints on news coming out of the Middle East constitute a meaningful addition to discussions of media coverage (Peretz, 1982a). In the final analysis, though, such journalistic and scholarly investigations can identify some of the forces that produce media coverage but they cannot answer basic questions about media bias. Too many additional factors influence the production of the news.

### **Moral Relativism**

Some values are commonly held by Arab supporters and Israel supporters. Thus, there is a basis for some agreement. We may expect many people, regardless of their political orientation, to object to extreme racism or, in some instances, outright lying. Clear demonstrations of errors in fact, prejudice, and invidious stereotyping, on occasion, can convince even partisans from the other side.

For most questions concerning bias, however, we are left with epistemological and moral relativism; our judgments about media coverage depend upon our values and political orientations. Where these come from, of course, is a central preoccupation of sociologists of knowledge (Berger and Luckman, 1966).

### Social Psychological Perspectives on the Bias Debate

The evaluation of media coverage and the judgment of media bias—at least in part—involve processes of social perception and cognition. A substantial and time-honored body of research highlights the extent to which preconceived theories and opinions can color partisans' evaluations of evidence (Allport, 1954; Nisbett and Ross, 1980). For example, Lord *et al.*, (1979) asked advocates and opponents of the death penalty to examine an identical pair of studies that provided mixed results on the effectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent. Partisans of each position saw the studies as supportive of their own outlook; they readily accepted confirmatory aspects of the studies and discounted conflicting aspects. The general principle that emerges from Lord *et al.*, (1979) and other research is that partisans tend to find support in evidence that non-partisan observers deem inconclusive or impartial; this process is called biased assimilation.

At first blush, partisans' evaluations of media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict seem inconsistent with this tendency. However, the contradiction exists only at a superficial level; further examination shows that the "hostile media" phenomenon, in fact, is a consequence of the general confirmatory bias in cognition. Vallone *et al.*, (1985) explain that,

Partisans who have consistently processed facts and arguments in light of their preconceptions and prejudices (accepting information at face value, or subjecting it to harsh scrutiny, as a function of its congruence with these preconceptions and prejudices) are bound to believe that the preponderance of reliable, pertinent evidence favors their viewpoint. Accordingly, to the extent that the small sample of evidence or argument featured in a media presentation seems unrepresentative of this larger "population" of information, perceivers will charge bias in the presentation and will be likely to infer hostility and bias on the part of those presenting it.

Social judgment theory (Sherif and Hovland, 1961; Kiesler *et al.*, 1969) provides a related perspective on partisans' accusations of media bias. According to this theory, when people are "involved" in an issue, their own stands provide a powerful internal reference point for subsequent judgments. If a position is expressed that falls relatively far from their own outlook, they will completely reject the discrepant position. If a person is heavily involved in the issue, he/she will have a very wide latitude of rejection. As a consequence of rejecting highly discrepant positions, the person's own sense of correctness will solidify. This will occur regardless of the "objective validity" of the discrepant positions. Anything short of partisan media support will fall within the latitude of rejection, and hence be perceived as bias. Uninvolved parties will have much smaller latitudes of rejection and, hence, be much less likely to perceive bias.

According to these social psychological perspectives, partisans may agree about the actual content of the media presentations and still disagree

about their fairness. Another social psychological approach suggests that partisans may perceive and remember very different stimuli in mass media coverage. Hastorf and Cantril's classic (1954) study of partisan perceptions of illegitimate violence in an intercollegiate football game illustrates the phenomenon. After viewing a film of the contest, Dartmouth and Princeton supporters each perceived the other side as having engaged in continuous, illegitimate atrocities and their own side as having retaliated occasionally. This suggests that pro-Arab partisans and pro-Israel partisans might in fact perceive different stimuli when they examine the same sample of media coverage.

Vallone *et al.* (1985) conducted a recent experiment to investigate the social psychological underpinnings of partisan judgments of bias in media coverage of the 1982 massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shattila. The researchers asked partisan Stanford University students to evaluate segments of television news coverage of the tragedy. The study concluded the following:

1. Partisans on both sides evaluated media coverage as biased against their own side.
2. Partisans *perceived* the coverage differently, remembering different aspects of the media presentations.
3. Arab and Israel supporters both evaluated "middle-of-the-road" and "gray" accounts of events as unfair and biased.
4. The more knowledgeable and more emotionally involved the partisan, the more likely he/she was to charge bias.

Thus, empirical evidence from Vallone, *et al.*'s (1985) study supports the three social psychological processes outlined above: the confirmatory bias in evaluating evidence, the tendency for deeply involved partisans to have a wide latitude of rejection, and the tendency for partisans to perceive (and misperceive) stimuli in accordance with their overall perspective. While these explanations suggest that charges of bias may evolve out of predictable cognitive, perceptual, and psychological processes, it should be emphasized that they cannot resolve questions concerning the objective validity of the accusations.

### The Politics of Bias Accusations

Perhaps, it is most realistic to understand arguments about media bias in a political context. If one can influence the press, one controls a powerful weapon. Whatever the media's real power, partisans on each side believe that media influence both public opinion and government policy in the United States. Historians may argue about the veracity of Israeli and Arab

perspectives on the conflict. The outcome of the conflict itself, however, will no doubt be influenced more by which side can marshal the resources necessary to get its views across. In large part, this depends upon whether Arab supporters or Israel supporters convince relatively uninvolved parties of the truth and morality of their positions. Since this task requires a facade of objectivity, the whole endeavor involves an essentially mythic pretense that one's own orientation derives from "objective" facts. To the extent that media coverage fails to support one's arguments, the accuracy of that coverage must be questioned. In addition, charges of media bias may constitute an attempt to encourage preferential treatment by the media.

For partisans (in their own eyes—if not in the eyes of some political scientists), media criticism plays a significant political role; to my mind, this role is not necessarily immoral. If people are willing to back up their values and politics with guns, I see no reason why they should not use words. Admittedly, though, this judgment rests upon personal values.

### SUMMARY

We may draw several conclusions about charges of unfair media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict:

1. The media should not be easy prey to accusations of bias. Moreover, they ought not rely upon "evenhandedness," "balanced content," or "middle-of-the-road politics" as guidelines for coverage of the conflict.

2. "Scientific," content analytic studies of media bias have obscured the centrality of values and political orientations in judgments of unfair coverage. When done properly, however, content analyses can enhance significantly our empirical knowledge about media treatment of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

3. While the media do have an obligation to adhere to certain journalistic norms and standards, it is difficult—if not impossible—to invoke these norms without making normative and conceptual judgments.

4. Since pro-Arab, pro-Israel, and middle-of-the-road analysts share certain values and political orientations, it is possible (but rare) to obtain agreement on some matters. In general, agreement is most likely when the amount of media coverage considered is small and when violations of norms are blatant, e.g., overt racist stereotyping.

5. Demonstrations of illegitimate exertions of influence and other barriers to fair coverage are useful. Most often, however, these demonstrations concern relatively isolated instances and seldom can establish the significance of such factors in the overall determination of media favorability.

6. Structural constraints predispose the mass media towards certain types of coverage. For example, television is drawn towards vivid imagery and away from presentation of historical background. Sometimes, limitations in media capabilities produce coverage favorable to Israel and sometimes they produce coverage favorable to the Arabs.

7. Judgments of media bias rest upon three social psychological processes: a general, cognitive confirmatory bias in judging evidence, a tendency for deeply involved partisans to have a wide latitude of rejection, and a tendency for partisans to perceive (and misperceive) media stimuli in accordance with their overall views.

8. Media criticism may also be understood as a partisan, political tool.

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