

Power and Silence: Australian Media Portrayal of Israeli and Palestinian Casualties during the Gaza War of 2014

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The Asian Conference on Media & Mass Communication 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

At one stage of the long-lasting Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Israel launched a military operation, Protective Edge, on the Gaza Strip in July–August of 2014. As a consequence, approximately 2,280 people died and over 11,000 people were injured, the majority of them Palestinian civilians (including children and women). These numerous casualties resulted in a pronounced interest in this particular event by international media such as CNN and the BBC, as well as other Western media including the Australian media.

This paper investigates how Australian print and online media portrayed the Israeli and Palestinian casualties during the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza. Specifically, through using critical discourse analysis, it examines how the casualties were represented by four Australian news sources: *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, ABC and Crikey.

Based on the concept of framing theory (a technique used to shape an event or issue, reflecting the power embedded in media texts), the paper analyses news items published in Australian mainstream media during the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza to identify the frames employed in reporting Israeli and Palestinian casualties.

The conflict frame was dominant in the Australian print and online media coverage of casualties during the Gaza War of 2014. As a result, this coverage did not provide the contexts of news stories about casualties who were portrayed in a statistical frame. Officials and medics' voices were dominant, while the voices of Israeli and Palestinian casualties themselves were largely excluded from the Australian media representations of Gaza War casualties.

Keywords: Australian media, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Gaza War, Framing, Critical discourse analysis

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Introduction

Israel launched its military operation “Protective Edge” on the Gaza Strip in July 2014. Two months of continued shelling of different areas in the strip resulted in the death of more than two thousands Palestinians including women and children, whereas Israel lost seventy-two soldiers during its operation in Gaza, and six civilians by Palestinian rockets targeting Southern Israel. Among Palestinian civilians not only were the number of deaths considerable, but also the number of injured citizens, was extremely high: for instance during the war approximately eleven thousands Palestinians were injured, yet only about two thousands Israeli were recorded injured.

International media such as CNN and the BBC took a pronounced interest in this particular event. Generally the Australian media do not prioritise covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; however, they were interested in covering events related to the Gaza War in July and August 2014 due to the numerous casualties among civilians.

This paper examines how Australian media framed casualties during the Gaza War of 2014. We analysed a sample of news items published in Australian print and online media during July and August 2014. The sample discussed in this paper includes two newspapers *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and two online news websites ABC and Crikey.

In our analysis we aim to identify how representations of casualties during the Gaza War of 2014 reflect the Australian media’s preferred discourse. Our approach is to critically analyse how actors and voices are represented in the Australian news reports and we then comment on the power of news media to include certain voices while excluding others. Subsequently, we consider the relationship between discourse and power by drawing on Fairclough’s (2001, 2015) critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework. From applying CDA to the Australian media representations of Israeli and Palestinian casualties during the Gaza War of 2014, we found that particular voices dominated creating a media discourse, which reflected the power of related actors. While the casualties’ voices were mainly excluded, the Australian media relied on both officials and medics’ voices. The approach can assist our understanding of how power shapes media portrayal of casualties during conflicts and whether those casualties were framed employing humanistic aspects.

Framing Theory

News media’s inclusion of particular voices while excluding others reveals the way in which the media frame events and issues. News framing is considered by media scholars as one of the crucial techniques used by the media to shape an event or issue (Hossain, 2015; Melki, 2014). Lecheler and de Vreese (2012) as well as Brantner, Lobinger and Wetzstein (2011) note that frames are patterns of interpretation of events and issues which are reported by media. These media scholars found that framing theory uncovers how media production shapes the news because framing reflects “the editorial direction and the ideology of the news writer or media outlet” (Yusha’u, 2011, p. 282). The frames used by news media to report on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, are applied as Fahmy and Al Emad (2011, p. 218) puts it to create and demarcate striking and significant social realities about the conflict.

We found in our study, media representations of events, including international news coverage, tend to highlight some aspects of these events and to exclude others through news frames. As Entman (2002, p.391) contends “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality” and by doing so the reality is made more noticeable and significant within the news report. The key point here as Lecheler and de Vreese (2012, p. 149) identify is the news medias’ “selective function” for news reporting frames which voices are included or excluded – that is, whose voice(s) is pushed behind the scenes. Events are framed according to Entman (2002, p. 392) by using elements in news reports, such as “certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information etc”, texts that ultimately leads to particular voices or actors to be either included or excluded.

Actors are not limited to just people in framing theory. Kandil (2009) refers to actors as people, organisations, political parties, or countries that are involved in one way or another in an event. We found several actors connected to events of the Gaza War, these include: Israel (Netanyahu, the Israeli Army and casualties); Palestinians (Hamas, Abbas, officials, medics and casualties); and international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), its bodies and countries such as the United States (US). In our study, voices are the sources that the media relied on when covering and reporting the Gaza War casualties.

Another important aspect of news framing also evident in our study is source selection. Hossain (2015, p. 526) recognises that sources are not only used by media outlets to obtain information about events but they can manufacture the news so it appears “authentic to the audience”. Whether sources are quoted directly or indirectly on sound bites in reporting, according to Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2012) they shape the framing of the news. A key reason that sources are significant as a framing device is that when news media rely on specific sources, the standpoint of the source shapes the reporting (Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011).

Our study of the conflict during the Gaza War (2014) also showed that when media outlets relied on specific sources in their news coverage, there was a disparity with regards to which voices were included or excluded in the media texts – thus the power of media reporting was exposed. As a result, using frame analysis to examine media representations of wars and political conflicts requires a three pronged approach: i) analysing how related actors are represented by media; ii) assessing which voices or actors are dominant; and iii) identifying the sources that the media outlet relied on during the conflict.

Method and Approach

We began examining a sample of news articles, published during July and August 2014 from selected Australian media outlets. The sample specifically focuses on the news articles related to the Israeli and Palestinian casualties during the Gaza War of 2014; news articles which discuss other events related to the Gaza War such as ceasefire talks between Israel and Hamas in Cairo were excluded.

The sample is mainly representative of Australian mainstream print media. Print media usually has far more in-depth coverage compared to audio and visual media. Mainstream national newspapers like *The Australian* play a significant role in setting

the political agenda “because they have the biggest newsrooms and every day they originate far more stories than any other news medium” (McKnight, 2012, p. 8). When choosing our sample of Australian print media we accounted for variations in ownership as well as the interest in media coverage of Gaza War of 2014. Hence, two newspapers were selected, *The Australian* which is the only national newspaper in Australia and is owned by News Corporation, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* “the oldest continuously published newspaper in Australia” (“The Sydney Morning Herald,” n.d.), which is owned by Fairfax Media and it reports on international events. Both newspapers represent the two major news proprietors in the Australian media (Han, 2011).

The sample also includes two online news websites: the public Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) news website, www.abc.net.au, and the largest independent news website, Crikey, www.crikey.com.au, which has a remit to cover international news. Each of these online websites were chosen as the Internet is one of the main sources of news for most people nowadays, as well as being a medium for numerous researchers interested in investigating media coverage of war and conflicts (Fahmy & Al Emad, 2011). For instance, between 2012 and 2013, 83% of people in Australia were Internet users (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014), so a substantial number of those people would have accessed their news online.

The print news articles were accessed through the Factiva database using the keywords Israel, Palestinians and Gaza. The news articles published on both news websites were collected from their online archives, using the same keywords. In total, 212 news articles were collected; the breakdown was 82 from *The Australian*, 46 from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 78 from ABC and 6 from Crikey.

Two research questions were proposed to guide the data collection and the application of critical discourse analysis:

1. How did Australian media represent Israeli and Palestinian casualties during the Gaza War of 2014?
2. How did the Australian media representations of the casualties during the War of Gaza 2014 reflect the power of related actors and voices?

CDA is particularly valuable for our study because it is explicitly critical: firstly in relation to its concern to reveal how discursive positions create discourses which can have inordinate influence on public opinion; and secondly in its commitment to progressive social change (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2001). CDA aims to investigate practices, events and texts that are shaped by power relationships (Fairclough, 2010). In our study of the news media’s reporting, CDA enables us to develop an in-depth understanding of how news reports are constructed and positioned to influence reader’s understanding.

Another aspect of CDA that is important to our study is to examine which voices and actors are included or excluded in reports about events in news article; this is the most significant framing device. When journalists or editors exclude actors and voices in their reporting it can be either intentional or as a result of blindsots, or bias. As van Leeuwen (1996, p. 38) surmises some exclusions in media representations are “innocent”, because reporters or editors assume the information is already known or

irrelevant to the reader; while other actors or voices are excluded due to media positions towards events or issues.

In our use of CDA in this study, we drew on Fairclough's (2001, 2015) three-dimensional analytical framework that consists of three stages: i) we began by describing the language, structure, and headlines of the text; ii) next we analysed the relationship between the production and possible interpretations of the text; and iii) finally we assessed the production and interpretation of the text within the social context of reporting on war conflicts and casualties. It is noted by Richardson (2007, p.100) that texts cannot be viewed or examined in isolation because news articles (texts) are neither produced, nor consumed by readers in isolation.

We examined the news articles about the Gaza 2014 conflict in relation to other articles on a similar topic. Here we used the concept of intertextuality to show the relationship between what is reported and the context of the reporting. According to van Dijk (2001), accounting for intertextuality allows the researcher to observe what might have interfered, reinforced or then transformed the reporting of the event. For our study this meant that framing the Gaza War casualties in Australian media (a particular type of text), there are other texts and voices which are also relevant and could also be part of the reporting of the event (see Figure 1).

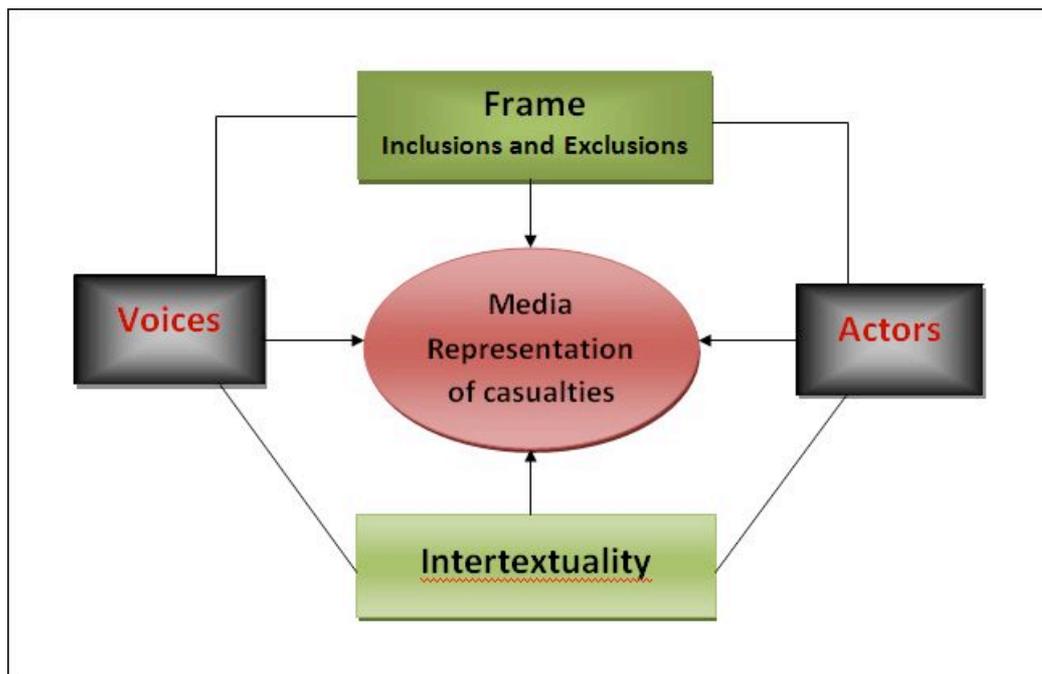


Figure 1: Analytical framework for analysing Australian media representations of the casualties during the Gaza War 2014

Findings

In our study, we examined Australian media representations of Israeli and Palestinian casualties during the Gaza War of 2014. From our analysis we found that the conflict frame was dominant in the Australian media portrayal of casualties during the war. We also found that the inclusions and exclusions of details and facts that were made by the Australian media shaped their representations. Ultimately, in examining the voices and sources Australian media relied on in their coverage of Gaza War

casualties, particular voices such as officials and medics' voices were dominant; and other voices including casualties' voices were excluded. After investigating how Australian media portrayed relevant actors to the Gaza War events, we found that casualties were portrayed in a statistical frame except in a few instances. We elaborate on each of these findings now.

Frames:

From our study a number of significant frames were evident throughout the Australian media reporting about events related to casualties during the Gaza War 2014. The most significant and dominant frame was the conflict between Israel and Hamas as well as the frame of attributing responsibility to Hamas, Israel and both sides. These frames were evident in most media reports about both Israeli and Palestinian casualties. Of a lesser significance was the frame of human interests, and the least significant frame was the victim frame.

Not only the frame of conflict was dominant in Australian media coverage of casualties during the Gaza War, but also the frame of attributing responsibility to Hamas, Israel and both sides. Australian media used the frame of attributing responsibility to Hamas for causing deaths among Palestinian civilians. This frame emerged due to Israeli claims that Hamas used its civilians as human shields, and fired missiles from inhabited areas and shelters used by civilians such as UN schools:

According to Gaza's Ministry of Health, at least 70 per cent of the dead and 1200 injured are civilians.

Israel said Hamas was using civilian premises as "human shields" when firing missiles, which is why many such facilities were hit. (Lyons, 2014a, p. 9)

The Australian media used the frame of attributing responsibility to Israel for deaths among Palestinian civilians including children. For instance, in its coverage of killing four Palestinian boys on a Gaza Beach, targeted by an Israeli shelling, the ABC attributed the responsibility to Israel, when it was stated: "In one incident, four boys aged between eight and 11 were killed on a Gaza beach when they were hit by Israeli fire in full view of several foreign journalists" (Cooper, 2014, para. 11). In other ABC reports, the responsibility was attributed to both Hamas and Israel for deaths among Palestinian civilians. An example is an indirect quotation from the Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop who said: "the retaliatory acts from both sides that have led to civilian deaths and injuries are deeply regrettable" ("Israel, militants trade fire," 2014, para. 15).

The human interests and victim frames were occasionally used during the reporting. Frames such as these were most noticeable when reporting on large numbers of casualties (mostly on the Palestinian side). In particular, these frames emerged during the events of the Israeli shelling of UN schools in Jabalia and Rafah Camps in Northern and Southern Gaza Strip; and the Israeli ground military operation in Shejaiya neighbourhood in Eastern Gaza and Khuza'a village in Southern Gaza. These events were written about by media correspondents at the site of the conflict. One of the reports written by Ruth Pollard, the *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent in Gaza about the Israeli shelling of a UN school in Jabalia Camp, for instance uses the human interests frame:

"I was sleeping when the first shell landed," said 15-year-old Rezeq al-Adham as he lay in Kamal Adwan Hospital awaiting surgery to save his injured right leg. "I escaped into the school yard and that is when the second shell landed." His father saw him fall to the ground bleeding. (Pollard, 2014b, p. 16)

Inclusions and exclusions

When examining the inclusions and exclusions in Australian media coverage of casualties during the Gaza War, we found that events and information excluded from one media outlet's coverage, were included in another's, or included in other reports published by the same outlet. For example, 'the knock on the roof' system used by the Israeli Army when shelling Palestinian houses, caused increasing deaths and injuries among civilians, but was excluded from most media reports covering Palestinian casualties. Yet, it was included in only a few reports and articles in a similar way to Lyons (2014c, p. 8) account below:

Israel has deployed the "knock on the roof" policy, under which it fires a missile without a warhead on to a building as a warning before firing a follow-up with explosives. It says it gives residents 15 minutes to leave the building but at least one video has shown only one minute passing before the second missile hits and destroys the building.

The inclusions and exclusions shaped the representations of casualties during the Gaza war as well as the voices used or quoted by the media. The sources that the media took their news items from also shaped the representations of those casualties. For instance, Australian and print media published news articles written by numerous writers who reflected their own points of view about the conflict and those casualties in Gaza. In August 11, 2014, *The Australian* newspaper published an article by Andre Oboler, who thought that the large numbers of Palestinian civilian casualties included a number of non-civilians. He claimed that "the high civilian casualty rate in Gaza is very likely to conceal many Hamas combatants" and "has been used not only to justify and mobilise hostility to Israel, but also to defend outright anti-semitism including comparisons to the Holocaust" (Oboler, 2014, p. 16). However, in another article also published in *The Australian* written by Matti Freidman (2014, p. 17), Palestinian civilians were portrayed as innocent victims when he stated that: "People were killed, most of them Palestinians, including many unarmed innocents".

The writers of news reports also adopted their own points of view in terms of attributing the responsibility for causing large numbers of casualties among Palestinian civilians to Hamas and Israel. This resulted in exclusions of some details and facts. Two examples are two articles published on the ABC website in which the responsibility was attributed to Hamas and Israel on the deaths of Palestinian civilians. First, in his article published on July 25, 2014, Glen Falkenstein attributed the responsibility for the death of Palestinian civilians to Hamas only as it "deliberately enmeshes itself within the civilian population, which means that innocent people will die despite Israel's best efforts to take precautions" (para. 1). Falkenstein wrote about the Israeli system 'knock on the roof', claiming that Israel was trying to warn civilians of impending strikes so that they would not be harmed. However, he excluded the fact that this system in which the Israeli Army fired

warning missiles to warn a few minutes before shelling the target area by destructive missiles, did not prevent the deaths and injuries among civilians. Second, in another article that was also published in July 25, 2014, Ben Saul attributed the responsibility for the deaths of Palestinian civilians to Israel, due to Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip which "cause excessive civilian casualties, illegally destroy property, and sometimes even deliberately target civilians" (Saul, 2014, para. 11). In each of these reports writers presented their personal point of view. Table 1 shows the number of news items which were written by writers and commentators.

Table (1): Numbers of news items taken from various sources within the four media

Sources of news items	The Australian	Sydney Morning Herald	ABC	Crikey	Total
Correspondent/Reporter	43	15	5	1	64
Writer/Commentator	12	12	5	5	34
Agency	1	-	22	-	23
Agency/Other sources	4	-	44	-	48
Reader	11	14	-	-	25
Other	11	5	2	-	18*
Total	82	46	78	6	212

* *Note.* Other = Undefined sources and media reporters and other sources

Voices

Although Australian print and online media employed various voices to portray Palestinian and Israeli casualties, official and medical sources were still dominant. This included both Israeli and Palestinian officials and medics. At the same time, this reliance on officials and medics resulted in an exclusion of eyewitnesses' voices such as injured people and families of dead:

Gaza's Ministry of Health said 165 Palestinians had been killed and more than 1000 injured since the war began six days ago.

The Israeli army says it has hit at least at least 1320 targets in Gaza. Hamas has fired more than 800 missiles towards Israel. (Lyons, 2014b, p. 8)

Voices of casualties emerged when Australian media were covering events that resulted in large numbers of casualties as well as events related to the Israeli shelling of UN schools in Gaza Strip. For example, Australian media included the voices of eyewitnesses in their reports about the Israeli shelling of UN school in Jabalia Camp, which Palestinian civilians were using as shelters during the war:

Four days before his death, Suliman had made the agonising decision to separate his extended family of 30, dividing them between the four local schools sheltering Palestinians.

"Let's not die together," he told his wife and children when the shelling from the Israeli tanks around their home in Beit Lahiya became too much to bear and they were forced to flee. The 42-year-old strawberry farmer died alongside two of his cousins but the rest of his family survived. Thirteen others also died and a further 100 were injured. (Pollard, 2014a, p. 25)

International sources such as the UN, US's and Australian officials were included in Australian media coverage of the Gaza War casualties according to what sources the reporter needed. The focus was on the international voices, which called for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and showed concerns about targeting civilians:

"The Security Council members called for de-escalation of the situation, restoration of calm, and reinstatement of the November 2012 ceasefire," the 15-member body said in the statement.

It also expressed "serious concern regarding the crisis related to Gaza and the protection and welfare of civilians on both sides" and called for respect for international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians. ("Israel, militants," 2014, para. 16–18)

Portraying Main Actors:

When examining how the Australian media portrayed relevant actors to events related to the Gaza War of 2014, we focused on representations of the main actors including casualties, Hamas and Israel.

Casualties reported by Australian media during the Gaza War were framed in numbers only, except in a few instances. As a consequence, the humanistic aspect was less apparent compared with the statistical aspect. Details such as the names, ages and the context in which Palestinian casualties were killed or injured were excluded. For instance, Johnson (2014, para. 1) wrote: "An estimated 190 Palestinian children have been killed and close to 2000 families have lost their homes to date (in less than three weeks) due to Israeli strikes that are purported to be targeting 'militants'". On the contrary, some details including the names of Palestinian casualties were included when the deaths were leaders or commanders in Hamas or other Palestinian factions:

The deadliest single strike took place shortly after midnight (local time) when a missile slammed into a house in the northern town of Beit Hanun, killing Hafez Hammad, a senior Islamic Jihad commander, and five of his family members, including two women and two children. ("Israel vows," 2014, para. 11–13)

Australian media used the same statistical aspect when portraying Israeli casualties. One example is published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*: "Two Israeli civilians and a Thai agricultural worker have also died, along with 43 soldiers from the Israeli Defence Forces, all killed since Israel began its ground invasion of Gaza on July 17" (Pollard, 2014c, p. 12). However, in some cases media reports showed the context in which Israeli deaths were killed as well as their ages as illustrated in this ABC report: "An Israeli citizen was killed by the rocket fire - the first Israel fatality in the fighting. A spokesman for the Israeli emergency services told AFP the 38-year-old was delivering food to soldiers serving in the area" ("Israel resumes," 2014, para. 3–4).

Overall casualties were mainly portrayed in Australian media coverage of most events related to the Gaza War of 2014 in a statistical frame – they were represented as victims and innocent civilians. During the war, these specific representations emerged when the media coverage was of a large human toll on the Palestinian side where "many hundreds of innocent people have been killed, including women and children" ("Gaza conflict," 2014, para. 7).

Due to the use of voices and the particular news sources each media took news from, various representations of Israel and Hamas emerged in Australian media coverage of the Gaza War of 2014. For example, Hamas was portrayed as a militant group, weakened rabble and a terrorist organisation that is responsible for targeting Israeli civilians. Miller's (2014) article is a case in point where Hamas was represented as an "Islamist terrorist" group (p. 18). Hamas was blamed for using Palestinian civilians as human shields and causing large numbers of deaths among them. Hamas was framed as "[s]uch a hate-filled organisation, with the cruelty to use its own children as human shields to protect its weapons and to stir up international hatred of Israel, cannot play a role in any peace process." ("Time," 2014, p. 23). Hamas was portrayed also in a headline of one of the Australian's editorials as "Gaza's worst enemy" who "puts its people at risk by operating in heavily populated residential areas" ("Hamas," 2014, p. 13).

On the contrary, sometimes Israel was portrayed as a strong military force that is responsible for the deaths among Palestinian civilians, and "an outlaw state, exploiting its power over Palestinians to take and keep what it wants" (Saul, 2014, para. 22). At other times, Israel was represented as a Western-style liberal democracy and a country under attack, defending its security and civilians' lives from Hamas rockets, as well as trying to reduce deaths among Palestinians:

Approximately two-thirds of those killed have been combatants but, despite Israel's unique policy of warning the residents of any house about to be bombed, Gaza civilians have, tragically, been killed, a direct result of the terrorists' longstanding tactic of using civilians as human shields. This is a war crime known as perfidy. (Hyams, 2014, p. 14)

The previous examples show different representations of Israel in news articles published by the Australian media according to different writers' positions. The quotations from sources or voices that media used shaped the representations of relevant actors, including Israel. One quotation from the Federal Labor member for Fremantle and former United Nations lawyer, Melissa Parke, published on the ABC website indicates this:

"Israel is the occupying power, Israel is the military might and if Israel and states like the US and Australia, which has a seat on the security council, would stand on the side of peace and justice then I think we would see a settlement happen,". (Borrello, 2014, para. 7)

Conclusion

Our study examined the representations of casualties during the Gaza War of 2014 in Australian print and online media. We analysed 212 news items published in two newspapers and two websites during July and August 2014.

We found that Australian print and online media employed a conflict frame when covering events related to the casualties during the Gaza War of 2014. This Gaza conflict was framed mostly as a conflict between Israel and Hamas, ignoring that the Gaza War is a stage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, Australian media

coverage did not provide the contexts of news stories about the Gaza War casualties. The dominance of the conflict frame on Australian media coverage resulted in portraying casualties in a statistical frame. Further, related details such as casualties' names and circumstances in which they were killed or injured were largely absent. While Australian print and online media framed some events related to large numbers of casualties in a human interest frame, the media coverage overall lacked the humanistic aspect. Therefore, there is still a need for more balance of Australian media between their coverage of conflicts and contexts relevant to victims' stories.

Australian media portrayal of casualties during the Gaza War of 2014 has showed how the dominance of particular voices or sources played a role in representing actors of related events as those representations varied according to the media use of sources. Our findings revealed that the media mainly relied on Israeli and Palestinian officials and medics as well as some international voices such as the UN and officials from countries such as the US, Australia and Egypt. On the contrary, the voices of Israeli and Palestinian casualties were excluded from Australian media coverage about related events to the Gaza War of 2014. This includes voices of injured people, families of dead people and eyewitnesses. A key finding from our study is that particular voices dominated the media discourse on the Gaza War and this reflected the power of relevant actors such as government and army officials. Casualties and victims of the Gaza War were the actors who have the least power, as their voices were largely absent in the media coverage. For now our study shows that actors such as the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian president as well as other officials such as the spokesmen of the Israeli Army and Hamas have more power to present their perspectives about the conflict, which enabled them to have the hegemony over media discourses.

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