

The Challenges to Objective Journalism About Islam and Muslims

Minaret of Freedom Institute Ninth Annual Dinner
With Caryle Murphy, Nadia Bilbassy Charters, and Alison Weir

March 10, 2007

[Edited Transcript]

Aly Abuzakouk:

Please be seated. *Salamu Alaykum*. Good evening everybody. It is our pleasure to welcome you all for our annual banquet, on behalf of the Minaret of Freedom [Institute] and our President, Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad and our Board of Directors. . Thank you for attending and keeping us in good company. As our tradition goes, we will start our banquet with recitations from the Holy Qur'an. The verse that we have chosen tonight is verse number 135, from chapter 4, the verse about An-Nisa, the chapter about women. [Performs recitation in Arabic.] I'll ask brother Alejandro to recite the verse in English.

Alejandro Beutel:

In the Name of God, The Compassionate, The Merciful. Oh you who believe, stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah [God], even if it is against yourselves, your parents or your kin, and whether it be against rich or poor – for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts of your hearts, lest ye swerve and distort from justice, incline to do justice, for verily Allah is well acquainted with all that you do.

Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

Asalâmu Alaykum. Peace be upon you. Good evening. I'm Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, President of the Minaret of Freedom Institute. Welcome to what is our Ninth Annual Fundraising Dinner. At these dinners we try achieve the dual purpose of raising the core money we need to go on with our operations, by which we are able to attract matching funds and other grants throughout the year and also to educate on some really important issue regarding our mission.

We're dealing with issues that other people seem really reluctant to touch. They're very important issues and they go to the heart of many of the problems confronting the Muslim World today. One of our major activities recently was at American University, a dialogue we had between a Sunni [religious scholar] and a Shi'a [religious scholar]. [In] the Washington Post last Thursday ... was ... an article by Pam Constable that deals with Sunni-Shi'a relations in the United States and which makes mention of our program at American University. It was different because it was not a program aimed at discussing politics, nor was it a program aimed at slapping people on the back and saying, "yeah we all believe the same thing, no problems." It was an attempt to discuss seriously what are the real differences between the Sunni and Shi'a schools [of thought] and to debunk the mythological differences. It is shocking what people in the Muslim community now, not just non-Muslims (in fact, most non-Muslims admit they don't know anything about this question). In the Muslim community people think that, like, for example, the Shi'a have a different Qur'an than the Sunnis. Now it is true that some Shi'a scholars have said that

there is more to the Qur'an than we have, but some Sunni scholars have said the same thing, so it's really not fair to point THAT out as a difference between the two schools. The Qur'an itself refers to the "Mother to the Book" and it says that "if the ocean were ink" I would be exhausted before "the words of my Lord." So these are taking subtle points, and trying to make trouble out of them is [just making trouble].

We are working on trying to bring programs for civics education in the Muslim World. We are working on setting up on Facebook . . . a dialogue area where young Muslims from around the world who are interested in the ideas that we are interested in can talk to one another and explore those ideas. We are putting up introductory material so they can get a quick grounding in some of these issues and questions.

Aly Abouzaakouk, my Vice President, asked me to mention the Islamic Rules of Order that we have been working on. Originally we wanted to publish this as a book – a set of rules of order, like Robert's Rules, but within the Muslim framework, rules that respect and acknowledge the Qur'an and Sunnah as a framework, but provide the detailed rules, not found in the Qur'an, for how you conduct a meeting and establish good governance and so on. We have decided now at our meeting this afternoon, at our board meeting that we are going to publish this as an e-book on the Internet to allow any organization that wants to use these rules of order to be able to access them for free – just to go and take it and make reference to it. We hope, well the Minaret of Freedom Institute will adopt those rules and we will be trying to get other leading organizations to adopt those rules.

Another very important project is the establishment of an Islamic resource bank. Right now, as you know, there are many people who are speaking for Islam who don't know what they are talking about and many people talking about Islam who don't know what they're talking about. This will be, not just a directory of Muslim and non-Muslim experts about Islam, but also opportunities for them to get together to exchange ideas to find out how to make contacts with the media, with the rest of academia, with one another, with the general public and so on. It will be a resource of great value to journalists such as those we have on our panel tonight who are making use of other resource banks provided by conservatives and liberals and other groups. We are working closely with the Association of Muslim Social Scientists under whose rubric this will be done, *insha'Allah*, and we are also talking to our friends at the International Institute for Islamic Thought to see if they can play a role in this.

Before I begin with the program, let me give thanks to the people who made this lovely dinner here tonight possible. First, let me thank the hotel staff. I want to thank all of them for their courtesy and their efficiency. I want to thank the staff of the Minaret of Freedom Institute, especially Alejandro and Fatiha. I would like to thank my wife Frances, who has volunteered to be the registrar, once again this year. Also Sarah Swick, although she is not here now, she played a major role in the promotion of this event here tonight.

I want to thank Hamoud Al-Tali from the Omani Embassy for being with us. I think brother you are the first representative of the Omani Embassy to be with us. I would also like to thank Dr. Rahmani from the Iranian Interest Section – the director of the Iranian

Interest Section, it is a delight that he is with us tonight. And his deputy Manouchehr Jafarzadeh – I love this man, I've known him for so long, he's a kind and helpful soul. Jafarzadeh the deputy director from the embassy has been there for quite a while and he's been doing a fine job. I would, in fact, like to thank the Iranian interest section for their support in buying a table tonight. The International Institute for Islamic Thought, for purchasing a table and sponsoring some of the students who are here tonight. That was very kind of you, a wonderful idea to try to get young people who are, after all, going to have to do this work in the future and who may not be able to afford to come otherwise. So we really appreciate that. Also we have Atlas Economic Research Foundation, who has also allowed some of the students to come on the table they have bought.

Also, the ADAMS Center which, for the second year in a row, has supported us by buying a table – we appreciate that support from one of the most dynamic local Muslim groups. I have to say this about the ADAMS Center – they really show what can happen when you let young people get involved in your masjid. I hope other mosques in the area have taken note of the dynamism of the ADAMS Center. It's not that hard. There are young people who want to do stuff. Just give them a chance....

I also want to thank the Rockville Halal Meat Market, which is associated with the Sadaf Restaurant. If you are in the mood for some good kabobs or if you want to know where you can get your Halal meat locally we recommend them to you. They have been providing the Halal meat for us [for] the last several years.

Abuzakouk:

The Islamic American Zakat Foundation.

Ahmad:

Oh, I'm sorry, yeah! How can I forget! The Islamic American Zakat Foundation for supporting for a VERY long time and is a regular participant here and I would like to welcome the volunteers and staff of the Zakat Foundation who are here tonight.

Ahmad:

Surely, anyone who knows anything about Islam has to be dismayed and appalled at the degree to which the picture of Islam and Muslims that is found in, what is supposed to be serious journalistic coverage, so often is unrecognizable. Why is this? What are the challenges to an objective coverage of Islam and Muslims, both in the United States and West in general, and in the Arab world as well, where the problems may be different, but where there are problems? We have three really outstanding speakers tonight. It's like a superfluity of abundance—there's so much, I don't know how we're going to get it all in. I'm asking them to restrict themselves to 15 to 20 minutes. It seems so unfair, you can see from their backgrounds they have so much they're involved in.

The first speaker is someone whom I've known for quite a while. Caryle Murphy has worked for the Washington Post, covering both the domestic and international affairs for 30 years. In the early 1980s she served as the paper's correspondent in southern Africa,

covering convulsive years following the Soweto uprising and the police slaying of black leader Steve Biko. In 1989, she was made Cairo bureau chief and until mid 1994 was responsible for covering the Arab world. On August 2, 1990, she was in Kuwait, when Iraq invaded the emirate. She remained there for almost a month after the invasion—part of that time, hiding from Iraqi troops. She escaped from Kuwait to Saudi Arabia in the backseat of a Range Rover and was a part of a caravan of Kuwaitis fleeing their homeland across the desert. In the months that followed, she covered the Persian Gulf War from Saudi Arabia. When not working overseas, she covered immigration policy, US Federal Court in Alexandria [Virginia] and most recently, religion. In 2005, she did a 3-month temporary duty in Baghdad. In 1991, she won Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting and George Polk Award for Foreign Reporting, for her coverage of Iraqi occupied Kuwait and the subsequent Persian Gulf War. She was also a recipient of the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women’s Media Foundation and the 1991 Edward Weintal Diplomatic Reporting Prize. From 1994 to 1995, she was the Edward R. Murrow Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Murphy is the author of *Passion for Islam*, a 2002 book that explains Islam’s contemporary revival and the roots of religious extremism in the Middle East. Last fall after leaving the Post, to pursue an independent journalism career, she was recruited by the Post’s new website, to help launch its new online feature called “On Faith.” She is currently planning to return to the Middle East to report on developments there. A Massachusetts native, she is a graduate of Trinity University in Washington DC and of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced and International Studies. Caryle Murphy. [Applause.]

Caryle Murphy:

Salaam Alaykum.

Audience:

Wa Alaikum as-Salâm.

Murphy:

I want to thank you Imad, for your invitation to be here tonight. I appreciate the opportunity to exchange some views with all of you. I’ve known Imad for quite a few years. In fact I read [of] him before I met him. When I was writing my own book, I came across his *Signs from the Heavens*. I found his views very refreshing and forthright and I realized this was a smart guy. So when I started covering religion at the *Post*, I made it my business to try to meet him. But Imad is also a brave guy. As some of you may know, after 9/11 he wrote an essay calling on Muslims to proactively and assertively help US law enforcement find the perpetrators and others who were seeking to harm this country. This happened at a time when some Muslims were still denying that Osama Bin Laden had anything to do with 9/11. What I didn’t know about Imad is that he is a supporter of independent career women, as you can see from the panel tonight. Congratulations, thank you. [Laughter.]

So, objective or fair? We’ve been asked to tonight to speak about our trade of journalism—how we work and so-called objective journalism. Well, I prefer to talk about fair journalism verse objective journalism. The reason is because I think it is much easier

to get a consensus about what's fair than about what's objective. Human beings will always disagree when discussing whether something is objective or not because they cannot help but look at the issue or the matter through their own personal viewpoint, that is, subjectively. But even when difficult subjects are tackled, I think human beings can and agree, and often do, on whether something is fair or not. Now a second point I would like to make initially is that I will happily debate any of you here tonight over what I've done or what my former employer the *Washington Post* has done or is doing, but please don't ask me to account what you see on Fox TV or you read in very Islamophobic blogs on the internet. Please don't ask me to defend "the media." If there's anything unique in this country, it's this beast, this wide, huge-ranging beast we call "the media." It goes from the far left to the far right; it goes from the fanciful and stupid to the sophisticated. I mean, just compare the *National Inquirer* to *Harper's Magazine*. They're both the media. It's the biggest media market in the world and so any reader can find an outlet to either confirm or challenge his or her viewpoint. And an added benefit is that minority views do get platforms or forums. They may be small platforms but at least they're there.

So constructive criticism, which I think we reporters should be willing to take, requires that the critic be specific in what you're criticizing. Please don't generalize about the media when you have a complaint. Because I don't think that leads anywhere to a fruitful discussion. So, what do I think is fair journalism? I believe that journalism is fair when the product takes a look at the issue from several different angles, when the media outlet gives a voice to people who are not usually heard, when they include different opinions on the same issue being reported and when they show an open mind toward difficult topics. So let me move directly to what I think you all want to hear tonight: What about the challenges to fair journalism—when it comes to reporting on Muslims and Islam. Here are some of the challenges I see.

First of all, the Islamophobia that has risen even before 9/11, but really gotten strong after 9/11—there's no question, has grown immensely. The irony is that in the first 2-3 months right after 9/11 this Islamophobia didn't exist. Everyone was very curious about Islam, open, wanting to learn about it; but then the pendulum swung to the other direction and unfortunately the other direction is still the strongest. If there is any bright spot in this, from what I've observed, is that this Islamophobia is the strongest on the Internet. Thankfully, it's the weakest, at least in the greater Washington area, in personal interactions, in the workplace, in schools, in meeting people on the street. This happens because the Internet allows people to anonymously attack others, and that's why I think it's so strong on the Internet. But it is a threat to the cohesion and value system of our society and, unfortunately, it is Muslims who are bearing its brunt. I would compare this to days we know as the McCarthy era.

Now one of the favorite themes of Islamophobes is, "Why don't we hear Muslims condemning terrorism?" I don't know what you can do about this. Every major Muslim organization in the United States has condemned terrorism. Most major Muslim leaders and communities have stood up and condemned terrorism and written letters to the editor. I don't know why this myth is perpetrated except that the people perpetrating it are against Muslims. Then there are anti-Muslim remarks by, shockingly, religious figures

like Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson. So this raises the question, “Should newspapers like the *Washington Post* report these comments?” Well, I don’t think that what these people said should be on the front page, but I certainly do think it should be reported. I would personally rather know what these people think, rather than saying these things silently or under the table. I was really shocked to hear what Franklin Graham said. Not only did he say it once, but he repeated it. But I was grateful that it was printed in newspapers and was talked about on television so that his actions in the future can be judged by everybody.

Okay. What’s a second challenge to fair reporting on Muslims? I think its ignorance. Unfortunately there is a great deal of ignorance in this country about Muslims and Islam. Again, I see a bright spot here. After my book came out in 2002, I went around talking to a lot of audiences and I was very gratified that so many people turned up. I mean, hundreds didn’t turn up, but to go to one bookstore and see 60 or 80 people turn up I think is pretty good. And most of the people came because most of them didn’t know anything about Islam and what to find about it. So that’s a good bright spot.

Okay, What’s another challenge to fair reporting on Muslims and Islam? In the newsroom, one of the challenges is repetition. If something happens over and over again, it moves to the back pages of the newspaper. And it moves way down on the interest level of reporters and editors. I’ve often had people ask me, “Why didn’t you report about such and such?” I would have to say, we’ve already written four or five stories about women who were told to go home from their job because they were wearing hijab. We can’t keep writing the same story over and over again. So that doesn’t if there is a particularly egregious or significant event we wouldn’t write about it. It doesn’t mean we don’t write about it at all, we may put it in the back pages as just a short story. You have to remember, you may be outraged at how you and your co-religionists are being treated, but in the newsroom, we’re hearing “Oh gosh, it happened again!” It’s a challenges for reporters and editors to think about how to keep reporting about these things in a new way, so both readers and the reporters don’t get bored.

That brings up another challenge that’s again situated in the newsroom and that’s a lack of imagination. This doesn’t apply to just reporting on Muslims and Islam; this applies to reporting on anything. We are constantly asking ourselves, “How can we get interested in this story again? How can we write another story about the wall the Israelis have built, without writing a story that sounds exactly like a story we wrote about two years ago?” I mean, there is a way to do it. I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it, but it requires editors and reporters to really use their imagination and go out and do some new reporting and use their energies to come up with that. Now, I think– you’re going to find me biased tonight–I think my former employer, the *Post*, is pretty good at coming up with imaginative ways. But you know, you go to a small town in some Midwestern state and they don’t have the resources, or they may not have the staff. They don’t have the luxury to think about, “How are we going to cover this story?” So you may find that the story comes out on Islam and Muslims sounds like it was written five years ago, or they decide, “We’ve written this too much, we’re not going to do it again.” So I ask you to... when you’re criticizing the media, try to yourself in the shoes of the people in the business.

We're always looking for some new way to present the material, if it is repetitive. I think the Washington Post story this morning on Gaza is a pretty good example of using imagination. What they did was, say, "Okay, we're going to sit back and we're going to sum up what's been happening for the last six months or year." It really was a good look. I learned a lot from it even though I read the news about the Middle East everyday because it put things in perspective.

So what's another challenge to objective reporting? Well, a lack of follow up. Sometimes reporters get too busy and they can't go back and find out how happened to those people they reported on six months ago. The one that came to my mind as I was gathering my thoughts for this was "What happened to those guys in Miami who were charged with terrorism and they were called 'Muslim terrorists'?" I don't know, because there hasn't been much attention to their case. But over and over again, so many people were getting arrested after 9/11 and getting put in jail. People were being deported or being held after immigration violation and we tried our best to go back and at least highlight what happened to the most unusual cases, but sometimes we failed.

Okay. Now let's move to another area where I see another challenge to fair reporting and that is a lack of cooperation from Muslims. Happily, this is a very rare experience for me. I covered the Muslim community here for seven or eight years and I only had one example of a person who refused to talk to me. The story came out okay in the end, but it would have been much better if I had been able to have his perspective and his voice in the story. And he would have been happy if his was in the story too, but I tried and tried and he just wouldn't talk to me. But if Muslims aren't going to talk to reporters and editors, you're tying their hands. It's only going to be work to your disadvantage. But as I said, happily that has not been my experience. But I know in other parts of the country it may be more of an issue.

I want to talk about another lack of cooperation from the Muslim community and this is what I call "passive lack of cooperation." What do I mean? I mean that if something is happening (an abuse by Federal law enforcement, immigration officials, airport officials) you should be calling your local newspaper or television station and telling the reporters you have contacts with, about it. It's no surprise to you that I believe in sunshine. I believe airing government misconduct or government aggression against people is the best form of protection. Nothing succeeds like having a name and a face in a paper, complaining about something because then you have a specific person with a specific complaint and the next day [the] government does respond.

Now I know many Muslims are frightened—and not without reason considering how many Muslims are in jeopardy because of their immigration status. It is a hard time to be a Muslim in the United States given the fears that are rampant in this society. But you have to have courage coming out publicly to fight these fears and good reporters and good media outlets can be helpful in this battle. I personally, at the *Post*, (I know you're curious), I personally was never told not to write a particular story that I proposed about Muslims or Islam and I never did hear any anti-Muslim comments from any of my supervisors or any of my colleagues. Are there some reporters biased against Muslims?

Definitely, but that doesn't mean all of us are. And to the extent you feel there is bias, against Muslims and Islam, I really encourage you to be proactive. Call the reporter to discuss what they have written; call them to suggest a story. Recently, about four months ago there was a front page story in the Post about how Muslims in this area are getting more involved in local politics and that story came about because somebody who lives in Montgomery County called me and I told my colleague Michelle Boorstein and she did a great story about it.

If you don't get a response from the reporter, send an e-mail or make a telephone call to the editor. As far as Islamophobia and ignorance goes I'm afraid this is a long challenge that the Muslim community has to tackle and I wish you the best of luck. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Ahmad:

Thank you very much Caryle. Our second speaker tonight is someone whom I just met for the first time tonight. We spoke on the phone arranging for her to be here and that is Nadia Bilbassy-Charters. Nadia is a Washington bureau senior correspondent responsible for the White House and State Department for the *Al-Arabiyya* satellite TV channel. She has traveled extensively in the United States, covering major stories, including the primaries and the presidential campaign. She has interviewed George and Laura Bush in two separate features. She gives her citizenship as Palestinian and Irish.

Abuzakouk:

That's two strikes against her.

Ahmad:

In the past she has worked with MBC, the Middle East Broadcasting center as the Nairobi, Kenya bureau chief and also for MBC in Addis Ababa as Horn of Africa correspondent. She is also a freelance journalist in Dakar, Senegal, working for numerous publications while on maternity leave. She worked for the Independent newspaper and IPS [Inter Press Service] in Colombo Sri Lanka, for BBC News Arabic Service in London, the Agence France Presse, the Jerusalem bureau, the International Committee of the Red Cross, for which she was a local officer and she is fluent in her mother tongues of Arabic and English, excellent speaking and writing ability in French and also knows Hebrew and Swahili. A frequent participant at the Woodrow Wilson school of Diplomacy, she has also lectured on Foreign Policy and Defense issues in numerous fora, nationally and internationally, National Defense University Army War College, the American University Law School, George Mason University, among others. Nadia Bilbassy-Charters.

[Applause.]

Nadia Bilbassy-Charters:

Salâmu Alaikum. I was just thinking of the greeting and I was thinking, “What a better way to start than saying ‘Peace Upon You’ as opposed to ‘hi, how are you, hello,’ you know, all of the other words we use. Thank you very much for inviting me, I’m very glad to be here tonight. Thank you very much, Imad. Thank you for the panelists and thank you for coming.

It would be a very hard act to follow having Caryle ahead of me and lots of things we shared in terms of the subject we are going to talk about because both of us are journalists. But I will start with a few anecdotes, one of them is a story I did Dearborn, in Michigan. I there used to do what we called the “human interest stories” or the positive stories. It was about the first Muslim judge in the United States, a fantastic woman. She’s great in every aspect, beautiful, intelligent and she became the first woman judge in the 9th District, I think. I went to report the story and in the process I met the Imam of the mosque there in Dearborn. I asked him what are the main issues that challenge you as a Muslim here, what is the most common question people ask you here and do they really know about Islam?

He said “You’ll be very surprised by what people ask me here. I go and give speeches all over the country.”

I said, “What is the challenge?”

He said, “People don’t know the difference between Muslims and Islam.”

It is just amazing and I’m going to start from this premise that people don’t know. I think a major challenge that faces all of us, not just as a journalist, but as a member of the public, is ignorance. Everywhere I go I am amazed. As Imad said, I worked all over world—I worked in Asia, and in Africa and Europe—but I’ve never seen a nation as so ill-informed as Americans. I don’t know what it is, whether it is lack of intellectual curiosity, whether it is a superpower that is two thousand miles away from everybody else and you can have your own mentality of “people should know about me, but I shouldn’t know about the world” or people work long hours and therefore they don’t have time to read foreign news or don’t know what is happening outside [of their country]. I don’t know what it is, but I always that the most interesting conversation I have in Washington are with the taxi drivers because they are all Ethiopians and Nigerians and everyone listens to NPR and has the *[Washington] Post* or *New York Times* in the backseat. It is just amazing.

There was another thing that I also noticed when I first arrived four years ago this summer. I was covering the election of Schwarzenegger as the governor of California and I was back on a plane from California to Washington and next to me was a man. (Americans are friendly by the way; you know that it’s just that they’re always trying to have a conversation with you. Sometimes they give you too much detail; I’m always shocked.)

Anyway, he said to me, “Where are you from?”

I said “I’m a journalist.”

He said, “Hmmm... Who do you work with?”

I said (I’m not going to tell him *Al-Arabiyya* because he wouldn’t know) so I said, “I work for an Arabic [language] television [station].”

He said, “Oh so you’re Muslim?”

I said, “Yeah.”

He said, “Okay, why do you hate us?”

[*Laughter from audience.*]

I said, “We don’t hate you. What do you mean ‘you?’”

He said, “All of you, there, all of the Arabs, the Muslims, they all hate us.”

I said, “No actually we disagree probably with your own—not probably, we disagree with your own foreign policies, but they actually like America.

People like America. If you look in any Arab countries or any Muslim countries you’ll see lines of people waiting to get a visa to come to America. A colleague of mine at Georgetown University did research about despite the fact that the height of the problem with France over wearing the hijab in schools, every time they asked them about foreign policy, America comes right at the end [least favored] and Britain comes on the top. But every time people were asked whether they wanted to immigrate to America or they wanted to receive medical treatment or they wanted to go to school or they wanted to study college or whatever, America comes on top. I think that sums up the whole concept of the dichotomy of how the Muslim and Arab world looks at America.

Generally, I think, number one, the first challenge that people have or journalists have here is ignorance. People don’t know. Sometimes of course ignorance is not an excuse—it is not a bliss actually. If you’re a superpower and you’re involved heavily in the Middle East, you have a major invasion of Iraq, you have a threat against Iran and Syria—all of the news in the Middle East is coming from here. In a way, yes, people in the Middle East and elsewhere at once want to know what is happening in Washington and we report daily (particularly for my job) what’s happening here because any decision taken in Washington will affect people in the Middle East—in Damascus, Tehran, Amman or Jerusalem—and therefore we need to know what’s happening.

Also I noticed—I can talk about Fox News—when we just first came here the attack against what is now called the Arab, Pan-Arab satellite television which is represented by Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera (maybe Al-Jazeera to a big extent than us) is enormous: lecturing

about fair reporting, putting propaganda on the air, inflaming sentiments of people, etc. When you come to America and see the reporting on Fox News, you are horrified. Is this really serious journalism? So I think in addition to the ignorance there is an agenda, and there is no doubt about it. I mean, it's wonderful to have a democracy—of course something we don't have in the Middle East and therefore you have outlets of newspapers and broadcasts from extreme right to extreme left, but at the same time, sometimes it is meant to be this way [the misrepresentation is deliberate].

In a world you live in after 9/11, everything is magnified. But saying that, if you look and examine the Muslim community in America in comparison to Europe, for example, it's extremely well integrated. They see themselves as Americans probably more than as the identity of being Muslim as comes to the surface. In Europe they are treated and seen as minorities and we have enormous problems. Of course it is in different historical context of the immigrants in France, for example, whether they are from North Africa or they're even Pakistanis or from the Indian subcontinent in Britain. But looking at the Muslims here [in America] it is amazing how they're not being used as a good example of the fact that it is the faith that separates them, but that they unite and have [embraced] "American" as an identity, as a nationality, that you don't see elsewhere in the world. There is no doubt 9/11 has changed the way people perceive Muslims in this country and you know the immediate attack after 9/11 of Sikhs being pulled out of stations because they see a turban on their heads and they think "Oh, they're Muslims!" so they can beat them up, threaten them, whatever. Women have been discriminated against because they wear the hijab. There are many incidents until now. It's been going up, and sometimes it stabilizes and then it goes up again, recently. So, the media has not been innocent of trying to report a certain aspect, especially that every Muslim is a terrorist and this is how they see it, unfortunately.

On top of that you have certain words being applied. I will focus in particular on the word Islamofascist. We have even seen the President using this word. Although the hijackers of 9/11 and the people who belong to Al-Qaeda are extremist Muslim groups have to be condemned and have to be condemned in a very loud voice—it's not just hushed voices and it is not just among us [among Muslim communities] – but you must speak loud, as much as you condemn anti-Semitism it goes for anybody trying to kill innocent people [as in] these grotesque pictures we have seen on our television screens coming from Iraq of beheading and killing, and the blood... But it goes both ways. As much as we want the Americans to treat us fairly and to look at us the way we are and to dismiss the extremists as a minority, that they actually don't represent Islam the way we know it, at the same time I agree with Caryle, that Muslims have a job to do and its not being done very well. In general, as a Palestinian, I will say that we are not really good in propaganda, or we're not really good in advertising ourselves; we're not very good in putting the point of view across. But also Muslim organizations in America [did condemn the attacks of] 9/11, but still we don't hear it. You might have the Mufti of Al-Azhar or you have Imams here and there, but it does not take away from our rights, from our justice to have, for example whether we have... deserve a Palestinian state or ending the occupation in Iraq, whatever causes we are fighting for, it doesn't take away from that cause when you see the atrocities and you see killing that Muslims should condemn it and in the loudest voice

possible. We don't see among Arab intellectuals unfortunately. You don't read it very much in Arab newspapers; you don't hear on Arab television and that is a minus. One time, after the Beslan massacre of almost 300 kids in the Caucasus, we had one or two voices saying, "Who are these people? Why are they killing in the name of Islam? How can they take these kids and blow them up and keep them as hostages in the name of Islam?" And it's the same that goes for the killing in Iraq. We have to make the distinction between legitimate resistance against occupation and killing for the sake of killing. I mean we're talking about Sunni and Shia. I'm appalled by the way when we just talk about the difference. Maybe the division is sharpened to an alarming degree that even the American media, when they talk about the Sunnis, they start talking about "the Sunnis in Egypt and Jordan." I mean this [terminology] was never used. You call people by their nationality, but you never call them by their religion, and you definitely don't call them by their sect.

Of course people's identity is more in focus and is sharpened when under threat and there is no doubt about it. It plays into the hands of people who don't know what they're talking about and it goes on and on and on. Therefore, I think there are so many challenges that we are trying to counter as journalists. I always say that for us at *Al-Arabiya* (which is relatively new, its station has been on for four years) first and foremost [for] journalists is to be professional. If you're a professional, it means you have to be objective, and to be objective means you have to report what you see in front of your eyes. Otherwise, if you're going to color and put opinions, then you're not a journalist, you're an advocate, and if you're an advocate you can join a political organization or a pressure group.

I have a problem with terminology as well. The word terrorist for example has been used. We know that his terrorist is hers or somebody else's freedom fighter and therefore even the UN cannot come up with a definition for terrorism. But also the word massacre and *shâhid* [Arabic word for martyr] I always if three Palestinians die, it's not a massacre. It's bad enough that one person died, and [therefore] we should report it as one death, but you don't report it as [a] massacre because a massacre is not three people. So we have to be a little bit more accurate. I always say (if you don't mind me doing a little bit of advertising for our station) is that and we're trying to do that slogan "*aklaq al-haqiqa*" which means "closer to truth" because we don't have a monopoly over truth and nobody does and there is no one single truth. Therefore, we struggle to set the standard for objective reporting. We say, "We have to be very much journalist before we are anything else." It's very hard to detach yourself as a person from any scene you can [see] in front of you, especially if you're reporting in Palestine or in Iraq. Or in my case, I have seen so many cases in southern Sudan, when you cover famine and starvation and dead children in front of you it's very hard not to be sympathetic to these causes, but as much you can, you're trying to report as much as you can see rather than interpreting it the way you think the viewer should see it.

Vice versa I found the opposite actually. Of course you have excellent journalism in terms of print media in this country—the *Post* and the [*New York*] *Times* and whatever. Even coming from Europe, I think European papers are superior in quality in terms of

trying to analyze foreign news and trying to report fairly on the news, and still behind the American media somehow. But generally speaking, if you go back to how we address the challenges, it is an enormous task—especially for television. Television, as you know, it eats money. Certain times we don't do stories—I have five minutes. See, the problem with having journalists, they talk too much.

I would say the worse censorship we have is self-censorship. It is not what we see, but what we don't see. Sometimes we report on certain stories because of our biases. And that is the most dangerous form of censorship, I would say. So, for television in particular, the challenge is bigger than for the print media: to get people to talk and to appear on television and to tell us their side of the story, because television is pictures, if you have no pictures you have no story. You might have the greatest story in the world, but if you don't have the pictures then that's it, it's the end of the story.

Now we have seen the rise of the Arab satellite media in the form of some kind of independence. We are miles away from being perfect but it's a beginning and the beginning is moving away from government-controlled media. But these television stations need money (and need a hell of a lot of money I can tell you). So to cover certain stories, money always is a consideration and sometimes it restricts the way we are reporting in general. But even on certain stories sometimes like the judge in Detroit—it's a great story about how a Muslim has been elevated to one of the highest positions in the United States—I can't cover another story because maybe my budget won't allow me to do it. We are affected by that, and I don't cover the story because of budgetary considerations—nothing more and nothing less.

There is also the stereotype. Part of the reason for peoples' ignorance is also stereotyping. People don't know Muslims, as you say, they say you can see them from all kinds of shades of colors and forms. You can women with hijab, you can have women without hijab and people always... they always ask me "Oh! Are you a Muslim?"

"Yes I am."

"But you don't look Muslim."

So [you see] the stereotyping of certain images of what a Muslim should look like. And this could be done with the work of the influence of certain groups trying to present what Islam is all about. But again there is no doubt that after 9/11 the world has changed and, unfortunately, changed for the worst. It is extremely... the negative effect is very hard to raise(?) above overnight. It takes a while and it takes a huge effort from people try to change this image. I leave lots of room for Q&A so, I'll leave it for later. [*Applause.*]

Ahmad:

Our third speaker is Alison Weir, whom I met several years ago after she had come back from Gaza where she had done some coverage of the Intifada with a very, very fascinating slideshow and an even more fascinating story about her journey to realizing what the challenges are to objective coverage. Alison Weir is director of

IfAmericansKnew, an organization dedicated to providing Americans with information on topics of importance that are misrepresented or underreported in the American media, with a special focus on the Middle East. She has been a journalist on and off for many years and was associated with the Center for Investigative Reporting, served as an editor of the Women's Sports Magazine, freelancer for the San Francisco Examiner, Rolling Stone and other publications.

Antony Sullivan:

And the Michigan Daily.

Ahmad:

Can't leave that out. All of the [University of] Michigan alumni will get after me. [Acknowledging Aly Abouzakouk]. She was education writer for the *Pacific Sun*, author of a children's book published by E.P. Dutton, and most recently editor of *Marinscope Newspaper* in Sausalito, California. Alison spent a month alone, traveling throughout Gaza and the West Bank as a freelance journalist and speaks throughout the country on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In her presentation she describes her experiences in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, shows slides of the area and gives a brief history of the conflict and describes her organization's detailed studies of American press coverage of the area and of her meetings with editors of newspapers across the country. Her articles have appeared in a variety of books, websites and magazines among these are "Gaza: A Report from the Front", published in *The New Intifada*, articles in the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, San Francisco Bay View's paper, *Counterpunch*, *The Link*, *Z-Magazine*, and chapters in the *Censored: 2005* and several upcoming books.

IfAmericansKnew completed seven statistical studies of US news media including two-year studies of the *New York Times*, the three major primetime news programs and the Associated Press. In addition, her organization has created four videos on Israel-Palestine and is in the process of producing a longer documentary to be released next year. Alison has given two briefings on Capitol Hill, has spoken extensively throughout the country, and a speech she gave at the Center for Policy Analysis that was broadcast nationally on C-Span. Among the numerous colleges and universities where she has been invited to speak are the Harvard Law School, Columbia, Stanford, Berkeley, the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy [at Tufts University], and the Naval Postgraduate Institute. She is the subject of a documentary produced by Alternate Focus, on news coverage of Israel-Palestine and appears in two others. She has received the Truth and Justice award from the American Muslims for Jerusalem, the Islamic Community Award for Courage, the Advocacy and Media Fairness Award from the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, and in March of 2004 was inducted into honorary membership Phi Alpha Literary Society, founded in 1845 at Illinois College. The [Phi Alpha] award cited her as, "A courageous lecturer and journalist on behalf of Human Rights." [She was] the first woman to receive an honorary membership in Phi Alpha history. Alison Weir.

[Applause.]

Alison Weir:

Thank you for that very nice introduction. It included everything but the kitchen sink. It's nice to follow two such wonderful speakers because now I know you have gotten your money's worth. Two out of three is good. So it takes the pressure off.

Abuzakouk:

And good food.

Weir:

And wonderful food, so maybe I should just sit down.

Thank you all for inviting me here tonight. I'm very honored to be at this gathering. Tonight I'll tell you a little bit about my own personal journey, and a case study, sadly. It won't directed specifically to Muslims and Islam, but it will be a case study with empirical data that I think will shed a great deal of light about what's going on. And it won't be very happy light, to tell you the truth, despite the fact that I believe very strongly in journalism. The press is the most powerful institution in this country, I feel. It's a public trust, which you will read in the statement of principle on every website of every newspaper, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Associated Press. I believe, strongly, it is a trust, and I think the trust has been betrayed. But you will see why I think that. Everything Americans think they know about the world, especially about something not local in their neighborhood, comes through the media. So if they don't know about Islam in the Middle East, it is because the media are failing in what we should be doing, not because people are stupid or lazy, I believe. We are all lazy at times, but I think it is a systemic failure.

What I'd like to do is start out and tell my own background because tonight I'll be talking about my case study of the media will have to do with Israel-Palestine and six years ago, like most Americans in this country I knew very little about Israel and Palestine. I don't happen to be Muslim or Jewish or Middle Eastern, and to me it seemed confusing and distant and irrelevant to my daily life. And so, like most Americans, I skimmed the headlines on the topic, accepted the confusion of what I read and I moved on. But then I began to see those images we do see occasionally of children throwing stones against tanks and I finally began to be curious enough about this issue to try to follow it just a little bit. At that time, I was the editor of the Sausalito newspaper, writing about very local stories; so this was in my spare time. And when I looked into these stories, when I followed them, it did appear to me very quickly I was hearing one side with great detail and the other side with almost no detail. That troubled me, because as journalists, we feel we should, as was spoken earlier, we should try to cover the whole story, not just one side or just the other. I began to look into this issue more and finally, using the internet, reading what was going on everyday, as you can, reading all of the stories you have read all of your lives perhaps (but for me this was the first time).

Looking at my daily newspaper and listening to NPR and watching the news [on television] it seemed to me that perhaps this was the most covered-up story I have ever seen—and I used to be involved in the Center for Investigative Reporting. I have seen cover-ups and the exposés that happen. This seemed to be more substantial and to have

lasted longer than anything else I could think of. It seemed so important to me, in fact, that I quit my job at Sausalito, a very nice place, and I traveled over to the West Bank and Gaza Strip to see for myself what was going on.

As journalists, that's the sort of inclination we have. I went as a freelance journalist—that's the lowest of the low—and traveled alone. I had no organization guiding or sponsoring me of any kind whatsoever. And it was the most unusual trip I have ever undertaken. I had wanted to see things for myself on that trip—I had thought. But as I landed on February 7th, I believe it was 2001, my return flight [was] set for a month later—I had sensed a pang of a disquiet I had been trying to ignore. What was it going to be like for me as a single female traveler wandering through the middle of a Muslim land that was in the middle of a violent uprising and that was, as we are told, extremely hostile to women in general, but particularly Americans. What would it be like for me?

What I discovered in a month of traveling randomly and haphazardly in the Palestinian territories—throughout the Gaza Strip and various parts of the West Bank—was that these were but two of many myths about this regions that are, as you know, quite false—that they are as untrue as they are widely held. The reality, as you all know, was that I was welcomed, I was invited to stay in peoples' homes, I was treated with respect, I was completely safe when I come to near the Israeli military and when I told Palestinians I was an American the invariable response was "Welcome."



I wish that this were all that I had discovered on that trip, but it was not. I also discovered firsthand what it was like to see entire communities destroyed, trees uprooted, children with bullets in their stomachs and in their backs and in their heads, I discovered what it was like to be with parents after their young son has been killed, hearing the mothers and sisters weeping and weeping and weeping and weeping and seeing the father sleep walking in the bad dream from which you know he'll never wake up. I discover what it was like to walk, to talk with the woman who's best friend has just been killed, to be with a family and their handsome son when the doctor has told them something he hasn't found the correct time to tell them – that their son is totally and indeterminably paralyzed.



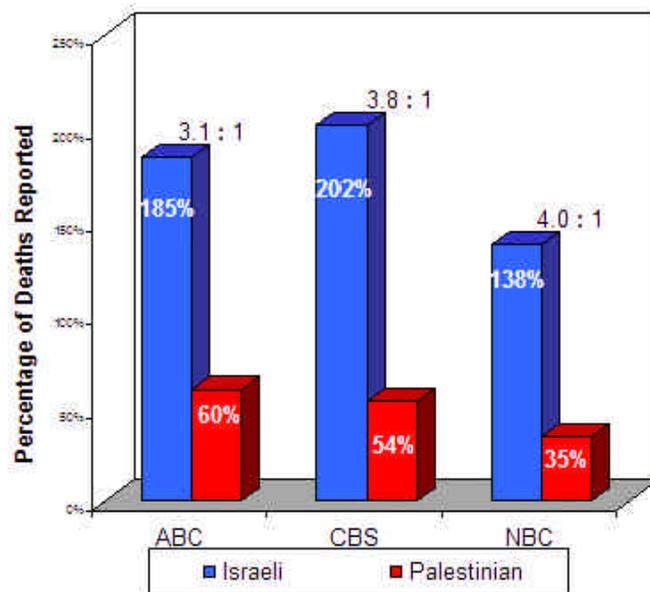


I discovered what it was like to be shot at, to arrive at a street corner and see young soldiers sitting in tanks with machine guns aimed straight at you. At night you really couldn't see the soldiers, but saw the flashlight with which they signaled whether or not they allowed you to continue driving, to continue living. I discovered this was routine. In other words, I discovered what it is like in Palestine and how Israel is using my tax money. And so, when I returned, I began an organization called IfAmericansKnew. Among our many activities have been to focus on the media to discover why we are not learning more of these facts, why we are giving Israel well over \$8 million per day of our tax money.

Journalists are much more interested in facts than theories, so I was looking for a statistical, objective way to study the coverage of Israel and Palestine. I decided to take a category that would be as significant as possible and as immune from subjective bias as possible and statistically, quantitatively "studiable." So we did studies of a number of the major media. (We've actually begun one on the *Washington Post*—I can give you some of the early results on that at the end.) We decided to look at how deaths were covered between both populations.

I like to think that we believe all human beings are equally valuable, their deaths equally tragic (that's our philosophy), that we should hear about both, not just one side or just the other side. We need all of the information. So the first thing you need to do in this kind of a study is to determine the baseline, what you compare the reporting to. So the first thing was to learn how many people were killed in the first year of the current uprising, the current Intifada. We used an Israeli human rights group

Percentage of Deaths Reported
 ABC, CBS, and NBC Evening News
 First Year of Intifada (9/29/2000 - 9/28/2001)



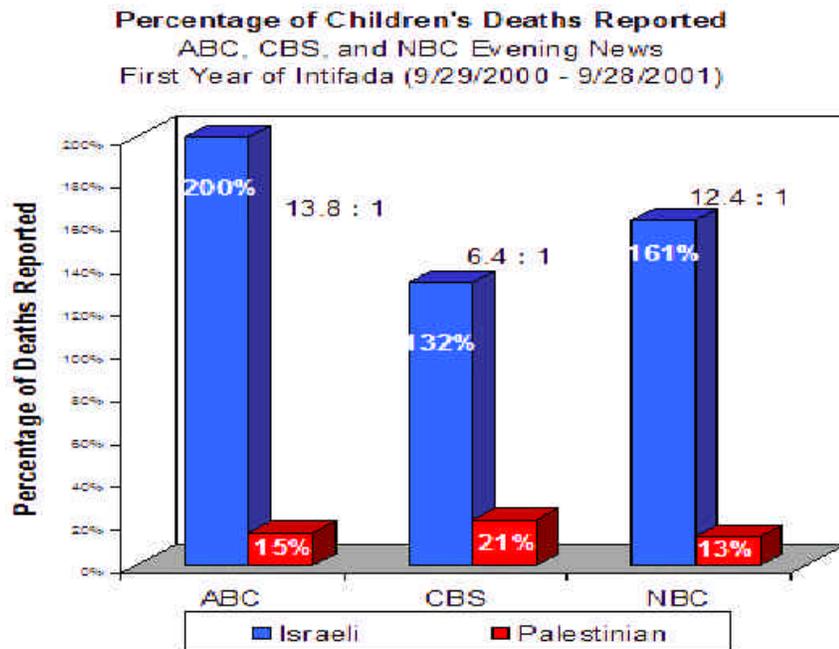
[B'tselem] and found it was 165 Israelis and 549 Palestinians that had been killed by the other side during this first year.

Now we chose this first year for our study because first impressions are so powerful. This is what leads everybody in American—your neighbors, your communities to conclude who initiated the violence, who is retaliating, who is the victim, who is just defending their population. So, the first year is very, very important. This is what was going on, let's look at some of the coverage. I won't give every one of our charts tonight, but we found for example these were the three primetime network news shows. We discovered they were reporting Israeli deaths up to four times greater than they were reporting Palestinian deaths. Now the question is, how can it exceed 100%? You see in one case its over 200%.

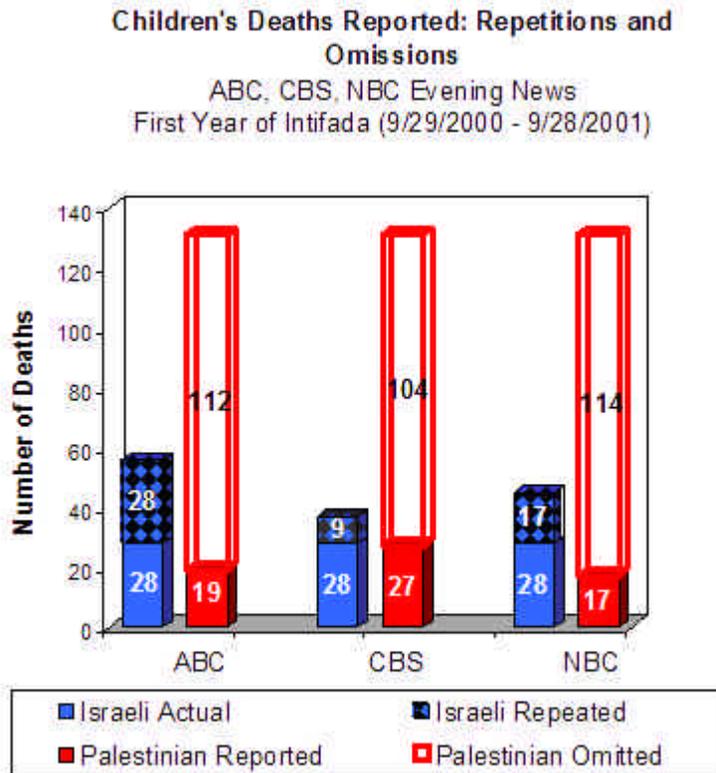
We were studying every report of a death in a population, including follow-up reports: Parents mourning for their children who died the day before—this makes it more real. If you missed the paper one day, you see it the next day. We felt it a most accurate study would count those as well. What was very surprising, even to us, was how often the coverage of the Israeli deaths exceeded 100%.

Now another way of looking at that is looking at how children's deaths were being covered because children's deaths are especially tragic to most of us, I believe. We are moved by them. We think of our own children perhaps. We tend to think that children are illegitimate targets of strife and when they are killed they are perhaps more newsworthy than adults. So let's see, first of all, how many were killed: the answer is 28 Israeli young people and 131 Palestinians. Now how was this covered?

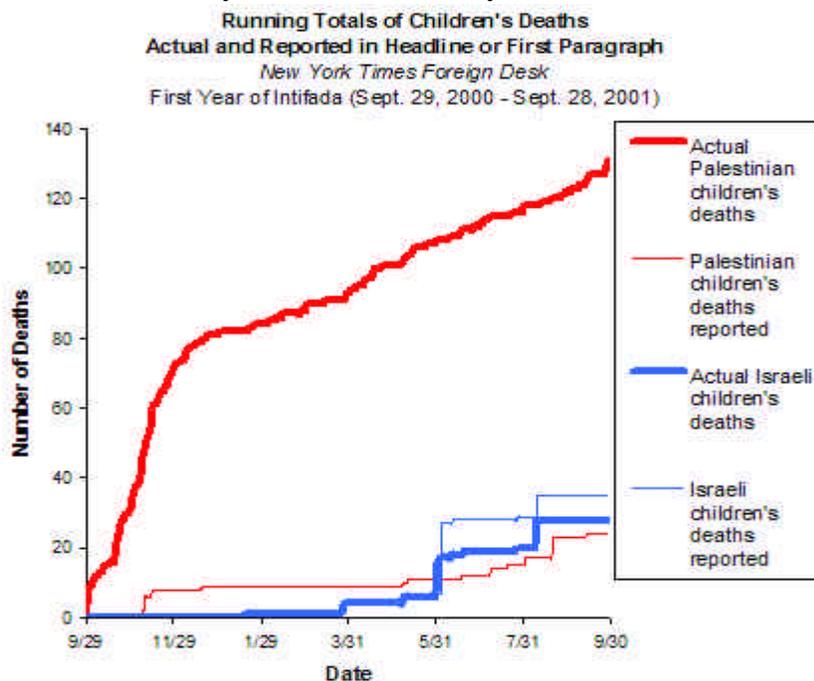
In this case, we see that the distortion has increased quite a bit, over already a very bad distortion. Now we see—this isn't Fox News, again, this is the major networks that are little bit along the lines of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in terms of people viewing them as a fairly reliable, non-political sources—and in one case we find it is fourteen times greater.



Here's another interesting way of looking at this data: In this chart, the dark blue column are the Israeli reports and the red column are the Palestinian deaths. The dark blue are the number of reports that have exceeded the number of deaths that actually occurred. The vast empty red column is the number of deaths of among the Palestinian young people that were never covered at all. So in other words, this is what our fellow Americans are comparing in their minds. Keep in mind that we're not talking about number of words about personal information and about context. My own view is that if we did a story of that sort of information (which would be valuable, but very time consuming), I believe the distortion would grow far beyond what I am describing tonight. To me, this is most likely the tip of the iceberg.



Now, it's interesting to look at this chart because in this case we charted the reports chronologically over the course of the first year. This is the study of the *New York Times'* headlines and lead paragraphs. For young people, 17 and below is the international definition of children and many are far below. The first line is the *Times'* reports on Israeli children's deaths; the next one will be the curve of the number of Israeli children's deaths that took place during that first year and you can see it is following that same curve. It's lower because of the follow-ups. The next



curve will be *New York Times*' reports on Palestinian young peoples' deaths during that first year and interestingly, you see, it's following the Israeli curve, lower but following that curve and the next curve will be the Palestinian children who actually killed during that first year and here it is.

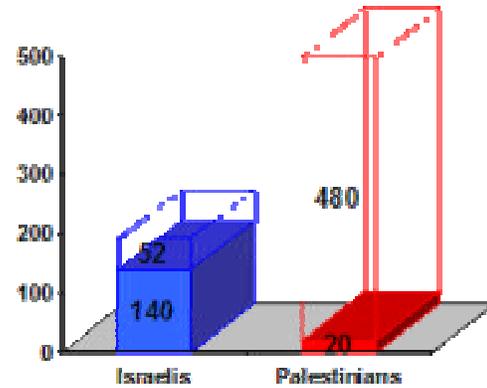
Now, this is what the chart basically looks like for every one of the media we've looked at. You know, naturally there's some variation, but this is basically what we keep finding over and over again. The three networks, the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, local papers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Jose Mercury*, we keep seeing this. That was the first year. Are these patterns continuing? It's not easy to be a journalist. People, we shouldn't expect perfection. It's very courageous, difficult work for many of these journalists. So maybe the media got better by 2004. We were also doing our studies in 2005, so also decided to look at the more recent data to see what that would show us. It's very important to remember that in 2004 the media consistently told us that the violence was reduced in the Intifada, that the violence had lessened considerably.

Well the first thing you need to do, of course is find out how many people were killed. In this case we're looking at children in that year, and we see that 8 Israeli children were tragically killed and 179 Palestinian children tragically were killed. Now, that's 22 to 1. As you'll recall—and we also have chart for all ages where there's that same distortion—the Israeli death rate had gone down. For the Palestinian population, it increased significantly for all ages and for children. So when someone is reporting that the violence has decreased, they're using Israeli-centered terminology without question. Again, we see the same type of distortion that we saw before.

Other groups have done studies as well. I don't think I have it in my presentation tonight, but I showed one of our first studies to a Stanford professor at the School of Journalism and he was astounded. He wasn't courageous enough to use our work, but he was courageous enough to do his own study and it corroborated what we had found. Now other groups have done these types of studies. This is National Public Radio, which is considered to be more reliable than the commercial networks and in this time period they were being pressured as being "Pro-Palestinian". There were boycotts. They lost a lot of money because they were supposedly "Pro-Palestinian". So [Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting \(FAIR\)](#), a long time respected media watchdog organization, did a study of their coverage to discover whether or not it was distorted and they found out, yes, actually it was distorted, but in the opposite direction, because, for example, of the coverage of approximately 90% of Israeli children's deaths and about 20% of Palestinian children's deaths.

Seth Ackerman, who did this study, I think, gave his report a brilliant title, which is, "The Illusion of Balance." NPR was almost covering equal numbers, sometimes equal numbers of deaths, but what its listeners did not know and were not told was they hearing a very high percentage of one population's tragedies and a very low percentage of another population's tragedies. I know I'm right at the end of my time period so let me see, I guess I'll just do one more chart and then I guess we can about more afterwards.

This was another study of the *San Jose Mercury News*. This is a daily newspaper in Silicon Valley in California, of the Palo Alto area. We did a study of their front-page headlines. During that period, we found that these were the number of deaths during that period. And this is what we found the front-page headlines covered, but they had reversed the differential and increased the differential.



Now, when we got our results from this one it struck me how astounding this was and should to all of us because it seemed to me that they got it backwards. Now imagine if they had reported the World Series backwards? Or the Super Bowl, they go it wrong. Now everybody would be laughing, making fun of it; late-night comedians across the nation would be joking about it. Here they were doing something with that degree of error having to do with lives and deaths and no one was even noticing it. I think that's all I have time for now, thank you very much. [Applause.]

Ahmad:

Thank you very much Alison.

The ground rules for the questions and answers and the commentary: As you know we don't require you to only ask questions because that only means people give a speech and put a question mark at the end. No speeches. If you want to make a comment, make a comment, but make it short, all right? You know how much people can say in a TV commercial in one minute? I'll be a little more lenient. I'll give you a little more than a minute, but I'm not going to give you much more than that. I will cut you off, all right? You may ask your question or address your comment to any member of the panel, or to all the members of the panel. I ask that when I call you, give your name and your affiliation for the record. I will repeat the question or summarize it for the cameras as we're recording this. I didn't mention earlier that one of our new projects is we're collaborating with our good friend Khalil Shadeed, who I neglected to thank for recording this. Khalil is the producer for "The Scholar's Chair" television program. If you haven't seen it, see it. It's on PG Cable, it's on Bridges TV and it's also on the Internet. It's a wonderful program and starting this year, Minaret of Freedom Institute is co-producing it, and my Program Assistant Sarah Swick is their new emcee so that Khalil can concentrate on the production side of it. I will start with Mauri' Saalakhan.

Mauri' Saalakhan (Peace and Justice Institute):

First of all, I want to repeat what I said to Alison Weir we had met about a year ago. I have an enormous amount of respect and affection for what you do. Sister Nadia, I remember seeing the report, I guess, a few months ago of the female judge, the first female judge in the 9th US Federal District Court of Detroit. The first thing that came to my mind is an African American Muslim judge, who has been a judge for years in Baltimore, had somehow fallen through the radar to some of our Arab and Muslim media,

that there is an African American sister who predates the Arab Muslim sister by a number of years. To Caryle Murphy, to be specific to the *Washington Post*, Emily Wax wrote a very powerful report that was titled, “Five Truths About Darfur,” that came out on April 23 of last year. When that report came out, I said to my colleagues, “I bet you she’s going to come under a lot of pressure.” And a week later, on April 30 she almost did an about-face in much of what she had to say.

Bilbassy-Charters:

[Muslim organizations bring the judicial appointments to the attention of my network.] Should I know about the previous one [African-American Muslim female judge]?

Definitely.... Actually, I did interview you. I don’t know if you remember me, but I did interview you in the Ali Al-Tamimi case outside the courthouse in Alexandria and that was one of the stories we did about Professor Tamimi.

Ghayth Nur Kashif (Masjid Ash-Shura):

Hi, *as-salâm alaikum*. Ms. Murphy, thank you for coming. I wrote an e-mail to Imad here, that this was an excellent choice for you to come and speak, but I have a question regarding your projection that your stories get boring after a while.... I would disagree, I think, on that. If you look at the Fox (News cable) station, they’ll take one item and run it and run it and run it and run it and you think the population gets bored, but they are saying they are the leading station. So they successfully used this method and they will repeat “Islamofascism, Islamofascism, Islamofascism, Islamofascism” and the way your saying this is that people would get bored with that. But it’s an old method used by Adolf Hitler and the rest. You tell a lie, a big lie, and you tell it over and over and over and over and after a while, people will believe it. So that’s just a thought. I understand what you’re saying about how difficult it is for you to follow a story, from killing one baby to killing another baby then you have to stop, but I think that there’s another side to this. They’re playing propaganda and ..., really, Fox beats up on the *Washington Post* all the time. So I think that those who are sincere—that is, so-called liberal papers like the *Post* ... need to fight back. The other thing is that the (American) Muslims are being put under a double burden by the people saying ‘Why don’t you people speak up (about condemning terrorism)?’ And as you pointed out, you look around and Muslims are always condemning terrorism but the way the story goes is, ‘You guys are not speaking up’ and they say ‘Yes we did. We spoke up.’ But they [some non-Muslims] say, ‘Yeah, but you didn’t speak loud enough.’ But I say, ‘We did speak loud enough.’ [Some non-Muslims] say, ‘Yes you said that yesterday, but what are you saying today?’ So that is...

Ahmad:

Okay you made your point. You made your comment.

Kashif:

That was a question.

Ahmad:

Well, if it was a question, she said she wasn’t going to defend Fox News. [*Laughter.*]

Murphy:

It's nice to see you here tonight.

Kashif:

Thank you.

Murphy:

I don't want any here to be left with a misapprehension about what I said. I wasn't saying that because something happens over and over again you ignore it or you never report on it again. But it may mean that for a certain period of time that particular phenomenon just doesn't get reported and hopefully reporters will use their imagination to come back and report on it. As far as Fox News, I mean, they have 24/7 hours to fill, so they have to be repetitive, the Washington Post comes out once a day. Though, you know, I'm not going to account for Fox News. [Laughter]

Judith Latham (Voice of America): [Asks about sources of pressure to slant coverage]

Weir:

There's no doubt in my mind and there and there have been statements by editors saying this that there's so much pressure when they write about Palestine, when they do report Palestinians and report on Palestinian deaths and don't call them terrorists there's pressure. As I said, even more than that, there are boycotts so you're losing money and you're bottom line is risky anyway; it could put you out of business. Then the conclusion that is fair to draw is that that is having a major impact. I know I heard of one newspaper, I believe it was in Vermont, a small newspaper under advertiser pressure. The advertiser stopped running his full-page ad and put the newspaper out of business. I won't spend the whole time talking, but I think there are other factors. I think there's a type of tendency to have a type of mainstream discourse and that's your mindset, that's the way you cover things. I think we have a wonderful representation of journalism here, but not everyone is wonderful at the *Washington Post*. I have had a number of cases of what seemed to me to be important stories the *Washington Post* hasn't covered—not in the religion section. But it seems to me if you have a chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Capitol Hill saying that the Navy investigating team was ordered by the White House to whitewash and falsify evidence, to me this is a news story. If only in the back pages, to me this is a significant news story, and we had that just a few years ago. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, accompanied by a Rear Admiral, been the head of the [Navy's] legal department, accompanied by several other people with equally impressive credentials, making extremely strong statements with a great deal of evidence to back them up and no story in the *Post*. I was surprised.

I'll just finish with this, along the lines of how do you re-write the same story. This was about something missed by all of the media; the *Post* had done better than all of them because they had one sentence about something. The title of my story was "Just another mother murdered." It was a Palestinian mother, and I think there's that view that's its just another mother murdered, it's another news item, the angle. Now one news angle is that it is another mother murdered and the second angle is that Americans don't know that this

has been going on. Often the journalists do see these, they often know what's going on all the time, but their readers do not know it because they're not seeing the reports.

Abuzakouk:

Well I want to put on my journalistic hat also because, it's a good company to be here. There are three things I really wanted to bring to the discussion. I know that when I was working for my master's in 1971 at Stanford, there was a book I read titled *Don't Blame the People*. It was about the misinformation about the war in Vietnam. The media here, we have all lived all in the era of the Iraq War, has been dormant. There has been an absence of a critical mind in the media to question the sources, the information and so on; they accepted it and they really played as part of the orchestra of the march to war. The best way out, it's great to have people like Alison and people Caryle and others to work and bring some kind of voices, but young American Muslims should work on becoming a part of the mainstream media. They have to be there. That itself will bring about something that is missing now, to bring people who will be part of the storytelling and also evaluating their colleagues inside the kitchen, in the press. That is missing until now, big time.

Ahmad:

Antony Sullivan; Dr. Tony.

Anthony Sullivan (Minaret of Freedom Institute Secretary):

That's what my students call me, especially when they want a recommendation to go to graduate school. [*Laughter.*]

I am the last person in this world, believe me, to defend Fox News. But let me give you some good news tonight and make a very brief observation about how complicated the media is like so many things in life. There is the Fox News you all see, 24/7 and on the tube, in other words, and then there is Fox News online. Fox News online is a separate operation. It has its own editor and Fox News online is very different in its coverage, at least in the Middle East items from the regular Fox News [on television]. I know because I have been interviewed by Fox News online on a number of occasions and the stories that come out there generally follow a pattern. They put me first and then they put Michael Rubin. So you have the neo-Conservative voice and my voice, then there's a mixture of reportage that follows that. And I think from an objective point of view, its very objective reporting. Now another aspect about—I think one can call it—"the media," are the public policy journals. One of those important journals is a journal founded by Irving Kristol, all over you I'd assume know who Irving Kristol, founder of *National Interest*. *National Interest* at the beginning was a neo-Conservative journal. That has come to an end. Today the journal is in the realist school of American foreign policy. I have been published there on a number of occasions. They're absolutely courageous, first-rate and objective. The final thing that I will say, since we have journalists here—and this may be my fault I may have missed it, although I read the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* daily online—is that the King of Jordan was just in the United States and made an eloquent address to the US Congress, calling for a focus on

the Israeli-Palestinian issue as Middle East issue number one for the United States in its own national interest.

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