

CNN whistleblowers expose systematic bias in Gaza war reporting

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CNN journalists shared sensitive materials with a rival news outlet, the British-based newspaper *The Guardian*, in an effort to expose persistent institutional bias in CNN’s Israel-Palestine coverage, particularly since the outbreak of the genocidal Israeli onslaught in October. Staffers revealed how even outlandish Israeli government propaganda gets rubber-stamped for broadcast, while the experiences of the Palestinians get systematically skewed or buried.

Half a dozen CNN staffers came forward, providing interviews and documents, to expose what one called “systematic and institutional bias within the network toward Israel” that “amounts to journalistic malpractice.” The extraordinary revelations detail how senior CNN officials dictated what could be reported and how, reassigned staff based on political conformity rather than expertise, and provided the Israeli government and military effective editorial control.

The six whistleblowers came from various CNN newsrooms, divisions and continents, indicating disaffection is widespread. “Senior staffers who disagree with the status quo are butting heads with the executives giving orders, questioning how we can effectively tell the story with such restrictive directives in place,” one said. “Some people are looking to get out.”

These executive diktats start at the top of the organization. Mark Thompson, chairman, CEO, and editor-in-chief of CNN Worldwide, set the tone in a broadly distributed memo, writing, “we must continue always to remind our audiences of the immediate cause of *this current conflict*, namely the Hamas attack and mass murder and kidnap of civilians” (italics in the original).

One whistleblower reflected, “How else are editors going to read that other than as an instruction that no matter what the Israelis do, Hamas is ultimately to blame? Every action by Israel—dropping massive bombs that wipe out entire streets, its obliteration of whole families—the coverage ends up massaged to create a ‘they had it coming’ narrative.”

This “big lie”—that the conflict began with an unprovoked attack and no antecedent history bears relevance—follows the same script used to vilify Russia as the sole aggressor in the NATO-led proxy war in Ukraine. Events such as the US-German-backed Maidan coup in 2014, the eight-year civil war leaving thousands dead, and the year-long impeachment of

Donald Trump for withholding arms shipments to Ukraine are wiped from memory, and the media resets the timeline of the conflict to Russia’s reactionary invasion in February 2022.

In another damning admission, a CNN employee drew out precisely this parallel: “The complacency in our editorial standards and journalistic integrity while reporting on Ukraine has come back to haunt us. Only this time, the stakes are higher and the consequences much more severe.” Or in other words, CNN editors got away with biased coverage of Russia for two years and thought they could follow the same formula in Gaza. Unfortunately for them, memories are stubbornly long regarding Israel’s mistreatment of the Palestinians.

Another tried-and-true method of editorial coercion deployed at CNN is to place individuals in key decision-making roles based on their agreement with, or least acquiescence to, the agency’s political line. “It is clear that some who don’t belong are covering the war and some who do belong aren’t,” said one journalist.

“The system results in chosen individuals editing any and all reporting with an institutionalized pro-Israel bias, often using passive language to absolve the [Israel Defense Forces] of responsibility, and playing down Palestinian deaths and Israeli attacks,” said another.

The network has gone so far as to require all reporting on Israel-Palestine, no matter where it originates, to pass through the Jerusalem bureau, whose relationship with the Israeli government and military—the principal subjects of their reporting—is so ethically compromised that it resembles that of a PR firm and a client they are trying to retain.

That is how the outrageous story of Hamas combatants committing ISIS-style beheadings—of 40 babies, no less—was allowed to air. As one of the insiders recounts, “The infamous ‘beheaded babies’ claim, attributed to the Israeli government, made it to air for roughly 18 hours—even after the White House walked back on Biden’s statement that he had seen the nonexistent photos. CNN had no access to photographic evidence, nor any ability to independently verify these claims.” One need look no further for evidence of journalistic malpractice.

CNN and other major news outlets have repeated breathless, unsubstantiated Israeli claims throughout this genocidal war,

notable among them the supposed vast underground command center beneath Al-Shifa Hospital, and the claim that the precision bombing massacre of 500 civilians at Al-Ahli Arab Baptist Hospital was to be blamed on the Palestinians themselves.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time:

An Israel Defense Forces (IDF) spokesman told CNN that Israel had “intercepted conversations” revealing that “they understand that it was a rocket that misfired.” This reference to “intercepted conversations” immediately recalls Colin Powell’s infamous 2003 speech before the UN, where he trumpeted “intercepted communications” as proving the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

While editors green-light unsubstantiated claims by the Israeli government and military, journalists are barred from interviewing or even quoting officials in Palestine. David Lindsay, CNN senior director of news standards and practices, described Hamas statements as “inflammatory rhetoric and propaganda” and “not newsworthy,” in a November memo. He directed news staff: “We should be careful not to give it a platform.”

One CNN employee said, “It’s OK for us to be embedded with the IDF, producing reports censored by the army, but we cannot talk to the organization that won a majority of the votes in Gaza whether we like it or not. CNN viewers are being prevented from hearing from a central player in this story.” They added, “We’ve interviewed Muammar Gaddafi. We’ve even interviewed Osama bin Laden. So what’s different this time?”

Moreover, Western journalists are physically barred from Gaza, where Israel has killed at least 85 journalists since October and injured dozens more, many in targeted assassinations. One of the CNN staffers said of the restrictions, “The response to our report on Gaza in Israeli media suggests an unspoken reason for denying access. When asked on air about our piece, one reporter from the Israeli Channel 13 replied, ‘If indeed Western reporters begin to enter Gaza, this will for sure be a big headache for Israel and Israeli hasbara.’ Hasbara is a Hebrew word for pro-Israel advocacy.”

CEO Mark Thompson went so far as to require that the Gaza health ministry be branded as “Hamas-controlled” any time its casualty figures are referenced, to imply they are politicized. In fact, the opposite is true: the IDF has engaged in a propaganda war, consistently making unsubstantiated claims about over- and under-inflated figures, while the Gaza health ministry has an admirable record of high-quality reportage under exceptional wartime conditions.

The ministry’s track record includes casualty reporting

during the 2008-9 and 2014 Gaza wars and 2021 Israel-Palestine crisis. Its figures have been independently confirmed and considered reliable by the United Nations, World Health Organization, Human Rights Watch and the US Department of State.

The accusation that all daily life in the tiny enclave is directed by Hamas and all its residents are in thrall politically and spiritually to the leadership of Hamas is perhaps the greatest distortion of all. “There are no innocent civilians in Gaza” is a refrain oft-repeated among Israel’s fascistic leaders.

Even if the Gazan population sympathized with Hamas politically, this would not justify their collective punishment or permit, under international law, the summary executions perpetrated by Israeli forces.

However, polling by Arab Barometer, a nonpartisan group led by US-based researchers, found in polls conducted shortly before October 7 that 67 percent of Palestinians in Gaza had little or no trust in Hamas. On issues such as the profound food scarcity, only 16 percent of Gazan residents blamed external sanctions, while twice as many blamed government (Hamas) mismanagement.

Furthermore, half of Gaza’s present population was not even born when Hamas won the 2006 parliamentary election that brought it to power, and another quarter were not of voting age. It is noteworthy that Hamas beat the ruling Fatah party by a narrow margin by denouncing the latter for acquiescing to Israeli apartheid—a perspective amply vindicated in the West Bank, where Fatah has continued to rule since.

However, these polls and historical context would not be seen as part of the “immediate cause of this current conflict,” according to CEO Thompson. CNN is not unique in its self-censorship and bias. One need only consider that before joining CNN in 2020, Thompson held the same roles at the *New York Times* for eight years and at the BBC for eight years prior to that. He has helmed some of the world’s preeminent news brands for two decades—because of his compromised ethics, not in spite of them.

This exposure underscores the critical importance of the *World Socialist Web Site* as the only independent and international publication of the working class, funded exclusively by workers—not states, foundations, corporate donors or advertisers.



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