

Why Words Matter

Your Feminist Friend

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North America is no stranger to polarization. Every political issue has its heroes and its villains; proponents on both sides attack the other for their morals more often than their opinions. The divide between right and left has never been greater, exacerbated by social media. But the specific responsibility of social media, while relevant, is a discussion for another time.

My own worldview, as an individual, is naturally informed by the media that I consume. While I believe that people have a responsibility to read the news, educate themselves, and seek alternative views, it is unfair to entirely blame the individual for lacking perspective. When it comes to Palestine and Israel, people are misinformed because most news outlets are touting a Western-centric narrative— a narrative which is thoroughly refuted by human rights groups and the UN, which have called Israel an apartheid regime.

The question of “truth,” once a philosophical debate, has become a political one. But the idea of journalistic integrity is a less contentious one. Journalists know that every story has two sides, and *that* reality should influence their coverage. News outlets have the minimum responsibility to explore multiple perspectives.

Let us remember an event from 2022. Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, well-known and beloved across the Arab world, was shot in the head by the IDF while on assignment in the occupied West Bank, despite clearly wearing a vest labeled “PRESS”. This was targeted, not accidental as originally claimed by the IDF, a story that they maintained for one entire year until the world moved on. After the story had disappeared from global news cycles, the IDF issued an apology, finally admitting fault, although they predictably have borne no consequences.

The unprecedented bombing of the Al-Ahli Al-Arabi Hospital on October 17, which killed hundreds of innocent Palestinians, appears to have followed the same playbook. The Arab world has united in blaming Israel, who in turn has blamed the Gaza-based group Islamic Jihad. With the circulation of such graphic and horrifying footage, people crave an evil enemy to unite against. They need to believe that the source of such evil – a group who would deign to kill civilians, refugees, the injured, but especially children – is not worthy of mercy. And who makes a better scapegoat than an Arab?

I would not be surprised if new evidence is presented one year from now, indicating that this was an intentional targeting by the IDF, rather than an accident traceable to a Palestinian militant group. At the time of writing, even the New York Times has evidence to question Israel’s claim.

The burden of proof is on the powerless. The story of Hamas beheading babies, which quickly hit the news circuit until it was discovered that there was no truth to the claim, was a rumor started by an IDF soldier. But Western media loves hearing that an Arab or Muslim has committed an atrocity: this becomes front page news, even without fact checking.

Yes, fake news spreads quickly on social media. But fake news is detectible to the educated or thoughtful person, who does the extra search to find out the truth – it’s easy, for example, to discover whether or not former President Barack Obama was really born outside of the United States.

Propaganda, on the other hand, is not necessarily detectible. On the contrary, it is often quite subtle.

The absence of Palestinian voices in Western mainstream media is alarming; there is no concept of elevating their voices or highlighting their narrative. A Palestinian or Arab appears on television only when there is an attack, with the singular request to condemn Hamas. Of course we condemn Hamas and acknowledge that October 7, 2023 was horrific. But the media exclusively interviews the “other” side to highlight Israeli suffering. What of Palestinian suffering, which happens daily – not just in Gaza, but also in the occupied West Bank?

Presence matters, and we should be aware of who is sitting at the table, as well as the language used when these stories are told.

The media consistently uses the phrase Israel-Hamas conflict. And sure, it is technically correct that the current conflict is a war between Israel and Hamas—with countless civilians caught in between, no doubt. But the larger conflict exists between Israel and Palestine. Why do we discount the experiences of Palestinians, by mentioning only Hamas? Why do the media refer to Gazans, rather than Palestinians? The continued failure to acknowledge ethnic Palestinian identity is yet another means of elimination.

If a tree falls in a forest...

If we do not say their names...

Do they still exist? This is what mainstream media are doing. Slow, steady, deliberate erasure.

In the West, we are taught that questioning Israel, let alone condemning them, is akin to antisemitism. Of course, antisemitism should not be tolerated any more than Islamophobia should be tolerated. But the political institution is separable from the religion; for this very reason, condemnation of the Saudi Arabian government does not offend all Muslims.

Imagine the following. During a discussion on women’s right to contraception in the *global south*, the men in the room claim *sexism*. Or, during a discussion on affirmative action, the *white people* in the room claim *racism*. This is a divisive tactic used intentionally to derail discussion. Freedom of speech is a guise under which marginalized groups are allowed to speak, with the condition that they do not criticize the status quo.

The media is doing a disservice to Palestinians, to Arabs, to oppressed people everywhere by presenting a one-sided narrative. And they are doing a disservice to their readers. They are not presenting the facts, and they dissuade Westerners from making informed decisions. In fact, one may argue that they are allowing Westerners to continue being complicit in oppression, war crimes, and even genocide. There is no doubt that people have a voice, and that voice is powerful. The BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) movement contributed to the fall of South African apartheid. But the public's voices, influence, and power are stripped when they receive incomplete information.

The media is not just complicit. They are authorizing the oppressive Israeli government to act with impunity. They have given a blank cheque to Prime Minister Netanyahu, following President Biden's example. Is this how they want to be remembered in history?

And we will remember that Western media outlets are instrumental in Palestinian genocide.

As Malcolm X said, "If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing."

The Palestinians are in pain: they are grieving the loss of family, land, and at the same time trying to advocate for their right to life and to convince the world of their humanity. I am humbly attempting to take on a small piece of this responsibility. If I convince even one person to read more, to think critically, to ask questions rather than blindly consume the media that is too easily at our disposal in this digital age, I will count this as a success.