

How bias shapes the news: Challenging The New York Times' status as a newspaper of record on the Middle East

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Abstract

This article addresses bias in the American press and shows how the inevitability of reporting from a point of view challenges the possibility of a newspaper of record on the Middle East. Examining 30 days of coverage of the Intifada, it both shows that coverage of events varied across three mainstream US newspapers - The New York Times, The Washington Post and Chicago Tribune - and demonstrates that in the case of the newspaper most often called a newspaper of record - The New York Times - coverage varied in distinct ways from other mainstream newspapers. The article thus considers how the Times reputation and influence converge with its record in creating a broader impression about the perspective of the US press on the Middle East.

US journalistic coverage of the Israel-Arab conflict has long generated competing assessments regarding its focus, tone, scope and perspective. Due in part to the complex and multifaceted nature of the conflict itself, active lobbies in both the US Jewish and Palestinian communities, and competing interests on national, international and global stages, journalistic coverage of the Middle East has rarely bypassed intense public scrutiny. Coverage of the so-called renewed Intifada, the latest round of violence between Israelis and Palestinians that began in September of 2000 and continues today, is no exception. Claims of bias and partisan reportage have been leveled by all sides to the conflict, provoking questions about journalism's role in molding public appraisals about events in this contested part of the world. The New York Times has come under particular scrutiny in this regard. Following a legacy that has asserted a distance from the passions and defined perspectives found in explicitly partisan chronicles, the Times has unevenly maintained its status as a newspaper of record against accusations of preferential reporting from both sides of the conflict.

How is it possible for one newspaper to be accused of bias by both sides of a given conflict? This study addresses that question by tracking the Times' coverage of the Intifada and comparing it with the coverage of two other mainstream newspapers. In so doing, we show that coverage of events not only varied across the three newspapers, demonstrating that the American press is not monolithic, but in the case of the newspaper most often accorded the status of the newspaper of record, coverage varied in distinct ways from other mainstream newspapers. We thus consider how the Times' reputation and influence converge with its record in creating a broader impression about the perspective of the US press on the Middle East.

Our analysis is based on an examination of 30 days of coverage, selected because they offered reportage of events important to both sides in the conflict. All events occurred during the first ten months of the renewed Intifada (September 2000 to June 2001). This coverage was examined qualitatively and quantitatively and compared across The New York Times, The Washington Post and the Chicago Tribune.¹ A wide range of journalistic features was examined in each

newspaper to help clarify the various settings in which bias might occur. In much of this analysis, the Times was the outlier, differing markedly from the other two newspapers.

The setting for locating bias in the news

One longstanding assumption about how journalism works is that it can and should hold to a value-free mode of reporting the world. Such a perspective -which insists on the possibility of reporting from no perspective at all - has begun to fade in much critical literature on journalistic practice (i.e. Hall, 1974; Hartley, 1993). Not only has the idea of non-biased reporting been rejected as untenable (Hackett, 1984) but scholarship on social perception has underscored the inevitability of bias in basic cognitive and perceptual mechanisms (Vallone et al., 1985). And yet, the notion of bias still remains a trump card in the public sphere, offering the backbone of an oft-repeated and impassioned plea for and against certain views on the world that infiltrate the reportage of wide-ranging events.

Scholarship on news bias has, by and large, presented a picture of the phenomenon that is smaller than its real-life manifestation. Bias study has been limited to certain features of news presentation, topics of reportage and circumstances for reporting, suggesting that the academy has not yet provided a picture of how bias spans the world of journalistic practice. Scholars have searched for it most frequently in the coverage of political campaigns, where it is seen as evidence of a deliberative choice for or against a candidate (i.e. Hofstetter, 1976; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Domke et al., 1997; Goldberg, 2001), and less often beyond the campaign cycle, as in patterns of senatorial communication (Kuklinski and Sigelman, 1992). For the most part we have yet to see a wide-ranging account of the inevitable and variegated presence of bias at the core of all kinds of reportage, not just coverage of the political world. At the same time, an assumption that bias is easily identifiable and can be located in discrete dimensions of the journalistic record has produced an emphasis primarily on verbal reports (i.e. Patterson, 1993; Dickson, 1994), with some focus on visual news presentation (i.e. Moriarty and Popovich, 1991; Kenney and Simpson, 1993). Yet in targeting only certain kinds of news features, such as those structured around an articulated opinion or preference like the editorial or column, these studies have positioned bias as if it is contained by certain features in a way that rarely leaks into others. Hence, we do not yet understand how bias might work simultaneously across different news features - how the slant communicated by headlines might intersect with that relayed by captions. What all of this means is that the academy's picture of bias has not facilitated a consideration of the less obvious places where bias might be located in the news. No wonder, then, that the public still cries bias in a somewhat simplistic fashion whenever exceptionally contested events are reported. As scholars, we have not yet provided an explanation that accounts for its wide-ranging presence in the coverage of public events.

When it comes to the record of contested public events, this is especially problematic. If bias exists everywhere yet the public insists on a non-biased reporting of events of a sensitive nature, what are we to make of the supposed role of the newspaper of record? More important, how are we to locate and account for the inevitable slant on events that emerges across papers in a way that neither denigrates nor disqualifies the differences in coverage? This article addresses these questions by focusing on where bias is and how it works. Accepting its presence across the board of presentational features in news, offered here by examining a sequential listing of those

features, suggests that bias might work differently in every feature of the press available for examination. This view necessitates analyzing a broadly defined set of data. Here, our data included news reports, headlines, photographs, editorials and columns, cartoons and graphics; each was examined for numerous attributes, including structure, authorship, size, placement, sourcing, language, tone and other signifying features.

In this regard, this article extends the vast terrain of scholarship on bias but proceeds with the assumption that bias can and will work differently in different kinds of news features. By examining its workings in the Intifada, we strategically use one domain of coverage that has long generated claims of bias and partisanship from both sides of the conflict. Additionally, by examining its coverage in *The New York Times*, we ask whether bias is so pervasive that it lays doubt to the very concept of the newspaper of record. Comparing the *Times*' coverage with that of both *The Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune* suggests that such is the case. Our analysis demonstrates how bias necessarily forces alternative pictures of the same event, even in newspapers of a similar scope, size, tone and regional involvement. Invoking the idea of one non-biased account of events, as implied by the notion of the newspaper of record, is thereby rendered unrealistic.

Coverage of the Intifada

Coverage of the Intifada follows a long history of Middle Eastern reportage, which has traditionally been the focus of competing assessments of its appropriate shape. Both the media and media scholars have tracked events since the late 1980s, when a series of violent public uprisings now commonly known as the 'first Intifada' began. When events heated up again in the autumn of 2000, both the Western media and media scholars were again available to address what was quickly called the 'renewed Intifada'.

Scholarship on coverage of the earlier Intifada primarily assessed whose side - Israeli or Palestinian - the coverage seemed to support. While the complicated issue of bias could have been reduced to a deliberative choice similar to that found in campaign coverage, instead much of this scholarship analyzed how a given perspective was manifested in reporting the Intifada. Collins and Clark (1992), for instance, examined the narrative storylines underlying *Nightline*'s coverage of the first Intifada, arguing that journalists moved toward ready-made scripts in making sense of its conflicted events. Liebes (1992) showed how those scripts often derived from other conflicts, such as the Gulf War. Lederman (1992) argued that the various parties to the conflict acted in routinized ways, such as the reliance on reporting formula. The most wide-ranging collection, edited by Cohen and Wolfsfeld (1993), provided solid analyses of media coverage of the first Intifada and people's consequent behaviors in regard to the conflict. In each case, unlike more general works on bias per se, the intrusion of value judgements in reportage was positioned not as a question but as an integral part of coverage.

Initial studies of coverage of the renewed Intifada have maintained this view, seeing perspective as a given of more recent reportage. Critics and scholars from outside the US have frequently underscored a tendency in the American press to empathize with Israel more than newspapers elsewhere in the world. Guttenplan (2002), for instance, queried the regular appearance of stories documenting the harsh treatment of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers in the British and even Israeli

press but rarely in the American media. British journalist Robert Fisk (2002) addressed the 'cowardly, spineless way in which American journalists are lobotomizing their stories from the Middle East'. Dunsky (2001) lamented the implicit and unacknowledged absorption of American foreign policy in US reporting on the Middle East.

Other studies have probed what they see as the US media's pro-Israel perspective by examining a larger array of features of news presentation. The Glasgow Media Group found evidence of a pro-Israel bias in television news that derived from a failure to provide historical context. The result was a limited understanding of the Palestinian version of events and a simplified view that the Israelis were justifiably responding to random acts of violence (Philo, 2002). Ackerman found similar results in the American press, where he noted that contradictory assessments of Intifada coverage persist: 'While the American press is perceived abroad as being unambiguously sympathetic to Israel, the most visible form of media criticism in the United States takes the opposite view - that the US press is constantly propagandizing for the Palestinian cause' (Ackerman, 2001: 70-1).

In sum, coverage of the renewed Intifada comes on the heels of a long and overtly interested set of public appraisals of the events being reported. While it is clear that coverage of the renewed Intifada already follows an established pattern of reporting events, what remains at question is both where bias can most reliably be located and where is the standard against which it needs to be evaluated.

Shared bias: where coverage was similar

Reportage of the renewed Intifada immediately borrowed from the established repertory for reporting events in the region. It is thus not surprising that coverage was remarkably similar across The New York Times, The Washington Post and Chicago Tribune, for the three newspapers resemble each other in scope, size, general tone, general interest and lack of primary involvement in the Middle East. Certain ways of telling the story of events - that were similar to each other but not necessarily reflective of the press elsewhere in the world - were thereby privileged over others. The newspapers appeared to follow recognizable norms of US news presentation (Roshco, 1975; Gans, 1979), displaying degrees of comprehensiveness, accuracy, balance and accountability in their coverage. More newsworthy events received more prominent placement in each paper, while events whose newsworthiness persisted over a two-to-three day surge of coverage tended to receive extended coverage that stretched to include cartoons, editorials and columns. Differences between newspapers tended to be most pronounced immediately following a significant event, only to even out with time. Each newspaper displayed evidence of attempts to consult with a range of sources about each event as it occurred, recount the story of each event by mixing even-handed prose and elements of drama and offer degrees of context for each event. As one might expect, no event in any of the papers was covered in a way that was perfectly accurate, balanced, comprehensive or accountable.

Similarities across the three newspapers included both issues of form and content - what was reported as well as the way in which it was reported. Such was the case for all 30 days of coverage examined here.

Form of coverage

Coverage in the three newspapers appeared as either texts or texts combined with photographs or graphics. Together the newspapers ran a total of 252 textual items (Times - 105, Post - 82, Tribune - 65) with the Times most likely to feature text-only stories over texts with photos. Each newspaper used a similar number of photographs and interspersed them across the 30 days of coverage (Times - 105, Post - 111, Tribune - 99). Photographs depicted a wide spectrum of topics and were more likely to appear on the front pages when events of acute newsworthiness occurred. Events of particular intensity usually generated several large photos for visualizing the story.

Items were also similar in form across the three newspapers. Most items were straight news reports (Times - 69 percent, Post - 62 percent, Tribune - 71 percent), with a small but similar percentage of background articles appearing when an event's coverage was sustained over time (Times - 10 percent, Post - 8 percent, Tribune - 10 percent). The headlines of all three newspapers displayed a similar spread across related topics. All three focused on politics and negotiations (Times - 44 percent, Post - 47 percent, Tribune - 40 percent) and all provided profiles of people involved in the conflict; profiles made up 3 percent of the Times stories, 7 percent of the Tribune stories and 7 percent of the Post stories. Both the Times and the Tribune ran a few stories on funerals from both sides of the conflict (each 4 percent). Intifada coverage appeared on both the front pages and international news pages of each newspaper, though the Times' coverage tended to appear more often in the latter. Photographs and non-photographic visuals, including maps, charts and cartoons, received similar attention across the newspapers. The three newspapers used different features to communicate aspects of the story in a way that resembled each other. All three newspapers used editorials and columns to accentuate underlying responses to hard news coverage, with roughly 10 percent of editorials over the 30 days of coverage devoted to the Intifada. These editorials tended to crop up immediately following peak periods of coverage, where they apportioned blame to prominent figures on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide. Columns differed from editorials in that they registered not the official voice of the newspaper but the sanctioned opinions of well-known journalists. The timing of the columns registered the conflict with a slight delay. For instance, columnists did not comment at length on the renewed Intifada until 4 October, a full six days after the sustained period of fighting began.

The three newspapers thus displayed a form of coverage that communicated a certain shared perspective. Coverage communicated the Intifada's salience as a topic not only in the domain of international news but also as front page news. The Intifada was so important that each paper used a wide range of features of news presentation and employed them in patterned ways common to each feature. Coverage tended to peak around events rather than offer a continued and consistent level of attention to the processes underlying the coverage. At times of intense coverage, each paper tended to branch across more varied features of newspaper presentation, allowing certain features -such as columns or photographs - to communicate dimensions of the story not necessarily relayed in the straight news article. In this regard, the location of bias in the full array of news features is not surprising.

Content of coverage

As is true more generally, the objective in reporting the Intifada appeared to be the establishment and maintenance of a perspective that could help readers make sense of its conflicting aspects in an enduringly coherent fashion. This was accomplished in numerous ways that were similar to each other, suggesting a shared perspective in reporting the region's events.

First, the three newspapers used similar words to describe the conflict, liberally using terminology that was problematic to at least one side of the conflict without acknowledging sensitivities surrounding its usage. The impossibility of discussing actions, actors and agents, settings and consequences without using such terms made word choice a necessarily slanted way of framing events. For instance, the events of the renewed Intifada - foreshadowed by a comparison with the events of 1987-93, during which the first

Intifada took place - were called 'the renewed Intifada' only gradually, begun in each case with quotations from primarily Palestinian officials and only later surfacing as journalist-initiated copy. The Tribune was the first to note the parallel on 1 October; the Times did not follow suit until 5 October. In far more instances, language was aligned with an Israeli perspective on events. All three newspapers chose similar labels when describing those engaged in violent acts against Israeli citizens, calling such individuals 'terrorists' or 'suicide bombers' rather than the 'martyrs' preferred by the Palestinians. Phrases describing victims who were 'caught in the crossfire' - a phrase said to denote yet soften Israeli culpability (Fisk, 2002) - appeared intermittently. Contested terms like 'occupation' disappeared from all three newspapers, 'occupied lands' became 'disputed lands' and 'Israeli settlements' were often labeled as 'Israeli neighborhoods'. Adjectival use proliferated after intense events, such as when the Tel Aviv disco bombing was described across the newspapers as 'a deadly suicide bomb attack' in 'a city of well-kept beaches and exuberant night-life' and 'tearful Israelis'. Civilian Israelis were sometimes called 'dovish' or 'peaceniks' but these terms were almost never applied to Palestinians. Such word choices suggest a consonance with the Israeli way of framing events.

Beyond simple word choice, all three newspapers displayed a geographic bias in their coverage, in that the largest percentage of Intifada stories came from Israel proper (Times - 44 percent, Post - 43 percent, Tribune - 40 percent). A substantially smaller percentage came from the Palestinian Authority (Times - 11 percent; Post - 14 percent, Tribune - 16 percent). Such a slant persisted despite the fact that the events provoking the most intense reactions occurred inside or alongside the borders of the Palestinian Authority. This discrepancy, a common result of reporting from the place of the reporter rather than the place of the event (Zelizer 1990), in itself set in place a prism for reporting -and understanding - events in ways that undercut the supposed neutrality of the coverage.

Similarly, all three newspapers relied on personalization in their stories, whereby certain individuals were seen as bearing individual responsibility for the events as they occurred. Such a tendency toward individual explanations, rather than toward more complex historical or geopolitical contexts,² is supported by scholarship on US journalism more generally (Carey, 1986). While personalization offered a degree of clarification, it also simplified and neutralized the broader complexities underlying the Intifada. All three newspapers displayed a similar slant toward individual explanations. Three individuals emerged in this regard - Yasser Arafat, Ariel

Sharon and Ehud Barak. For instance, the Times implicated Yasser Arafat in headlines that proclaimed the conflict 'Arafat's War' (13 October) or 'Arafat's Arsenal of Missiles' (4 June). Similarly, after the Israeli elections in February 2001, the Tribune ran numerous stories about Sharon's personal impact on the region, under titles like 'An Old Hawk in a New Middle East' (8 February) or 'Is Sharon a War Criminal?' (8 February). An early cartoon in the same paper depicted 'Ariel Sharon's Wailing Wall' (5 October). Personalization concretized the abstract nature of the conflict and facilitated the assignment of blame and agency.

All three newspapers also displayed a tendency to tell the story of the Intifada as if there were an objective reality which was possible to discern. Such a bias was supported by including certain objectifying devices in the coverage that seemed to offset the intrusion of subjective values. One such device, used by all three newspapers, was an ongoing roster of how many people had died. Body counts tended to appear on days in which additional people had died and were usually positioned midway or near the ends of the news stories in which they appeared. Body counts, however, were controversial in that they tended to list at length Israelis who died while not always according the same treatment to Palestinians. When a car bomb exploded in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda open-air food market, the Times' headline of 3 November proclaimed 'Car Bomb Kills 2 Israelis' and gave extensive biographical information about those killed. While the same article also mentioned the death that day of two Palestinians - 17 and 18 years-old - they were not mentioned in the story's headline.

Another objectifying device used by all three papers was graphics and other visual aids. Graphics - maps of physical terrain, charts, bar-graphs and editorial artwork - appeared to provide an objective grounding for the events taking place and tended to appear when events received sustained attention over time. In particular, the maps of physical terrain helped visually situate a given event in geographic space, even if the maps themselves differed by use. Certain maps provided spatial representations of recognizable locations and others provided chronological recountings of relevant, usually violent events over time.

Other devices catered more directly to certain ways of telling the story of the Intifada. Establishing coherence often depended on rendering seemingly irreconcilable differences into simplistic and narrowed interpretive templates. Three alternative interpretive frames appeared intermittently across the three US newspapers. The first suggested a simple competition between the two battling sides, Palestinian and Israeli, whereby each new event that jarred the balance between the two sides - such as a Palestinian bombing or an Israeli incursion - was contextualized as upsetting an already tenuous balance between them. Much coverage that followed involved discussions of how to reinstate that balance and often used body counts as ways of establishing who was 'winning'. A second frame suggested a moral struggle between good and bad. Resolving the question of which side - Palestinian or Israeli - was to be identified as good or bad was carried out by invoking an implicit sense of moral certitude when describing the actions of each side. For instance, the continued identification of the battle as an historic struggle over disputed land raised important questions regarding ownership of the land and their impact on questions of human rights, yet the question of which context - historical, biblical, political, geographical, social - would be applied to the events at hand was central to determining the frame. A third frame used by all three newspapers was that of fatalism, which emphasized the degree to which events stemmed from seemingly ancient and unexplainable traditions. Such a

frame underscored the basic impossibility of ending the conflict by political means and emphasized the degree to which people on the street believed that there was no solution to the violence. All three frames were used in a way that suggested a unidimensional interpretation of events, even when each offered at best a partial understanding of what had happened.

Sourcing practices in all three newspapers generally conformed to more general US norms of sourcing (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979). According to conventional US journalistic practices, each newspaper would be expected to employ as wide a range of sources as possible so as to represent the widest array of opinion and fact. Sources ranged across three attributes: the rank of sources consulted (high rank or low rank), the explicitness of sources consulted (anonymous or named) and the nationality of sources consulted (Israeli, Palestinian, US/other). Yet at the same time, the tendency to use high-ranking and named sources left the common people typically not quoted or consulted in most of the coverage, except when directly affected. To that end, all three newspapers relied on expert and high-ranking sources; during the first 12 days of the conflict, 42 percent of the Times stories and 44 percent of the Post stories featured high-ranking personalities of US or other international origin. Low-ranking sources consulted by each newspaper, usually 'people in the street', tended to be either Palestinian (15 percent or less across all three papers) or Israeli (less than 10 percent across all three papers). Low-ranking Americans were quoted approximately 5 percent of the time in each paper. All three newspapers tended to interview low-ranking sources who were taken to represent the ranks of the wounded and victimized and were typically quoted in stories about funerals and in the aftermath of violence; frequently, these quotes cued the 'fatalism' frame described earlier. All three newspapers cited named sources from among all three categories - Israeli, Palestinian, US/ others.

Editorials were used to offer responses to events in a way that offset the feverishness of daily news. In all three newspapers, the Palestinians, and Arafat in particular, received more editorial criticism than did the Israelis. The combination of events in one editorial often slanted the understanding of each independent event by that which followed. For instance, the Tribune ran an anti-Sharon editorial on 3 October, its first editorial comment since Sharon visited the Temple Mount, yet it ran immediately following the shooting of 12-year-old Mohammed Aldura in Gaza. Not surprisingly, the editorial matched the events by concluding: 'There's plenty of blame to go around, but it starts squarely with Likud leader Ariel Sharon . . .'.

A broad array of columnists asserted recognizable stances vis-a-vis the conflict in each of the newspapers. In the Times, William Safire was reliably anti-Arafat, anti-Barak and pro-Sharon. Thomas Friedman was dovish, anti-Sharon and anti-Arafat. Anthony Lewis was anti-Sharon, anti-Arafat and mildly pro-Barak, as long as Barak was seen as a pro-peace advocate. Overall, columnists in all three newspapers were more likely to be critical of Arafat and the Palestinians than of Barak or Sharon, although Sharon's trip to the Temple Mount was almost universally singled out as a provocative act.

Photographs and cartoons were used similarly across the papers. Photos depicted a range of topics - violence, funerals, non-violent demonstrations, lifestyle pieces and politics - and increased in number and prominence as events received sustained attention. As is more generally the case, captions often provided erroneous information and were unevenly connected to what

was depicted (Zelizer, 1998). The most well-known example here was a caption affixed to the image of Tuvia Grossman on 30 September, in which the Times originally and erroneously identified the American-born yeshiva student as a Palestinian. Cartoons tended to appear when the newspaper wanted to counter tendencies prevalent in the hard news items. While the Times ran no cartoons, those which played in the Post and Tribune offered value statements 'against' a certain side to the conflict. For instance, two of the three Post cartoons were pointedly anti-Palestinian, while three of the five Tribune cartoons were negative toward both sides of the conflict. Many of the cartoons lampooned photographs already made familiar through the coverage.

In sum, the content of the three newspapers was markedly similar, following recognized standards for conventional US journalistic practices. Against that background, all three newspapers displayed a perspective on events that resembled each other. Such a perspective involved using words that were more closely aligned with the Israeli perspective on events than with that of the Palestinians; a geographic attachment to Israeli over Palestinian locales; a tendency to favor the involvement of individuals as an explanation for the conflict over the more complex broader contextual, historical or geo-political explanations; and a reliance on objectifying devices - such as body counts or maps of physical terrain - that overplayed the objective aspects of coverage at the expense of its subjective dimensions. All three newspapers invoked similar interpretive frames of competition, moral struggle and fatalism in a way that simplified the complexities of the events they addressed. All three favored high-ranking US or international sources over local voices in the conflict. Each practice helped simplify the coverage that ensued. This was crucial, for as a strategy of coverage, simplifying events in itself opened the door for claims of partisanship to be leveled by both sides of the conflict. But when combined with the extensive aspects of presentation that further pointed to a shared perspective, the American press can be seen to exhibit its own values and preference statements, not necessarily followed elsewhere in the world, about how the Intifada should be understood. This shared perspective in itself underscores the unlikelihood of locating a newspaper of record on the Middle East. But on closer examination, within that shared perspective differences emerged that further increased that unlikelihood.

Differential bias: where coverage was different

Against the perspective shared by all three newspapers, differences emerged in an array of features of news presentation. Such differences were not always found in the obvious settings for bias in the news and were difficult to locate because they had a combined impact rather than a clear linkage with an explicit dimension of news presentation. Significantly, when the different features of presentation were examined together, it becomes clear that no one paper can be called a newspaper of record on the Intifada, for though displaying a shared perspective on events, each paper also differed on discrete aspects of coverage. Most important, on a slew of features - including headlines, photographs, graphics, sourcing practices and lead paragraphs - the Times was the outlier, with its coverage differing markedly from that of either the Post or the Tribune, which remained more similar to each other than to the Times. In this regard, the Times displayed more consonance with the claims of a pro-Israel slant that have been leveled against the American press. This was the case even when maintaining such a perspective necessitated the Times differentiating itself from the other papers reporting the same events.

The Times differed, first of all, in the sheer amount and quality of its Intifada coverage. The Times ran the largest amount of coverage (8705.2 square inches), while the Tribune ran the smallest (6138.4 square inches).³ The Times also ran a greater number of brief stories additional to the main news stories than did the other two. How this larger amount of coverage affected the different features of news presentation is telling. Not only did it facilitate the different usage of such features, but it also easily allowed for the intrusion of bias into news presentation.

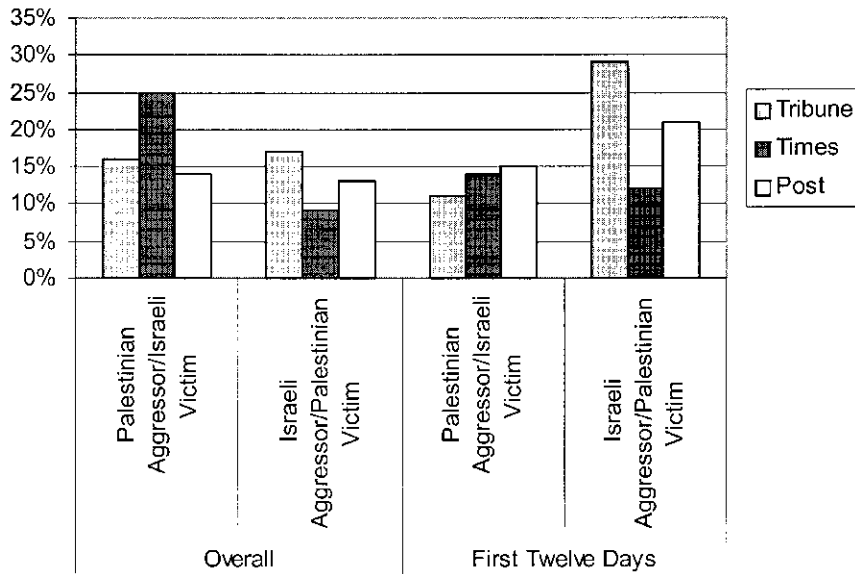


Figure 1 Implied aggressor in headlines

Headlines

Headlines highlight the main point of the coverage, privileging certain interpretations of an event over others. The Times emerged as a clear outlier in its positioning of aggressors and victims in headlines. Unlike the other two papers, the Times tended to portray the Israelis as victims and the Palestinians as aggressors in its headlines. It was two and a half times more likely to position Palestinians as aggressors and Israelis as victims in its headlines than to do the opposite. This was revealing, for the headlines of the Tribune and Post displayed a different pattern, positioning Israelis and Palestinians as aggressors in a roughly equivalent number of headlines: the Tribune positioned Israelis as aggressors 17 percent of the time and Palestinians 16 percent, while the Post positioned Israelis 13 percent of the time and Palestinians 14 percent (see Figure 1). Differences between the Times and Tribune were at their greatest during the first 12 days of the conflict, when the Times positioned Israelis as aggressor 12 percent of the time versus 14 percent for Palestinians. By contrast, the Tribune was nearly three times as likely to position the Israelis as aggressors and the Palestinians as victims (29 percent) in its headlines as the other way around (11 percent). The Post was similar to the Tribune, situating Israelis as aggressors 20 percent of the time versus 15 percent for Palestinians.

It is important to note that the Times' use of headlines in part differed from that of the other two newspapers for the simple reason that more of its Intifada coverage appeared on its international

news pages than front pages; only 27 percent of the Times stories made it onto the front page (compared to 37 percent in the Tribune and 38 percent in the Post). This means that the Times ran more stories and sidebars, many of which fell to inside pages. Such a basic difference had direct bearing on the headlines used by the Times. Yet differences in headlines were also borne out qualitatively. The Times tended to use agent-free language that suggested the violence came from nowhere. This seemed to be the case particularly when the other newspapers held the Israelis responsible - if only in their subheads. For instance, on 30 September, the Times ran the headline 'Battle at Jerusalem Holy Site Leaves 4 Dead and 200 Hurt', while the Tribune ran the more attributive: 'Four Dead, Scores Wounded in Jerusalem Clashes', with a sub-head reading 'Israelis Fire On Stone-Throwers'. The Post's headline made the same attribution as did the Tribune, stipulating that 'Violence Surges in Jerusalem', with a sub-head that read 'At Least Five Palestinians Are Killed in Clashes with Israeli Police'. The difference was revealing, in that the Times' headline made no distinction between Israelis and Palestinians and no mention of culpability. This difference in headline use offered a clear reading of the story of events to follow. The tendency of the Times to portray the Israelis as victims and the Palestinians as aggressors persisted across events.

Lead paragraphs

An alternative way of cueing a news story is via its lead paragraph. In the events of the renewed Intifada, this often involved situating violence against a larger interpretive frame. Focus here varied by the degree to which the papers targeted either Israeli or Palestinian-instigated violence. On this point the Times was again the outlier, highlighting Palestinian-instigated violence twice as much as it focused on Israeli-instigated violence. By contrast, both the Post and Tribune were more prone to highlight Israeli-instigated violence over Palestinian.

The Times gave less emphasis than either the Tribune or Post to Israeli-instigated violence, with the latter two twice as likely to cast an event as having been caused by the Israelis (12 percent of each of their lead paragraphs) as was the Times (6 percent of its lead paragraphs). When the first 12 days of the conflict were isolated the differences were even more pronounced: the newspaper devoted more attention to Palestinian-instigated violence (12 percent) and less to Israeli (7 percent). By contrast, during the same period both the Tribune and Post devoted more attention to Israeli-instigated violence (17 percent and 18 percent, respectively) than to Palestinian (6 percent and 12 percent, respectively). Differences between the Tribune and Post on this variable evened out over time, but the Times remained different from the other newspapers (see Figure 2).

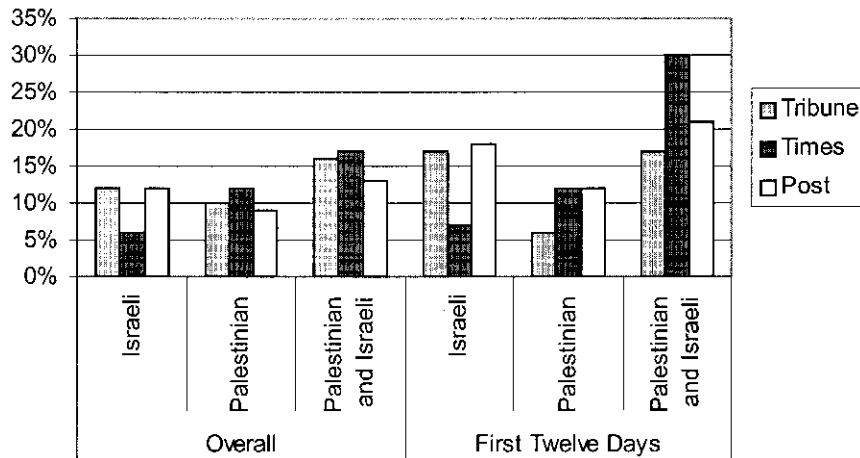


Figure 2 Violence in lead paragraphs

Other tendencies, though less marked than the Times' focus on Palestinian-instigated violence, pointed in the same direction. One such tendency was an attempt to portray a middle ground in the lead paragraph, by which both Israelis and Palestinians were held accountable for the violence. The Times was slightly more likely (in 17 percent of its lead paragraphs) than the Post (13 percent) or Tribune (16 percent) to see violence as emanating from both Palestinians and Israelis than from either the Palestinians or Israelis independently. This difference became more marked during the first 12 days of the crisis, when a full 30 percent of the Times' lead paragraphs suggested shared accountability, contrasted to only 21 percent in the Post and 17 percent in the Tribune. Not surprisingly, then, the establishment of a middle ground was offered even during events that other newspapers saw as bearing Israeli responsibility. The Times' preference for establishing a middle ground, when considered alongside its tendency to cover Palestinian-instigated violence over Israeli, suggests that the Times offered a less even-handed view of the violence in the region than did the other two newspapers. In its view, violence was more likely to originate with either the Palestinians or with both parties but rarely with the Israelis alone. By contrast, both the Post and the Tribune entertained the possibility that for at least some of the events that occurred, Israel bore independent responsibility for the ensuing violence.

Photographs

The Times was also a clear outlier in certain uses of its photographs, in that it more often displayed photos suggesting Palestinian culpability (30 percent) than Israeli (22 percent). The Tribune and Post, however, depicted the culpability of both groups in similar percentages of photos, with the Tribune slightly more likely to display photos of Israeli culpability (25 percent) than Palestinian (23 percent) (see Figure 3).

A tendency to depict Palestinian culpability was also found in the qualitative analysis. For instance, immediately after the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount, the Times featured on both 29 and 30 September images of Palestinians throwing stones. At their side were: a small frontal shot of Ariel Sharon; an image of a verbal argument between a Palestinian and an Israeli border policeman; and a photo of an Israeli soldier standing above a young man (originally misidentified as a Palestinian but later correctly identified as American-born yeshiva student

Tuvia Grossman). By contrast, both the Tribune and Post depicted Israeli soldiers in aggressive acts. The Tribune showed Israeli soldiers invading Bethlehem, while the Post portrayed soldiers both firing 'rubber-coated metal bullets' on the Temple Mount and physically clashing with Palestinian demonstrators. Aggression on the part of the Israelis was not depicted by the Times. A visual juxtaposition similar to that portrayed by the Tribune and Post did appear in the Times three days later on 2 October but by that time the shooting of 12-year-old Mohammed Aldura had already further complicated the sequencing of events.

Additionally, the Times from the beginning established a visual middle ground for the conflict that created a different impression of culpability than did the other newspapers. The Times used some of its photos to maintain a visual stance that was not explicitly pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian but instead depicted both sides of the conflict in culpable positions. The fact that this middle ground existed in photographic depiction suggests that the Times used pictures to convey aspects of the story that were not necessarily told in its verbal reportage. But even on this point, the Times differed in its use of photos from the other newspapers.

One Times article of 5 October, detailing a series of events producing Palestinian casualties, was accompanied by a photo showing Palestinians burning tires in East Jerusalem. By contrast, the other newspapers at times depicted a visual middle ground when Palestinian culpability was highest. For instance, following the Tel Aviv disco bombing in June 2001, the Tribune offered two photos - one of the bomb site and one of a Palestinian funeral - in its lead story. On 13 October, after the Ramallah lynching, the Post showed four photos: one of the Palestinian lynchings, one of Israeli helicopters firing, one of Arafat and one of Barak. Similarly, during the first 12 days of the conflict, when tensions and events were at their most intense, one-quarter of the Times' photos depicted Israelis and Palestinians as culpable to an equal degree. By contrast, both of the other papers were more likely to pinpoint the Israelis as aggressors than the Palestinians, with the Tribune showing the Israelis as aggressors twice as much as it showed Palestinians.⁴ The Times was also more likely than the other papers during the first 12 days to use photos depicting shared Israeli and Palestinian violence (18 percent) than photos holding one side more responsible for violence than the other. By contrast, during the same time period, the Tribune used such photos only 9 percent of the time and the Post only 2 percent of the time.

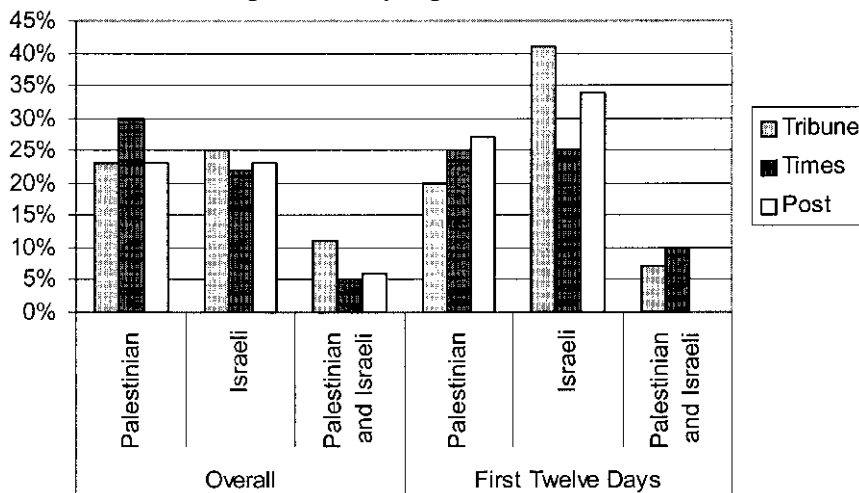


Figure 3 Culpability in photographs

All of these examples suggest that during the sample days of coverage and particularly during the first 12 days of the conflict, the visuals in the Times seemed to show either Palestinian culpability or both sides clashing with each other, rather than one-sided Israeli-instigated violence. While the Times' establishment of a visual middle ground could be construed as the display of an even-handed and non-biased photographic documentation of events, it is worth mentioning that these first 12 days of coverage included a number of events for which Israel was roundly criticized by the international press. The newspaper's decision, then, to portray violence and aggression as either a Palestinian action or a shared attribute of both Israelis and Palestinians, rather than hold Israel independently responsible for some of the aggression and violence, constituted an outlying use of visuals that established a perspective on the conflict more favorable to Israel.

Graphics

All three newspapers used graphics (maps, charts, bar-graphs and editorial artwork) to provide what appeared to be an objective grounding for the events taking place. Yet the Times used graphics, particularly maps, in a way that differed from that of the other papers. While each paper provided a spatial visualization of the events as they occurred, the mere depiction of geographic terrain - geographic maps - differed from the depiction of violent acts that had occurred in the represented area - event centered maps.

The Times used purely geographic maps that outlined geographic places in the region without inserting editorial comment. Alongside a 10 October article titled 'Crowds of Jews Rampage in Nazareth', the Times affixed a map of the region with key cities noted in the story starred on the map, with no visual translation of the action into the map itself. Conversely, both the Post and Tribune regularly used event-centered maps that integrated the occurring events of violence into the map's composition. On 13 October, the Tribune included a small event-centered map of the Ramallah lynchings of Israeli soldiers, featuring arrows and adjoining bubbles that pointed to 'where soldiers were killed' and to places where 'Israeli helicopters [were] deployed'. The different function of the two kinds of maps was clear, in that one's relevance to the story was unclear without accompanying text, while the other made the map independently comprehensible. One held to a so-called 'objective' reality - geographic - while the other admitted that the violent events of the region needed to be brought to bear on the 'objective' quality of the physical terrain in which they occurred.

Another type of graphic, the chart, appeared sporadically over the sample days. Providing the visual presentation of quantitative information, charts tended to appear in the weekend review sections. Serving to objectify and concretize abstract dimensions of the event at hand, the chart was used only in the Times.

Sourcing practices

A final area of difference between the Times and the other newspapers related to sourcing practices. While the three newspapers displayed sourcing practices generally consonant with

standard news-gathering routines, the question of whom to consult for a given article played a major role in explaining the events of the renewed Intifada. During the 30 days of coverage, there appeared to be few differences across the newspapers in regard to either the rank of sources or the anonymity/named status of the sources consulted. Differences did emerge, however, when the nationality of sources was brought to bear on the sources consulted, with the nationality of sources consulted by each newspaper differing both with regard to rank and named status.

Although all of the newspapers cited a range of named sources, the Times repeatedly turned to US sources when citing anonymously, using them over four times as much (in 9 percent of its stories) as it used either Palestinian or Israeli (2 percent each). By contrast, both the Post and Tribune turned to Palestinian sources when citing anonymously (5 percent and 6 percent, respectively). The Times' proclivity, then, was to portray the story in terms of international process but in a way that possibly undercut the local voices in the conflict (see Figure 4).

These differences were even more marked during the first 12 days of the crisis: the Times ran one story with an anonymous Israeli source, seven with US/other anonymous sources and one with both Israeli and US/other anonymous sources, while the Tribune ran only two stories with anonymous sources, both Palestinian, and the Post cited a range of Palestinian, Israeli and US/other sources.

When not relying on anonymity, the Times was more likely to use Israeli sources as its primary source of information (16 percent) than was either the Post (10 percent) or Tribune (11 percent). When the Times did use Palestinian sources, it was slightly less likely than either the Post or Tribune to cite high-ranking Palestinian figures.

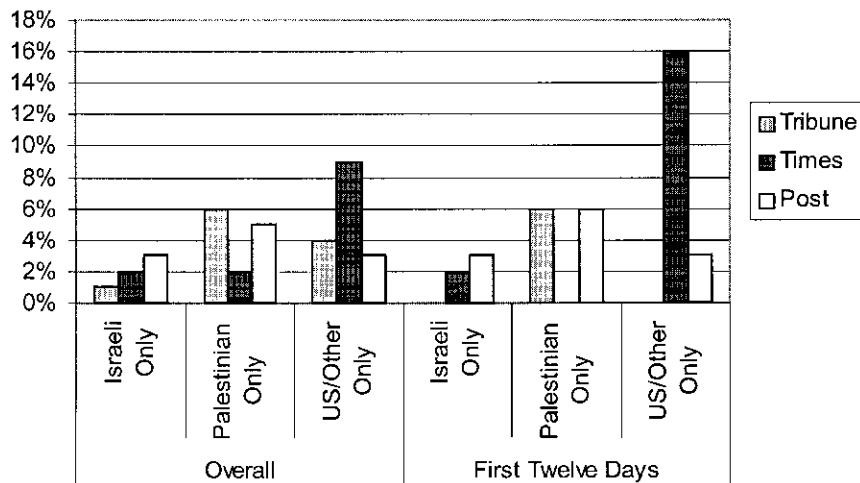


Figure 4 Anonymous sources

In sum, each newspaper displayed differences from the others in covering the Intifada, with the Times emerging as the clear outlier. The Times was quicker to portray Israelis as victims and Palestinians as aggressors in its headlines, less likely to discuss Israeli-instigated violence and more likely to establish a middle ground of accountability in its lead paragraphs, more likely to

use photos to either depict Palestinian culpability or a visual middle ground even when events warranted otherwise, more likely to employ objectifying devices like geographic maps and bar-charts to lend an objective ground to events, and more likely to feature anonymous high-ranking American sources and named Israeli sources over local Palestinian voices, anonymous or named. Taken together, these features, most of which followed standards for conventional US journalistic practice, underscored a reflection of an Israeli perspective on events that was not always matched by the newspaper's attitude toward the Palestinians. The Times' distinctiveness on these points suggests its consonance with the more general criticism of the American media for a pro-Israeli slant in covering the Intifada.

Conclusion: how bias shapes the news

This analysis of 30 days of Intifada coverage reminds us how inescapable bias is in the news. Commonly used features of news presentation, often heralded as among the best of US journalistic practices, inevitably shape and slant the story through the mere act of coverage. Bias thus emerges as a far more embedded and complex dimension of US print journalism than commonly assumed in popular, if not in scholarly, discourse.

For journalism scholars, none of this may be surprising. Not only have we known for some time from experiments in social perception that the same event will always look different to different people but research on journalism has long wrestled with the limitations of objectivity in reporting. Yet the public's insistent demand for objectivity in the news and a naive faith in its possibility keep bringing debates about the media back to an insistence on unbiased coverage. Questions, then, remain concerning the impact of such debates and how they feed into lingering notions about the coverage offered by the US press.

This article shows that no feature of American print news presentation was free of values or preferences. On numerous aspects of coverage all three newspapers resembled each other, producing a shared perspective that was similar yet unevenly realized across the different features of news presentation.

The papers resembled each other in an erratic fashion: on certain features of news presentation, the Times and the Post were aligned; on others the Tribune and the Times resembled each other. On most features, the Tribune and Post tended to move in a direction opposite to that of the Times, making the Times the clear outlier.⁵ Its distinctive position, embedded in discrete aspects of presentation such as agency in headlines or focal point of photographs, demonstrated a perspective that was on the whole less critical of the Israelis than of the Palestinians. In this sense, and within this sample, the Times, while upholding conventional US journalistic practices, appeared to be the most slanted in a pro-Israeli direction, in accord with longstanding criticisms of a pro-Israeli bias leveled against the American media by observers around the world. And yet, our analysis demonstrates that the question of bias cannot be resolved simply by looking at certain isolated features of news reportage. Even though the Times' coverage produced a picture that could be construed as slanted in favor of Israel, these presentational features did not occur alone. Their occurrence in tandem with other features that exhibited no such slant necessarily qualifies claims of bias. While a slant undeniably exists, it needs to be looked at not in one isolated feature of presentation but in the interstices across features, across time and across the

repeated patterns of coverage in the numerous newspapers that comprise the US press. When considering the fact that the uneven appearance of bias here seemed to have no consistent shape across the three newspapers, our analysis underscores how pervasive and embedded it actually is.

This analysis also shows that the American press is not monolithic. While none of the newspapers was identical to the others in all features, The New York Times, assumed for generations to be the leading authoritative voice on events like the Middle East crisis, displayed a consistently deviant view of the crisis. This in itself sheds doubt on the notion of the newspaper of record but it also raises important questions about the relationship of the Times to the rest of the American press. Despite its variance from the rest of the American press, the Times seems to possess a disproportionate role in influencing evaluations of the American press in general. Is the impression that the American press is biased driven by The New York Times? Has the Times' often pro-Israeli slant - reflected here in its use of headlines, photographs, graphics, sourcing practices and lead paragraphs - helped mobilize discussions of a pro-Israeli slant more generally in American coverage of the Middle East? This raises questions concerning the function of the 'gold standard' of US journalistic practice. Not only does our analysis suggest the difficulty of ever assigning the standard of coverage to one paper but it questions whether it has been appropriately assigned to the Times.

All of this calls for a more nuanced and wide-ranging understanding of bias. In coverage of the Middle East, the tendency has long been to pronounce the media as either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. Our analysis suggests that such a tendency - in either direction - is simplistic, often erroneous and difficult to establish or maintain. We argue instead that the practice of invoking one standard against which all media can be evaluated has produced its own problems. It is simply impossible to establish one objective standard of coverage.

The question of bias in the American press is not just an academic question. There is an urgent need to develop a framework to ascertain how different indicators of partisan reportage work with and against each other. By more aggressively evaluating the workings of bias in the US press, we may be able to play a role, however small, in quelling the tensions that threaten to tear apart the Middle East.

NOTES

1. The study derives from the findings of an internal report commissioned by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and completed in October 2001. The 30 days of coverage were chosen because they were thought to reflect key events occurring within the time period of the renewed Intifada. 'Key events' were defined as events of noticeable import for both sides of the conflict that produced two-to-three day surges in journalistic coverage. These included Ariel Sharon's Temple Mount visit (29-30 September), the shooting of Mohammed Aldura and his father in Gaza (1-3 October), the lynching of Israeli soldiers in Ramallah (13-15 October), an explosion in a Jerusalem food market (3-5 November), the Israeli elections (5-7 February), a Netanya car bombing (5-6 March), the release of the Mitchell report (4-7 May), and a Tel Aviv disco bombing (2-4 June). Additionally, the first 12 days of the conflict (29 September-10 October) were analyzed in detail. All told, the analysis included a total of 577 separate cases -

including 252 textual items, 315 photographs, eight cartoons and three photographic stand-alones. Coding was initiated by identifying and operationalizing 21 separate variables, of which more than half (12) referred to possible sources of bias. The other nine variables addressed journalistic conventions. With the exception of square inches, all variables represent nominal data. After achieving inter-coder reliability, two coders independently analyzed the data by splitting the sample material across newspaper and time period. Inter-coder reliability was achieved by selecting a reliability sample slightly greater than 20 percent of the general sample. The two coders for this study achieved Holsti reliability of .80 or greater for all but one variable, which achieved a Holsti reliability of .79.

2. When historical explanations were displayed in the coverage, they tended to have an either-or quality that reduced interpretation of the current situation to the contexts of former ones. For instance, the Palestinians called the Intifada the 'renewed', 'second' or 'al-Aksa' Intifada, positioning it as a continuation of hostilities that occurred during the late eighties, while the Israelis forwarded a notion that the Intifada was a continuation of the War of Independence. All three newspapers downplayed the possibility of competing contexts.

3. The decision to use square inches instead of column-inches was based on the capacity to develop a standardized measure that could be equally applied across newspapers and across features, including texts, graphics and photographs.

4. On this variable, the Tribune differed markedly from the Times, especially during the first 12 days of the conflict, when the Tribune photos were four times as likely to depict Israel as the aggressor (45 percent to 11 percent depicting Palestinian aggression). During that same time period, the Tribune also showed proportionately more pictures of Israeli violence (24 percent) and fewer pictures of Palestinian violence (13 percent) than did either of the other newspapers (Times - 24 percent, Post - 23 percent).

5. Briefly, the Tribune relied more on anonymous Palestinian sources and a higher percentage of high-ranking Israeli sources than did the other papers, positioned Israelis and Palestinians as aggressors equally in its headlines, displayed slightly more photographs of Palestinians, and was the only paper of the three to display more photos of Palestinians than of Israelis. Its photographs were more likely to depict Israeli culpability than Palestinian and it showed proportionately fewer pictures of Palestinian-instigated violence than did the Times. The Post displayed features that were similar to both those of the Times and Tribune but on key points it followed the Tribune more closely: it was two times as likely as the Times to focus on Israeli-instigated violence in its lead paragraphs, displayed equal numbers of photos of Israeli and Palestinian culpability, used headlines that equally positioned Israelis and Palestinians as aggressors, and used event-centered maps. The Post differed from both the Times and Tribune in that it relied on high-ranking and named US/other sources in its stories, making it more likely to run stories that relied exclusively on US/other stories. It is difficult to divine any clear bias in conjunction with all the features at work here but it is important to note that the Post resembled the Tribune on most of its key points of difference from the Times, suggesting the wide-spread lodging of bias in all features of news presentation.

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