

## **MEDIA COVERAGE OF PALESTINIAN CHILDREN AND THE INTIFADA**

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**Abstract** / Using qualitative and quantitative research tools, this article attempts to examine the media coverage of Palestinian children in relation to the current Palestinian uprising. The criteria for the selection of the news outlets and indicator categories were agreed upon by Birzeit University Media Institute and the UNICEF representative. The regional and international outlets selected were as follows: NBC TV (US), BBC World Service radio station (UK), *The Guardian* (UK), Aljazeera TV (Qatar), *The New York Times* and *The Jerusalem Post*. All the outlets are representative of regional and international categories and are leaders in terms of news-making or represent contrasting political views. The results of this particular study seem to confirm assumptions that Palestinian children have very little media access and issues relating to them rarely feature in the dominant news narrative despite the privileged position of the Middle East crisis in these international news agendas.

**Keywords** / media coverage / news / Palestinian children / Palestinian intifada

### **Introduction**

The aim of this study was to examine the media coverage of Palestinian children in relation to the current Palestinian uprising. The research was commissioned by UNICEF in order to aid its advocacy efforts in supporting the rights of the Palestinian child.

Thus, the research was scientific and theoretical in nature and both the qualitative and quantitative research tools were designed to assess, in some depth, the kind of coverage Palestinian children were subjected to in the news outlets selected.

Despite the labour-intensive nature of the research, the extent of the material viewed and scope of the variables monitored, this study does not boast to be more than a modest effort to gauge representational issues concerning Palestinian children in the current crisis. As such, however, it proved a valuable pilot study that opens a forum of debate on the issue and gives key indicators for further research.

The findings are, nevertheless, illuminating on many fronts and certain motifs emerged, which must inform any interested party of the issues at stake in the current news coverage of Palestinian children.

The results of this particular study seem to confirm assumptions that

Palestinian children have very little media access and issues relating to them rarely feature in the dominant news narrative despite the privileged position of the Middle East crisis in these international news agendas. When there are references to them, Palestinian children rarely manifest outside the narrative of violence and conflict by which they are very much defined.

It is important to emphasize from the outset that this is not a comprehensive study in terms of the number of media outlets monitored or in terms of scope of indicators and their relationship. Nevertheless, the research tools and parameters have been designed to produce maximum data relating to the key quantitative and qualitative indicators, which have been selected in order to produce results that are directly relevant to the needs of UNICEF's emergency campaign in the region. The criteria for the selection of the news outlets and indicator categories were agreed upon by Birzeit University Media Institute (BZUMI) and the UNICEF representative.

## Method

The methodology used derives from standard models of media research, both empirical and theoretical. The quantitative data (Wimmer and Dominick, 1987: 49–50) were collected from news texts about Palestinian children located by a thorough monitoring process. The data were then scrutinized using a specially designed coding tool. Results were presented in tabulated and graphic form. The qualitative research (Wimmer and Dominick, 1987: 50–1), in the first instance, was based on the quantitative data generated. This, however, was developed and elaborated using qualitative analysis derived from a theoretical base including semiotics and discourse analysis, to deconstruct the news texts and foreground representational issues.

The study was conducted over a six-week period between 14 November and 25 December 2001. It entailed the daily monitoring of six news outlets that were representative of regional and international media, including US, European, Arab and Israeli news outlets, and encompassed both a variety of print and broadcast media as well as online media. The news outlets selected were as follows:

- NBC TV *Nightly News with Tom Brokaw* (accessed online): this is one of the major television news networks in the US and as such provides a good example of what is being broadcast to the mainstream American audience.
- BBC World Service's *World Today* programme (UK): the BBC World Service radio station is still in the forefront in its news coverage of international affairs. It reaches both national and international listeners particularly among the political class. The BBC has the most widely listened to station among the Palestinian intellectual community and it is the station they trust most as a source of information (Aqtash, 1998).
- *The Guardian* (UK): *The Guardian* as a print sample represents a different political view to that of *The New York Times* and has also been chosen because it is one of the leading newspapers which has online popularity, boasting half a million online users in the US.

- Aljazeera TV (Qatar): the choice of Aljazeera satellite channel, as the major regional Arab news-maker, cannot be disputed as it has widely been recognized as such, especially after its news-breaking coverage of the US war on Afghanistan.
- *The New York Times*: this paper is well established as a leading US news-maker and has long been considered a key opinion-maker.
- *The Jerusalem Post* was chosen as it represents mainstream Israeli opinion, more so than *Ha'aretz* newspaper, which was also considered. It is also available in English. This is important because the selection of a Hebrew daily would have incurred translation costs.

It is important to note that although the aforementioned outlets are wide-ranging in terms of medium and audience, the lack of a representative sample from the European continent could be questioned. This was purely a matter of logistics. British outlets were used because translation costs would have inflated the budget. Despite this concern, however, we are confident the choice of outlets, in terms of spectrum of opinion and targeted audience, was appropriate to the overall objective. The outlets are all major news leaders in their respective fields – if not in terms of circulation and ratings figures then in terms of reaching decision-makers and policy-makers. All the outlets have correspondents posted in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, all the outlets chosen are representative of regional and international categories and are leaders in terms of news-making, or represent contrasting political views. Also it is important to remember that their accessibility, whether online or on air, has been a deciding factor for the purposes of this study.

The limitations, which were necessarily imposed when designing the parameters of this study, in terms of number of news outlets monitored and range, did not necessarily curtail the rather ambitious nature of the scope of indicator categories and the depth of the textual analysis.

The indicators were chosen in coordination with UNICEF representatives and were selected to ascertain how stories about Palestinian children were treated in the various news outlets and what this coverage had in common and how it differed, on a regional and international level and between media.

The indicators selected for the quantitative analysis comprised key content and form categories and provided the foundation for the discursive analysis in the qualitative appraisal.

The final analysis of the data intended to bring to light a variety of wider representational issues in relation to Palestinian children and the media in the current crisis in the region.

The indicator categories decided upon fell into four main subsections: language use, image, themes and form. Under language use there were a number of subdivisions. These included terms used to describe Palestinian children: child, children, youth, minor, adolescent, teenager, *shabab* (transliteration from Arabic for the word meaning 'young men'), martyr, boy, toddler, baby and schoolchild.

The next subdivision aimed to ascertain how Palestinian children were

described in the context of violence as perpetrators: stone-thrower, gunman, violent/demonstrator, rioter; or as victims: victim, injured, wounded, hurt, killed, shot and shot dead. Also, the use of active and passive forms was monitored in relation to the description of the death or injury of Palestinian children and whether the agent of violence was referred to in this context. Despite the fact that the terms chosen for coding did cover a wide range of the definitions used to describe Palestinian children found in the news texts, there were terms which featured that were not covered and a category of 'other' was formed. This, however, did not have any major implications in terms of results.

The subdivision relating to image included categories that aimed to ascertain how Palestinian children were presented in the visual frame, whether in still images or in moving image. Indicator categories comprised: victim, perpetrator of violence, stone-thrower, masked children, demonstrators, witness of violence, children and poverty, children and recreational activities and close-ups. Again the list proved very comprehensive when used for monitoring purposes but there were images that did not fit into any one of these categories outright.

The subdivision themes and topics aimed to measure the overall range of themes that related to children created by word and image. In an effort to ascertain whether children's welfare generally was ever covered in the news outlets, a subdivision was designed including categories such as: general health, psychological distress, education, school closures, children and poverty, future, expectations and recreational activities. This was especially important as UNICEF's advocacy efforts were directed at issues encompassed by this category. Also included were themes related to conflict and violence, which were expected to dominate in the coverage. These categories comprised: victim of violence, perpetrator of violence, witness of violence, child as adult (if a child was not differentiated from an adult in media treatment) and children represented as being exploited by adults.

There was also a category included which aimed to explore whether the image of Palestinian children was generally positive or negative. This category proved too general and ambiguous however.

The final category aimed to ascertain how the various media's specific conventions, in terms of form, played a part in defining the representation of Palestinian children. For print media the categories of news report, news in brief, feature story, front page or inside pages were used. A category for column space was disregarded as this seemed to be too problematic because most of the stories that were relevant had only a few lines of reference to Palestinian children.

For broadcast media, the categories studio or location based, shot size and camera angle, headline news, airtime and interviews were used. The camera-work categories proved less informative than anticipated because they kept to conventional filming codes for news footage. However, the scarcity of close-up shots of Palestinian children was an important finding.

A coding form was designed (Singletary, 1994: 292-4) to enable us to monitor each media text individually and was modified for print and broadcast use. Daily monitoring, recording and printing of all the relevant media texts from the news outlets listed earlier were coded on a weekly basis, on the coding form.

The data were tabulated. These data were then submitted, accompanied by a narrative description, on a weekly basis to UNICEF. The final quantitative data summary, shown here in the tables, was a cumulative and correlated summary of all the data collected over the six weeks.

In an attempt to develop and inform the quantitative base of this research, qualitative analysis was also conducted on a bi-weekly basis, foregrounding issues of representation, developed from the textual analysis, as well as informed by wider theoretical models of representation in the media.

There were some weaknesses and limitations that came to light as the research got underway. For example, it would have proved elucidating to compare the stories in which Palestinian children figured to those about violence and conflict generally in the region as well as political stories, which tend to dominate the news narrative. This, however, would have needed far more labour-intensive monitoring and coding, which was beyond the scope of this study.

Also another limitation which became apparent was that the range and scope of the variables proved to be, at times, difficult to manage and very labour-intensive. Despite the fact that a wide range of categories was designed to explore a maximum number of representational issues, at times this fact made the study too wide in terms of focus, affecting the clarity of the findings.

Any future research would benefit from a much more focused and limited indicator spectrum, developing and exploring key findings that have emerged from this study, which has been very much characterized by its pilot status.

## Results

Appreciating the latter point is particularly important to recognize the complex nature of the treatment of data in terms of their presentation and analysis. Future research could focus on only one or two key variables that have been brought to light by this study and the issues it tries to address.

### *Language Use*

#### *Frequency of Coverage*

Palestinian children featured 103 times over the six weeks in which this study was conducted in the selected media (see Table 1a).

Aljazeera News ran stories about Palestinian children or featured them in some way 32 times during the six weeks or 31 percent of the total coverage, followed by *The Jerusalem Post* at 24 times or 23 percent. *The New York Times* came in third place with 19 stories or 18 percent of the total. *The Guardian* came fourth with 13 stories at 13 percent of the total. The BBC World Service ran seven stories and NBC TV ran six stories. There were two UNICEF-related stories in the media sample. (Note: There were two more UNICEF stories in other media outlets.)

Aljazeera seems to outrank the other media monitored and from a certain point of view this may be true. It may also have been expected because Aljazeera

TABLE 1a

## Frequency of Coverage

News Outlet	Number of Stories per Week						Total	%
	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6		
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	3	6	4	3	3	5	24	23.3
BBC World Service	2	1	0	1	1	2	7	6.8
<i>The Guardian</i>	2	3	1	3	2	2	13	12.6
<i>The New York Times</i>	4	4	2	4	2	3	19	18.4
Aljazeera TV	5	7	5	4	6	5	32	31.1
NBC TV	0	1	2	2	1	0	6	5.8
UNICEF Stories	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	1.9
<i>Total each week</i>	18	22	14	17	15	17	103	100

$N = 103.$

is an Arab regional news outlet. However, as is examined in more detail later, the vast majority of the coverage consists of news film footage in which Palestinian children are in the visual frame, at demonstrations or at the scene of violence or its aftermath but are not referred to specifically.

### Defining Palestinian Children

During the six weeks in which the monitoring took place, the selected news outlets defined Palestine children a total of 260 times. The term 'children' is the most frequently used term in defining Palestinian children. The term was used 110 times or 42.3 percent of the total terms used. The term 'boy' was used 53 times or 20.4 percent of the total.

The study revealed that 13 percent of total definitions focused on 'other'. This can be considered a limitation of the coding form as this category should not be so large. Many of the terms, however, which fell outside the other categories were ones which used the age of the children to define them, such as 'six-year-old'. The coding form used in this study does not have a place for such definitions and this would justify the figure of 13 percent shown in Table 1b.

The term 'schoolchild' was used 21 times or 8 percent of the total definitions of the Palestinian children. The term 'child' was used 14 times or 5.4 percent of the total.

The terms 'youth', 'teenager', 'baby', '*shabab*', 'martyr', 'minor' were used 11, six, five, four, two and one time respectively. Finally, however, the terms 'adolescent' and 'minor' were not used once to define the Palestinian children in the selected news outlets.

Surprisingly enough, *The Guardian*, with 13 percent of the total coverage (see Table 1a) ranks fourth, but came third in its coverage of Palestinian children as victims of violence, with 20 percent of the total proportionately (see Table 2b). *The New York Times* was fairly consistent with 27 percent of the total proportionately. The BBC World Service and NBC covered Palestinian children the least. The BBC was far ahead of NBC, relatively speaking, in its coverage of

TABLE 1b

## Definitions of Palestinian Children

	Child	Children	Youth	Minor	Adolescent	Teenager	Shabab	Martyr	Boy	Baby	Schoolchild	Other	Total
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	2	19	6	1	0	1	0	1	5	0	10	10	55
BBC World Service	2	18	0	0	0	2	0	0	4	0	1	5	32
<i>The Guardian</i>	6	19	2	0	0	1	0	0	15	1	4	10	58
<i>The New York Times</i>	1	10	1	0	0	2	0	0	26	2	4	7	53
Aljazeera TV	3	34	1	0	0	0	4	1	3	2	1	0	49
NBC TV	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5
UNICEF Stories	0	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	8
Total	14	110	11	1	0	6	4	2	53	5	21	33	260
Percentage	5.4	42.3	4.2	0.5	0	2.3	1.5	0.7	20.4	1.9	8.1	12.7	100

Palestinian children as victims, with 9.5 percent as compared to NBC with 2.5 percent. This last finding may suggest some of the reasons why the American public is so ill-informed about the suffering of Palestinian children.

As expected, it can be observed that the regional news outlets, Aljazeera and *The Jerusalem Post*, were more prolific in their coverage. The kind of treatment in this coverage is examined more carefully later. Also it is no surprise that the US mainstream television news network was the least prolific and sympathetic in its coverage of Palestinian children.

Although, Aljazeera News did not live up to expectations, in some respects, it was the only news outlet that did give Palestinian children a voice, enabling them to express their feelings in a meaningful way with six out of the seven interviews with children featuring on the Arab regional news channel. The issue of a voice for Palestinian children is addressed in more detail elsewhere in this article.

Superficially, there do not seem to be too many unexpected findings. In the code of terms used to define Palestinian children (see Table 1b), the word 'children'/'child' occurred 48 percent of the total. This was followed by the word 'boy', representing 20 percent of the total. 'Schoolchild' represented 8 percent of the total. Young Palestinians were also defined as 'youth' (4 percent), 'teenager' (2 percent) and '*shabab*' (2 percent). It is interesting to note here that the fairly impersonal collective noun 'youth' was used the most, whereas the more socially and culturally specific term 'teenager' was used less and 'adolescent' and 'minor' not at all. The phrase 'stone-throwing youths' has become part of the clichéd language in the coverage. The sizeable category of 'other' shows a weakness in the coding tool as most of this category contained terms such as '17-year-old', 'three-year-old', etc. to define Palestinian children.

### *Perpetrator of Violence*

Palestinian children were defined as perpetrators of violence 27 times throughout the six weeks of this study. Eight times they were defined as 'stone-throwers', and also eight times the term 'violent demonstrator' was used; Palestinian children were described as 'demonstrator' four times, as 'gunman' three times, as rioter twice and twice using other terms (see Table 2a).

*The Jerusalem Post* used terms defining Palestinian children as perpetrators of violence 10 times or 37 percent of the total. *The New York Times* newspaper used such terms five times or 18.5 percent of the total. The BBC World Service used these terms three times, *The Guardian* and Aljazeera used them twice each and NBC once. Finally, surprisingly, four such definitions occurred in UNICEF stories.

The terms defining Palestinian children as either perpetrators or victims of violence were interestingly proportioned. *The Jerusalem Post* ranked highest in defining Palestinian children as perpetrators of violence at 37 percent proportionately and *The New York Times* second, at 19 percent. NBC ranked least at 3.7 percent but this is most probably due to the minimal amount of coverage on the US news network of Palestinians overall.

TABLE 2a

## Language Use: Palestinian Children as Perpetrators of Violence

	Stone-Thrower		Violent				Total	%
	Gunman		Demonstrator	Demonstrator	Rioter	Other		
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	1	2	2	1	2	2	10	37.0
BBC World Service	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	11.0
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	7.4
<i>The New York Times</i>	3	0	2	0	0	0	5	19.0
Aljazeera TV	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	7.4
NBC TV	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	3.7
UNICEF Stories	2	0	2	0	0	0	4	15.0
Total	8	3	8	4	2	2	27	100
Percentage	30	11	30	15	7	7	100	

### *Victim of Violence*

In the six-week study the selected news outlets used terms referring to Palestinian children as a victims of violence 158 times. Table 2b shows that the term 'killed' is the most frequently used term, occurring 60 times or 38 percent of the total.

The word 'victims' was used 44 times or 28 percent of the total terms used. The term 'wounded' was used 17 times. The term 'shot dead' was used 14 times, the term 'injured' three times and 'hurt' once. Over the six weeks, 'other' terms were used 10 times to describe Palestinian children.

However, the story of these children is not articulated. For example, Aljazeera only refers to Palestinian children as victims of violence 10 percent of the total as compared to the other news outlets (see Table 2b). *The Jerusalem Post* outdoes Aljazeera on this score with 27 percent of the total coverage referring to Palestinian children as victims of violence. This, however, may have more to do with the more prolific nature of the print coverage in general, which does not have to operate under the soundbite economy of the broadcast medium. Moreover, *The Jerusalem Post's* treatment of this issue is not necessarily sympathetic, as is examined later.

The terms defining Palestinian children as victims of violence were more prolific, as might be expected because of the brute reality of this fact. Palestinian children were defined as victims 158 times as opposed to perpetrators of violence 27 times (see Tables 2a and 2b).

Superficially, this may seem to accurately reflect the facts, but as already mentioned it is how these victims are represented in the story that plays an important part in evoking sympathy in the reader or viewer. Also, the violence of stone-throwing and demonstrators has to be viewed in relative terms as compared with the violent deaths of child victims. Accordingly, I would say the figures 27 out of 185 defining children as perpetrators of violence as opposed to 158 out of 185 as victims is in fact disproportionate in terms of the reality on the ground.

As previously mentioned, Palestinian children were described as 'victims' 44 times (see Table 2b). The term 'killed' was the most often used to define Palestinian children as victims. This may seem uncontroversial enough but the word 'killed' being a passive participle is markedly less graphic and evocative than the term 'shot dead', for example, which was used only 14 times.

There was little coverage of Palestinian children as 'wounded' or 'hurt', which made up 14 percent of the definitions of them as victims. Stories about death undoubtedly have a higher news value but when the reality on the ground is over 7000 Palestinian children wounded in the last year, this itself should give a more privileged position to injured Palestinian children in the media coverage of the conflict.

*The Jerusalem Post* and *The New York Times* were the most prolific outlets in defining Palestinian children as victims but this finding must be radically qualified by the textual analysis which follows.

TABLE 2b

## Language Use: Palestinian Children as Victims of Violence

	Victims	Injured	Wounded	Hurt	Killed	Shot	Shot Dead	Other	Total	%
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	9	1	5	0	20	2	3	3	43	27.0
BBC World Service	2	0	0	0	6	1	4	2	15	9.5
<i>The Guardian</i>	11	0	4	0	10	0	3	3	31	20.0
<i>The New York Times</i>	13	1	4	0	15	4	4	1	42	27.0
Aljazeera TV	4	0	2	1	6	2	0	1	16	10.0
NBC TV	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	2.5
UNICEF Stories	4	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	7	4.4
Total	44	3	17	1	60	9	14	10	158	100
Percentage	28	2	11	1	38	6	9	6	100	

### *Syntax Used in Defining Palestinian Children*

Counting the kinds of words used to define Palestinian children may be a useful exercise but a more sophisticated textual analysis gives a deeper understanding of how news language can colour the reader's or viewer's perception of violent events and their victims. This is why special attention was given to the syntactical use of the active and passive in sentences and phrases describing the death and injury of Palestinian children. As can be observed from Table 2c, there is far more use of the passive than the active voice in the sample, with 48 cases using the passive as opposed to 29 using the active when describing the death or injury of Palestinian children. The use of the passive often has the effect of dissipating the force of the violence that causes death. It, invariably, weakens the emphasis on the suffering of the victim. This is also true when the agent of violence, e.g. the soldier, is not mentioned as the cause of injury or death, which more often happens in passive phrases. As can be seen from Table 2c also, in 50 cases no agent of violence was mentioned. This also has the effect of sanitizing the violence or giving the impression it was inevitable as no 'will' to violence on the part of the aggressor is articulated in the news narrative.

This use of the passive voice was most prevalent in *The Jerusalem Post* and *The New York Times*, which can also be seen in Table 2c, with the BBC following close behind. In fact, all news outlets were susceptible to this use of language.

*The Jerusalem Post* was the news outlet which used this device most prolifically over the six weeks:

*... the boys appeared to have been killed by a bomb planted by the Israeli forces. (25 November 2001)*

*Four Palestinians were killed, one of them a 12-year-old-boy, in clashes. (25 November 2001)*

*... there is a possibility that the children may have been killed by playing with an explosive device planted by an IDF force. (26 November 2001)*

**TABLE 2c**  
**Syntax Used to Define Death or Injury of Palestinian Children**

	Passive	Active	No Agent
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	14	9	13
BBC World Service	8	4	10
<i>The Guardian</i>	10	6	9
<i>The New York Times</i>	11	7	13
Aljazeera TV	4	3	4
NBC TV	1	0	1
UNICEF Stories	3	3	2
Total	48	29	50

\*UNICEF Stories are not computed.

*The five children were killed last Thursday when one of them apparently kicked a booby-trapped bomb laid by the IDF. (28 November 2001)*

*. . . a 15-year-old youth was seriously wounded in the head when a tank fired a shell at the southern entrance of Khan Yunis. (10 December 2001)*

*A 15-year-old boy was fatally wounded and eight others hurt in the IAF strike on Rafah. (14 December 2001)*

*A 14-year-old Palestinian was also among those killed. (23 December 2001)*

The way this use of language serves to sanitize the horror of violence and death may be apparent from the preceding examples but it can be seen all the more clearly if it is contrasted with the more energetic and evocative use of language in the emotive coverage of the death of a Palestinian child in *The Guardian* (5 December 2001). The death of Mohammed Abu Marasa in Gaza and the wounding of other schoolchildren featured on the front page of the newspaper, accompanied by an image of an injured child being embraced by his young friend. The headline, 'They Ran for Their Lives Through a Field of Death' is graphically descriptive and evokes the fear and desperation of the children and uses strong and emphatic Anglo-Saxon derived diction in the active voice.

*The New York Times* was, in comparison, toned down in its description of the deaths: 'In other military action, Israeli missiles destroyed a security headquarters in Gaza, killing a security officer and a 17-year-old boy who was walking to school.' Here the age of the child, who is not named, is erroneous.

In this brief comparison it should be clear how different use of diction and syntax can give a markedly different representation of events and of the victims, evoking different responses in the reader.

### *Film and Photo*

As shown in Table 3, Palestinian children featured in images a total of 196 times in the news outlets in this study. They were portrayed as witnessing violence 89 times or 45 percent of the total, and as victims of violence 31 times or 15 percent of the total. Twenty-four times or 12.2 percent of the total images of Palestinian children represented them as demonstrators. They were represented in close-up shots 17 times (8.7 percent).

Palestinian children were depicted as stone-throwers 15 times, masked twice and as some other perpetrator of violence three times. They were shown in circumstances of poverty eight times. They were depicted only seven times undertaking some sort of recreational activity.

The predominant image of Palestinian children was the image of a child/children witnessing violence. This occurred 89 out 196 times. It is important to note when defining a child as a witness of violence for the purposes of this study, this incorporates, in addition to violent acts such as shooting, shelling and bombing, the aftermath or consequences of violent acts such as a demolished house, the burnt-out shell of a car rocketed by helicopter missiles or blood on a paving stone. Also potential violence is assumed to be represented in

TABLE 3

## Presenting Palestinian Children in Films and Photographs

	Victims	Perpetrators of Violence	Stone- Throwers	Masked Children	Demonstra- tors	Recreational Activities	Witnessing Violence	Close-Up	Children and Poverty	Total
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	3
BBC World Service	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>The Guardian</i>	5	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	0	10
<i>The New York Times</i>	4	0	1	0	2	0	10	4	0	21
Aljazeera TV	22	2	12	2	19	6	75	7	8	153
NBC TV	0	0	1	0	1	1	4	1	0	8
UNICEF Stories	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	31	3	15	2	24	7	89	17	8	196
Percentage	15.8	1.5	7.6	1.02	12.2	3.6	45.4	8.7	4.08	100

situations or objects that could produce violence. Thus, a child crossing a check-point nose to nose with the Israeli soldier's gun, or a child standing in front of an Israeli tank are images considered as witnessing violence.

It is interesting to note that as well as witnesses of violence, children were depicted as victims of violence 31 times out 196 and rather disproportionately, as detailed earlier, as perpetrators of violence, including stone-throwers and demonstrators, 44 times out 196 (see Table 3). Aljazeera portrayed children as victims 22 times and as perpetrators, whether as angry demonstrators or stone-throwers, 35 times. The frequency of images of children as perpetrators of violence does seem to be very disproportionate as only a very limited number of children get involved in such acts. The frequency of these images may suggest more than anything else what the photojournalist or cameraperson feels makes for a dramatic shot.

Children were portrayed in the news outlets as victims or witnesses of violence 60 percent of the time, mostly on Aljazeera News. The representation of children in these images is, however, not one that necessarily evokes sympathy.

The most common image of children, found mostly in Aljazeera's coverage, is of children demonstrating, frequently at funerals with adults. Here they were shown as part of an angry chanting crowd connoting thoughts of the inappropriateness of their presence in such situations. Children were also seen as onlookers within the frame while adults vented their anger or distress, or as accompanying parents past checkpoints or Israeli military positions. Children, here, were perceived to be witnesses of violence or its aftermath.

Children represented as victims were also common, whether picking up belongings from the rubble of a demolished house or as grieving onlookers, or in images of their dead bodies being carried by mourners at funerals. However, though poignant, such images were strangely anonymous as they were silent witnesses with no voice. They were seen but not heard.

The large number of these kinds of images normalizes the violence and the violent environment of the children. Each new image reactivates the existing reservoir of similar images, enforcing the reality of the scenes. This creates a sense in which, for the viewer, there is an inevitability about the violent circumstances of these children's environment. They are totally encompassed by a discourse of violence and conflict and seem powerless to escape it. No alternative reality is proffered, such as a child opening a present or playing football with friends. This disempowers the child and has the effect of making them inevitable victims, even deserving victims of the violence that surrounds them.

## *Themes and Topics*

### *General Welfare*

A total of 59 topics featured in the six weeks of this study referred to the general welfare of Palestinian children. The theme of psychological distress occurred 27 times or 45.8 percent of the total. Recreational activities were addressed a total of eight times and children and poverty six times. The topic of education

occurred five times and the future three times. General health and expectations were each mentioned twice (see Table 4a).

### *Palestinian Children in Violent Situations*

There were 269 occurrences where Palestinian children are represented in conjunction with violence in the six weeks of coverage represented by the sample (see Table 4b). Of these, 129 or 48 percent showed the children as victims of violence; 85 occurrences or 31.6 percent showed them as witnessing violence; 25 occurrences or 9.3 percent showed Palestinian children as perpetrators of violence; 18 times portrayed children as adult; and finally there were 12 instances where they were shown as exploited by adults.

A great deal of what has been said in terms of language use and images informs this section of the article. The themes and topics which emerged over the six-week period have been formed by a combination of words and images. Needless to say the dominant theme is that of violence and conflict. The themes have not necessarily been confined to one story though. Often one story or correspondent's report contained a number of themes. Out of the 328 themes and topics identified, 269 of these involved violence and 59 dealt with non-violent concerns of the Palestinian child (see Tables 4a and 4b).

### *Image Projection*

Table 4c shows whether the image of Palestinian children projected by the media in the study was, in general terms, positive or negative. The majority, 88 cases or 69.8 percent, of the images that were seen projected positive images, while 38 cases or 30.2 percent of the images were negative. There were also neutral images which were not coded. This may indicate a weakness of the coding tool.

### *Print Media Forms*

#### *Type of Coverage*

As shown in Table 5a, the largest proportion, 85.5 percent, of the news coverage of Palestinian children consists of news reports: 7.2 percent are news in brief items and a further 7.2 percent of the articles are feature stories.

In general terms, the language used to define Palestinian children, their behaviour and suffering is framed and filtered through a discourse of conflict within which the Palestinian child is very firmly fixed. No other kind of reality or alternative life is envisaged for them in the stories in which they figure and the dominance and consistency of this discourse give a kind of inevitability to this kind of existence. They are not represented as children first, but rather as Palestinians in a narrative of conflict, and only then as children. This is exacerbated by the fact that there are very few feature articles which give background and dimension to the Palestinian child: 92.7 percent of the print stories were articulated in the clipped tones of the news report or news in brief genre. As

TABLE 4a

## General Welfare of Palestinian Children as Shown in the Selected News Outlets

	General Health	Psychological Distress	Education	School Closures	Children and Poverty	Future	Expectations	Recreational Activities	Other
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
BBC World Service	0	8	1	1	0	1	0	1	0
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	7	2	0	4	1	0	2	0
<i>The New York Times</i>	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Aljazeera TV	1	4	1	2	1	1	2	3	3
NBC TV	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
UNICEF Stories	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total	2	27	5	3	6	3	2	8	3
Percentage	3.4	45.8	8.5	5.1	10.0	5.1	3.4	13.6	5.1

**TABLE 4b****Palestinian Children Shown in Conjunction with Violence**

	Victim of Violence	Perpetrator of Violence	Witness of Violence	Child as Adult	Exploited by Adults
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	27	5	2	7	2
BBC News TV	11	2	2	0	7
<i>The Guardian</i>	26	1	7	0	0
<i>The New York Times</i>	33	5	6	7	1
Aljazeera TV	25	11	66	2	1
NBC TV	2	1	2	0	0
UNICEF Stories	5	0	0	2	1
Total	129	25	85	18	12
Percentage	48.0	9.3	31.6	6.7	4.5

**TABLE 4c****Image Projected of Palestinian Children**

	Positive Images	Negative Images
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	13	5
BBC World Service	10	6
<i>The Guardian</i>	21	0
<i>The New York Times</i>	20	5
Aljazeera TV	23	20
NBC TV	1	2
UNICEF Stories	0	0
Total	88	38
Percentage	69.8	30.2

**TABLE 5a****Type of Coverage in the Print Media**

	News Report	News in Brief	Feature Story	Total
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	20	2	0	22
<i>The Guardian</i>	10	0	3	13
<i>The New York Times</i>	17	0	1	18
UNICEF Stories	0	2	0	2
Total	47	4	4	55
Percentage	85.5	7.2	7.2	100

mentioned earlier, only 7.2 percent of the print coverage consisted of feature articles. Incidentally, three out of four of these ran in *The Guardian* and none ran in *The Jerusalem Post* (see Table 5a).

*Position in Newspaper*

Table 5b shows the position where the articles about Palestinian children are placed within the newspaper. The greatest proportion, 87.7 percent, of them were published on the inside pages, not on the front page; only 12.2 percent of the articles were published on the newspapers' front pages.

*Broadcast Form*

*Broadcast Placement*

Most of the shots or radio references depicting Palestinian children featured in correspondents' location reports, a total of 75 times in our sample; on only six occasions were images shown from the studio accompanied by the presenter's voice-over. Throughout the six weeks of the study only once did a story relating to Palestinian children make the headline news. The total airtime of film footage or radio broadcast containing Palestinian children over the six weeks was 102.3 minutes (see Table 6a).

**TABLE 5b**

**Position of Articles in Newspapers**

	Front Page	Inside Pages	Total
<i>The Jerusalem Post</i>	1	19	20
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	10	11
<i>The New York Times</i>	4	12	16
UNICEF Stories	0	2	2
Total	6	43	49
Percentage	12.2	87.7	100

**TABLE 6a**

**Shot Placement**

	Studio Reports	Location Reports	Headline News	Airtime (minutes)
Aljazeera TV	5	69	1	92.6
BBC World Service	1	4	0	7.6
NBC TV	0	2	0	2.1
Total	6	75	1	102.3

### *Type of Camera Shot*

A total of 114 shots were taken of Palestinian children, as shown in Table 6b. The majority of the shots, 55.3 percent, are medium-range, 28.9 percent are long-range shots and 15.8 percent are close-ups.

Also the type of camera shot is an important factor in evoking the sympathy of the viewer. As can be observed from Table 6b, out of 114 camera shots, only 18 were close-ups, which usually move an audience more. Also, most of the medium- and long-range shots were of children in crowds, undifferentiated from adults, giving little individual dimension to them.

### *Camera Angle*

The most common camera angle is level shots, nine shots were taken from a high angle and six shots taken from a low angle (see Table 6c).

### *Interviews*

As shown in Table 6d, a few interviews featured Palestinian children in the six-week sample. Altogether there were seven interviews in which Palestinian children participated. There was only one interview where a specialist on children's issues was interviewed. Parents were never interviewed about their children.

**TABLE 6b**

	Type of Shot Used			
	Medium-Range Shot	Close-Up	Long-Range Shot	Total
Aljazeera TV	59	17	29	105
NBC TV	4	1	4	9
Total	63	18	33	114
Percentage	55.3	15.8	28.9	100

**TABLE 6c**

	Camera Angle			
	High Angle Shots	Low Angle Shots	Level Shots	Total
Aljazeera TV	9	6	90	105
NBC TV	0	0	7	7
Total	9	6	97	112

TABLE 6d

**Who Features in the Broadcast Interviews**

	Child	Parent	Specialist	Total
Aljazeera TV	7	0	0	7
BBC World Service	0	0	1	1
NBC TV	0	0	0	0
Total	7	0	1	8

**Some Notable Stories**

The economic and rather clichéd language used in the broadcast medium can give a rather one-dimensional representation of events, motives and issues. This is well illustrated by an NBC news item of 5 December 2001, titled ‘The Mind of a Suicide Bomber’. On the face of it, this feature, which focused on Kassan Abu-Siriya, the 10-year-old brother of a suicide gunman from Jenin, may appear a welcome attempt to give more background to the headlines. The story featured an interview with the family of the gunman and particularly his younger brother, who had recently seen a nine-year-old friend die, shot by Israeli soldiers. The boy’s trauma, through witnessing violence, depicts him as a prime candidate for suicide bomber recruiters and projects him into a scenario where he will follow in his brother’s footsteps. There is an attempt to give an understanding of the poverty and difficulties in Jenin but the fact of Israeli occupation is very emphatically deselected, giving a truncated representation of the social and political context and despite an aura of more in-depth investigative reporting, the story falls short of engaging with the complexities of the issue it tries to address.

It may be interesting to compare this with another story which ran on NBC. It was a human-interest feature story about the conflict, but this did not focus on a Palestinian child but an Israeli teenager. A report titled ‘Living with Terror’ ran on 5 December on NBC’s *Nightly News* and looked in depth at the trauma of 18-year-old Irina Olympia, a survivor of a suicide bombing who witnessed her friend die. The evocative piece gives a vivid description of the trauma of the young Israeli, who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. There is an interview with a specialist psychologist who talks in depth about the disorder, relating how 20 percent of sufferers never recover. The reporter describes how Irina is improving, even though she ‘dreams of Arab eyes’, and can see a future for herself married with children. The report starts with funeral footage of the victims of the bombings with grieving mourners and the sound of a woman’s heart-rending sobs. The report features six close-up shots of Irina as well as the psychologist and ends with the funeral images again and the pitiful sobbing with the voice-over outro, ‘The children of Israel bury their friends and try not to bury their hope for the future’.

This feature shows the potential of such a feature to evoke emotion in viewers and is a device journalists can use to bring such stories alive. If this is compared to the Kassan Abu-Siriya’s story, it is clear that his trauma and

experience were deprioritized and the rather vulgar narrative logic framed him in a crude representation of a suicide bomber-to-be.

It is, I believe, valuable to compare these stories to demonstrate how very pointed is the difference between the representation of Irina and Kassan, in terms of angle, background and emotive production devices.

In stark contrast, a long, in-depth feature has the opposite effect on *Guardian* readers in its description of the life and death of Johnny Thaljieh, a 17-year-old Palestinian teenager shot by an Israeli sniper in October 2001. His death opened a story about the hardships in Bethlehem that Christmas. The journalist described how the teenager had been a choirboy in the Church of the Nativity, had sold souvenirs in the church and had been shot as he was playing with his cousin's toddler son, dying minutes later in his father's arms in front of the church. Such detail and background give human dimension to the daily statistics of deaths and gives a poignant and evocative representation of the suffering of Palestinians.

In the same story, which has many quotes from ordinary citizens of Bethlehem, a grandfather talks about the problem of shielding children from violence:

*We do not teach them to shoot guns. We cannot educate them to see the future because there is no future, because they live in these conditions, and they see on the TV the problem also. We try to make them study more, to be educated, to use computers, but no way.*

This kind of coverage gives real dimension and background to the news stories and fosters understanding of the issues at stake in the conflict. Unfortunately such stories were very few and far between.

## Discussion

Despite the limited nature of this study and its pilot status, a number of conclusions can be drawn about the representation of Palestinian children in the news media outlets monitored.

It is apparent that there is a scarcity of stories about Palestinian children generally, despite the high profile the crisis has in the region, on regional and international news agendas alike. The issue of deselection is a real one. Palestinian children and their suffering and experiences have a precarious place on the periphery of the dominant news narrative.

Representations of them that do exist in the media coverage monitored, define them in rarefied forms. Almost exclusively they are encompassed in a discourse of violence and conflict and almost all representations of them are filtered through this dominant frame. They do not appear to exist except within this discourse, in which they seem to be inevitably trapped, whether as victims, witnesses or perpetrators of violence. The dominant image is of victim or witness of violence but these representations are routinely one-dimensional in character and the real horror of their suffering is sanitized by clichéd and obtuse language. Potent images of them are often ambivalent as they are seen in the visual frame but rarely given a voice to express their experiences.

Equally forceful are representations of Palestinian children as perpetrators of violence, although of less frequency. The stone-throwing youth and the angry demonstrator are tenuous images that, although they may be not as frequent as others, are vivid and lasting in the audience's memory.

Alternative representations of Palestinian children in different environments at school, at home, engaging in recreational activities are extremely rare. This accentuates the distorted image the viewer and reader have of their lives and does little to create sympathy or identification with them.

There were notable exceptions to this, as described earlier, but these brief alternative views do little to change the dominant representations and almost by default the focus returns to the Palestinian child as an anonymous victim or witness of violence, or stone-thrower and demonstrator.

It is difficult to suggest ways this relentless process of representation can be changed. It is clear from the study that the exceptions to the mainstream image of Palestinian children only succeeded in presenting an alternative view by engaging with their subject in particular first-hand ways. Giving context, background and dimension to the representation of the Palestinian child was achieved when journalists were there on location and gave the child a name, described details of the child's life, interviewed friends and grandparents or the child her- or himself. The featuring of news reports succeeded in giving a more memorable picture of the child. Also avoiding bland, clichéd language and passive verb forms would be a key recommendation to journalists. Being there, to talk to children, to record eyewitness accounts is a key factor.

## Recommendations

Addressing issues of media representation and finding ways to challenge dominant narratives and discourses that exist is a very complex issue. At a fundamental level, such narratives often depend upon invisible axes of power and control within hegemonic structures, which in turn revolve around the key issue of the political economy of the media. When it comes to international news production this becomes further complicated by globalization of this production and its distribution, and which lobby groups have privileged access and influence in this process.

To attempt to challenge such complex and powerful dynamics would be inconceivable. However, there are practical and manageable steps that can be taken on a local level by a variety of groups and actors that may have some impact and make a difference in a limited capacity.

These possibilities are discussed here and fall into three main categories. First, setting up some mechanism for regular, long-term monitoring is considered a key strategy. Allied to this would be a process of raising awareness among media professionals and local NGOs as well as the Palestinian Authority. Finally, creating a mechanism to provide media professionals with reliable and regular information about Palestinian children and background to particular stories that make the news (or not as the case may be) is seen as an important part of the whole equation. In summary, three main areas for action would be media monitoring, raising awareness and provision of newsworthy information.

These three key strategies can be implemented on a number of fronts but should, however, be envisioned as a holistic solution.

### *Media Monitoring*

This could be achieved by a variety of tasks, which would cumulatively prove to be effective tools. UNICEF could, if possible, initiate some form of manageable and long-term monitoring of the media coverage of Palestinian children. This could be done in-house at UNICEF with some sort of volunteer support or may be more viably achieved through a coordinated effort with other international agencies and research bodies. The monitoring could take the form of a long-term research project, which would include monitoring international and regional news outlets and their coverage of Palestinian children, very much in the mode of the research outlined in this study, but it would have to be a less labour-intensive endeavour to keep costs down. It would also be more effective if it could run on a long-term basis with an initial pilot period of possibly three months' duration. Using volunteer support would make this kind of project economically viable and could be done using student volunteers if it were based at a university such as Birzeit.

The monitoring would have to be broadly Internet based if costs were to be kept down. A wider spectrum of media outlets would have to be scrutinized to make the findings more comprehensive and key indicator categories chosen to make the findings pertinent to UNICEF's needs. The reporting could be undertaken on a monthly basis.

In conjunction with the media monitoring, a media watchdog could be set up as part of or affiliated to it. The role of this would be to alert editors and producers of inequality of coverage or biased reporting and to raise awareness of the inadequate coverage of Palestinian children. This would be viable if it was staffed by committed volunteers, coordinated by a project leader. This would contribute to an awareness-raising approach as detailed in the following section.

### *Raising Awareness*

This would be a key strategy and could operate on a number of levels.

In the first place organizing briefings, workshops or seminars with UNICEF and other international and local children's organizations and media professionals to disseminate the findings of the research of this study would be the first step of a more long-term programme.

This could be allied to a media campaign, which could raise awareness about children's rights and could utilize commissioned media productions about or by children that could be widely circulated. Having Palestinians speaking for themselves on radio, television or in newspaper supplements would help remedy, if only to a small extent, the lack of children having a voice, which was so apparent in the results of this research.

As mentioned earlier, the media watchdog would be crucial to engage media professionals, working for regional and international outlets, directly in

issues of representation. Writing letters to editors, producers and individual journalists, many of whom are accessible by email, would be a crucial part of this media overview.

Also, contacting key media professionals and correspondents based locally is an important and indispensable way of creating lines of communication to address coverage issues and feed in alternative information. Networking with media professionals is considered a key recommendation.

The media watchdog and networking mechanisms are seen as important parts of the solution to the poor coverage of Palestinian children. Using findings generated by monitoring can alert journalists to practices that distort or devalue the image of the Palestinian child. For example, the use of the passive voice to describe death and suffering is an issue that could be taken up in this forum. The use of the active rather than the passive voice is something that can be recommended to journalists. The use of active alone makes a story about the death and the injury of a child less euphemistic and does not allow omissions of key facts, for example, *who* did the killing. There is no need to use literary devices to make the story more emotive – just the inclusion of the facts and the name, age and other background details of the child would give due weight to the suffering of Palestinian children. When more airtime or column space was available, giving the child a life before death, as a family member, a school-mate, would give a more rounded representation of the victim. He or she would be more than a statistic, more than a nameless victim. It is clear that this kind of detail could be used only in longer feature articles, which are a better genre to elaborate on such stories. However, when there is a child involved in a story with high news values (such as the killing of the child in Gaza reported in *The Guardian* story ‘They Ran for Their Lives’ referred to earlier in this article), the watchdog should question why such a story did not make headline news and challenge editors and producers.

On a different track, UNICEF would do well to explore other research and literature on this issue of representation of victims, especially children, in other zones of conflict to inform other approaches. As a global agency with long experience, there must be such research available which is pooled centrally and available to regional offices. Also other aid agencies must have similar archives that can be accessed in this respect.

### *Providing Information*

It is clear from the findings in this study that deselection of Palestinian children and their suffering is an unfortunate fact. Also, the sparseness of information about the children when they are mentioned is another. To attempt to remedy this, UNICEF should consider playing a more assertive role in actively supplying information to media professionals about Palestinian children.

One way of doing this would be to employ a researcher/journalist who could actively find and write stories about Palestinian children, providing background to the headlines in concise, media-friendly style to feed to locally based media professionals and news agencies. This actor could also play a role in networking with journalists, improving the chances that Palestinian children’s

rights and experiences are addressed more regularly. Also a media-minded professional of this kind would be more sensitive to what may prove newsworthy data and could thus filter key and effective pieces of information to regional and international media. It would be important, also, to provide information about the ordinary social and economic life of Palestinian. This would help give a more holistic picture of their lives and experiences. The political dimensions of their life would never be deselected, as this is a dominant narrative. However, giving Palestinian children another persona outside the violence and victimization encourages greater identification with them, as they are seen as children first, as would any child from the industrialized nations. Thus, when these images of them are juxtaposed to their image as victims, the connection with the before and after creates a deeper sympathy. This phenomenon, I believe, is one that has already been addressed by international aid agencies and manifested in different kinds of more positive images used in their advertising campaigns. Continuously displaying a victim as a victim makes it difficult to envisage them as anything else.

As part of this strategy of information provision, an additional idea would be to set up a well-designed, well-written and, crucially, regularly updated web page about Palestinian children. This could include stories produced by the journalist/researcher, stories by children themselves, findings from the media monitoring research and a link to the media watchdog site. Showing a wide spectrum of Palestinian children's lives, socially and culturally, would provide an alternative view of their experiences and much needed alternatives to the images and narratives which dominate, as shown by this study. In addition to this, information and statistics from other local and international agencies could be fed into the site, as well as statistics from government organizations such as the ministry of health. It is important to emphasize again that this website would have to be updated very regularly if it were to become a usable resource for media professionals.

Some of the recommendations listed here seem manageable in terms of human and financial resources. Others may be more ambitious. However, if a media strategy is put into place with short- and long-term objectives and a progressive sequence of achievable tasks within a coordinated media plan, this can be implemented in phases.

The success of such a plan is imperative, if the dominant representations of Palestinian children are to be challenged and an attempt made to offer alternative images and narratives to audiences. Palestinian children need to be given a voice, a life context and individual dimensions to allow the reader and the viewer to see an alternative to the oppressive landscape of violence they perpetually inhabit.

## Note

This is a revised version of a study commissioned by UNICEF, Jerusalem, undertaken by the Print Unit of Media Institute, Birzeit University, West Bank.

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