

Silencing the First Draft of History: The Deadly Impact on Journalists and Media Bias in the Gaza Conflict

So, what happens when that “first draft of history” is physically erased?

By Oosheen Yadav



Student protest at Hofstra University

The old adage that “journalism is the first draft of history” has been repeated hundreds of times, and points to the importance that a democratic society like ours places on the free flow of unfiltered information coming from a viable, functioning press corps, especially during times of crisis.

Journalists play a pivotal role in providing the public with a clear understanding of the important events of the day, locally, nationally and on a global level. When that flow of

information is stunted or suppressed, it becomes that much more difficult to have an informed public.

So, what happens when that “first draft of history” is physically erased?

In the case of the ongoing war in Gaza, this is exactly what has many human rights advocates, media critics, and Muslim community members concerned. To some of these observers, the crisis facing journalists in Gaza today is connected to a longer pattern of problematic news coverage of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims in general in the U.S. press, resulting in a general misrepresentation of their experiences, their culture and their role in U.S. society.

As of late May, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ, at least 105 journalists have been killed since the war began on October 7th. There have been more than 35,000 Palestinians killed in Gaza and the West Bank since Israel launched its military response to the deadly surprise attack by Hamas that killed over 1,200 Israelis.

The concerns of CPJ were first expressed in a statement issued on Nov. 9, 2023, when the group highlighted the deadly impact on journalists and called for an end to the violence.

"Since the Israel-Gaza war began, journalists have been paying the highest price—their lives—to defend our right to the truth," said Carlos Martínez de la Serna, program director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), in an email response to my inquiry. "Each time a journalist dies or is injured, we lose a fragment of that truth. Journalists are civilians protected by international humanitarian law in times of conflict."

In his response, Martinez extended the “journalism as history” metaphor, stating “those responsible for their deaths face dual trials: one under international law and another before history’s unforgiving gaze."

The CPJ, which tracks the deaths of journalists, stated that the war in Gaza is the deadliest conflict for reporters since it began its records in 1992.

Moreover, according to [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#), the deadliest period for the media was the initial three months starting October 7, with nearly 80% of the deaths occurring then, averaging almost one journalist per day. RSF has escalated these incidents to the International Criminal Court, citing deliberate attacks on journalists and their homes. The constant threat faced by media personnel has been highlighted by RSF correspondent Ola al-Zaanoun, emphasizing the “omnipresent danger of death” that has loomed since early October.

Journalists worldwide have rallied to support their Gazan colleagues, emphasizing their critical role in illuminating the realities of the conflict. They have criticized Western media for perpetuating dehumanizing rhetoric and failing to hold Israel accountable. Around 1,200 journalists signed a letter last Fall urging precise and truthful reporting, warning that failure to do so risks complicity in genocide.

For Muslim scholars and activists, the silencing of reporting from Gaza is not unlike the misinformed coverage we see regularly in the news media.

A study in [Communication Research](#) indicated that Muslims and Arabs are frequently depicted as violent terrorists in the media, which has led to increased negative attitudes toward these groups. The [University of Chicago Press](#) highlighted the significant role of news media in shaping public attitudes and generating stereotypes. Scholars noted that media often frame minority groups negatively, reinforcing societal biases. Representations of Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims have been linked to violence and terrorism, especially post-9/11, contributing to harmful policies and stereotypes.

During a panel discussion at Hofstra University on March 6, 2024, Dr. Sahar Azim, a professor of law and chancellor’s social justice scholar at Rutgers University, said, “The media portrayed Islam and Muslims exclusively through a terrorism lens, which legitimates and validates that racial frame.”

Dr. Abdus-Salaam Musa, co-founder of the South East Queens Muslim Collective, noted that immigrant Muslim communities have historically been insular, leading to a lack of understanding of Islam among the broader Judeo-Christian society. Dr. Musa criticized the media for their unclear reporting on Islamic issues, stating, “The lack of clarity in media reporting on Islamic issues contributes to a lack of understanding.”

Politicians have also been criticized for spreading Islamophobia. Dr. Azim's recent analysis highlighted entrenched biases in political and judicial systems regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict and counterterrorism issues. She criticized elected officials for leveraging Islamophobia for political gain, mirroring post-9/11 counterterrorism efforts that disproportionately targeted Muslims.

“We started to become very concerned about informants infiltrating our mosques, a fact that was confirmed by multiple media reports. Over time, it began to feel as though the government was scrutinizing us,” said Dr. Aziz. “It didn’t take long before the public got kind of this green light: that it’s okay to suspect Muslims, and it’s okay to harass them. That was patriotic because that’s what a good citizen does. And then, we would start having this; it was all in the news. But this is ironic: the farther away we got from 9/11, the more we started to remember.”

The FBI's surveillance practices, particularly involving Muslim communities, have faced scrutiny. Craig Monteilh, [a confidential informant](#), infiltrated a large mosque in Southern California for 14 months, gathering information on hundreds of individuals.

Yassin Aref, an Iraqi Muslim man, spent [15 years in prison](#) after being targeted in a post-9/11 crackdown. Arrested in 2004 on conspiracy charges in an FBI sting operation, his conviction, based on secret evidence, was influenced by a generalised fear of Muslims, with the judge telling the jury the FBI had good reasons for targeting him. Aref's case drew criticism from the American Civil Liberties Union and other critics of post-9/11 counterterrorism policies. Deported to the Kurdish region of northern Iraq in 2019 after his release, Aref reflects on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 as a reminder of his lost years.

The CPJ coalition's criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza and the examination of media portrayals of Muslims and Arabs highlight the broader challenges faced by journalists and minority communities. As the conflict persists, demands for accurate and responsible reporting intensify, stressing the need for accountability in media and politics. The deaths of journalists in Gaza underscore the high risks associated with reporting the truth and the lasting impact of biased narratives on public perception and policy.

