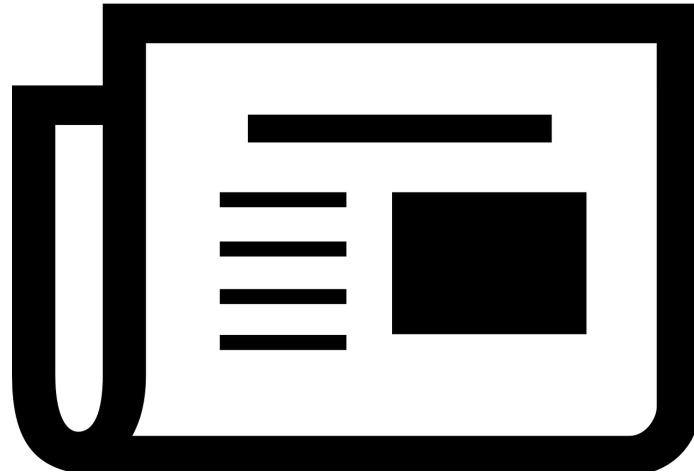


AMERICAN NEWS BIAS



CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICAN NEWS COVERAGE THROUGH THE EVENTS OF THE 2006 LEBANON WAR

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The 2006 Lebanon War, a 34-day long conflict between Lebanon and Israel, was extensively covered by the international press. However, two different narratives predominated the coverage. This paper juxtaposes the different narratives by American and Arabic media outlets, and argues that American media, although considered the freest in the world, actually censors itself through a process known as “the tyranny of the majority.” The implications of this self-censorship demonstrate larger problematic societal perceptions when it comes to understanding the Middle East.

The 2006 Lebanon War caught the world's attention and caused news outlets to produce hours of coverage of the event for audiences back home. However, the drastically different narratives of these incidents offered two opposite perceptions of what happened during the month-long conflict. On one hand, there is the story of a victimized Israeli nation defending herself against terrorists. On the other hand, there's a narrative portraying Israel as the perpetrator and oppressor of innocent Arabs. The American news coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War sheds light on the true nature of American media bias and the unintended consequences that follow it.

Since the integration of media into society, coverage of major news events around the world has played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of how humans and communities interact. While it is widely accepted that news coverage around the world does present local and regional biases in the shared information, the impact and consequences of the American media coverage of an event as small as the 2006 Lebanon War is a minuscule window to a broader issue plaguing American society at the moment. The media outlets' parallel viewpoint with the American government can be illuminated by applying a principle called the "tyranny of the majority." Developed by 19th-century French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, the idea behind this concept is that public opinion would become an all-powerful force, with the majority tyrannizing unpopular minorities and marginalized individuals.

Tocqueville even goes so far as to say that there is less freedom of discussion and independence of mind in America than in Europe (De Tocqueville 204-213). But before delving into the juxtaposed narrative, it is important to understand the facts of the 2006 Lebanon War and the historical context of some diplomatic relations in the Middle East.

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah launched a missile attack against Israel border towns as a diversion for an anti-tank attack on two armored Israeli patrol vehicles. Two of the seven Israeli soldiers were captured, and the others were wounded or killed. After a failed rescue attempt, the Israeli Defense Forces quickly retaliated and responded with massive airstrikes and artillery fire, ultimately leading to a 34-day long

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war. It led to the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the death of many Lebanese civilians, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. The conflict ended with a United Nations-brokered ceasefire on August 14, 2006, although the war formally ended on September 8, 2006, when Israel lifted its naval blockade of Lebanon (Kalb and Saivetz 43-66).

Known as a militant, secretive, and religiously fundamentalist sect, Hezbollah, which stands for the "Party of God," rose to prominence in Lebanon in 1982 during its civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990 ("Hezbollah").

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Members of the Hezbollah party are predominantly Shia Muslims and have historically worked closely with Iran, the most powerful and largest Shia majority country in the region. They are known for engaging in alleged terrorist attacks, including kidnappings and car bombings. In 1990, following the end of the civil war, the militant group gained access to the country's political power after an arrangement was approved. Although the group's original manifesto called for resistance against the newly formed state of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic republic within Lebanon, it dropped the latter after the 2006 war, affirming as its ideal government a democracy representing national unity. Hezbollah has been considered a terrorist group by the U.S. Department of State since October 1997 ("Hezbollah | Meaning, History, & Ideology"). Hezbollah was also one of the first Arab militias to have fought the IDF to a standstill, making them heroes throughout the Arab world (Chadwick). This regional perception of Hezbollah is further acknowledged in a later discussion of regional coverage of the events.

The state of Israel, proclaimed on May 14, 1948, following the United Nations' Resolution 181, allowed for the split of land in Palestine between a Jewish and Arab State. Although the Jews agreed to the deal, the Palestinians did not. Following the creation of the new state of Israel, five Arab armies invaded the territory in response to the resolution, which many Arab countries saw as unfair to the Palestinians now

forced to live under Jewish rule. The war ended with an armistice in 1949 with Israel gaining some of the territory originally promised to the Palestinians under Resolution 181. Egypt and Jordan retained control over Gaza and the West Bank respectively and the armistice lines held until 1967 ("The Arab-Israeli War of 1948").

Today, many countries in the Arab region have weak or non-existent ties with the state of Israel, which is not recognized by many as a sovereign state. For example, the state of Israel does not have a representative in the League of Arab States; that seat is instead given to the state of Palestine. Alone among its Arab counterparts, Israel quickly established close ties with the United States in the 1970s. The United States was one of the first states to recognize Israel as a newly formed country under President Harry Truman. There is immense support from the U.S. toward Israel, especially in terms of financial support and diplomatic backing (Collins). During a speech to Israel's parliament, former President George W. Bush stated that "Israel's population may be just over seven million. But when you confront terror and evil, you are 307 million strong because the United States of America stands with you" ("President Bush Addresses Members of the Knesset," 2008).

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are blurred. As a result of this portrayal, there was an increase in American hostility towards Arab identity and its many cultural aspects, blending the complex and rich history of the region into a uniform, inaccurate portrait of the Middle East (Alsultany 161-169). In the United States, it is not uncommon to place all Middle Eastern culture under the same umbrella – that all Arabs are Muslims and therefore are all terrorists. It is often forgotten that there are Christian Arabs, Palestinian Jews, and Jewish communities in predominantly Muslim countries in North Africa.

As the hegemon of news coverage around the world, the United States prides itself on having the “freest” media in the world. However, the American media has experienced a constant need for immediacy and a seemingly growing polarization of reporting that has limited the alternative perspectives available to American audiences. In American news coverage, new viewpoints are not informatively introduced; instead, the current societal viewpoints are reaffirmed. Although this trend can be seen in other national media, it is very prevalent in American media and carries many visible consequences. Because the content presented aligns comfortably with American society’s viewpoints, it is widely accepted globally and, unfortunately, people are left to create their own opinions and understanding of the events based on dubious facts (Collins).

Local television, which is preferred by Americans in contrast to national television reporting, presents a unique market that forces reporters to work with more limited coverage time, smaller budgets, and market influencers when compared to the national television news. However, it is important to understand that local news outlets rely on footage from their networks or wire services.

For example, in prepackaged daily reports made by ABC to its affiliates in 2006, footage included images of the battlefield, statements from the Israeli foreign minister and a State Department official, as well as speeches from the United Nations. Generally, most local editors leaned towards the position of U.S. authorities, ensuring an undisputed coverage of foreign events (Cavari and Gabay).

Previous research done by Ammon Cavari and Itay Gabay on the differences in the coverage of an Israeli strike on Beirut, July 20, 2006, by a national network and local network support this idea of disproportionate coverage. The ABC network reported on the disproportionate Israeli actions while the local affiliate in Chicago emphasized Israel’s right to self-defense. The vastly different reporting of the same event means each respective audience absorbed different information and formed different viewpoints of the same event. Because local television tends to align with the U.S. government’s viewpoints, their coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War portrays the conflict as Hezbollah attacks and fully supports Israel’s work at total disarmament of Hezbollah (Cavari and Gabay). This type of coverage is in line with the U.S. government’s longstanding support for Israel, particularly in this conflict. Rather than presenting the various and complex narratives of the war, the American media has chosen to stick to the viewpoint shared with the government and widely accepted by American society. Due to this drastically different coverage, local news that favored Israel, portrayed their actions against Lebanon as justified and normalized the aggressiveness. A small majority of network news defined the issue as Israeli aggressiveness, projecting a slightly more balanced view (Cavari and Gabay).

However, when looking at the coverage of the same conflict through the eyes of a different media market, the painted story of the conflict is not the same. Over the last decade, major Arab news networks have grown their audience in the region and have established themselves as the big players in information distribution. Because they operate so close to the issue in comparison to American media, Arabic news outlets have offered a different narrative through their coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War, more in line with opinions and sentiments proper to the region. Another major reason the viewpoints presented to the Arab world were different was that Arabs no longer had to receive their information from Western media, relying instead on local networks which were established as Arab news networks grew. By 2005, there were 150 Arab satellite channels (Fontana).

By informing their population through more regional lenses, the content presented by those news outlets reflects the opinions and feelings of the local population. Therefore, the influence of the Western narrative of Israel is reduced (Fontana). In this case, the growth of Arab networks has created a new narrative when it comes to news coverage in the Middle East. Locals are getting reports from people in the region and are being informed by experts from their region rather than having to accept Western coverage as accurate and the only source of information available.

For example, look at the coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War by Asharq Al-Awsat, one of two Arabic-language

newspapers published in London and distributed throughout the Middle East. During their July 13 to August 16 coverage, 24 photographs were printed on the front page relating to the war and all but two showed the death and destruction caused by Israeli attacks in Lebanon. This portrayed Israel as the sole aggressor and shows, in the context of Middle East journalism and history, that Arabs have a prejudice against Israel. By focusing their coverage on the destruction caused by Israel and ignoring the actions of Hezbollah, Asharq Al-Awsat aligned itself with the feelings of its readers who sympathized with their Arab brothers under Israeli fire (Kalb and Saivetz 43-66). This biased coverage of the events parallels the coverage of the same war by American media – both entities have chosen to tell the story that will not be questioned by its audience and that aligns with societal views of the key players in the war.

The narrative given by Arabic-language news outlets is the complete opposite of the coverage done by American news outlets, being more in line with Arab perceptions of the facts. While the latter saw the IDF attacks as a right to self-defense, the Arab population, particularly the Lebanese population in the zone of conflict and abroad, saw the IDF attacks, which were backed and funded by the U.S., as the Bush Administration's final attempt at abolishing Hezbollah (Fadda-Conrey 159-173). Again, the crucial role the regional politics, dynamics, and history play in shaping the information given out to the mass audiences is evident.

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The coverage of the international conflicts by various media in the United States and the Middle East reflects the regional biases and history of relationships with the parties involved. While this is well-known, the underlying consequences of the coverage of the conflict by American media go beyond giving out biased information. American media shapes the perceptions and ideas society has about the reason for events and is but a piece in an endless cycle where the majority opinion shapes those same ideas and limits the flow of discussion.

The misconceptions about this region of the world have even spilled over into U.S. policies. In January 2017, President Trump signed Executive Order 13769, barring entry into the U.S. for individuals from countries like Iran, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan, while also suspending entry of refugees from that part of the world for an indefinite amount of time. The administration claims that the executive order was signed to limit terrorists from the countries involved in the 9/11 attacks from entering. However, none of the countries on the list provided terrorists towards the World Trade Center attacks. The countries which did participate in the attacks (Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates) and countries with which the Trump business and administration worked with or are currently working with (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia) were omitted from the list (Torbati et al.).

The attitude of Americans toward the portrayal of world events in the Middle East is unique. Consider European censorship laws, for example. In December 2019, the French Parliament passed a new law declaring anti-Zionism a criminal offense on the same level as anti-Semitism. Critiques of the bill claim it is a direct attack on freedom of

expression in the country. The U.S. does not have any laws similar to this; in fact, the U.S. prides itself on allowing the greatest amount of speech and encourages healthy dialogue among the different opinions of individuals. However, the consequences of vocalizing opinions that diverge from the majority are much more drastic. As Tocqueville explains it, the “tyranny of the majority” forces those who do not align their views with the majority to engage in self-censorship and self-silencing. For fear of being mislabeled or exiled by their community for voicing an opinion that challenges what the majority believes and has dictated is correct, many Americans keep their thoughts to themselves, taking away from the healthy, democratic dialogue that is expected. Unlike the French, the U.S. does not have laws banning anti-Zionist ideas; however, those ideas are often linked to being anti-Semitic, forcing people to not fully share their thoughts, naturally censoring ideas and opinions without ever implementing any laws. This self-censorship is a direct example of the “tyranny of the majority.”

The local American coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War often aligned itself with the majority responses of the U.S. population. By aligning themselves with the majority, the media outlets were, therefore, presenting an uncontested narrative to their audience. Regardless if it’s voluntarily or involuntarily, the news coverage of the conflict coming from the U.S. followed the majority opinion on the actors in the conflict. Whether the whole U.S. agreed to it, the moral of the story for many viewers was that Israel was defending itself against the aggression from the terrorist group Hezbollah and did not acknowledge the different narratives that were taking place in this complex conflict.

While there was some condemnation toward the damage

done by the IDF on Lebanese civilians, the U.S. government's agenda is the narrative that ended up marking the targeted American audience. To this day, the impact of this "tyranny of the majority" in our perceptions of issues in the Middle East and who the U.S. needs to align itself with is clear to see. Israel is and has been a big ally to America and many of the recent foreign policies of the current administration reflect that ("U.S. Relations With Israel.").

The American news coverage of the 2006 summer war between Lebanon's Hezbollah and the state of Israel, heavily shaped by the politics and dynamics between the U.S. and Israel as well as its societal perceptions of the regions, mirrors the greater issues in U.S. society and the impact news bias has on the information absorbed by viewers. While it is easy to acknowledge that all media is, in fact, biased, the American news networks' far-reaching consequences are apparent today, more than ever. The misperceptions perpetuated in the media about the region's conflicts and culture have shaped the American audience's views of the Middle East, which then impacts the news coverage of the media, pushing the U.S. into a perpetual cycle of misinformation, where the majority opinion rules and all opinions against the standard are dismissed and attacked.

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