Article

Covering the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera English and BBC's Online Reporting on the 2023 Gaza War

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Abstract: The Hamas surprise attack on southern Israel on 7 October 2023, and the Israeli military response unleashed a catastrophic episode of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and exacerbated broader tensions in the region. This study compares Al Jazeera English (AJE) and BBC's coverage of and discourse around key events in the early stages of the 2023 Israel–Gaza War. Using critical discourse analysis as an analytical framework, this study employs mixed methods to compare transitivity, intertextuality, and lexicalization as key discursive features in the two outlets' coverage of the war. Counter to previous qualitative works, this study quantitatively reveals no variation between AJE and BBC's use of active voice yet points to key qualitative differences in the discursive treatment of Palestinians and the reporting on death tolls. It further demonstrates drastic differences in the quoting patterns and negative lexicalization of the early phases of the war, with AJE taking a more balanced approach and BBC refraining from emphasizing accusations against Israel of committing "genocide", "ethnic cleansing", "terrorism", and "war crimes". The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of differential discourses around the Gaza War and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in international media.

Keywords: critical discourse; BBC; Al Jazeera; Gaza; Israeli–Palestinian conflict; October 7; headlines; quotations; media coverage

1. Introduction

The October 7 Hamas surprise attack on Israel and the Israeli military response in Gaza have resulted in a catastrophe in the region. Hamas-led militants killed nearly 1200 people in Israel, over half of which were civilians, and took 240 hostages, according to Israeli authorities, while Israel's subsequent attacks on and invasion of Gaza killed over 45,000 Palestinians, about 70 percent of which were women and children, as per the Palestinian health ministry (Batrawy, 2024; Agence France Presse, 2024). Not only has the Israel–Gaza War been the deadliest amongst four other conflicts in the strip since Hamas took over in 2006, the October 7 death toll is the highest in Israel's history since the 1973 Arab–Israeli War and Gaza's death toll and immense devastation render it one of the "deadliest and most destructive in recent history", even surpassing the Allied bombing of Germany in WWII (Frankel, 2024). The war further spilled over regionally to multiple countries, including Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq.

Previous Gaza wars received considerable amount of media reporting by Arab and Western news outlets.[1] In the 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2023 Gaza Wars,

Arab media typically favored Palestinian voices and others who were critical of Israel and its policies (Alwan, 2022; Archibald & Miller, 2012; El Damanhoury & Saleh, 2017; Elmasry et al., 2013; Mahmoud et al., 2024; Merriman, 2012), emphasized Palestinian suffering and war's humanitarian toll (Almahallawi & Zanuddin, 2018; Blondheim & Shifman, 2009; Doufesh & Briel, 2021; Taha & Al-Khanji, 2020), and gave a platform to militants in Gaza, presenting their rockets as a form of resistance against occupation (Aguiar, 2009; El Damanhoury & Saleh, 2024; Majzoub, 2021). By contrast, Western news reporting, which can vary across the media landscape, has mostly favored the Israeli side (M. M. A. Amer, 2022; Artz, 2014; Dobernig et al., 2010; Hoewe et al., 2012; Munayyer, 2014; Tasseron, 2021; Zeitzoff, 2011; Zghoul, 2022), exhibited an anti-Palestinian stance (Alkalliny, 2017; M. Amer, 2017; Ramamurthy, 2016), and emphasized violence (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Fahmy & Neumann, 2012; Jungblut & Zakareviciute, 2019). While the amount of reporting dedicated to the latest conflict that began on 7 October 2023 has been unprecedented,[2] its comparative analysis in Arab and Western media remains relatively scarce thus far (Zawawi et al., 2024). Yet, others have explored its coverage in Western, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Pakistani, and Indonesian outlets (Anwar & Fajar, 2024; Asmus, 2024; Elmasry, 2024; Gondwe & Walcott, 2024; Hoon, 2024; Nguyen, 2024; Oktavina et al., 2024).

This study builds on the existing literature by comparing Al Jazeera English (AJE) and BBC's coverage of and discourse around key events in the early stages of the 2023 Israel–Gaza War. After reviewing the literature on AJE and BBC's reporting patterns on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, we highlight critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework and break down the study's mixed-methods approach used to analyze transitivity, quoting patterns and lexical choices across AJE and BBC's sampled articles. The study reveals similarities between the two outlets in their coverage of certain events, but also highlights differences in their amplification of Palestinian versus Israeli voices and in their approach towards official statements. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the implications of differential discourses around war and conflict in international media.

2. AJE, BBC, and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

AJE has become one of the most prominent English-speaking news outlets in the world since its launch in November 2006, receiving praise and criticisms. With its funding coming predominantly from the Qatari government, AJE's stated mission is to counter Western hegemony over international news, rebalance global media, and cover underrepresented communities, countries, and regions of the world (Al-Najjar, 2009). It has garnered numerous journalistic accolades, such as the Emmy, Peabody, and Edward R. Murrow awards. AJE correspondents reported out of various conflict zones over the years, at times as the only or one of the few English-language news outlets on the ground (Shihab-Eldin, 2009). In the meantime, AJE has been criticized for alleged anti-American bias (King, 2008), threats to Egypt's national security ("Egypt Crisis: Al-Jazeera Journalists Arrested in Cairo", 2013), and hostility against Iraqi Shiites ("Iraq Shuts Down Al-Jazeera Office, Saying It Incites Violence", 2016). Its editorial independence has also been questioned due to its core funding coming from the Qatari government and its linkages to its controversial Arabic sister channel. Seven months into the 2023–2024 Gaza War, Israel shut down Al Jazeera's operations in the country and later in the West Bank, deeming it "an 'incitement channel' against Israel" (Ni & Kelemen, 2024).[3]

The BBC is one of the oldest, largest, and most trusted international news outlets in the world (Newman et al., 2024), yet not without criticisms to its coverage either. Launched over a century ago, the public broadcaster is mainly funded through license fees that British households pay annually. The UK government, however, announced in late 2023

it will be reviewing the BBC's license fee model, citing concerns over the broadcaster's financial sustainability. With a stated mission to serve all audiences and offer impartial news content, the BBC has won multiple prestigious awards, ranging from Emmy and Peabody awards to numerous others. Yet, it has often received domestic criticisms over alleged anti-left and anti-right bias over the decades, with studies pointing to shifts in the nature of its programming and sourcing patterns depending on which party is in government (Cushion et al., 2021; Lewis & Cushion, 2019). Internationally, its coverage has also been criticized for alleged bias against a range of countries, such as India, Iran, China, and Palestine (M. M. A. Amer, 2022; Ellis-Petersen, 2023; Ganjian & Zanuddin, 2018; Wang & Hallam, 2021).

Comparative studies have not only found differences in Al Jazeera and BBC's reporting on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but also variations within each network's coverage based on language. While BBC tends to amplify the voices of official sources, particularly from Israel, deemphasize the political and historical context, associate Palestinians with militancy and violence, and question Palestinian casualties, Al Jazeera typically provides more space to humanitarian organizations and Palestinian sources, historicizes the conflict and lays blame on Israel for its policies and military action in the occupied West Bank and Gaza (Barkho, 2007, 2011; Sarwar et al., 2023; Zawawi et al., 2024; Zghoul, 2022). Al Jazeera's coverage, however, differs by language, with its English channel highlighting the conflict more often than the Arabic-language service (Al-Najjar, 2009). Additionally, Al Jazeera Arabic is more likely than other Arabic competitors to focus on the conflict, cite Palestinian sources, feature on-ground reporting from its correspondents, and use emotional language (Elmasry et al., 2013; Majzoub, 2021). Meanwhile, studies show that BBC Arabic is more balanced in its sourcing, offers more context, and utilizes a tone that is less emotional compared to the English-language service (Abu Hashish et al., 2023; Barkho, 2008). This study builds on the existing body of literature by utilizing CDA as a framework to better understand AJE and BBC's reporting on the conflict in 2023. Examining AJE and BBC's articles, thus, allows for comparing Western and non-Western coverage of the conflict on two of the most visited English-language news sites in the world (Press Gazette, 2024).

3. Critical Discourse Analysis

As a means of investigating power relations in society and media, CDA can take numerous approaches united in their pursuit of critiquing hegemonic discourses that contribute to social injustices and inequalities (Van Leeuwen, 2015). CDA is built on the premise that discourse and power are inseparable, with the latter not only creating the social world, but also the way it is talked about (Foucault, 2002; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). It considers language as "social practice", which involves the shaping and framing of discursive events by social structures and institutions (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 58). Political and media institutions, for example, can create and reproduce racism and prejudices against specific groups in the discourse (Van Dijk, 1997, 2019). Nonetheless, CDA does not constitute a single theory but rather a heterogenous framework encompassing multifarious theoretical and methodological approaches (Wodak, 2022). It has, thus, become more of a subdiscipline that dissects how meanings are constructed by analyzing the underlying ideologies, power relations, hegemony, and inequalities constructed within discourses (Billig, 2003).

Fairclough's (1992) Social Theory of Discourse lays out three dimensions for CDA. First, the discourse as social practice dimension engages with power and ideology within society at a macro level, building on Gramsci's (1971) articulations of hegemony and counterhegemony as well as Althusser's (2001) conceptualization of discourse as a feature that is intertwined with the control of ideological state apparatuses. Second, the discourse as a discursive practice approach focuses on the production, circulation, distribution, and

consumption of discourse in society, hence emphasizing the importance of context. Third, the discourse as text layer addresses the relationships between language and power, hence investigating the linguistic organization of discourses, lexicons, and textual structures at a micro level. This study adopts Fairclough's (1992) discourse as text dimension as a lens for better understanding the mechanisms employed in the media presentations of the October 7 attack and the Gaza War that followed.

Transitivity, intertextuality, and lexicalization are key features of the textual approach to CDA. Transitivity refers to the ideational dimension of grammatically constructing a clause and the participants involved in it to emphasize or de-emphasize causality (Halliday, 1978). The "passivization" is a principal transitive characteristic that transforms a clause in ways that can obscure agency and responsibility (Fairclough, 1992, p. 27), omit the agent (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000), and amount to censorship (Fowler & Kress, 2018). Discussing an example of active voice, in which police shoot demonstrators dead, Fairclough (1992) posited that its transformation into a clause that starts with the goal (i.e., demonstrators) rather than the subject (i.e., police) presents the agent/actor either as passive, if relegated to the end of the clause along with the prepositional "by" preceding it, or simply non-existent. Intertextuality denotes the process of reproducing discourses in a text by drawing on other voices (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). First coined by philosopher and semiotician Julia Kristeva, intertextuality emphasizes how texts, quotes, and references shape the broader discursive practice, influence the narrative, and construct social understandings (Martin, 2011). The act of quoting is a form of what Fairclough (1992) labels "manifest intertextuality" that can result in heterogeneous or homogenous texts (p. 104). Meanwhile, lexicalization is the "provision of words and phrases to code new concepts or consolidate existing ones" (Fowler & Kress, 2018, p. 208), which often involves differential ideological systems of classification that can produce, for instance, the "freedom fighter" versus "terrorist" labels in reference to conflict parties (Fairclough, 1992). The classification of entities or ideas using "an excess of quasi-synonymous terms" constitutes an over-lexicalization that signals preoccupation in the discourse (Fowler, 1991, p. 85). Together, transitivity, intertextuality, and lexicalization help dissect text and analyze its discourse.

While few studies have employed CDA in examining the coverage of the latest Gaza war, the literature points to key differences in news media's discursive strategies on the broader Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Al Jazeera tends to construct its headlines using the subject-verb-goal order, and hence, using active rather than passive voice (Barkho, 2007), while the subject is typically at the beginning of BBC and other American outlets' headlines when Palestinians are the perpetrators, but not when reporting on the Israeli military killing and injuring Palestinians (Barkho, 2008; Johnson & Ali, 2024b). Western and Israeli outlets are also more likely than their Arab counterparts to favor Israel's discourse, thus featuring and quoting more pro-Israel sources in events ranging from Israel's withdrawal from Gaza (Thomas, 2011), the 2008–2009 war in the strip (M. Amer, 2017), the 2021 Gaza War (M. M. A. Amer, 2022), and the March of Return protests (Taha & Al-Khanji, 2020) to the 2023 Gaza War (Elmasry, 2024). Furthermore, Western and Israeli media engage in negative lexicalization, hence using loaded word choices in reference to the Palestinian side, associating it with "terrorism" (Barkho, 2008, 2011; Livio & Cohen-Yechezkely, 2019; Tasseron, 2021), while mainly reserving words like "massacre", "slaughter", "horrific", "brutal", "savage", and "barbaric" to instances when Palestinians attack Israelis (Johnson & Ali, 2024a, 2024b; Shehadi et al., 2024). Arab media, on the other hand, use emotional language presenting Israeli actions as "crimes" and "massacres" (Mahmoud et al., 2024), frequently remind the audience of the Israeli occupation (Taha & Al-Khanji, 2020), and glorify Palestinian casualties as martyrs (El Damanhoury & Saleh, 2024).

The study adds to the literature by examining AJE and BBC's discursive strategies in the coverage of the October 7 attack and the Gaza war that followed. In doing so, it gauges whether AJE and BBC's reporting on the most recent conflict align with their historical journalistic practices or may have shifted in the face of Hamas' unprecedented assault on Israel and the Israeli military's deadliest attacks on Gaza.

H1. *AJE will be more likely than the BBC to use active voice in headlines on the 2023 Israel–Gaza War.*

H2a. *AJE will be more likely than the BBC to source and quote Palestinian voices in its online coverage of the 2023 Israel–Gaza War.*

H2b. *BBC will be more likely than AJE to source and quote Israeli voices in its online coverage of the 2023 Israel–Gaza War.*

RQ1: *How, if any, did AJE and BBC differ in the use of negative lexicalization in their online coverage of the 2023 Israel–Gaza War?*

4. Methodology

This study examined 104 AJE and 32 BBC articles on the Hamas-led October 7 attack on Israel and the major incidents at the onset of the Israeli military's subsequent war on Gaza in late 2023. The authors compiled a list of eight of the biggest instances and controversial events in the first two months of the conflict in terms of death toll and magnitude, such as mass evacuations, hospital attacks, hostage releases, ground offensives, communication blackouts, claims about militarization of hospitals, and ceasefires, which allowed for an in-depth comparison of the AJE and BBC's discourse surrounding such occurrences (see Figure 1). Then, the authors searched AJE and BBC's websites and Google News for all their articles published on the day of or immediately following each event, using generic key words (e.g., Gaza, Israel, Hamas, and Palestine) and more specific ones pertaining to the incidents (e.g., Shifa, Ahli Baptist Hospital, evacuation, hostages, ground offensive, headquarters, truce, and ceasefire). The focus on that period stems from the study's goal of assessing the two outlets' initial discourses around the Gaza War prior to the intensification of criticisms directed at Israel for the way it conducted its attacks and to the corresponding shifts in international public opinion over time. Additionally, the event-based data collection approach aligns with studies that examined the media's discourse on key events in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, ranging from much shorter Gaza Wars in the past (e.g., Abu Hashish et al., 2023; Malinsky, 2015; Merriman, 2012)—the longest of which was 50 days long in the case of the 2014 Gaza War—to Israel's withdrawal from Gaza (Thomas, 2011), the 2010 Gaza flotilla raid (Bayram, 2015; Neureiter, 2017), and the 2017 Al-Aqsa Mosque protests (Alkalliny, 2017). To assess the discourse, this study examined multiple units of analysis within the 136 articles that together gauged the CDA components of transitivity, intertextuality, and lexical choices: verbs in the headlines (n = 356), quotes in the articles (n = 1492), and the use of several words/labels in the headlines, subheaders, lead paragraphs, and quotations, such as "terror", "genocide", "barbaric", "ethnic cleansing", "massacre", "slaughter", "hell", "heinous", "hideous", "cruel", "horrific", "brutal", "savage", and "war crime".

Using mixed methods, the study quantitively and qualitatively examined AJE and BBC's discourse on the conflict. Two coders conducted a quantitative content analysis of the verbs and quotations in AJE and BBC's articles. The authors developed a coding sheet that was revised after an analysis of a small testing sample to examine the verb voice (1 = active, 2 = passive) and quotation sourcing (1 = Palestinian civilian, 2 = Israeli civilian, 3 = Palestinian politicians/officials/militants, 4 = Israeli politicians/officials/military,

5 = Palestinian health authorities, 6 = Israeli health authorities, 7 = NGOs/International Organizations, 8 = Western civilian, 9 = Western politicians/officials/military, 10 = Other, 11 = N/A). One coder examined all verbs and quotations, after which a second coder examined a random sample of 11 percent and 25 percent of the respective datasets, achieving a high intercoder reliability agreement of 0.96 based on Krippendorf's alpha. The authors further pulled out the 189 sentences, including headlines and subheaders, that contained any of the lexical choices mentioned earlier, which they then qualitatively analyzed in their context to reveal similarities and differences in how AJE and BBC utilized them. The qualitative content analysis was guided by the CDA framework to compare the two outlets' negative lexicalization practices, reveal whether the lexical choices were attributed to sources, and identify the actors and acts that were lexicalized.
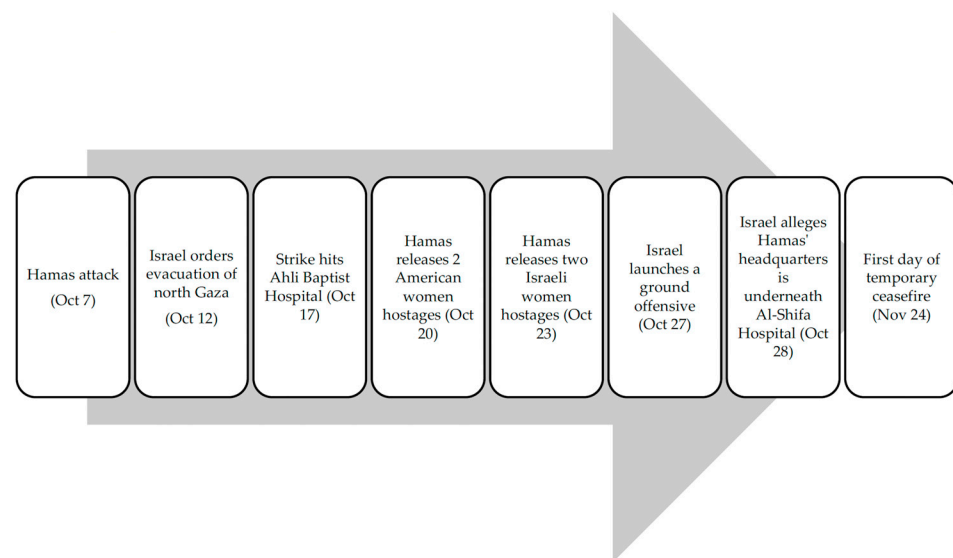

Figure 1. A timeline of eight major incidents in the Israel–Gaza war in the first two months.

5. Findings

While the BBC dedicated more of its online coverage to the October 7 attack, AJE was much more likely to report on the subsequent incidents in Gaza. Out of BBC's 32 articles on the eight major incidents, 12 (37.5 percent) came out on the day of or following the attack, mainly foregrounding violence against Israel, the hostages taken into Gaza, and the border breach. AJE published 24 articles, or less than a quarter of its reporting, on October 7 and 8. However, the focus of these articles did not exclusively emphasize the Hamas attack and its immediate repercussions on civilians and hostages. Instead, it further broadened the scope of coverage to highlight Israel's immediate response, attacks on Gaza, Palestinian casualties, property damage, and the historical context. AJE, thus, closely covered the conflict and its various updates, whereas BBC singled out the October 7 attack as one that was worthy of much more attention than subsequent events that unfolded in Gaza. By putting out three times as much articles as the BBC on the major events at the early stages of the war, AJE seemed to align with its stated mission of covering underrepresented communities and countries of the world. Previous studies show Al Jazeera typically dedicating more coverage to stories in the Global South compared to Western media outlets (e.g., Aday, 2005; El Damanhoury & Saleh, 2017; Kasmani, 2013). For a breakdown of AJE and BBC's articles published on the day of or immediately following the eight major incidents at the onset of the war, see Figure 2.
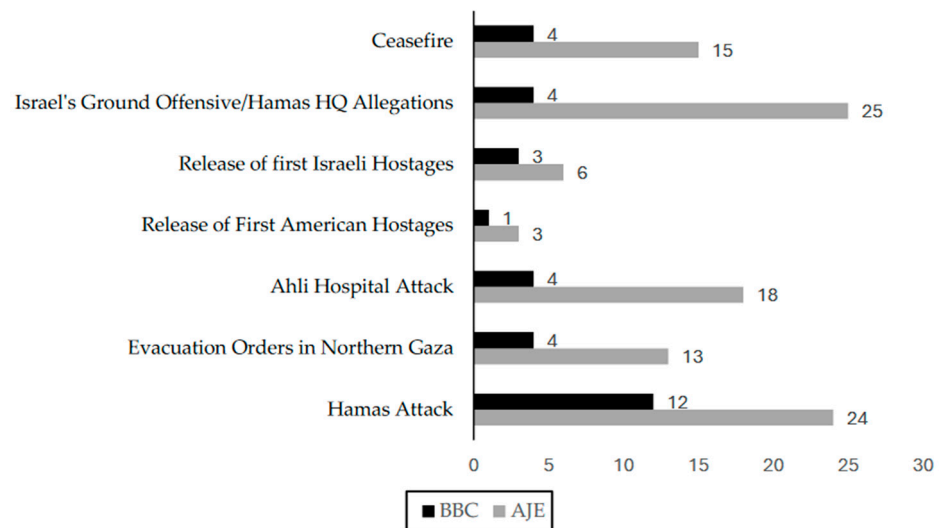
Figure 2. The number of AJE and BBC's articles published on the same day or immediately following key events between 7 October and 7 December 2023.

5.1. H1: Transitivity in the 2023 Israel–Gaza War

At first glance, both outlets' transitivity approaches, or the grammatical construction of clauses and participants involved, appear to have not differed much in the 2023 Israel–Gaza War coverage. A chi-square test of independence revealed AJE was not more likely than the BBC to use active voice in the headlines, χ^2 (1, N = 356) = 1.41, $p > 0.05$, which rejects H1. Out of AJE's 309 verbs across 104 articles, 264 (85%) were in active voice, compared to BBC's 37 active verbs (79%) from a total of 47 across the outlet's 32 articles. The higher frequency of verbs in AJE's articles relates to the outlet's use of main and subheaders at the top of almost every article, with an average of 28 words per headline. BBC, on the other hand, used much shorter headlines averaging 10 words each, with no subheadlines. Additionally, the two outlets did not exhibit much quantitative differences in their use of active and passive voice by type of subject. AJE and BBC used active voice around 80 percent of the time with Palestinian and Israeli subjects, ranging from Hamas militants and the Israeli military to Gaza residents and hostages.

Nonetheless, AJE and BBC's headlines differed qualitatively in their treatment of the actors involved. Out of all BBC articles on the biggest events in the first two months of the conflict, Palestinians were hardly present as actors unless in reference to Hamas, whom the headlines attributed for the acts of shocking Israel, breaching the border, entering Israeli communities, killing people, and taking hostages before releasing some of them later. The only times Palestinian actors appeared in BBC's headlines in isolation from Hamas were in reference to a Palestinian American saying how he checked on his family in Gaza daily to see if they were alive, and once collectively to Palestinians searching for their loved ones amid the destruction in the strip as the temporary ceasefire went into effect. In contrast, Palestinians in AJE's headlines were actors carrying out a wide range of acts. For one, AJE expanded the scope of Hamas' actions beyond just launching a massive attack, taking Israel by surprise, seizing and freeing hostages, and triggering an Israeli bombing campaign to include other mundane things like running the Gaza strip, denying and rejecting Israeli claims, and labeling US support to Israel as aggression. More importantly, AJE's headlines featured Palestinians as encompassing of a wide array of actors, such as children, parents, prisoners, people with disabilities, residents, protesters, workers, health officials, politicians, and police personnel. Take, for example, the subheader "Men, women and children travelled from the places where they have sought refuge to inspect their damaged homes" in an AJE article in November following the announcement

of the truce (Al Jazeera, 2023d), which diversifies the actors involved beyond a Palestinian monolith. Hence, AJE's headlines presented Hamas as a political entity and Palestinians as a pool of diverse human actors, while BBC mainly limited their depictions to Hamas as a Palestinian militant actor.

AJE and BBC further exhibited similarities and differences in their usage of the verb "kill" to report death tolls in headlines. Throughout BBC's sampled articles on the eight major events between October and December 2023, only four articles (12.5%) featured the act of killing in the headline. The sole instance when BBC used the verb in active voice referred to how a "Hospital blast in Gaza City kills hundreds" (Gritten, 2023a), attributing the act to an attack without a clear actor, most likely due to the Israeli military and Palestinian health officials trading blame for the deadly incident at Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital on October 17. The other instance when a BBC headline referred to mass Palestinian casualties, it not only used passive voice and refrained from stating Israel as the actor behind the deadly strikes in Gaza, but it also implied that Hamas was the entity putting out such death tolls by using "Hamas-run health ministry" as the source (Gritten, 2023b). Like BBC, the number of AJE articles featuring the verb "kill" in the headlines was rather small too (17.3%), using passive voice about two-thirds of the time. However, AJE headlines cited Palestinian health officials in Gaza more frequently without ever using the label "Hamas-run" or "Hamas-controlled", while usually referring to the Israeli military or, to a lesser extent, Hamas as the actors behind the acts of killing either at the beginning of the clause when using active voice or at the end if using passive. In other words, AJE and BBC both tended to avoid active voice in headlines reporting on killings, with the latter further exhibiting a sense of distrust in Palestinian health officials by linking them to Hamas militants.

5.2. H2: Manifest Intertextuality in the 2023 Israel–Gaza War

As expected, AJE amplified Palestinian voices much more than the BBC. A chi-square test of independence revealed AJE was more likely than the BBC to quote Palestinian sources in its articles, χ^2 (1, N = 1492) = 17.86, $p < 0.001$), which supports H2a. Out of AJE's 1142 quotations across 104 articles, 298 (26%) were from Palestinian voices, compared to BBC's 53 quotes from Palestinians (15%) from a total of 350 in its articles. When quoting Palestinian sources, the two outlets favored civilians, mainly recounting their suffering amid soaring casualties, displacement, and dwindling supplies, more than militants, politicians, and health officials. However, AJE provided more space to Palestinian civilians not only to describe their daily lives in Gaza, but also to further contextualize the conflict as part of a broader Palestinian struggle against decades-long Israeli occupation. Take, for example, an AJE article published on October 7 shortly after the Hamas attack, quoting Palestinian-American journalist and co-founder of Electronic Intifada Ali Abunimah as he described the Palestinians as "indigenous people fighting for their existence . . . [and] living under the boot of [Israeli] colonial regime" (Al Jazeera, 2023a). The broader Palestinian narrative was, thus, at the forefront of AJE's coverage.

In contrast, the BBC relied on Israeli voices in its coverage more than AJE. A chi-square test of independence showed the BBC was more likely than AJE to quote Israeli sources in its articles, χ^2 (1, N = 1492) = 38.21, $p < 0.001$), which also supports H2b. A total of 118 quotations, or about one in every three across BBC articles, came from Israeli sources, compared to AJE's 207 (18%). Accounting for more than double the featured quotes from Palestinian sources, the quoted Israeli voices in BBC's articles were equally distributed among civilians, including October 7 victims and released hostages detailing what they had witnessed and/or experienced in captivity, as well as government and military officials, most quoted of which were Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, followed by military spokespersons Daniel Hagari and Jonathan Cornicus. While AJE quoted Israeli officials

frequently, it was much less likely to cite civilians from Israel, with BBC quoting them almost four times as much as AJE. Therefore, the Israeli narrative was much more prominent in BBC's reporting on the war. See Figure 3 for a breakdown of quoted Israeli and Palestinian sources by outlet.
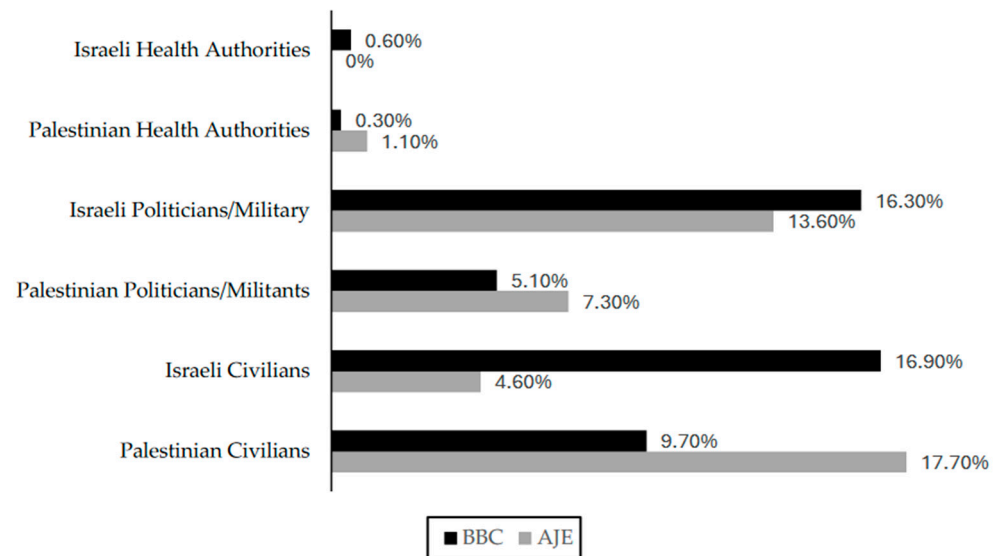

Figure 3. The percentage of quoted Palestinian and Israeli sources in AJE and BBC's articles published on the same day or immediately following key events between 7 October and 7 December 2023.

The coverage of both outlets further revealed two key differences in manifest intertextuality, or the reproduction of discourses in the text by means of quotations, beyond the amplification of Israeli and Palestinian voices. First, BBC dedicated most of its quotations to Western voices (40%), mainly from Britain, when reporting on the early stages of the conflict. A chi-square test of independence showed the BBC was more likely than AJE to quote Western politicians and civilians in its articles, χ^2 (1, N = 1492) = 47.59, $p < 0.001$). The Western voices ranged from British politicians (e.g., then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Labour leader Keir Starmer, and Foreign Secretary David Lammy), European family members of individuals living or visiting Israel, and Jewish community leaders in the U.S. to British and American citizens either trapped in Gaza, having family members there, or volunteering as healthcare professionals in the strip. Take, for example, Scotland's then First Minister Humza Yousaf, who was quoted 18 times, far more than any Palestinian source, across two BBC articles that focused on his Scottish mother-in-law that was stuck in Gaza. In other words, the BBC prioritized Western voices in its coverage of the Israel–Gaza war more than Palestinian and Israeli sources.

Second, AJE foregrounded the voices of relief organizations and humanitarian groups in its coverage. A chi-square test of independence showed AJE was more likely than BBC to quote NGOs in its articles, χ^2 (1, N = 1492) = 16.97, $p < 0.001$). Although NGOs were the least quoted sources in AJE and BBC's articles compared to Israelis, Palestinians, and Westerners, they were present in one out of every six quotations by the Qatari outlet, which was more than twice the usage rate by its British counterpart. The UN and its agencies were the most prominent NGO voices in AJE and BBC's articles, with the former also providing space for smaller groups, such as the Palestine Red Crescent Society that explained conditions on the ground in the aftermath of Israeli attacks on Gaza and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee that advocated for the safety of pro-Palestine demonstrators in the U.S. As a result, AJE often gave a platform to voices typically deemed as relatively neutral at the international stage to expound the magnitude and consequences of Israeli military actions on Palestinians in Gaza and their proponents elsewhere.

5.3. RQ1: Negative Lexalization in Israel–Gaza War

AJE was generally much more likely than BBC to engage in negative lexicalization, or the act of classifying an act and/or actor in negative terms, but also specifically in relation to the Israeli side (see Figure 4). Throughout the headlines, subheaders, lead paragraphs, and quotations in 136 articles from both outlets, the words "genocide", "ethnic cleansing", and "war crime" appeared 19 times. Interestingly, they were all part of AJE's reporting on the war, sourcing NGOs (e.g., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, ICC, CAIR, and Jewish Voices for Peace), academics, Israeli lawmakers, and Al Jazeera reporters, to characterize Israeli actions in Gaza. An October 28 AJE article, for instance, quotes the network's reporter in Khan Younis during the Israeli-imposed communication blackout in the strip as he suggests that cutting Gaza from the outside world "has made people feel it could be a genocide in the making" (Al Jazeera, 2023c). While such terms typically appeared in quotation marks directly attributed to a source, three of AJE's headlines used the label "war crimes" without scare quotes, including the headline "Gaza's communications blackout raises concerns of Israeli war crimes" following the October 27 blackout in the strip (Al Jazeera, 2023b). Through its sourcing patterns and editorial position as early as October 2023, AJE presented Israel as a violator of international and humanitarian laws that is engaged in crimes against the Palestinian people in Gaza.
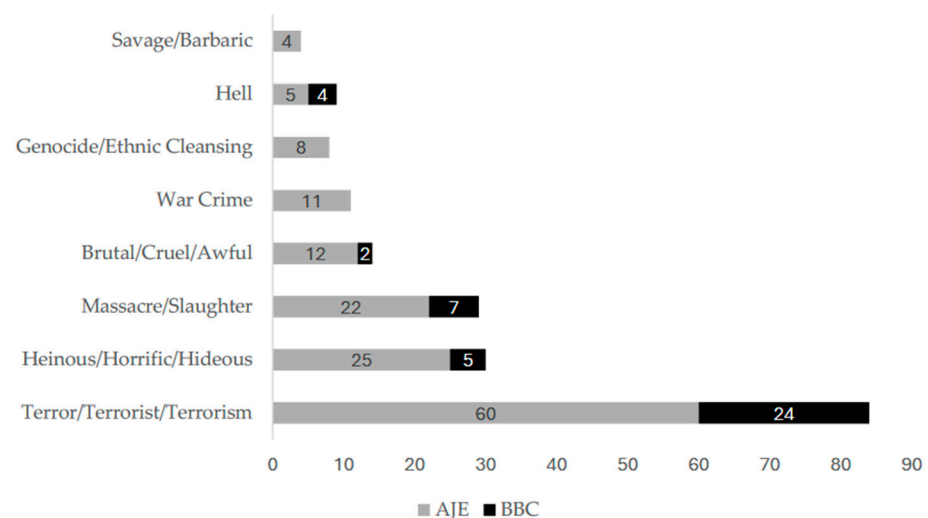

Figure 4. Lexical choices by frequency in AJE and BBC's articles published on the same day or immediately following key events between 7 October and 7 December 2023.

Nonetheless, AJE appeared more balanced than the BBC in its use of other negative lexical items. Throughout the 24 instances where BBC used the labels "terror", "terrorist", and "terrorism", all but one were attributed to residents of Israel as well as American, British, and Israeli official sources mainly in reference to Hamas and its alleged facilities in the strip. For the most part, BBC further reserved the lexical choices of "heinous", "horrific", "hideous", "massacre", and "slaughter" among others to describe the Hamas-led October 7 attack and the psychological state of hostages and their families in its aftermath. The only exception was in the BBC's coverage of the Ahli Baptist Hospital blast that killed hundreds of people in Gaza. Reporting on the blame trading between the Israeli and Palestinian sides, BBC quoted local health officials, British-Palestinian doctors, and Hamas itself describing the blast as "horrific" and a "massacre" (Gritten, 2023a). In contrast, AJE not only used "terror" and its derivatives over twice as much as BBC mainly citing the same sources, but it also broadened the scope of its coverage to include Palestinian officials and public figures accusing Israeli forces and settlers of terrorism. Similarly, AJE quoted a wide array of sources, ranging from Israeli and Palestinian civilians, officials, and local

health authorities to international politicians, describing the October 7 attack, the Ahli Baptist Hospital explosion and other Israeli actions in the strip in emotionally charged ways (e.g., massacre, slaughter, horrific, etc.). Through their negative lexicalization practices, BBC furthered a pro-Israeli narrative that was briefly altered in the aftermath of one of the deadliest attacks of the conflict, whereas AJE platformed accusations against both Hamas and Israel.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study contributes to understandings of the media component of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and to the methodological applications of CDA in dissecting cross-cultural similarities and differences in the coverage of the latest and deadliest Gaza War that began on 7 October 2023. First, counter to previous qualitative works that point to AJE's higher likelihood of using active voice in its headlines on the conflict compared to BBC (Barkho, 2007, 2008), this study quantitatively reveals no variation between the two outlets in their frequent use of active voice and overall tendency to tone down headlines' reporting on death tolls by using passive voice. Notwithstanding, the analysis points to key qualitative differences, with BBC's headlines mainly restricting the representation of Palestinians to Hamas and Islamist militancy. Second, the study's findings on manifest intertextuality and sourcing patterns align with the existing literature on Al Jazeera's amplification of Palestinian voices (e.g., M. M. A. Amer, 2022; Taha & Al-Khanji, 2020; Thomas, 2011) and Western media's favoring of Israeli sources (e.g., Abu Hashish et al., 2023; Zghoul, 2022). Third, this study demonstrates drastic differences in the negative lexicalization of the early phases of the 2023 Israel–Gaza War. Unlike AJE, BBC refrained from platforming accusations against Israel of committing "genocide", "ethnic cleansing", "terrorism", and "war crimes" in its headlines, lead paragraphs, and quotations, while predominantly leveraging a differential discursive treatment of the October 7 attack vis-à-vis Israel's military action in Gaza, hence aligning with previous studies (e.g., Barkho, 2011; Johnson & Ali, 2024a, 2024b). Parting from Arab media's lexicalization practices of prior Gaza wars (e.g., El Damanhoury & Saleh, 2024; Mahmoud et al., 2024), however, AJE appeared more discursively balanced in its negative lexicalization of Israeli and Palestinian actions at least at the first phase of the war. The mixed findings point to the role that the magnitude of Hamas' attack and the Israeli military's response may have played in altering some of the two outlets' prior discursive strategies around the conflict, even if temporarily. They further allude to the critical importance of applying CDA both qualitatively and quantitatively to provide nuanced interpretations of coverage patterns in times of war and conflict.

Although the nature and funding structures of AJE and BBC can help explain some of their biases and differential discursive reporting strategies, the Qatari outlet apparently provided a better journalistic coverage of the key events in the early phases of the war based on three factors. First, AJE dedicated more journalistic resources to the coverage of the deadly war that has had repercussions on the region and the world. With more than three times the number of BBC articles, AJE closely reported not only on the October 7 attack, but also on the subsequent military action in Gaza, including evacuation orders, communication blackouts, hostage releases, attacks on hospitals, and the temporary ceasefire.

Second, AJE articles offered a nuanced coverage of events by tapping into local and proximate sources and balancing its lexicalization practices, which the BBC did not usually do. AJE prioritized Palestinian and Israeli voices, while also giving more space to NGOs and aid relief groups to inform the audience about the massive humanitarian toll of the war in Gaza. Meanwhile, BBC relied heavily on Western sources, did not feature many Palestinian voices, and engaged in one-sided, negative lexicalization in its reporting on

the conflict, which align with claims by some BBC journalists themselves about their outlet's pro-Israel slant, disproportionate representation of sources, and use of humanizing language with Israelis more than Palestinians (Jones, 2024). In doing so, BBC's discourse connects to Johan Galtung's (2005) articulation of war journalism in its dichotomous, us-versus-them approach that tends to foreground one side, while relatively ignoring and/or dehumanizing the other.

Third, AJE's reporting often contextualized the Israeli–Palestinian conflict by historicizing the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, Hamas' status as both a militancy and a governing entity in the strip, and the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza rather than isolating the October 7 attack, along with the subsequent war, as a stand-alone episode. AJE employed a thematic framing approach that emphasizes "historical, social, [and] economic antecedents" (Iyengar, 1990, p. 21), and hence, synthesizing events and providing the audience with much needed background knowledge (Lee & Basnyat, 2013). Offering space, amplifying voices of people most impacted, and providing context help bring the audience closer to the conflict and its realities on the ground and tap into some of the features of peace journalism that humanizes the people impacted and explores how conflicts came to be (Fahmy & Eakin, 2014).

Moreover, the study foregrounds the role of healthcare in revealing discursive differences, similarities, and shifts in international media's coverage of war. The sourcing of Palestinian health authorities when reporting death tolls, for example, emerged as a key difference that showed BBC's suspicion of the Gaza health ministry, at least initially, characterizing it as "Hamas-run", despite the UN, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and many others defending the accuracy and reliability of the ministry's casualty figures (Debre, 2023). Meanwhile, the magnitude of the Ahli Baptist Hospital deadly attack prompted similar negative lexicalization practices by AJE and BBC, quoting numerous sources describing the event in emotionally charged ways (e.g., terrorism, war crime, horrific, heinous, massacre, etc.). Such similarities reinforce the alignment between Arab and Western media when it comes to covering immense violent attacks against civilians (Gerhards & Schafer, 2014; Satti, 2015). Yet, BBC's discursive treatment of the hospital blast constituted a temporary shift in its otherwise pro-Israeli coverage, which can be attributed not only to the scale of the deadly attack on a healthcare facility housing patients and the displaced, but also to the Israeli military's blaming of a Palestinian militant group as the perpetrator, a claim that the British government supported.

The study's limitations can help inform future research on the coverage of the decades-long Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The sampling of key events during the early phase of the Israel–Gaza war provided an opportunity to assess and compare media's initial discourse on controversial instances but was not comprehensive. Future studies should expand their scope to account for the sustained international coverage of the war throughout the first year, which big data and topic modeling approaches can help realize. The findings on the Ahli Baptist Hospital explosion further point to the importance of healthcare attacks in understanding the nuances of cross-cultural reporting patterns. Yet, researchers can expand on this by focusing on global media's reporting on healthcare attacks within the 2023 Israel–Gaza War and elsewhere to assess the validity of this conclusion over time and place. Finally, the study's analysis of words alone, while informative, does not account for the immense role of visual imagery in framing war and conflict. More examinations of the photojournalistic coverage of the conflict are, thus, imperative to gauge the media's visual construction and interpretation of attacks, deaths, and humanitarian toll.

Notes

1 By Arab news outlets, we refer to those originating from and headquartered in Arab countries regardless of the language of their content. Similarly, Western media refers to outlets originating from and headquartered in Western Europe and/or North America.

2 A search for "Israel" and "Gaza" on Nexis Uni database between 7 October and 31 December 2023 yields over 400,000 news articles in English language alone.

3 Israel's restrictions on Al Jazeera have carried over to local media, including the oldest Israeli newspaper Haaretz, and aid groups like UNRWA.

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