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Habitual media: interrogating Western legacy media's complicity in the epistemic 'war' against Palestinians

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the coverage by habitual Western legacy media of the 2023/24 Israeli genocidal war against Gaza. It considers the observable media-related practices these media used in coverage of the war and how these practices have helped define, articulate, imagine and intervene implicitly and explicitly in the war, its securitisation, visualisation, mediation, narration, and representation. Together, it suggests, these practices serve to normalise Israel's epistemic violence against the Palestinians while also depriving them of agency as knowable subjects/agents. It suggests the practice of devoicing the colonised through epistemic violence aims at sowing a narrative that sustains the asymmetry of power in global affairs and attributes a higher moral authority in the 'Global North' while widening the gap between the West and the Rest.

Introduction

The short- and long-term socio-political and humanitarian consequences of Israel's war against Palestinians in Gaza that began in October 2023[1] following an unprecedented Hamas attack inside Israel have yet to be addressed. However, there is no doubt that the global coverage of the war, the first to be livestreamed in the contemporary period, has revealed serious fault lines in global media's reporting of Israel's material and immaterial violence against the Palestinians. Much has already been said and written about the persistent long-standing structural, orientalist and ideological biases in Western legacy media's coverage of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, of which the latest war against Gaza *represents* the most painful material reality of Palestinians' lived conditions under a settler-colonial regime that sanctions the disposability of an entire population as an integral practice for maintaining control over the colonised and expanding its power. Yet much more needs to be documented about the complicity of these media in the mediation of the war. Mediation, in this respect, does not solely refer to the dynamics between production and consumption[2] nor the blurring of the boundaries between them. Rather, it refers to the ubiquitous, quotidian, commonsensical and conflictual media-related practices[3] that in wartime alter the conditions of everyday life for those under military occupation through the repetition and reproduction of material and immaterial violence, including epistemic violence.

Violence, as a political, social and cultural practice, has been discussed as predominantly a direct and physical phenomenon normally defined in the West as something that occurs somewhere else (i.e. not in the Global North – or, if it does occur there, understood to be the exception rather than the rule. It is thus not surprising that violence, as Brad Evans and Henry Giroux write in their book *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle* (2015, 7), 'is easily condemned when it appears exceptional though this assumption precludes more searching and uncomfortable questions. Normalized violence, by contrast, represents a formidable challenge, requiring a more sophisticated response' that can help expose how normalised mediated cultures of cruelty shape the historic moment, while at the same time activating a critical de-colonial imagination and political agency necessary for successfully living in a non-violent future.

Nowhere is the call for a response more ethically and politically important than in discussing Israel's material and epistemic violence against the Palestinians as a mediated culture of cruelty and oppression that goes hand in hand with its other practices of violence to limit and erase knowledge about them, and its sustenance and reproduction in the Global North. Broadly speaking, epistemic violence refers to violence against knowledge as well as the false and deliberate communication or prevention of knowledge production about certain groups and communities through the language of othering and related practices. Relating in some respects to Bourdieu's term *symbolic power/violence* that accounts for the tacit modes of cultural/social domination, *epistemic violence* has been most effectively articulated by Gayatri C. Spivak (1988) as the systematic process through which colonised and subaltern social groups are prevented from formulating their own epistemologies (systems and spaces of knowledge), are deemed to be inferior or unreliable and, as such, are denied the right and ability to express themselves on their own terms, or speak in their own voices.

Drawing on this articulation, this paper explores the role – indeed, the complicity – of habitual legacy media in the main centres of power of the Global North in the mediation and reproduction of Israel's long-term practice of epistemic violence against the Palestinians. Using the BBC as a microcosm of such habitual Western legacy media, it addresses what I call observable media-related practices of epistemic violence in media coverage that have served to normalise and legitimise Israel's epistemic violence against the Palestinians, intended to normalise the war and shape the historical moment. I do not suggest the Global North is a homogeneous space devoid of diversity and nuance or contestations over power, identities, visions and truth, nor do I use the term to concretise and accept at face value colonial attempts to divide the world as developed and non-developed. Rather, I use the term as a meta-metaphor to refer to the persistent colonial attempts to locate and produce knowledge in the Global North. The paper begins with a broad discussion of the literature on global reporting of the Israel/Palestine conflict[4] before addressing three observable media-related practices, namely discursive epistemic violence, testimonial epistemic violence and structural epistemic violence, in Western legacy media's coverage of the 2023/24 war against Gaza. Together, the paper suggests, these practices have helped define, articulate, imagine and intervene implicitly and explicitly in the war, its securitisation, visualisation and mediation, narration, and representation, while also devoicing the Palestinians.

In making its argument, the paper partially fills a lacuna in the western-centric field of media and communication studies which have generally regarded epistemic violence as an academic nonissue, or a theoretical oxymoron. Indeed, discussions of epistemic violence as a media practice have largely been absent from dominant Western-centric theorisation of

media and conflict/war, with war itself largely also absent from contemporary debates on the crisis of politics and communication which continue to focus on the crisis of legitimacy in democracies (see, for example, Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). Even the most influential paradigms in global news and sociology of journalism, such as frame analysis, agenda-setting and discourse analysis, have continued to focus on the meaning of frames and discourse rather than addressing how frames and discourses produce knowledge. The lack of attention to the relationship between news frames and epistemic violence is surprising particularly because, as Brunner succinctly argues, epistemic violence is not external or alien to the communication field if we accept that it is essentially 'rooted in knowledge itself, in its genesis, formation, organization, and effectiveness' (Brunner 2021, 204), and in its communication or dis-communication.

Habitual media and reporting on Israel–Palestine

In this paper, I broadly draw on Mann's (2022) use of the term 'habitual media' as referring to ubiquitous media and communication technologies defined by the repetitive engagement of various users with media, on the one hand, and the permanent need, by the state and main power holders, to continuously update and recalibrate practices of media, on the other.[5] In his study, Mann was concerned primarily with habits of media use and how habits of using cameras, mobile phones and social media dictate the integration of media into the armed conflict in Israel–Palestine and provide new modes of control over the occupied populations in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories. For him, habitual media is, as such, sustained by the engagement of various Israeli officials, citizens and soldiers[6] with media, and by the Israeli state's continuous intervention in media practices to ensure the dominance of its narrative about itself, maintain its control of the Palestinians[7] and ensure that habitual media use becomes inseparable from the security regime in Israel–Palestine.

In this paper, I discuss Israel's intervention in Western habitual legacy media through addressing the observable media-related practices that normalise and perpetuate Israel's epistemic violence against the Palestinians. I foreground my approach in the understanding that the Israeli state's intervention in habitual Western legacy media is a central practice of its political communication strategies underpinned by its propaganda practices. In the 2023/24 war, the state's intervention has been significantly boosted by the involvement of thousands of Israeli citizens, professional network influencers and soldiers in the struggle over the narrative of the war, with hundreds of civilian war rooms set up to stream Israel's Hasbara (Hebrew for public diplomacy) and make it more effective.[8] While not explicit about the role of Israel's political communication strategies and interventions in the media practices of habitual Western legacy media, existing literature on the global coverage of international conflicts and wars has already documented that Western legacy media are plagued by ahistoricity, decontextualisation and bias, particularly when reporting on the Palestine/Israel conflict. Indeed, the literature has consistently shown that contemporary conflicts/wars are reported by legacy Western media in a politicised fashion that benefits traditional power centres and power elites in the Western hemisphere (for example, Fenton et al. 2020; Kennis 2022; Zollmann 2017, 2019) with coverage often limited to the narrow sphere of what constitutes formal politics and legitimate controversy in democracies.

These trends are particularly evident in the reporting of the asymmetrical conflict between Israel and the Palestinians even before the 2023/24 war, where research has consistently exposed

inherent structural and ideological biases in Western legacy media's reporting of unfolding events, which legitimise Israel's narrative about itself and de-legitimise Palestinian stories and voices. In fact, several studies have documented that the BBC in the UK and the *New York Times* in the US have played a role in normalising (and legitimising) Israel's continuous efforts to represent an image of itself as a legitimate state aiming to defend itself against its enemies (see, for example, Amer 2022; Matar 2016; Philo and Berry 2004, 2011).

In the latest and most violent Israeli war against Gaza that began in October 2023, new research has provided empirical evidence of persisting structural and ideological biases against the Palestinians in the global coverage of Israel's spectacular war against Gaza and in its violent practices in the occupied Palestinian Territories. Some of these studies have shown that the Western legacy media's coverage of the war, such as that of the BBC in the UK, has been largely defined by Western political and foreign interests, misinformation, hate speech and the repetition of Orientalist tropes, images and language that have served to dehumanise Palestinians and normalise the violence and the war against them (see for example, Freedman 2023; Gilboa and Sigan 2024). These studies also revealed the Western legacy media's failure to contextualise the war as a product of Israel's settler-colonial practices that include its long occupation of Palestinian territories and its 17-year-long siege of Gaza, thus obscuring essential knowledge about Palestinians' long history of oppression and struggle for liberation. Indeed, in the 2023/24 Israeli war against Gaza, anyone watching the news can recognise the boundaries of what can and cannot be said. For instance, it has been acceptable to describe the indiscriminate killing of Palestinians by the Israeli military as 'attacks in retaliation for' the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. But it was much more difficult to describe the indiscriminate killing of Israelis by Hamas and other militants on 7 October as 'attacks in retaliation against' what is now almost universally recognised by human rights groups as a brutal settler-colonial regime.

Several interest groups, too, have documented the bias in the BBC's war coverage. For example, the Muslim Council of Britain's Centre of Media Monitoring (CfMM) examined 180,000 video clips from seven UK broadcasters and three international broadcasters, as well as about 26,000 news articles from 28 British media websites. In line with the findings of smaller-scale studies conducted thus far, it found that Israeli narratives, voices and grievances were favoured over Palestinian voices, narratives and grievances in the coverage. An investigative report by Al Jazeera English (AJE) released in October 2024 furthermore documented the ways in which Western media organisations sought to conceal some facts about the war against Gaza (see https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-listening-post/2024/10/5/failing-gaza-behind-the-lens-of-western-media), including mentioning the significant advantage of Israeli officials in shaping agendas and, crucially, the language of reporting. Indeed, as Mann (2022, 9) suggests, habitual media are not 'simply another tool in the arsenal of a normalizing military occupation; they also enable to military to flexibly change and recalibrate how media is used … habitual use of media has become inseparable from the security regime in Israel–Palestine'.

Israel's battle to control the epistemological space

The global coverage of the 2023/24 Israeli war against Gaza cannot be discussed without paying attention to the Israeli state's incessant intervention in the practices of habitual legacy media, specifically in the main Western countries of the Global North, to ensure the dominance of its narrative about itself and to legitimise its war. Israel's intervention in the practices of habitual

media, including the commonplace news practice of framing and agenda setting, is a well-known tactic of its propaganda (hasbara in Hebrew) that aims to produce a particular narrative about Israel as a nation under attack while also manufacturing public discontent, and even animosity, towards the Palestinians. Israel's propaganda has gone hand in hand with its long-term practice of shutting down communication networks in the areas it is controlling or attacking; the prohibition of entry to Gaza to international journalists, the mass killing of Palestinian journalists, and the shadow banning and censuring of social media posts and accounts all serving to reveal and obscure important realities of the devastating war and its consequences for ordinary people.

Since their early encounters with Zionism, Palestinians have been the target of a concerted effort by Zionists and their supporters to silence them, strip them of their right to know themselves, to narrate their own politics and their own history, or even acknowledge their existence. Indeed, since its foundation, Israel has intentionally communicated and repeated ideological tropes and visions about itself to control the global epistemological field, intervening both materially and immaterially in the production/erasure of knowledge about itself and about Palestinians. As Israeli historian Ilan Pappe has documented in several of his works, Israel's privileged place in the West and Western mainstream media is the result of continuous Israeli–Zionist efforts to manage and market an image of Israel as a state of what the West aspires for in the East – that of a modernising and modern state championing Western-centric discourses of progress and civilisation.

In other words, Israel's privileged place in much of the Global North is the outcome of its constant need to update and intervene in media practices of habitual media, particularly the Western legacy media. These practices are central to Israel's sophisticated technological political communication strategy that instrumentalises propaganda and technology as part and parcel of its settler-colonial political and military practices. Israel's political communication strategy is continuously evolving and responding to advances in technologies and top-down surveillance apparatuses. In the digital age, such practices have been made blatantly superfluous as Israeli soldiers and Israel Defence Forces (IDF) members,[9] along with extremist settlers, Israeli citizens, and Israeli political and military elites, are all engaging in the sharing of information and the production of violence as prevailing forms of surveillance in the war. At the same time, Israel's state surveillance has been enhanced by advancements in digital technologies and the employment of artificial intelligence in the war, factors that need to be discussed in any theorisation of war and conflict. As Tawil-Souri (2023) has succinctly argued, digital systems of surveillance, particularly those used by Israel, materialise the state's territory. She writes:

> Populations and territories can be excluded and still be embraced by a surveillance regime. Israel has at its disposal a restricted Palestinian system that is dependent on Israel which is easier to surveil and an advanced Israeli system that enacts all kinds of surveillance mechanisms onto Palestinians. The extent of Israel's surveillance is expansive, and within these spaces is where the containment of Palestinians takes place. … Palestinians are thus not simply excluded, but differentially excluded. (2023, 220–221)

Epistemic violence

Irrespective of the political and cultural advantages of technological changes in the military battle on the ground, Israel's political communication strategy remains underpinned by two inter-related discursive strategies: the first is the consistent discursive production of

knowledge about itself to legitimise its policies and practices; and the second is its practice of denying or erasing knowledge about the Palestinians, by silencing them or by discussing Palestinians within certain perceptual views or registers while depriving them of their most important human qualities. These practices have produced a dominant settler-colonial representational order that, through repetition and dissemination, has informed ways of seeing or not seeing the world and the 'Other', supported materially by the high-technology infrastructure that Israel has used to control Palestinian spaces and materialise its control.

Discussing the visibility and invisibility of the images that make up the global media spectacle of the Israel–Palestinian conflict, Gil Hochberg writes in her book *Visual Occupation: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone* (2015) that one 'cannot fail to notice how severely limiting these images are and how violently they restrict our ability to read them' (2016, 6). The images and narratives Hochberg talks about include the familiar photos of Palestinian suffering, the ruins of Palestinian homes, Israeli soldiers fully armed along with images of armed Palestinians, which have become stock images of the conflict repeated and shown on various occasions and familiar to audiences everywhere. For her, the repetitive production and re-production of such images 'constructs a highly restrictive visual framework. Palestinians and Israelis appear in this predetermined visual field, time and again, as familiar objects with pre-assigned roles' (Hochberg 2015, 6). In other words, within these visual frames, Israel's occupation and settler-colonial practices become banal and commonsensical while Palestinians are seen through a fetishised lens of destruction, suffering, violence and loss and as people deprived of any political agency.

Writing about the practice of repetition and its implications from an international law perspective, Nimer Sultany suggests that repetition does not mean sameness; 'repetition is complex and dynamic, not static … it connotes recursive power dynamic and a structural relationship between an occupier and an occupied. It should serve as a reminder of context rather than an erasure of context' (2016, 204). As he notes, there is nothing rhetorical about the repeated deaths in Palestine. Rhetorical accounts only reduce the materiality of death and suffering to image and narrative production for political gains. Tragic accounts of death, in fact, distort the political responsibility of the parties involved in the killing, including those third parties complicit in the genocidal actions (Hochberg 2015). What is more troubling is how repetition normalises and legitimises Israel's ideologies and image of itself while normalising violence, immaterial and material, and concealing the Palestinians as the unseen and the irrelevant 'other' of the long-term Zionist paradigm (Sultany 2016).

These practices are central to the production and reproduction of epistemic violence, articulated most effectively by Spivak (1988) in her seminal text 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak argued that epistemic violence is the systematic process through which colonised and subaltern social groups are prevented from formulating their own epistemologies (systems and spaces of knowledge); are deemed to be inferior or unreliable; and, as such, are denied the right and ability to express themselves on their own terms, or speak in their own voices. Elaborating on the phenomenon in discourse, feminist philosopher Kristie Dotson introduced the idea of dominant 'hearers' who refuse to accept the marginalised and what they say on common epistemic grounds, a practice she called 'reliable ignorance', that is employed as a utilitarian and strategic move to ensure that members of oppressed groups remain unheard or misunderstood. For feminist and postcolonial thinker Vandana Shiva (1990), epistemic violence is deeply embedded in an entangled knowledge monopoly which is executed by so-called experts to conduct 'violence against the subject of knowledge, the

object of knowledge, the beneficiary of knowledge, and against knowledge itself' (Shiva 1990, 233–234). Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos goes further in proposing the concept of 'epistemicide' to describe the actual 'destruction' or 'death' of what he refers to as 'knowledges', whether these are historical or cultural knowledges (Santos 2014), while Latin American sociologist Grosfoguel (2000) argues convincingly that epistemicide played a crucial role in Europe's colonisation of the rest of the world, including the settler colonisation of the Americas.

Epistemic violence and habitual media

In what follows, I draw on these critical insights to address the ways in which habitual Western legacy media play a role in reproducing Israel's epistemic violence against the Palestinians through the repetition of Israeli discourses and narratives about itself intended to discredit, silence and sabotage Palestinian knowledge production and control the political communication arena. Specifically focusing on the BBC[10] as a microcosm of habitual legacy media, I focus on three main observable media-related practices that come across in its coverage of Israel's war against Gaza in 2023/24.

I begin with the observable media-related practice of discriminatory epistemic violence which comes across in the naming and framing of the other, and in constructing the other (the Palestinians) as inferior, both essentially and morally, thus contributing to Israel's casting of them as subhuman. Framing, as the literature in media studies and journalism has shown, is the use of discursive descriptions and interpretations by various actors to explain various phenomena. In international news coverage of events elsewhere, framing is a fundamental discursive tool instrumentalised to provide legacy news media with a 'quasi-monopoly' of breaking news in the world periphery (Van Ginneken 1998, 113–114) while offering the first interpretations of complex issues in relation to events elsewhere. During war and conflict, legacy news media, as Norris, Montague, and Marion (2003) write, tend to prioritise some facts, images and developments over others, thereby supporting and legitimising ways of seeing and knowing about the world. Judith Butler further suggests, in her acclaimed book *Frames of War* (2009), that frames organise visual thinking (of the intended audiences) so some subjects are constituted through norms that determine which or how subjects are recognised and which or how others are unrecognised or made absent.

In the context of the 2023/24 war against Gaza, Israeli-produced first frames and interpretations (meaning frames first uttered by Israeli officials) of the war communicated and repeated by Western legacy media, such as the BBC, have been rarely challenged by these media. Furthermore, if counter evidence is provided, such as in the methodical reports of casualties by the Gaza Health Ministry, this evidence is immediately attacked as being suspect and void of any truth through adding words like the 'Hamas-run health ministry'. Indeed, from the beginning of the war, the BBC, like other habitual Western legacy media, uncritically adopted frames and explanations put forward by Israeli political and military elites intended to de-humanise Palestinians as unworthy victims or as terrorists, ignoring the decades of structural violence and occupation. One of the starkest examples of such frames were those repeatedly used shortly after the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023. These included the framing by Israeli President Isaac Herzog who said it was not only Palestinian militants but 'an entire nation' that was responsible for the violence, and that Israel would fight 'until we break their backbone'.[11] Others include the statement on 9 October 2023 by then Israeli Defence Minister

Yoav Gallant who referred to Palestinians as 'human animals', and said that Israeli forces were 'acting accordingly'.[12] Gallant later told Israeli troops at the border that 'we will eliminate everything'. On 16 October, in a formal address to the Israeli Knesset, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the situation was 'a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle',[13] a statement also posted on the prime minister's official X account but later deleted (see https://www.yahoo.com/news/fact-check-children-darkness-post-194500902.html).

Other frames the BBC News reports used often referred to the Palestinians as the guilty and unworthy other, frames exacerbated by vilification narratives exploited by Israel to minimise the suffering of the Palestinians. Furthermore, Palestinians were framed as the 'problematic' victim, providing a conducive environment to negate and, by extension, normalise the material and immaterial violence – indeed, war – of protracted colonial occupation and violence that the occupying power exercises. The use of the victim/defensive model of reporting is not new. In fact, Wolfsfeld at al. (2008) argued this model was based on the fact that media coverage of violent conflicts tends to vary depending on the alignment of news outlets with the parties involved. In addition, as they note, the victim/defensive mode of reporting model also posits the existence of an 'ethnocentric' slant in local/national news coverage of violent conflicts. Specifically, the model suggests that local and national news outlets cover their own militaries sympathetically when they are involved in violent conflicts, while at the same time reporting unsympathetically about enemy sides. However, this paper suggests that the use of these selective frames is an example of discriminatory epistemic violence that legitimises Israel's epistemic violence to silence, attack, discredit and undermine Palestinian knowledge production, creating what Jabiri (2024) calls an anti-Palestinianism that shapes Palestinian experiences.

An examination of the BBC News reporting reveals it regularly repeated Israeli information about the war without challenge and without making it clear that its reporters, along with other international reporters, had been banned entry to the battlefield by Israel since the war began. The excessive reliance on Israeli or pro-Israeli sourcing in the corporation's news reports is important to address because it can be a crucial factor in news coverage of violent conflicts, with framing imbalances often being the byproducts of sourcing imbalances. One example of such practices was the BBC's repetition of the framing by the IDF of areas subjected to attack in Gaza as 'Hamas command centres' without suggesting that such statements could not be independently verified, as normal journalistic practice demands (for example the tweet from BBC news on 13 October 2023, available at https://x.com/BBCWorld/status/1713936586411311331?s=20). Another practice was the framing of Palestinian children as 'persons under 18' while Israeli children were talked of as children, thus contributing to what some scholars have called practices of unchilding Palestinian children. This practice comes across in a report by correspondent Caroline Hawley aired on 11 October: the footage starts with images of children as Hawley speaks on voiceover, saying: 'Imagine that you know and love these children; all are now hostages in Gaza, and the wait, the absence of news is torture' (BBC News 2023k, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9scGFj7zp5w (Accessed: 1 April 2024). Hawley then proceeds to say the total number of children taken hostage is unknown, but as images appear on the screen, she provides names and ages of the ones who are known to be taken into Gaza. The report concludes with an image of a Palestinian child walking on top of the rubble of a destroyed building as Hawley's voice over says: 'As Israeli airstrikes flatten buildings in Gaza nobody knows what's happening to them

[Israeli children hostages] and Palestinian children are also been taken and torn apart' (BBC News 2023k).

In other examples, Palestinian civilian casualties were talked of as collateral damage (BBC, 28 December 2023, available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-middle-east-67831997), in contrast to the reference to 'civilian casualties' when referring to Israelis; and the killing of Palestinian women and children was indirectly or directly justified through invoking the frame of human shields. The human shields frame has been consistently instrumentalised as a strategic discourse in asymmetric armed conflicts, especially those conducted in densely populated urban areas, such as can be found throughout most of Gaza.[14]

Unlike its other wars against Gaza, Israel consistently communicated and instrumentalised these frames in the 2023/24 war through a social media campaign that compared Hamas with the Islamic State, while blurring the lines between civilians and combatants and framing Israel's campaign as a humanitarian fight to free Palestinians from Hamas. Israeli tropes and frames suggesting Israel's war was its own 'war on terror' while comparing Hamas to ISIS were consistently used in the BBC coverage of the war, repeating the language and frames advanced by Israeli political elites while making explicit comparisons between the Hamas 7 October 2023 attack inside Israel and the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US (Matar and Hahn-Herera, forthcoming). The power of such selective frames to explain events elsewhere comes through their role as providing or enhancing socially shared narratives that instrumentalise pre-existing cultural resources, codes, and regimes of interpretation, or what Alshaer has called cultures of communication (2008), to mobilise support and legitimise military action and excessive violence against the Palestinians and other opponents.

There is also little doubt that powerful institutions in the Global North, including governments, news organisations, and academic institutions, have enabled these practices to a certain extent. There are many examples of this enabling, but one such example during the early weeks of the 2023/24 war against Gaza is US President Joe Biden's action of unilaterally passing judgement regarding who was culpable for the attack against al-Ahli Baptist Hospital in Gaza in October 2023, accepting Israel's claims of innocence uncritically while wholly dismissing the accounts of Palestinian eyewitnesses. What is troubling is that despite the social media-driven rise of alternative news sources, traditional news outlets continue to maintain power in the social media environment, thus exerting considerable social media sway while setting the agenda for non-media actors.

Testimonial epistemic violence

The second observable media-related practice of epistemic violence is the practice of testimonial symbolic violence, or discursive silencing, which has been a consistent practice of habitual media in the Global North in the coverage of Israel's war against Gaza. Testimonial symbolic violence is a documented practice used to undermine the credibility of the 'other' through using language and frames that discredit or de-legitimise what the 'other' says or does, despite any expertise or personal experiences the other may have. In her seminal text, Spivak (1988) refers to testimonial symbolic violence as a silencing act that includes incorporating and producing damage to a group's ability to speak and to be heard, while Dotson talks about it as testimonial smothering, which occurs when the speaker from the outgroup truncate their testimony 'in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which [the] audience demonstrates testimonial competence' (Dotson 2011, 244).[15]

Testimonial smothering goes hand in hand with the practice of what Dotson calls testimonial quieting which occurs when a speaker attempts to make assertions or to give testimony, but because of their audience's profound ignorance about their epistemic credentials, their speech is not taken up as it is meant, i.e. not taken up. Another way to silence a group is by refusing to recognise its representatives as legitimate representatives of communities and peoples – that is, as having the authority to speak for the group. Historically, this kind of recognition refusal has been used to disempower marginalised groups, including Palestinians, and prevent them from producing knowledge about themselves.

One example of testimonial symbolic violence is the lack of coverage by habitual Western legacy media, such as the BBC, of events directly connected to the Gaza genocide that do not get highlighted or, at best get, buried in obscure areas on their web pages. One of these major events is the genocide case filed by South Africa against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). It was the first time since its inception that Israel stands accused at the ICJ, and yet only 'shy coverage' was offered to audiences around the globe. The court hearings were streamed live basically everywhere, mainly on social media platforms, but not on major media outlets. Even when the court announced that it is 'plausible' that genocidal acts are being committed by Israel in Gaza, this was also downplayed.

Testimonial symbolic violence, this paper suggests, is a consistent observable practice in the reporting of the habitual Western legacy media of the asymmetrical conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. For example, in the reporting of the 2023/24 war against Gaza, Western legacy media, such as the BBC, systematically prioritised and legitimised Israeli and pro-Israeli voices as the voices of rationality and reason, and, as such, served to silence or discredit the Palestinians, often talked of as irrational and unreasonable. The media-related practice of testimonial symbolic violence was also evident in media-related practices such as the linking of all developments in the war with the word 'Hamas', making it difficult to see anything beyond what the word implied or meant to the targeted audience while constructing 'a highly restrictive visual framework. Hochberg had argued, Palestinians appear in this predetermined visual field, time and again, as familiar objects with pre-assigned roles (Hochberg 2015, 6) while ensuring that Palestinians could only be seen and made visible through a highly mediated fetishised lens of destruction, violence and loss, and, as such, deprived of any agency.

These practices result in forced devoicing of the colonised through the production of a narrative that erases their stories and their perspectives from history. Writing about his experiences as an invited panel speaker on one of the BBC Radio 4's flagship programmes, *The Moral Maze*, soon after 7 October, Atef Alshaer writes that the frames of habitual media in the Global North were not only 'loaded with de-humanising language directed against the Palestinians, [but] every issue [was] reduced to the word "Hamas"'. Indeed, he wrote that 'the dehumanization of the Palestinians was to be doubled down upon, so that bombing and attacks with the most advanced weapons on the planet against their bodies and institutions, against Palestine as a nation and community, could be justified and legitimated' (Alshaer 2024, 7).

Another observable media-related practice of epistemic discursive silencing was the demand, made to Palestinians invited to talk about their lives and experiences, to focus on the feelings and grief of Israelis suffering from the 7 October 2023 attacks before reflecting on their views of the ongoing war. An important example was the demand during a BBC

interview with the Palestinian Authority's Ambassador to the UK Hussam Zomlot, who lost members of his own family in the Israeli war against Gaza, to 'condemn Hamas' on screen before making any statement or comment. Another common example of this kind of approach relates to the Palestinian 'failure' to commit to peace with Israel, a discursive practice that implies Palestinians are the guilty party and not the victims.

Institutional/distributive epistemic violence

The third practice of epistemic violence is that of institutional/distributive epistemic violence, which refers to violence against the institutions of knowledge production to control or restrict access to knowledge platforms and institutions, including education and the media, to marginalised communities. It is no secret that throughout its history, Israel has consistently sought to control the Palestinian and global spaces for production of knowledge. In the 2023/24 war against Gaza, Israel deliberately attacked the various structures and institutions of knowledge production (such as schools, the media and universities) in Gaza, destroying all the universities and a large number of schools in what has become to be known as scholasticide. A year since the war began, a report by the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education confirmed that Israel had killed at least 10,490 school and university students, and 16,700 more had been injured. More than 500 schoolteachers and university educators have also been killed. Israel's relentless assault on Gaza's educational infrastructure has resulted in the complete disruption of schooling, leaving a whole generation of Palestinians without access to education. All schools, universities, or training centres in Gaza have remained closed since the beginning of the ongoing genocide. A staggering 625,000 school-aged children have been forced to miss an entire academic year, with no prospect of resuming any time soon. Hundreds of school buildings have been deliberately targeted and destroyed by the Israeli military. Those still standing have been repurposed as shelters housing hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons.[16] In late April 2024, United Nations (UN) experts concluded, 'with more than 80% of schools in Gaza damaged or destroyed, it may be reasonable to ask if there is an intentional effort to comprehensively destroy the Palestinian education system, an action known as "scholasticide" (see UN Human Rights release available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza).

Along with the destruction of educational institutions, Israel has consistently intervened in the communication of knowledge about Palestinians, shutting down communication channels and Internet access for prolonged periods of time and refusing battlefield access to international journalists, including those working for habitual media in the Global North. As Tawil-Souri explains in her analysis of Israel's digital occupation, Israel has always controlled and maintained telecommunications systems in the occupied territories and imposed legal and military restrictions on them. What little was done with regards to telecommunications in Palestinian areas rendered the network subservient to Israeli infrastructure. In addition, Israel killed more than 120 Palestinian journalists covering the war from the battlefield.[17] Israel also shut down operations of the Al Jazeera network, branding it as a mouthpiece of Hamas.

There is no doubt, as several studies have documented, that habitual Western legacy media, including liberal institutions like the BBC and the New York Times, along with right-wing

media organisations globally, have played a pivotal role in the legitimation of the asymmetrical response by the Israeli state by gatekeeping, repeating Israel's frames and refusing to address the settler-colonial historical context of the brutal 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks against Israel. The US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) records at least 103 Palestinian journalists and media workers killed in the war in Gaza. Other lists suggest the true number is higher. The fact that so many Palestinian journalists and media workers – working for a wide range of local and international outlets – have been killed, injured or detained by Israeli forces has raised concerns among press freedom organisations that the IDF has deliberately sought to silence critical reporting.

Conclusion

Israel's latest war against Gaza that began in October 2023 and had been on-going for over a year at the time of writing this paper has revealed that information is not by itself a form of power, but that it can become a powerful tool when intentionally used to produce and reproduce epistemic violence – the deliberate erasure or control of knowledge about, and by, marginalised communities and colonised people. Grounding its discussion in the understanding of habitual media as the ubiquitous media and communication technologies that are sustained by the repetitive engagement of users with media, on the one hand, and the need, by the Israeli state, to continuously update and recalibrate practices of media on the other hand, the paper explored how habitual legacy Western media have played a role in enhancing and supporting this powerful tool during (and outside) war and, as such, in the production and sustenance of Israel's epistemic violence against the Palestinians.

The analysis of the observable media-related practices that produce epistemic violence supplements the findings of several studies that have documented how Western habitual legacy media, including liberal institutions like the BBC and the *New York Times*, along with right-wing media organisations globally, have played a pivotal role in the legitimation of the asymmetrical response from the Israeli state by gatekeeping, repeating Israel's frames and obscuring the existing settler-colonial historical context that led to the brutal 7 October 2023 Hamas and its affiliates' attacks against Israel.

Writing in the summer of 2024, Hanan Toukan suggests that one of the key practices of epistemic violence against the Palestinians was the stifling of dissenting voices against the indiscriminate Israeli military onslaught on Gaza, which she called an enduring form of *slow institutional epistemic violence* of Palestinian knowledge that is deemed acceptable because it doesn't manifest with the extreme physical violence that we currently see unfolding in Gaza. However, as she argues, these actions of stifling discourse are

> needed to enable the final stage of violence against knowledge and people that is occurring on the ground. They exist in a continuum….Hence, a certain level of epistemic violence in global institutions of knowledge and cultural production has to exist to fuel the logic of dehumanisation, racialisation and stereotyping that has long been part and parcel of the Palestinian experience.[18]

Almost 40 years ago, Edward Said, disturbed and angered by the silencing and sidelining of the Palestinians in Western media and public discourse then, suggested that the problem of closing down representation partly lay with the refusal by Israel and the United States to 'see' the Palestinians or to take seriously their claims for justice and human rights. In his book

After the Last Sky, published in 1986, Said movingly questions such images and juxtaposes them with other images of Palestinian everyday lives. He writes:

> For all the writing about them, the Palestinians remain virtually unknown. Especially in the West, particularly in the United States, Palestinians are not so much a people as a pretext for a call to arms. It is certainly correct to say that we are less known than our co-claimants to Palestine, the Jews. Since 1948, our existence has been a lesser one …. Many of us have been killed, many permanently scarred and silenced, without a trace. And the images used to represent us only diminish our reality further. To most people, Palestinians are visible principally as fighters, terrorists, and lawless pariahs.

Said's arguments remain relevant today, particularly given the neglect in the western-centric field of media and communication studies to address epistemic violence as a media-related practice during war particularly by settler-colonial regimes, such as Israel's, which aim to preclude certain forms of knowledge. This is not an accident; it is a central goal of colonial violence. Colonisation and land dispossession would not be possible without them. While the processes and practices of settler colonialism are as diverse as the lands they have occupied and conquered, a commonality that arises among these variegated techniques of violence is that colonisation is, in large part, an epistemic project. In essence, the *devoicing* of the colonised through epistemic violence aims at sowing a narrative that sustains the asymmetry of power in global affairs and attributes a higher moral authority in the West, thus widening the imagined gulf between the West and the rest.

This said, this epistemic project is increasingly being challenged and subverted by the incredible pro-Palestinian solidarity movements in capitals and main cities of the Global North, as well as by what might be called emerging 'counter-publics' in social media platforms, such as TikTok and other spaces. The narrative is also challenged by Palestinians, too, including those besieged and targeted in Gaza, who are also engaged in knowledge production about their lives and histories, contributing to these challenges while also producing lived imaginations of Palestinian-ism and what it means to be Palestinian.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Dina Matar is Professor of political communication and Arab Media at the School of Law, Gender and Media, SOAS. She has served as Chair of the Centre for Palestine Studies and of the Centre for Global Media and Communications. She is the co-editor, with Helga Tawil-Souri, of *Producing Palestine: The Creative Production of Palestine through Contemporary Media* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), and author of *What it Means to Be Palestinian: Stories of Palestinian Peoplehood* (I.B.Tauris, 2010). She is also sole editor of the forthcoming *Reframing Political Communication in the Middle East and North Africa, Towards de-colonisation* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025); co-author of *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication* (Hurst, London: 2014) and co-editor of *Gaza as Metaphor* (2016). Her research focuses on political communication in the Arab region, with a special focus on Palestine, cultural politics, memory and oral history, social movements, media and activism. She has published extensively in journals and books. She is the founding co-editor of the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

Notes

1. By the time of writing the conclusion to this article in September 2024, more than 40,000 Palestinians, including women and children, had been killed by Israel's ferocious war.
2. Roger Silverstone, building on other scholars, suggested mediation refers to the dialectical 'processes of communication' – that is, production and reception – as well as to its role in changing 'the social and cultural environments that support them' (2005, 189). While relevant, such an understanding tends to cast all media as sharing a common logic and cast all societal units as susceptible to this logic.
3. I borrow the concept media-related practices (whether in the form of news, visuals, commentary or even sharing other news and commentary) from Mark Hobart in his chapter on media practice (2010).
4. It is important to note that the term 'conflict' does not adequately reflect the power relations between Israel and the Palestinians.
5. Mann draws on Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's theorisation of 'habitual media' as media dictating a routine of perpetual crisis, thus becoming inseparable from the perpetual crisis of economic instability and risk.
6. The engagement by Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldiers with media has been starkly evident in the war against Gaza, with individual soldiers engaging with their own smartphones and social media platforms to upload the destruction of Gaza with some gruesome images and content.
7. Habitual media is also sustained by Palestinians' continuous engagement with media to tell their own stories; to get information about the next deadly strike and the tragic consequences of others; to find out where the next food and aid supply is; to locate family and friends and to assess what is being said about Palestinians experiencing extreme violence.
8. Mapping Israeli civilian hasbara – public diplomacy – initiatives aimed at the West in December 2023, researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), with the help of the Israeli Hasbara Map, found some 120 operations rooms, 40 organisations engaged in developing technological tools for hasbara purposes, and 100 databases dealing with various kinds of public diplomacy.
9. In fact, Israeli soldiers have constantly used Telegram and other channels to share images of themselves, some of them extremely violent and racist, carrying out strikes and operations in Gaza and revelling in the outcome. The ethical considerations around these practices have yet to be discussed.
10. I focus on BBC News as a division of the British Broadcasting Corporation, often talked of as a model for broadcasting systems internationally and with more than 27 million followers, including through social media platforms.
11. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/19/criminal-complaints-filed-against-israeli-president-herzog-in-switzerland.
12. https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2023/10/9/israeli-defence-minister-orders-complete-siege-on-gaza.
13. https://www.gov.il/en/pages/excerpt-from-pm-netanyahu-s-remarks-at-the-opening-of-the-knesset-s-winter-assembly-16-oct-2023.
14. It is no secret that Israel has repeatedly accused Hamas of using human shields in two ways, first by conducting military operations in proximity to residential areas and critical infrastructure – such as hospitals and schools – to deter the IDF from attacking these areas, and second by using Israeli civilian hostages to shield members of Hamas' senior leadership from attack.
15. More precisely, she distinguishes between two epistemic practices of what she refers to as Eurocentric, race–sex–class-based silencing: (i) (exogenous) 'testimonial quieting' as an active practice of unknowing, and (ii) (endogenous) 'testimonial smothering' as a form capitulation or self-silencing (Dotson 2011, 242–244).
16. Available at https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/scholasticide-israels-deliberate-and-systematic-destruction-palestinian-education-system-gaza).
17. (https://rsf.org/en/rate-journalists-are-being-killed-gaza-there-will-soon-be-no-one-left-keep-you-informed).
18. https://www.afterall.org/articles/refusing-epistemic-violence-guernica-gaza-and-the-german-context/#footnote-11-1791.

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