

**Is the Western media impeding press freedom  
in those countries that need it most?**

**By Annabel Symington**

War raged in Gaza for 22 days. The battle for media coverage raged still longer. Western journalists viewed the war from a corralled position on a hill in Israel overlooking Gaza. The local journalists were inside, surrounded by the realities of the war. But did we hear their story?

Israel stopped foreign journalists from entering Gaza, and in doing so placed iron shackles around the Palestinian journalists. The BBC, CBC and CNN were reliant on journalists inside Gaza for images and information, but they handled all images and reports that came out of the territory with suspicion because they couldn't verify the facts themselves. When they aired reports from Gaza, they placed a disclaimer on the images that came from Palestinian journalists stating that no foreign journalist had been able to check the images' authenticity. In so doing they questioned the images' legitimacy, and the legitimacy of the Palestinian journalists. Israel carefully handled the Western media to promote their own version of the Gaza war. "It was about who was important to Israel when it came to getting their message out," said Sherine Tadros, a British journalist with Al Jazeera English, "And Israel were more interested in their message being filtered through the Western media than the local media." The effects of Israel's controlling hand on the Western journalists had a butterfly effect on all journalists inside Gaza. Sherine Tadros was in Gaza for the duration of the war. She had entered the territory two months earlier and had stayed to support her colleague Ayman Mohyeldin, Al Jazeera English's permanent Gaza correspondent. "

"We really felt like we were the only ones there," said Sherine. "The Western broadcasters were sending correspondents to Gaza sporadically. Suddenly there was this war and everyone wanted to get in, but Gaza was a story before that."

When the war began everything changed for Sherine and the Palestinian journalists working alongside her. The story they were living, along with the 1.5 million Gaza residents, was in the international media everyday, but it was not the same story they were witnessing. It was as if the largely Arabic media inside Gaza were experiencing a different war to the one that the Western press were reporting on from Israel.

Israel capitalised on the commercial monopoly that the established Western press has over the media globally. And the Western media became the modus operandi for Israel's press office. The status that the international news broadcasters' hold granted them a legitimacy that caused the reports coming out of Gaza, produced by international Arabic and local news channels, to be dismissed by many as sensationalist.

"If the same image had been taken by a Western journalist, from CNN or BBC, it would have been considered much more powerful within international public opinion," said Soazig Dollet, head of Reporters Without Borders North Africa and Middle-East Desk. "When you take a photo of your own people suffering, people think that you are not as objective as a photographer from the outside would be."

But can this argument be applied to any local journalist reporting on a local story? Or is the argument only applicable to Palestinian and Arabic journalists whose style of journalism is different from that of the Western media?

Soazig commented that when she went to Gaza after the war, the Palestinian journalists said that they should have told more stories rather than just showing woman crying, bloodied bodies and devastated houses. "That would have had more emotional play, they told me," said Soazig, "As their reports would have been more inline with the Western style of journalism."

But why is the different style of journalism that the Palestinian journalists have from the Western press used against them, ultimately at the detriment of the story and global awareness of the plight of the Gazan people? This question seems unanswerable.

Reporters Without Borders wrote a report about the media environment in Gaza during the war. They interviewed a number of Palestinian journalists who complained that they were not seen as "real journalists". The manager of *Ramattan*, the Palestinian news agency that provided footage for the BBC, CNN, Channel 4, and France 24, told Reporters Without Borders: "We are not credible because we are Palestinian. Anyone is considered to be better than us and this is even if we have many years of media experience."

The International Federation of Journalism, in a report titled 'Justice in the News: A Responce to Targeting of Media in Gaza' , commented: "It is important to note that the conditions of journalism in Palestine have been severely compromised in recent years by political divisions." But once again, why should the political factions of Gaza be used to discredit the work of Palestinian journalists?

Gaza needs a voice. Gaza does not need a voice mediated by Hamas. Gaza does not need a voice mediated by Israel. Gaza does not need a voice mediated by the Western press. But through a sophisticated application of public relations, Israel sought to limit the press freedom in Gaza by mediating all the voices that spoke of the war.

It appears that Palestinian journalists have been paralysed by years of inaction by the international press and the actions of the Israeli government. "For press freedom to flourish in Gaza, Palestinian journalists need investment," said Sherine Tadros. "Having local people reporting is increasingly what the big international broadcasters are doing. But that is certainly not happening in Gaza."

Maybe the detrimental effect that Israel's blockade of foreign journalists had on the international coverage of the war will encourage foreign editors to invest more in Gaza in the future. And finally the Western media will be able to promote local Palestinian journalists as their colleagues rather than silencing them through distrust of their work.

"The Israelis won the propaganda battle of the Gaza war but in a very crude sense it backfired," said William Horsley, International Director of the Centre for Freedom of the Media at Sheffield University, "The unquestioning support that Israel enjoyed is now being questioned by journalists and the world." Hopefully as Israel is questioned, Palestinian journalists will be able to find their voice.