



MEDIA BIASNESS IN CONFLICT REPORTING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CNN AND AL JAZEERA COVERAGE OF HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GAZA

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Abstract

This study investigates how CNN and Al Jazeera reported on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as the conflict reached its peak in 2023. In a content analysis of 30 news stories from each network, we compared the framing of the crisis, examining language, sources, and visual elements. CNN predominantly emphasized government statements, diplomatic actions, and the international response, often maintaining a neutral tone that aligned with Western perspectives. In contrast, Al Jazeera prioritized first-hand accounts from Gaza, highlighting the suffering of civilians particularly women and children through emotionally charged narratives and on-the-ground reporting. These differences underscore each network's editorial priorities, cultural influences, and target audiences.

The findings reveal how media framing can shape public perception, with CNN's approach potentially fostering a more detached, policy-oriented view, while Al Jazeera's coverage evoked empathy and urgency. Such disparities raise critical questions about objectivity, bias, and the ethical responsibilities of news organizations in conflict zones. Additionally, the study explores how social media amplification further influenced these narratives, with Al Jazeera's content often going viral among pro-Palestinian audiences, whereas CNN's reports were widely cited in Western political discourse.

Ultimately, this research highlights the power of media in shaping humanitarian responses and global opinion. It calls for greater transparency in conflict reporting, urging journalists to balance empathy with accuracy while encouraging audiences to critically evaluate news sources. By recognizing these biases, consumers can better navigate media landscapes and advocate for more equitable coverage of crises worldwide.

Keywords: Gaza Crisis, Media Framing, Conflict Reporting, Gaza-Israel Conflict, Humanitarian Crisis

Introduction

The media plays a very important role in defining public perceptions and consciousness towards international conflicts. In humanitarian crises-particularly those arising from prolonged political and military conflict, the media framing could make a difference between life and death as far as awareness and also empathy on a global scale and policy transformation are concerned. The Israel-Gaza conflict that has been illustrated in an ambiguous shape by a large number of international media outlets remains one of the most complex and enduring geopolitical crises. The Gaza Strip, a densely populated land region, has undergone a sequence of violent conflicts before recurrent rounds of violence, particularly between the Israeli military forces and Palestinian groups. These actions have resulted in severe humanitarian suffering coming under huge scrutiny from the media worldwide. Regional stability is not the only important frame through which global media narratives are constructed (and re-consumed): the conflict itself is essential (Elmasry et al., 2013).



Shortly after major disasters occur around the world, such as the tsunami in Japan, where many dangerous technologies have been assembled over decades to force food and change global direction, there is pressure from global news networks such as CNN and Al Jazeera, which are well-established sources of information that typically set the agenda for how such global crises are discussed. However, networks can present the same event with different emphasis and bias and scope of framing due to variations in political affiliation, ownership structure, editorial policy, and audience commitment Fahmy and Eakin (2014). Such variations require critical examination of media coverage to explain how narratives are constructed and the implications of such constructions for global understanding and humanitarian intervention.

The media role in conflict areas such as Gaza is a crucial one. Media are not just reporting from the frontline, they are also the conduit through which the world learns of the suffering of the people who are in the firing line. CNN and Al Jazeera are worldwide networks and have millions of viewers in various regions around the world. The way they report on news from Gaza can shape the opinions of the public, steer political leanings, and influence policy making. CNN's broadcast and international presence in the United States made it an appealing news source for many Westerners, particularly in the United States, as a balance to the then Soviet Union's state-owned news agencies (Damanhoury & Saleh, 2017). Al Jazeera, however, is a voice from within the Arab world itself - in Qatar - and is a window of opportunity to represent Arab world for Middle Eastern matters even as it seeks to be a global news purveyor such as the BBC (SELLAT & DAANI, 2024). These structural contrasts in their origins, readership, and editorial line provide an interesting context in which to compare how they have handled the Gaza crisis.

CNN American news outlet in which we view the Gaza war (amongst other things) and are updated 24 hours in action and analysis (Iqbal & Ahmed, 2024). However, the network's coverage is also occasionally seen as synchronized with Western values and political interests, particularly those of the United States. The relationship between Israel and the American government has historically been a close one, and it is one that, naturally, informs CNN's reporting in imperceptible ways. This link can be seen in the way the war is framed, the sources chosen, and the narratives that are produced in their coverage (Shahzad et al., 2023). For example, CNN might focus more on the activities of Hamas or the impact of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on regional security, and less on the larger humanitarian situation. This makes for a kind of coverage that, even when informative, may miss much of reality, that of the suffering of the Palestinian people, concentrating instead on the political or military aspects of the conflict.

Compare that to Al Jazeera, founded in Qatar in 1996, which has become one of the Arab world's most powerful news networks. Al Jazeera, whose editorial line is generally viewed as being more in line with the Palestinian cause, tend to cover Gaza in that same vein (Ali, 2023). Al Jazeera has a large presence within Gaza and its reporting is more local in nature and in greater detail in reflecting humanitarian conditions. The network's correspondents regularly report from the ground in Gaza, humanizing the anguish first hand (Sarwar et al., 2023). Having access to the incidents on the ground, Al Jazeera is able to show the emotional and the human aspect of the crisis, stressing the human part of men who are suffering due to the crisis that they had no connection to (Alim et al., 2024). Moreover, Al Jazeera's reporting is frequently less limited by the political pressures that may dictate those of Western outlets such as CNN. Therefore, Al Jazeera is perceived by many in the Arab world and elsewhere as the most important source of news out there, counteracting the Western media's versions of events.

The influence of international media on shaping worldwide opinion of the Israel-Gaza conflict cannot be underestimated as editorial stance, political leaning, and audience expectations shift for different narratives. As a Western outlet, CNN can be expected to reflect U.S. interests, centering the focus on security and military elements, whereas Al Jazeera offers a more human perspective of events, spotlighting Palestinian voices and suffering. These contrasting framings shape public perceptions, political wrangling, and international intervention, making it even more important to scrutinise media portrayal of conflict zones. By contrasting coverage through CNN and Al Jazeera, this research aims to disentangle the influence of media bias and framing on global understanding of the Gaza crisis, which matter for humanitarian compassion and political involvement.

Problem Statement



Despite a vigorous media action on media bias, there is a massive gap in understanding how media bias shapes the global conversation concerning the humanitarian problem in Gaza. These other studies have been on general media bias in conflict reporting, but there has hardly been a direct comparison of Western and non-Western media taking a human perspective in the same conflict. Depiction of events in Gaza by international reporting bodies like CNN and Al Jazeera might be a case of conflicting ideological perspectives and, thus, continuity in stereotyping, fact distortion, and disregarding views (Perry, 2005; Wolfsfeld, 2004). There is therefore a dire need to analyse the framing strategies employed by these media outlets in ways to make people pay attention to differences in reporting and balance the reporting.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse and compare the media framing of the Gaza humanitarian crisis by CNN and Al Jazeera.
2. To identify the presence and patterns of media bias in the coverage of the conflict.
3. To assess how framing techniques influences public perception of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Research Questions

1. How does CNN frame the humanitarian crisis in Gaza during conflict periods?
2. How does Al Jazeera frame the humanitarian crisis in Gaza during the same period?
3. What are the key similarities and differences in their reportorial emphasis?
4. What protentional impact do CNN and Al Jazeera's portrayals have on audience's perception and policy discourse?

Research Significance

Several reasons make this research important, including an aspect of the growing knowledge surrounding framing and bias towards the media and, more so, during humanitarian crises. Exploring two world-shaping networks, CNN and Al Jazeera, this work explains how different media systems construct stories about conflict and human suffering. With knowledge of these patterns, future journalistic practices can be informed, ethics of reporting may be demonstrated, and advocacy work for balanced and compassionate reporting can be encouraged. Moreover, the present work aims to address the gap, giving a comparative tool for reflection on real-life events and their representations. (Seib, 2005; El-Nawawy & Powers, 2009).

Literature Review

Several scholars have discussed the role of bias and framing in conflict reporting. Entman (1993) established the basic theory of framing, explaining how media companies select and make more salient parts of a perceived reality in order to reinforce a given idea of an issue or moral judgment. The framing for Gaza has the potential to change much about the victims and aggressors in Gaza.

Fahmy & Eakin (2014) studied the international media framing of the Gaza flotilla invasion and provided a clear explanation of how Western and Arab media reported it. CNN focused on the security implications of Israel, while Al Jazeera took cues from the humanistic views of the Palestinian people. This is consistent with the fact that ideological affiliations determine.

Elmasry et al. (2013) have analysed a comparative study of CNN and Al Jazeera's coverage of the Arab Spring, showing that civilian casualties and grassroots movements received more coverage on Al Jazeera, while CNN preferred to adopt official sources and Western geopolitical narratives. Such findings reflect a potential imbalance in their treatment of Gaza.

The comparative study of the coverage of CNN and Al Jazeera in the Arab Spring, demonstrating that the civilian casualties and grassroots movements received more coverage on Al Jazeera, while CNN prefers to adopt official sources and Western geopolitical narratives. Such results reflect a possible imbalance in their treatment of Gaza.

Aday et al. (2005) examined the role media have in crafting foreign policy by opining that U.S. networks tend to objectively portray the concerns of the government, particularly in conflict reporting. This alignment can lead to neglecting humanitarian crises or putting them under the securitized frame.

Shah (2011) focused on the ethical consideration of biased reporting: selective imagery and language can numb or bend the audience's responses. The use of words such as "terrorists" while referring to "freedom fighters" by the media may sway the people's hearts and policy-making.

Kumar (2006) examined media representations of the Israel-Palestine conflict and observed that



framing techniques selection of images, headlines; expert commentary, etc. Generally reinforce dominant power arrangements. His results highlight the necessity for variety in the perspectives that make up international news.

According to Perry (2005), the discussion of journalistic routines and newsroom pressures and their bias, especially in fast-moving conflict zones was also made. He observed that access to sources, safety considerations, and editorial priorities determine the end product. Wolfsfeld (2004) investigated the role of the political backdrop in media to report conflicts, finding that media are not neutral observers but are participants who are subject to cultural and institutional pressures.

This set of studies collectively brings forth the importance of conducting comparison-based analysis of media bias. The main historical research contribution of this work lies in that it focuses on the recent coverage of the Gaza humanitarian crisis, a theme that has been greatly understudied in comparative media studies. From this perspective, the paper seeks to add to existing conversations about media ethics and accountability.

Methodology

Research Design

This research applies a qualitative content analysis technique that works well in explaining the construction and framing of media messages in crises. The design is based on Entman's (1993) four-part framing model. Problem definition (categorization), causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (strategy). Media bias studies use a lot of qualitative content analysis, especially in conflict settings, because researchers are able to identify underlying meanings, emotional tones, and source prioritization Zhang & Wildemuth (2016).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 30 news articles were sampled in the course of the present study: 15 coming from CNN and 15 from Al Jazeera. These were collected through purposive sampling, which is suitable for study designs that want to compare the treatment of issues between media Flick (2018). Articles were chosen depending on their relation to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza over the selected period. The sample comprises full-length English reports as published without opinion, editorials, and non-news.

Data Source and Collection

Data sources were extracted from official CNN and Al Jazeera news archives. This study was highly specific to the coverage from October to November 2023, during the first and most intense period of the 2023 Israel-Gaza conflict. The motivation for this specific one-month period is that it represents the high-water mark of global media representation and humanitarian appeals, creating a fertile ground for shaping the analysis. All articles were downloaded, archived, and manually verified for reliability and relevance.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the full news article, including headlines, leads, body content, and excerpts. Each article was examined for dominant themes, emotional tone, source attribution, and word formation. This approach is consistent with earlier conflict media studies Nossek & Berkowitz (2006).

Analytical Framework

This study uses Entman's (1993) framing theory as the primary analytical lens. Articles were coded under four categories: (1) how the humanitarian crisis is defined, (2) who or what is blamed or praised, (3) moral judgments implied or stated, and (4) suggested solutions or calls for action. Additional coding categories—tone (natural, positive, negative), thematic focus (e.g., medical crisis, aid blockade), and word cues (e.g., "siege," "massacre," "strategic strike")—were derived from previous studies Huang & Fahmy, (2013); Semetko & Valkenburg, (2002). Source analysis recorded which actors were cited (e.g., citizens, NGOs, the UN, and governments) and their frequency, helping to reveal media bias through selection and omission Al-Nawawi & Iskander, (2002).

Results and Findings

This section presents a detailed comparative analysis of how CNN and Al Jazeera framed the humanitarian crisis in Gaza between October - November, 2023. Using Entman's (1993) four-frame model and qualitative tone and thematic coding, results are organized by outlet and then comparatively.



CNN Coverage Analysis

CNN's reporting showed a mixed tone but leaned toward institutional framing. The network often quoted official sources such as the UN, WHO, and Israeli government, focusing on diplomacy, aid negotiations, and civilian displacement. While humanitarian suffering was reported, it was frequently framed within broader political contexts.

Table 1

Thematic and Tonal Breakdown – CNN (n = 15)

Article Focus	Dominant Theme	Tone	Key Vocabulary	Primary Sources
Aid blockade and water shortages	Humanitarian Access	Negative	siege, blockade, cut-off	UN, Israeli officials
Diplomatic engagement	Ceasefire Efforts	Positive	ceasefire, diplomatic push	US State Dept, UN
UNRWA shelter overcrowding	Shelter Crisis	Negative	overwhelmed, risk, displacement	UNRWA, OCHA
Hospital collapse reports	Health Emergency	Negative	overwhelmed, crumbling	WHO, Doctors
Rafah crossing operations	Border Movement	Natural	movement, coordination	UN, Egyptian authorities
UNICEF on disease outbreak	Public Health Risk	Negative	unsanitary, outbreak	UNICEF, WHO
Aid trucks from Egypt	Humanitarian Relief	Positive	relief convoy, assistance	Red Crescent, UN
Ceasefire talks with Qatar, UAE	Political Negotiations	Positive	diplomacy, efforts, de-escalation	Gulf States, UN
Collapsing sanitation in Gaza	Infrastructure Failure	Negative	sewage, contamination	UN, Gaza health officials
Children's suffering in hospitals	Civilian Impact	Negative	starvation, untreated	Hospital directors
Mental health issues in Gaza	Psychological Trauma	Negative	trauma, stress	NGOs, survivors
Education collapse	Education Disruption	Negative	no school, destroyed classrooms	UNICEF, UNRWA
UN appeal for humanitarian funding	International Response	Natural	urgent aid, appeal	UN OCHA
Fuel shortages affecting hospitals	Operational Breakdown	Negative	blackout, emergency	WHO, local staff
Israel–Hamas truce efforts	Peace Dialogue	Natural	truce, negotiation	Israeli officials, UN

According to the results in above mentioned table there are CNN maintained a balanced tone (5 natural, 3 positives, 7 negative). Emotional vocabulary was limited, and framing often emphasized institutional voices and diplomacy, reflecting an international policy-oriented narrative Huang & Fahmy (2013).

Al Jazeera Coverage Analysis

Al Jazeera's coverage was more emotionally intense and morally assertive. Articles focused heavily on civilian casualties, infrastructure collapse, and direct condemnation of Israeli actions. Civilian sources and humanitarian workers were frequently quoted, reinforcing ground-level narratives'


Table 2
Thematic and Tonal Breakdown – Al Jazeera (n = 15)

Article Focus	Dominant Theme	Tone	Key Vocabulary	Primary Sources
Gaza's overall crisis	Humanitarian Catastrophe	Negative	catastrophe, mass suffering	UN, civilians
Bombings on hospitals and shelters	Civilian Infrastructure Loss	Negative	war crimes, bombardment	Doctors, NGOs
Fuel and water shortages	Resource Starvation	Negative	no water, fuel crisis	Gaza health ministry, civilians
Mental trauma of children and families	Psychological Toll	Negative	trauma, PTSD	Field psychologists, UN
Education under siege	Systemic Disruption	Negative	school shutdown, future ruined	UNRWA, UNICEF
Blocked aid convoys	Political Obstruction	Negative	denied, starvation tactic	UN, aid workers
Alleged war crimes coverage	Legal Violations	Negative	war crimes, violation of IHL	UNHRC, Human Rights Watch
Lack of safe zones in Gaza	Displacement Crisis	Negative	trapped, no escape	Civilians, local NGOs
Economic collapse	Economic Devastation	Negative	unemployment, destroyed markets	Local economists, journalists
Visual gallery of destruction	Human Impact	Negative	lifeless bodies, ruins	Photojournalists
Focus on women and children's deaths	Victim-Centric Framing	Negative	massacred, buried alive	Families, hospitals
Truce failure analysis	Political Failure	Natural	broken truce, fragile diplomacy	Regional observers, UN
Ceasefire call and international appeal	Moral Advocacy	Positive	justice, demand ceasefire	Amnesty Intl., UN
Disease outbreak in camps	Health Crisis	Negative	cholera, infections	WHO, Gaza officials
Civilian pleas to international bodies	Accountability Appeal	Positive	dignity, protection, humanity	Displaced civilians

The results show in table 2 that Al Jazeera used a predominantly negative tone (11 negative, 2 positive, 2 neutral), often invoking strong emotional and moral language. Coverage favoured civilian voices and moral framing, aligning with advocacy journalism practices El-Nawawy & Iskandar (2002).

Comparative Analysis

Table 3
CNN vs. Al Jazeera – Comparative Framing Overview

Category	CNN	Al Jazeera
Tone Distribution	5 Natural, 3 Positive, 7 Negative	2 Natural, 2 Positive, 11 Negative
Framing Style	Diplomatic, Institutional	Humanitarian, Advocacy
Primary Themes	Aid, Ceasefire, Health Systems	Civilian Suffering, War Crimes
Source Preference	UN, WHO, State Officials	Civilians, NGOs, Local Officials
Vocabulary	crisis, diplomacy, escalation	siege, genocide, starvation
Bias Type	Institutional Bias	Emotional/Advocacy Bias

CNN shows institutional bias, characterized by reliance on official sources and a neutral-diplomatic tone. This reflects framing through the lens of geopolitical actors and global governance institutions (Herman



& Chomsky, 2002). Al Jazeera exhibits emotional and advocacy bias, often framing the crisis in morally urgent and highly emotive language, centered around victims and international humanitarian violations (Kenix, 2011; El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002).

These findings support Entman's (1993) view that framing choices are shaped not just by events, but also by editorial policies and audience expectations. Apart from tone and thematic divergence, the analysis identified major differences in coverage focus within the two outlets. Al Jazeera reporting was dominated by the suffering of civilians, with a great deal of reporting on casualties, displacement, and destruction of infrastructure: hospitals, schools, etc. The framing referred to victimhood, especially women and children, commonly including emotionally coloured language and moral references. On the other hand, the reports on CNN did not completely avoid civilian impact but tended more towards diplomatic activity, aid logistics, and official statements, which at times mapped civilian harm as collateral to wider military or political operations. The difference implies that Al Jazeera found top billing while CNN conveyed events within an institutional and military framework, a tendency that highlights the editorial posturing and target audience of the networks.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal a clear disparity in how international media outlets present the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Applying the framework of Entman's (1993) theory, it appears that CNN and Al Jazeera operate under two paradigms of conflict reporting one institutional and neutral, and the other emotional and activist.

CNN's reliance on authoritative sources, measured language, and emphasis on diplomatic measures is consistent with what Herman and Chomsky (2002) observed in their propaganda model: the tendency of Western media to reflect elite bargaining and policy objectives. While such an approach may create the illusion of balance or objectivity, it would ignore the human cost of war by prioritizing institutional voices over those most affected.

In contrast, Al Jazeera's journalism is more confrontational in tone but morally sound. By emphasizing the plight of non-combatants, especially women and children, and by using emotive language, Al Jazeera's journalism is consistent with the principles of advocacy journalism (Al-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002; Kenks, 2011). Such a strategy goes beyond simply disseminating information. It seeks to inspire empathy and, potentially, action.

These framing differences are important. They help the public cope with the crisis, influence international public opinion, and immediately affect the sense of urgency with which humanitarian intervention is initiated. Previous studies have confirmed that framing choices can generate public sympathy or, conversely, personalize suffering by placing it in diplomatic or strategic frames (Huang & Fahmy, 2013). One of the most interesting observations is that the two media outlets, reporting on the same conflict, offer fundamentally different representations that are in line with their respective editorial philosophies and audience expectations. The choices within their editorial processes carry heavy moral responsibilities, especially for humanitarian crises, where the stakes include not only public opinion but also the potential for international advocacy, aid, and intervention.

Limitations

This study is important to add to the body of research on media framing of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. However, some limitations must be noted. First, the analysis was limited to 30 English-language articles from CNN and Al Jazeera over one month. Although this was a time frame that covered the peak intensity of the conflict, it may not reflect long-term trends. Second, tone classification and theme coding, while drawing on previous literature; inevitably involve some degree of subjectivity. While cross-validation attempts were made, the results could have been improved by including coder triangulation or inter-coder reliability checks. Third, the study was limited to text-based features only, leaving out visual structuring features such as images and videos, although these play an important role in audience perception during a humanitarian crisis. Finally, the limitation of English-language articles may exclude important narratives conveyed by Arabic versions, especially Al Jazeera.

Conclusion

This work finds that Al Jazeera and CNN use different lenses in framing a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.



Al Jazeera focuses on human suffering and moral necessity, where, as a rule, it uses emotionally provocative language and quotes local victims and NGOs. By contrast, CNN offers more institutionally screened coverage based on the official narratives and with a more neutral voice.

These variations indicate editorial ideology, geopolitical affiliation, and target audience expectations as principal drivers behind media bias in conflict coverage. The study supports the notion that, besides selection and emphasis, media framing is also about who gets heard and who does not.

Ultimately, acknowledging these differences in narrative is beyond academic interest. It is needed to promote ethical reporting, facilitate informed international exchange, and shape compassionate public responses in times of crisis.

Recommendations

For Researchers: Future research could benefit from computational methods for visual structure, cross-linguistic research, or more detailed linguistic research. Incorporating visual content: images, videos, or infographics can also enhance framing research and offer a closer analysis of affective and symbolic messaging.

For Journalists: A more balanced integration of local voices with institutional narratives may enhance the credibility and completeness of conflict reporting.

For media consumers, awareness of framing bias is essential; comparing multiple outlets can offer a fuller picture of complex crises like Gaza.

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