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## BIAS IN THE NEWS?

### The Representation of Palestinians and Israelis in the Coverage of the First and Second Intifada

**Annelore Deprez and Karin Raeymaeckers**

**Abstract** / Various authors on the media coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict assert that it is biased and unbalanced. This study focuses on the representation of the First and Second Intifada in Flemish daily newspapers. It combines a content analysis with in-depth interviews with journalists to investigate any imbalance and bias in favour of the Israeli point of view. The results reveal a certain evolution and some divergence in the coverage of the two Intifadas. The study shows that while some variables are in favour of the Israeli point of view, others clearly reflect the Palestinian perspective. The study therefore does not support the hypothesis of a pro-Israeli bias in Flemish daily newspapers. They are found to cover the First and Second Intifada in a rather balanced way, in contrast to the conclusions reached by other international studies on the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

**Keywords** / bias / content analysis / First and Second Intifada / in-depth interviews / representation

## Introduction

One of the main conclusions of the expert meeting on ‘Transparency in Foreign News Reporting’ (Rotterdam, April 2008) is that the selection and construction of news items, the picture that we see of ‘the foreign’, is a filtered, distorted, manipulated, one-sided and simplified image. In recent years several empirical studies of the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict have supported this conclusion by detecting a bias in the representation of Israelis and Palestinians in the news coverage. However, these studies neglect to some extent European news coverage and include more television news bulletins than newspaper articles. Moreover, their findings are seldom tested against the professional opinions of journalists.

The purpose of our study is to remedy the shortcomings observed in empirical research on the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. We do so by focusing on the portrayal of Israelis and Palestinians in the coverage of the First and Second Intifada in Flemish daily newspapers. This longitudinal content analysis, combined with in-depth interviews with journalists who cover the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in newspapers and news bulletins, investigates any shifts in representation of the conflict between the First and Second Intifada. Various studies acknowledge that

the representation of both parties in the conflict has evolved over the years. In particular, key events such as the two Intifadas, peace negotiations and agreements are put forward as influencing this changing representation (Bar-Tal and Teichman, 2005; Daniel, 1995; Dente Ross, 2003; Dor, 2004; Mandelzis, 2003; Zaharna, 1995).

Many authors mention not only an evolution in the coverage but also a certain degree of bias. Numerous publications on the representation of victims, the contextual information, the use of sources and the labelling of acts and actors support this idea of imbalance (Dunsky, 2001; First, 1998, 2004; Korn, 2004; Lowstedt and Madhoun, 2003; Mandelzis, 2003; Nir and Roeh, 1992; Rinnawi, 2007; Viser, 2003; Zelizer et al., 2002). However, it must be remarked that most previous research into the representation of Palestinians and Israelis narrowly concentrated on the Israeli and American media – mostly the daily press – and only recently have studies been conducted in European countries (mainly in Great Britain) (Ackerman, 2001; Cohen et al., 1993; de Bruijn, 2002; Loughborough University Communications Research Centre, 2006; Philo and Berry, 2004; Philo et al., 2003). Furthermore, it is striking that newspaper research is carried out only sporadically. As only a few research studies concentrate on both the First and the Second Intifada, moreover, any divergence or changes in the coverage are obviously neglected. Studying both Intifadas on the basis of the same content analysis (taking into consideration the differing background of both uprisings) makes it possible to discover any changes.

Thus it is both timely and of interest to study how Palestinians and Israelis are represented in the written press coverage of the First and the Second Intifada. Are the two Intifadas real turning points in the representation of the conflict parties? How are the Israelis and Palestinians covered in the media? Can a degree of imbalance in representation be detected? And what do journalists themselves think about these observations?

## **The Influence of the First and Second Intifada on the Representation of Israelis and Palestinians**

Both the First and Second Intifada are key events in the representation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. While the image of the Palestinians is quite positive during the First Intifada, a change can be observed towards a more negative view during the Second Intifada. The reverse holds true for the Israeli image. Israelis are portrayed rather negatively in the period of the First and quite positively during the Second Intifada.

Several authors notice this shift in portrayal. Some of them explain the change in representation as a consequence of the First Intifada. Zaharna (1995), for instance, argues that at the beginning of the First Intifada Palestinians are highly individualized and represented as the underdog in the conflict. It is also the first time that they are connected with positive values such as courage and self-confidence. Daniel (1995) also stresses the First Intifada as a turning point, as the prevailing David–Goliath pattern – where the Israelis were David and the Palestinians Goliath – is reversed. Palestinians are depicted as unarmed civilians who are trying to defend themselves with limited resources against the military power of Israel. Thus the

image of the Palestinians as ruthless terrorists is replaced by the image of heroes and, at the same time, victims in the conflict. Exactly the kind of image Israelis were claiming for themselves before the beginning of the First Intifada.

However, several authors argue that the image of Israelis and Palestinians changes again at the outbreak of the Second Intifada. Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005) detect a new trend of delegitimizing the Palestinians with the Second Intifada. Such a shift is also emphasized by Dente Ross (2003) and Mandelzis (2003). The Palestinians are specifically depicted as racists, anti-Semites and suicide terrorists, whereas the Israelis are represented as terrorized and traumatized victims. Dor (2004) supports these observations and contends that Israeli newspapers emphasize the justice and rightness of Israeli objectives, focus on Israeli security, delegitimize the opponent, declare the Israeli people to be victims and push for unity.

The main reason for the observed shift in representation in the Second Intifada appears to be the change in the nature of the Intifada itself. In 1987, at the start of the First Intifada, young Palestinians spontaneously took to the streets, using stones as weapons, to protest against the Israeli occupation. The Second Intifada was, from its onset in 2000, much more violent, with numerous terrorist and suicide attacks. It is the latter element that has turned the representation of the Palestinians into a far more negative picture (Moghadam, 2003; 65–92).

## **The Representation of Israelis and Palestinians Related to Journalistic Practice**

Empirical research into the content of the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict shows that Israelis and Palestinians are portrayed differently in the media. Nearly all the studies reveal an imbalance in favour of the Israelis. In this regard, a lack of contextual information leaves the motivation of Israelis and of Palestinians ill-defined (e.g. Dunsky, 2001; Loughborough University Communications Research Centre, 2006; Mandelzis, 2003; Philo and Berry, 2004). Palestinian victims are not personalized. Figures of the numbers of victims are inaccurate. Although more Palestinians are killed, the coverage takes it for granted that there are more Israeli victims (e.g. Cohen et al., 1993; Korn, 2004; Viser, 2003; Zelizer et al., 2002). Labelling also favours the Israeli side of the conflict. Journalists write about disputed territories, settlements, terrorists, rather than about occupied territories, colonies or freedom fighters (e.g. First, 1998, 2004; Korn, 2004). Finally, the actors cited and reported on are predominantly Israeli, while Palestinian actors are rarely consulted (e.g. First, 1998, 2004; Nir and Roeh, 1992; Philo et al., 2003; Rinnawi, 2007).

Various authors agree that one of the reasons for the observed imbalance is the way the international news media and their correspondents/journalists function. The Shoemaker and Reese (1996) hierarchy of influences model identifies several levels of influence: the individual, routine, extra media, organizational and ideological level.

In the first place, there are the individual, journalist-related variables that influence the content of news coverage towards a pro-Israeli bias (Ibrahim, 2003: 92; Prevo and van de Hulsbeek, 2002; Werder and Golan, 2002). As many Middle East

correspondents do not speak Arabic, they have no other choice but to base their stories on Israeli sources. This language gap renders Palestinian perceptions of occurrences virtually inaccessible. The religious background is another important factor. Are Jewish journalists capable of neglecting their religious affinity with the Israeli actor for the sake of balanced coverage? And what about journalists who favour Islam? And finally, how important is the fact that western journalists look at events in a biased way? Ibrahim (2003: 92) contends that western correspondents approach Middle East conflicts from a western ethnocentric perspective and neglect to make the necessary differentiation.

However, not only journalist-related variables determine the way the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is covered in the media. Correspondents are also confronted with practical journalistic impediments. Noakes and Wilkins (2002: 654) and Philo and Berry (2004) point to the correspondent's place of residence. Most international correspondents are stationed in Israel, rather than in the occupied territories. They are consequently far from the real centre of conflict. Besides, the Israeli government does not encourage coverage from inside the territories. Journalists who want to enter the occupied territories are often denied access or meet with severe travel restrictions (Enderlin, 2003; Ibrahim, 2003: 96–7; Philo and Berry, 2004: 247; Philo et al., 2003: 146).

Apart from practical limitations, media coverage of the Middle East is also affected by organizational and routine pressure. A study by Dor (2004) shows that it is the editor, rather than the correspondent, who decides what is news. In other words, unless journalists conform to certain media routines and organizational values, they run the risk that their reports will not be published. Luyendijk (2008) stresses the impact of media budgets, the time pressure inherent in news gathering, the available genres in journalism and the internal dynamics of the news organization bureaucracies on the 'manufacturing' of news. In his words, 'the coverage that we get is the logical outcome of the limitations inherent in the production of news' (Luyendijk, 2008: 4).

In the US, and to a lesser extent in Europe, there is also the pressure exerted by political and religious lobby groups. The US counts a lot of Jewish lobby groups that are active in political and media environments. Obviously, the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict reflects the power of those groups (Philo and Berry, 2004: 248). Contrary to the European media coverage, the American news media bring out little or no Arab context (Ibrahim, 2003: 91; Schechter, 2003).

However, the international news media are not alone in bearing responsibility for the overrepresentation of Israeli perspectives and views. The defectiveness of Palestinian information dissemination is also a contributory factor. While Israelis are apparently very much aware of the importance of information dissemination, Palestinians are less interested in pleasing international media contacts.

Each Israeli ministry has a spokesperson who is readily accessible to foreign correspondents. This spokesperson uses western-style communication techniques, organizing press conferences on a regular basis and providing foreign journalists with a wealth of source material (El-Nawawy and Kelly, 2001: 105; Philo and Berry, 2004: 246; Philo et al., 2003: 146). The Palestinian PR apparatus is underdeveloped.

Its spokespersons are not trained to confront foreign correspondents and they lack the linguistic and communicative fluency of their Israeli counterparts (Prevo and van de Hulsbeek, 2002: 30). So 'Arabs are at least partly responsible for misconceptions about themselves in the Western news media and for increasing the discrepancy between themselves and the Israelis in dealing with the foreign news media' (El-Nawawy and Kelly, 2001: 107). Wolfsfeld (2001: 114) adds that Palestinian organizations increasingly address the international media with negative messages, e.g. videotapes with testimonies of Palestinian suicide terrorists or footage of attacks on Israeli targets. Apparently Palestinians regard this kind of alternative communication as an efficient way of addressing the international media.

### **Journalists' Responses to Limitations in News Production, with a Focus on the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict**

As the previous paragraphs show, various factors intervene in the way in which the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is portrayed in the media. However, if we combine the above data from various empirical studies with information taken from our in-depth interviews with journalists, we find that they have some reservations concerning news production and selection. But first it is important to frame the working environment of the Flemish-speaking journalists who report on the Middle East.

First of all, few journalists employed in Flemish media organizations have the opportunity to dedicate themselves to the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on a daily basis. Only journalists on quality papers may exclusively specialize in certain foreign regions. Journalists who work for popular news media are expected to report on a variety of foreign countries. Unlike the audiovisual media, the Flemish dailies have no correspondents on the spot. This is quite remarkable, especially when compared with the Dutch dailies, which do have their own correspondents (Luyendijk, 2006). It follows that most of the coverage of Israel/Palestine is deskwork, unless exceptional circumstances and available financial resources make it possible to travel to hot-news regions.

To test the results of international studies concerning news selection and production, we interviewed five journalists who are experts in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and who are responsible for its coverage in the Flemish media. Four are employed by newspaper organizations and one by the public service broadcaster. All journalists travelled at least once to the conflict area to cover the news events. Only a few among them have a notion of Arabic and Hebrew, most conducting their interviews in English, French or German. As far as knowledge of the languages is concerned, it cannot be denied that a thorough command of the language of the people you are covering is an asset. Knowing Arabic and/or Hebrew also gives access to documents and sources that otherwise cannot be referred to. According to the journalists, however, knowledge of the different languages, while important, should not be overrated. Contrary to what scientific studies conclude, a lack of knowledge of Arabic or Hebrew does not necessarily undermine good coverage. Also the place of residence of the correspondents (practically always in Israel) is not a big problem. Every journalist who wishes to do his or her job well has to take the initiative to

visit the Palestinian territories on a regular basis. Of course, this should be put in the right perspective. Journalists may be prepared and willing to enter the Palestinian territories to get the other side of the story, but the numerous border closures and checks often make this impossible. Particularly at a time of heavily escalating violence, reporting from the inside is anything but self-evident.

As for the influence of the aforementioned factors on the representation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the journalists interviewed were unanimous that the media organization and the editors hardly play a part. There are no official guidelines, rules or regulations for covering the conflict. It is up to the journalist to decide on the words in which to report on the conflict. However, all journalists do find it important to avoid using labels that are heavily charged with meaning and to report in a neutral way. The journalists also acknowledge that they are responsible for the headlines and the content of their reports. Editors may happen to change the content or the headlines, but this is certainly not a deliberate strategy. As a rule editors might alter headlines for reasons of space or to correct grammatical errors. They have no intention to steer the content or interpretation in a particular direction.

Opinions on the influence of western culture on the news coverage are divided. Some of the journalists we interviewed affirm that a neutral coverage – under certain conditions – is possible. Others recognize that cultural influences play their part. One of the journalists admits that there is undoubtedly a closer affinity with the Israeli versions of events. Another journalist thinks that covering the conflict from a western cultural background favours the Palestinians. Journalists project western norms – often related to western-style democracy – onto Israeli society, and this creates big expectations from this country. On the other hand, Arabs, who often live in authoritarian regimes, are not expected to live up to western norms and values.

As far as the impact of personal influence is concerned, the journalists have to admit that this is difficult to avoid. Nevertheless, each journalist strives for an objective coverage. One of them argues that personal influences are not necessarily bad, as long as the journalist remains aware of them and open to changes in his or her personal ideas.

The study of the influence exerted by interest groups and embassies shows that although they attempt to exert control over the content of the coverage, the journalists themselves ultimately decide which pieces of information they take up. Journalists are aware that these groups try to influence them, but they also believe they can manage to exclude spin from their reports.

Finally, our study also differs from the statements in previous research outcomes about the accessibility of actors and PR strategies (cf. el-Nawawy and Kelly, 2001; Philo and Berry, 2004; Philo et al., 2003; Prevo and van de Hulsbeek, 2002). According to the journalists it is not difficult to interview official Israeli and Palestinian sources, non-official points of view, however, are less easy to come by. Neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis are very keen to reply to questions in a non-official way. There is a noticeable difference, however, in the contacts with the two sets of actors. Israeli political actors are much easier to talk to than their Palestinian counterparts, because of the difficult working conditions of Palestinian political organizations. According to one of the journalists:

*Arab countries [are] generally less familiar with openness and democracy. It was possible for me to see and speak to a number of people, but you always have the feeling of being watched. They told me that if I wanted to speak to people of the PLO, I had better not asked after their contacts with Hamas. Otherwise I would get trouble. On the contrary Israel is very open. You can speak to opponents of the government, you can speak to Israeli Arabs and that causes no trouble at all.*

In summary, we can conclude that some empirical research findings are supported by journalists working in the field, while others must be modified. However, the question remains how Israelis and Palestinians are portrayed in the Flemish press during the periods of the First and Second Intifada. Can we observe an evolution and potential bias that concurs with previous research? In the following paragraphs we compare the results of our study with the opinions of the journalists interviewed.

Methodology

In a longitudinal content analysis centred on the variables of context, victims, sources and labelling (see the international representation research cited earlier), a sample of 926 newspaper articles was examined. The sample includes only articles concerning the First or the Second Intifada and excludes articles on elections, peace negotiations, etc. that are not directly related to the Intifada.

As mentioned earlier, the subject of our study is the coverage of the First and Second Intifada in the Flemish daily newspapers. The literature places the First Intifada between 1987 and 1993, and the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005. We selected and researched the periods from 1 October 1987 to 31 March 1988, from 1 October 1989 to 31 March 1990 and from 1 October 1991 to 31 March 1992 for the First Intifada, and for the Second Intifada the periods from 1 October 2000 to 31 March 2001, from 1 October 2002 to 31 March 2003 and from 1 October 2004 to 31 March 2005. We opted to examine all newspaper issues from the selected periods. A preliminary research on the basis of one artificial week – composed of a stratified sample with constructed weeks – showed that this was too small a sample to identify significant findings. Also the selection of two or more artificial weeks would not have resulted in the necessary amount of articles. Eventually 537 articles on the First Intifada and 389 articles on the Second Intifada were examined (Table 1).

TABLE 1  
Number of Articles per Newspaper during each Intifada

	The First Intifada	The Second Intifada	Total
<i>DS</i>	120 (43.2%)	158 (56.8%)	<i>N</i> = 278 (30.0%)
<i>DM</i>	91 (38.7%)	144 (61.3%)	<i>N</i> = 235 (25.4%)
<i>HLN</i>	69 (58.5%)	49 (41.5%)	<i>N</i> = 118 (12.7%)
<i>HV</i>	56 (53.3%)	49 (46.7%)	<i>N</i> = 105 (11.3%)
<i>FET</i>	53 (27.9%)	137 (72.1%)	<i>N</i> = 190 (20.5%)
	<i>N</i> = 389 (42.0%)	<i>N</i> = 537 (58.0%)	<i>N</i> = 926

$p < .001$ .  $\chi^2 = 35.390$ .



The representation research was carried out in five national daily newspapers, representative of the Flemish newspaper market: *De Standaard* (DS), *De Morgen* (DM), *De Financieel Economische Tijd/De Tijd* (FET), *Het Volk* (HV) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (HLN). *De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *De Financieel Economische Tijd/De Tijd* are quality newspapers, while *Het Volk* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* are classified as popular newspapers. As Table 1 shows, 278 articles were found in *De Standaard*, 235 in *De Morgen*, 190 in *De Financieel Economische Tijd/De Tijd*, 105 in *Het Volk* and 118 in *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

## Results<sup>1</sup>

### *The Presence of Contextual Information*

Various international studies conclude that contextual information is missing in the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Ackerman, 2001; de Bruijn, 2002; Dunskey, 2001; Mandelzis, 2003; Philo and Berry, 2004; Philo et al., 2003; Lowstedt and Madhoun, 2003; Loughborough University Communications Research Centre, 2006). Consequently, the audience has difficulty understanding the background, the arguments and the developments in the conflict.

Our analysis underlines the minimal reporting of context. Table 2 shows that only the connection between Israel and the occupation of Palestinian territories is mentioned frequently. Also, information related to the American involvement in the conflict is often present, as is the problem of Palestinian refugees and Israeli acts framed in the context of anti-terrorist and security measures. Other important contextual elements concerning the main controversies (Jerusalem, water supply, settlements) or the origins of the conflict (Zionism, Holocaust) are only rarely broached. Furthermore, it is striking that contextual data are seldom expanded on. Journalists may mention the difficult status of Jerusalem, but they fail to frame it.

The in-depth interviews with the journalists show that the lack of context is due to the limited space in which the news has to be reported. Besides, journalists assume that the public has become able to put the conflict in a broader context. Studies by Philo and Berry (2004) and Rotik (2006) disprove that assumption.

As for the amount of contextual information, we can observe some striking differences between the First and the Second Intifada. In the coverage of the First Intifada Israel is explicitly labelled as an occupying power. For it is the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories that provokes Palestinian acts of violence. The articles on the Second Intifada still mention the occupier, but not bracketed together with Israel. What we do notice is an increase in reports of the Israelis reacting against terror. In other words, Palestinians are no longer seen as reacting against the occupation, but Israelis are portrayed as acting against Palestinian terrorists to safeguard their own security.

The journalists give different reasons for the disappearance of the explicit relation between Israel and the role of occupier. Some journalists argue that within the context of the Second Intifada the labelling of Israel as an occupier is no longer accurate. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the restricted autonomy

TABLE 2

**The Presence of Contextual Information**

	Present	Extensively discussed
The illegality of Jewish settlements	3.8% ( <i>N</i> = 35)	0.2% ( <i>N</i> = 2)
The existence of Israeli checkpoints	3.9% ( <i>N</i> = 36)	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)
A network of roads for Israelis only	1.3% ( <i>N</i> = 12)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
The occupation of Palestinian territories	<b>39.0% (<i>N</i> = 361)</b>	2.9% ( <i>N</i> = 27)
The expropriation of Palestinian territories	1.7% ( <i>N</i> = 16)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
American involvement and aid for Israelis	<b>14.4% (<i>N</i> = 133)</b>	1.6% ( <i>N</i> = 15)
Zionism as justification for occupying Palestinian territories	1.6% ( <i>N</i> = 15)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
The Holocaust as justification for occupying Palestinian territories	0.3% ( <i>N</i> = 3)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
Islam as justification for fighting the Israeli occupation	0.8% ( <i>N</i> = 7)	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)
Unequal distribution of water resources	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
The problem of Palestinian refugees	<b>15.4% (<i>N</i> = 143)</b>	0.8% ( <i>N</i> = 7)
The special status of Jerusalem	4.9% ( <i>N</i> = 45)	0.4% ( <i>N</i> = 4)
Israelis acting to guarantee their own security	<b>10.8% (<i>N</i> = 100)</b>	4.5% ( <i>N</i> = 42)
Israelis acting against Palestinian terror	<b>14.0% (<i>N</i> = 130)</b>	4.5% ( <i>N</i> = 42)
The occupation of 1967	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
The Green Line	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
Historical background of the Intifada	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)
The Sharm-el-Sjeikh Summit	0.2% ( <i>N</i> = 2)	0.2% ( <i>N</i> = 2)
Religion as justification for occupying Palestinian territories	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)	0.0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
The construction of a 'security fence' wall	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)	0.1% ( <i>N</i> = 1)

in the Palestinian territories have changed the relations between Israelis and Palestinians. Israel no longer occupies all Palestinian territories. Habituation is another factor. After so many years of conflict journalists assume that the public knows who the occupier is, and explicit reporting seems superfluous. A third factor is that the goal of the Second Intifada is rather obscure. While the First Intifada is obviously an uprising of Palestinian people against the Israeli occupier, the objectives of the Second Intifada are less clear and unequivocal. Therefore journalists avoid expressly labelling Israel as the occupier.

The fact that during the Second Intifada the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is more often framed in the context of terror proves to be related to the events of 11 September 2001. According to the journalists interviewed, 9/11 introduced terrorist labels into the media coverage of the conflict. So this historical event almost certainly accounts for the implementation of the argument that Israelis are only reacting against terrorism.

*The Labelling of Israelis and Palestinians*

Our study shows that Palestinians and Israelis are labelled with a very limited range of terms. Words such as ‘underground movement’, ‘patriot’, ‘saboteur’ and ‘assassin’ are not found. Labels such as ‘anti-Semite’, ‘home guard’, ‘criminal’, ‘fanatic’, ‘front’, ‘nationalist’, ‘independence movement’, ‘racist’, ‘separatist’, ‘freedom fighter’, ‘enemy’, ‘liberation movement’, ‘resistance fighter’ and ‘suicide activist’ are hardly used. The question thus remains, on what basis Palestinians and Israelis are labelled?

Table 3 shows that frequently used labels for Palestinians are ‘activist’, ‘extremist’, ‘fundamentalist’, ‘guerrilla fighter’, ‘martyr’, ‘militant’, ‘murderer’, ‘organization’, ‘movement’, ‘radical’, ‘fighter’, ‘terrorist’ and ‘suicide terrorist’. Only the word ‘occupier’ is used more often to label the Israeli actor. In other words, heavily charged labels are more often attached to the Palestinian actors in the conflict.

Our study further confirms that Palestinians are predominantly portrayed as terrorists rather than as martyrs (Zelizer et al., 2002). The labels of ‘freedom fighter’ and ‘resistance fighter’ are not employed in the coverage. On the other hand, we find several instances of the Israeli actor being labelled as ‘occupying army’. However, the use of the latter term is rather rare in comparison with labels such as ‘terrorist’, ‘radical’ and ‘extremist’ for Palestinians (de Bruijn, 2002).

The journalists interviewed explain changes in the labelling of Palestinian actors in the first place by the changing geopolitical and global context. In the period of the First Intifada several freedom movements were active across the world, notably in Latin America. The fact that other people stood up and fought for their rights had an impact on the labelling of Palestinians. During the Second Intifada, the threat of terror played an important role in the labelling process. Second, the nature of the

**TABLE 3**  
**Labels Applied to Palestinians and Israelis**

	Palestinian	Israeli
Activist	52	4
Movement	124	12
Occupier	0	32
Extremist	67	18
Fundamentalist	28	2
Group	85	5
Guerrilla fighter	42	1
Martyr	19	5
Militant	74	7
Murderer	8	2
Organization	101	10
Radical	94	4
Fighter	35	1
Terrorist	108	24
Suicide terrorist	18	1

Intifadas also influenced the choice of words. In particular, the increase in suicide attacks gave the Second Intifada a negative image. Consequently, the ‘terrorist’ label gained more acceptance. Nevertheless, the interviewees state that they are very careful in their use of the ‘terrorist’ label. The problem is that few alternatives or synonyms are available.

*The Labelling of Palestinian and Israeli Acts*

Not only are the Israeli and Palestinian actors assigned different labels, but also their acts are associated with specific words. Our research shows that labels such as ‘interception’, ‘misunderstanding’, ‘miscalculation’, ‘slaughter’ and ‘intervention’ are not mentioned in articles on the First and Second Intifada, and that ‘barbarian’, ‘aimed attack’, ‘murder’, ‘tragedy’, ‘security measure’ and ‘mistake’ are hardly used. On the other hand, there are other labels that are frequently used, as shown in Table 4. In the articles sampled ‘attack’ is very often used as a label, especially and most frequently to typify Palestinian acts. Also the labels ‘massacre’ and ‘act of terror’ are predominantly attached to Palestinian acts. It is striking, however, that the latter are only used sporadically. Consequently, we have to adjust the conclusions of previous studies that the ‘massacre’ label mainly occurs in relation to Palestinian acts (e.g. Fisk, 2005). The label is used less often than some studies purport and it is recognized that the Israelis are also responsible for massacres.

Although Table 4 shows that the more negative labels such as ‘invasion’, ‘raid’ and ‘revenge’ are more closely related to Israeli acts, it is important to point out that there is not the same preponderance of the ‘attack’ label as earlier studies find. This means that these labels tend to be used in relation to both Israeli and Palestinian acts. Moreover, more neutral words such as ‘action’, ‘incident’, ‘military offensive’, ‘operation’, ‘offensive’ and ‘skirmish’ are likely to be predominantly associated with Israeli acts.

**TABLE 4**  
**Labels Applied to Palestinian and Israeli Acts**

	Palestinian act	Israeli act
Attack	700	66
Act	73	149
Massacre	17	13
Incident	83	103
Invasion	0	34
Military operation	1	17
Offensive	0	52
Operation	7	95
Raid	32	63
Skirmish	19	22
Act of terror	32	4
Revenge	10	20

The journalists we interviewed also agree that the labelling of acts is determined by the conflict party that is committing the acts. Different labels are used when the perpetrators are Palestinians, the Israeli army or Jewish extremists. In this sense, correspondents themselves may also have an impact on the labelling. Because they are stationed in the area, they are able to assess the situation correctly. So the labels they use to describe events are likely to be right. However, former correspondent Luyendijk (2006: 132) argues that Palestinians and Israelis are still judged with different standards because the story of the Middle East is told in terms of western democracy.

### ***'Disputed' vs 'Occupied' Territories and 'Colonies' vs 'Settlements' and 'Neighbourhoods'***

In the sample of articles the label 'disputed' is rarely used to refer to the territories. The dominance of the 'occupied' label is complete. The conclusion must be that the Israeli vocabulary is not copied into the Flemish dailies. This is different for the terms 'colonies', 'settlements', 'illegal settlements' and 'neighbourhoods'. Journalists refer more to 'colonies' and 'settlements' and less to 'neighbourhoods' and 'illegal settlements'. Our analysis shows that the term 'settlement' is the most frequently used by far. The more negatively loaded 'colonies' appears less frequently.

The in-depth interviews clearly show that journalists prefer the word 'settlements', because it is the most correct. Indeed, Israel has no colonies in the occupied territories any longer. On the other hand, journalists use the term 'occupied' in relation to the Palestinian territories because they believe Israel is occupying these areas. The few journalists who are in favour of an alternative term – because Israel cannot be said to occupy Gaza – say they find 'disputed' an uninspiring term. They argue that the word is deceptive, and they prefer the term 'occupied' when referring to the territories.

### ***Victims and Perpetrators in the Articles on the First and Second Intifada***

Various studies have repeatedly claimed that the Palestinians are more likely to be portrayed as the perpetrators and the Israelis as the victims in the newspaper headlines, and that Israeli victims, moreover, are more individualized (e.g. Korn, 2004; Rinnawi, 2007; Viser, 2003).

Concerning the relation between Israelis or Palestinians and the perpetrator or victim roles we may conclude from our study, however, that it is the Palestinians, more than the Israelis, who are victimized in the article headlines (18.1 percent vs 6.9 percent), while the Israelis tend to be portrayed as perpetrators more (12.1 percent vs 9.3 percent).

A comparison of the figures between the First and the Second Intifada reveals no significant differences as far as the attribution of the victim role. It is clear that the coverage of both Intifadas contains more Palestinian victims in the headlines. When focusing on the perpetrator role (Table 5) we do find some differences. Only

**TABLE 5**  
**Palestinians and Israelis as Perpetrators in Headlines during the Two Intifadas**

	Palestinian perpetrators	Israeli perpetrators	Total
First Intifada	3.9%	8.7%	12.6%
Second Intifada	13.2%	14.5%	27.7%
	9.3% (N = 86)	12.1% (N = 112)	21.4% (N = 198)
	$p < .001$	$p < .05$	
	$\chi^2 = 24.436$	$\chi^2 = 10.692$	

3.9 percent of the articles headlines on the First Intifada portray Palestinians as perpetrators. This percentage rises to 13.2 percent during the Second Intifada. This supports the idea of Palestinians as victims during the First Intifada. However, the Israeli party to the conflict shows a similar evolution. The portrayal in headlines of Israelis as perpetrators also increases between the First and the Second Intifada. In other words, the Israelis are not portrayed more as perpetrators during the First Intifada than during the Second Intifada.

The journalists interviewed state that the attribution of victim and perpetrator roles depends on the nature and consequences of the acts and the position of the parties involved in the conflict. When an Israeli attack has strong political consequences, the headlines will refer to the political angle of the attack. In this case the political consequences, rather than Palestinian victimhood, are highlighted. When the act claims the lives of children, journalists prefer to cover this angle, rather than focusing on any political implications.

Differences in the attribution of perpetrator roles are defined by contextual and geopolitical factors. Because of a contextual evolution between the First and Second Intifada and the fact that their struggle is no longer treated on a par with a struggle for independence, Palestinians are more often portrayed as perpetrators during the Second Intifada. Whereas Palestinians are freedom fighters in the coverage of the First Intifada, this image changes radically in the Second Intifada. Their image changes from victim to perpetrator.

Next to the attribution of victim and perpetrator roles we also examined whether and what personal information about the victims is disseminated. Table 6 shows that the representation of personal data is completely different from what numerous previous studies conclude (e.g. Korn, 2004; Nir and Roeh, 1992; Philo and Berry, 2004; Rinnawi, 2007; Viser, 2003). Personal data are more likely to be given about Palestinian than Israeli victims. The figures concerning the Palestinian actor show that 690 of the articles studied refer to victims, and 41.6 percent of these articles not only identify these victims, but also supply personal information. This information mostly comprises the name (12.9 percent), age (34.8 percent), marital status (0.3 percent) or profession (8.0 percent), or a combination of such data.

The figures regarding the Israeli actor show fewer articles referring to Israeli victims. The fact that only 394 articles mention Israeli victims does not mean that those victims are less extensively covered. Newspapers can highlight these victims

TABLE 6  
Publication of Victims’ Personal Information

Palestinian victims (N = 690)	Personal information	41.6%	Name	12.9%
			Age	34.8%
			Marital status	0.3%
			Profession	8.0%
			Other	2.2%
Israeli victims (N = 394)	Personal information	24.9%	Name	5.3%
			Age	12.7%
			Marital status	1.0%
			Profession	9.4%
			Other	0.8%

by communicating a lot of personal information. However, our figures show that only 24.9 percent of the relevant 394 articles focus on personal details. This percentage is considerable lower than the number of articles that supply personal data on Palestinian victims. We can conclude that the Flemish press pays less attention to personal data when Israeli victims are concerned. The name is mentioned in 5.3 percent of the articles studies, the age in 12.7 percent, marital status in 1.0 percent and the profession in 9.4 percent.

While the journalists explain these findings by arguing that Palestinians are better at providing emotional pictures and personal descriptions, they also agree that communicating personal data is not only dependent on nationality but also on the function/profession and the age of the victim. When the victim is a politician or a child, journalists are more likely to insert personal information in their report.

A final point of interest concerns the labelling of victims. Are Israeli victims ‘killed’ or ‘murdered’? And do Palestinians ‘lose their life’ or are they ‘slaughtered’? The findings of our study are somewhat surprising. The same labels are used to describe Palestinian and Israeli victims. Few headlines contain ‘murder’, ‘losing life’ or ‘being killed’. Only 98 headlines of the sample are relevant for this part of the study. The label ‘killed’ in particular is used often. Respectively 41 and seven headlines mention the term in relation to Palestinian and Israeli victims. ‘Shot to death’ and ‘killed off’ are also used. Thirty headlines use those words to refer to Palestinian victims, as opposed to seven headlines for Israeli victims. More neutral terms such as ‘dying’ and ‘losing their life’ are not found in the headlines. Derivatives such as ‘claiming lives’ and ‘costing lives’ are mentioned in six headlines (divided equally between Palestinian and Israeli victims). ‘Murdered’ and ‘being slaughtered’ with respectively five and two occurrences are also less frequently used labels.

These data indicate that both Palestinian and Israeli victims are predominantly ‘killed’. There is no significant difference in their labelling. Widening the study to include the whole sample of articles yields no different results. The label ‘killed’ is often used for both Israeli and Palestinian victims. However, the most frequent label is ‘losing their lives’. This label is often used in the body of the article, though not in the headline. Negatively loaded words such as ‘slaughtered’ and ‘murdered’ are rarely

present in either the headline or the body of the article. As far as the ‘slaughter’ label is concerned, we can conclude that if it is used at all, it is in relation to Israeli victims. Palestinians are never ‘slaughtered’.

*The Use of Sources*

Various authors argue that the use of Israeli and Palestinian sources in the media is unbalanced (e.g. First, 1998, 2004; Korn, 2004; Nir and Roeh, 1992; Philo and Berry, 2004; Rinnawi, 2007; Viser, 2003). Our study indicates that 30.1 percent of the articles refer to Israeli sources (sometimes in combination with other, non-Palestinian sources) (Table 7), while Palestinian sources are used in 8.7 percent of the articles. Although the figures show that Israelis are more present as sources than Palestinians, 45.5 percent of the articles mention both Palestinian and Israeli sources. Consequently, we can conclude that Israeli sources are quoted more often, but also that the Flemish newspapers give space to Palestinian sources.

A study of the coverage of the First and Second Intifada separately shows that 78.7 percent of the articles sampled concerning the First Intifada quote Israeli sources. During the Second Intifada this percentage decreases to 73.2 percent. During the First Intifada 47.8 percent of the articles refer to Palestinian sources, while 58.8 percent of the articles on the Second Intifada mention Palestinian sources. These figures indicate that during the First as well as the Second Intifada Israeli sources are quoted more often. It is remarkable, though, that the amount of Palestinian sources increases significantly in the coverage of the Second Intifada.

According to the journalists interviewed, there are various reasons for the predominance of Israeli sources. First, there is the well-functioning Israeli PR machine that distributes loads of information. Second, there is the fact that the correspondents tend to favour the Israeli point of view. The content and the veracity of the information also play an important role. The journalists interviewed affirm that Palestinian information is not always correct and factual. However, this also applies to information that is spread by Israelis. As Luyendijk (2006: 116) observes, Israelis are quite skilled in manipulating the press. Next, as journalists often have to appeal to secondary sources for their coverage, they are not free to choose which sources

**TABLE 7**  
**Sources Used in the Coverage of the First and Second Intifada**

	Present
Israeli sources	22.2%
Israeli and other sources	7.9%
Israeli and Palestinian sources	28.4%
Israeli, Palestinian and other sources	17.1%
Palestinian sources	6.8%
Palestinian and other sources	1.9%
Other sources	3.1%
No sources	12.5%



and insights – Palestinian or Israeli – to reflect in their articles. However, the discrepancies in the supply of information must not be an excuse for an imbalance in quoted sources. New communication technologies such as the Internet allow journalists to search for a wide range of sources reflecting both sides of the conflict.

Another question concerns the nature of the quoted sources. To answer this question we divided the various sources into categories. Table 8 shows that Israeli military and political sources are most frequently referred to. The Palestinian sources often used are politicians and citizens. Terrorists are also cited.

The analysis of the status and the anonymity of sources shows that military sources are often quoted anonymously. As far as it is possible to determine the status of those spokespersons, we can find a prevalence of individuals of high military rank and status. Terrorist sources are less individualized, as journalists tend to mention the name of the terrorist group rather than that of its individual members. It is striking that members of terrorist groups who are individually quoted occupy important positions in the group. Political sources are least often anonymous, though this category also includes high status sources. Media and security sources, on the contrary, very often remain anonymous. As far as citizen sources are concerned we can find numerous individuals with a lower status. This is often because they are eye-witnesses. We further find that named and anonymous sources are more or less equally represented.

These results clearly show that contrary to what other studies have reported, we cannot conclude that Israeli sources have a higher status and are more often quoted by name than Palestinian sources.

TABLE 8  
The Use of Sources by Category

Israeli source	Category	Palestinian source
31.2%	Military	
	Terrorist	12.4%
46.4%	Political	29.5%
14.3%	Media	4.1%
8.5%	Citizen	<b>14.4%</b>
7.0%	Security	2.4%
15.4%	Other	13.2%

Conclusion

Various studies of the representation of Israelis and Palestinians within the framework of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict conclude that the coverage is incomplete and mostly favours the Israeli side. Also, the concluding remarks of the expert meeting on ‘Transparency in Foreign News Reporting’ (Rotterdam, April 2008) stress the biased picture of ‘the foreign’.

This article focuses on the question to what extent the results and findings of previous research apply to the coverage of the conflict in the Flemish dailies. It also

examines any differences between the coverage of the First and of the Second Intifada. Finally, we compared our results with the opinions of a number of journalists who report the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the Flemish newspapers.

We can conclude that the outcome of our study of the coverage of the First and Second Intifada in the Flemish dailies does not always support the findings of other international representation studies. Only the results concerning the representation of contextual information are rather similar in confirming the overall absence of contextual elements, i.e. that too little background and context is reported in the articles on the First and Second Intifada. As far as the labelling of actors, acts and victims is concerned, our study contradicts the view that Israeli vocabulary is predominantly used in descriptions of the Intifadas. For example, in mentioning the territories, the label 'occupied' is used far more often than the label 'disputed'. Still, it is striking that negatively charged labels tend to be more associated with the Palestinian actor.

This is different for the description and the individualizing of victims. Palestinian victims are more individualized than Israelis. Their name, profession, marital status, etc. are mentioned more often than those of Israeli victims. These conclusions run counter to those in various previous international studies. However, our study of the use of sources confirms that Israeli sources are cited more than Palestinian sources during both Intifadas.

Our data also reveal differences in the coverage of the First and Second Intifada. The image of Palestinians changes from largely positive to preponderantly negative between the two Intifadas, while that of the Israelis goes through an opposite change. Israel is given the role of occupying force during the First Intifada, and Palestinians are its victims. In the Second Intifada, Israelis are the victims, while Palestinians are the perpetrators of acts of terror. The journalists interviewed agree that this development is the consequence of the changed context following international events such as 9/11.

A final question remains: may we conclude that the coverage of the First and the Second Intifada is unbalanced? There is no easy or straight answer, but some differences and changes are clearly present. The differences observed, however, are not always in favour of the same side in the conflict. Some variables obviously play into Israeli hands (e.g. the use of sources), others are in favour of the Palestinian actor (e.g. the individualizing of victims). But a pro-Israeli bias that various other studies find is clearly not supported by the outcome of our research. In other words, in contrast with global findings on international news output, the Flemish daily newspapers are found to report on the Intifadas in a fairly balanced way.

## Note

1. We verified the validity and reliability of the researched variables. As our sample is constructed in a representative way, the variables studied are operationalized and defined and the statistical analysis is based on techniques applied to the nominal research variables used, we can confirm that the validity of our study is high. Besides, the measured kappa coefficients also indicate a high reliability. All variables had a kappa of .75 or above.

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