

What we should expect from wartime reporting

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Simple narratives make the best stories. The most popular books and movies tell tales of good vs. evil, hardworking vs. lazy, lawful vs. the criminal. Not surprisingly, the wartime reporting around Russia's invasion of Ukraine has adopted similar themes. Perhaps rightly, much of the media have portrayed Ukraine's resistance fighters as heroic, their leaders stoic. As for Putin and the Russian army, most reports make them sound villainous and robotic.

The outpouring of support for Ukraine among populations in the West and elsewhere has been astounding. But while the West's political leaders have played a role, it is foremost the media which have painted the extremely sympathetic portrayal of Ukrainian resistance and resilience. Such a supportive media posture for Ukraine may be appropriate, but its sudden appearance is conspicuous, and it has been absent in the reporting from other conflict zones around the world.

People familiar with mainstream media's treatment of other conflicts have not missed the irony. In his piece, "On Watching Ukraine Through Palestinian Eyes," Yousef Munnayer wonders why the New York Times glorifies the Ukrainian use of Molotov cocktails in professionally produced videos. But the Times is just one of dozens of media outlets which has presented this and other stories of Ukrainian resistance in heroic terms in recent weeks.

In contrast, one is hard-pressed to find any media articles about 15-year-old Palestinian Yamen Nafez Mahmoud Khanafseh. Khanafseh was shot dead on March 6 near Abu Dis—in the Israeli-occupied West Bank—by an Israel occupation soldier. An Israeli military statement suggested that Yamen was shot because he was throwing Molotov cocktails. Not one Canadian outlet reported on Khanafseh's death, even though he was one of three Palestinian children killed by Israeli forces within a three-week period. Of course, if there had been an article, it likely wouldn't have portrayed Khanafseh as a freedom fighter.

Reporters have grappled with questions of "objectivity" and "balance" since journalism was first professionalized. The late veteran Middle East war journalist Robert Fisk was disgusted by suggestions that "balanced" reporting required journalists to give equal time to each side. Said Fisk, "My feeling is, you must be neutral and unbiased, but unbiased on the side of those who suffer."

So perhaps it is right for the media to give greater focus to embattled Ukrainian civilians resisting a Russian occupation army. But if so, the same would be true of Iraqis facing an invading Anglo-American occupation army, or Palestinian civilians facing an Israeli

occupation army. But all too often, if they're even profiled, such protagonists are presented in a neutral or negative light by Western media. Worse, the media often adopt the language of the occupier, and use terms like "terrorist" and other pejorative labels.

This leads to a second observation on Western war reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine: it is extremely skeptical of the assertions of the aggressor. Many of Putin's claims about his country's invasion of Ukraine seem extremely far-fetched. On the day he launched his invasion, Putin challenged Ukraine's very legitimacy as a nation. He also positioned the war's objective as being defensive, seeking merely the "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine." As the fighting progressed and Ukrainian civilian deaths mounted, Russia's excuse was that, "Ukraine's Armed Forces and neo-Nazis use civilians as human shields, deploy weapons in residential areas."

Western media *should* be reluctant to give credibility to such Russian claims, but such skepticism must also be applied in other conflicts. Many consider the media to have given the US a free ride with its campaigns in Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan. Of course, mainstream media rarely even bother to report from Yemen, where Saudi airstrikes are notorious for their civilian toll. And Israeli statements about airstrikes on Gaza are reported unquestioningly by Western media, and are off the media radar when they're debunked months later by human rights organizations.

Of course, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel often justify their own aggressions and civilian casualties with language similar to Putin's: e.g. "defensive wars," "demilitarizing," "human shields" and similar tropes about getting the 'bad guys.' As they've done recently with Russia, will Western media apply a more critical lens to such assertions moving forward?

Another telling development is mainstream media's recent insistence on using Ukraine's preferred spelling and pronunciation—Kyiv—for its capital. Seems fair enough. A CBC article cites an expert who encourages this shift as a "small choice one can do in recognition that Ukraine does have the right to exist as an independent nation." But in contrast, CBC has gone so far as to give an on-air apology when one of its commentators 'mistakenly' used the word "Palestine" when speaking to the author of a book entitled—you guessed it—*Palestine*. The CBC usage guide currently bans on-air use of the term "Palestine" arguing, "There is no modern country of Palestine."

The media's treatment of Israel-Palestine is unique among conflicts, and Fisk himself decried the media's euphemistic language around it. In one example, Fisk observed, "Journalists refer to the Israeli wall separating the West Bank as a 'security fence,' because they don't want to offend the Israelis and Israel's supporters by calling it a wall, even though it is higher and longer than the Berlin Wall." Fisk explained the phenomenon as a result of media ownership partial to Israel.

In a piece about media objectivity, Chris Hedges wrote, “[T]he creed of objectivity becomes a convenient and profitable vehicle to avoid confronting unpleasant truths or angering a power structure on which news organizations depend for access and profits.” Clearly, the media’s reporting on conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and elsewhere have fallen prey to this “creed of objectivity.”

Of course, Hedge’s observation about “objectivity” can take many different forms. Just as media owners can exert pressure to overlook or euphemize issues, they can also exert pressure to create momentum or sympathy around an issue. Or they can simply decide not to report developments that don’t fit the preferred narrative. On Friday March 11, for example, the European Union’s foreign policy chief Josep Borrell admitted that NATO had made a mistake in offering membership to Ukraine and Georgia. Only Russian media and a few alternative media seem to have noticed.

Recent coverage of global conflict reminds us of the inherent vulnerabilities of our media institutions. We should engage intelligently and skeptically with wartime media, knowing that it can easily galvanize us to action, or harden our hearts with indifference. We must hope that, despite such dangers, a few experienced journalists can still manage to find the right balance, and if unsure, to be “unbiased on the side of those who suffer.”