

Framing the Onset of Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of CNN and Al Jazeera English Coverage of the Israel–Hamas War (October 7, 2023)

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Abstract

During war and conflict, news media not only report events but also create initial interpretive frameworks that guide public understanding. This study examines the formation of these frameworks during the first three days of coverage (October 8–10, 2023) following the outbreak. We conducted a comparative quantitative content analysis of 60 news articles from CNN and Al Jazeera English (AJE), focusing on source selection, news tone, and depth of coverage. These dimensions are examined as observable framing mechanisms that shape early interpretations of the conflict. The results indicate apparent differences in framing strategies, despite a shared commitment to linguistic neutrality. CNN relied primarily on official US and government sources and provided brief, episodic coverage that framed the war primarily as a geopolitical crisis managed by diplomatic actors. AJE, in contrast, provided greater coverage and drew on a broader range of sources, including independent experts and victims of the war, to construct a thematic framework focused on the human consequences and historical context. This study argues that in the early stages of war, structural choices such as source selection and scope are crucial framing mechanisms that shape public opinion before the complexity of war is fully understood.

Keywords: *Al Jazeera English, CNN, Israel–Hamas conflict, Media framing, Public opinion, War journalism.*

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چارچوب بندی آغاز منازعه: تحلیل تطبیقی پوشش خبری سی‌ان‌ان و الجزیره
انگلیسی از جنگ اسرائیل و حماس (۷ اکتبر ۲۰۲۳)

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چکیدہ

در زمان جنگ و درگیری، رسانه‌های خبری تنها رویدادها را گزارش نمی‌کنند، آنها چارچوب‌های تفسیری اولیه‌ای را می‌سازند که درک افکار عمومی را جهت می‌دهد. این مطالعه به بررسی شکل‌گیری این چارچوب‌ها در سه روز نخست پوشش خبری (۸ تا ۱۰ اکتبر ۲۰۲۳) پس از آغاز درگیری پرداخته است. ما از یک تحلیل محتوای کمی مقایسه‌ای روی ۶۰ مقاله خبری از شبکه‌های سی‌ان‌ان و الجزیره انگلیسی استفاده کردیم و تمرکز خود را بر گزینش منابع، لحن خبر و عمق پوشش رسانه‌ای قرار دادیم. این ابعاد به عنوان سازوکارهای مشهود در چارچوب‌بندی (فرامتن‌سازی) بررسی شده‌اند که تفسیر اولیه از جنگ را شکل می‌دهند. یافته‌ها نشان‌دهنده تفاوت‌های آشکار در راهبردهای قاب‌بندی است، هرچند که هر دو شبکه به بی‌طرفی زبانی تعهد داشتند. سی‌ان‌ان عمدتاً بر منابع رسمی ایالات متحده و منابع دولتی اتکا داشت و پوششی گذرا و رویدادمحور (اپیزودیک) ارائه داد که جنگ را بیشتر به عنوان یک بحران ژئوپلیتیک تحت مدیریت بازیگران دیپلماتیک بازنمایی می‌کرد. در مقابل، الجزیره انگلیسی پوشش گسترده‌تری فراهم کرد و با بهره‌گیری از طیف وسیع‌تری از منابع، از جمله کارشناسان مستقل و قربانیان جنگ، یک چارچوب موضوعی (تماتیک) با تمرکز بر پیامدهای انسانی و بافت تاریخی رویداد ساخت. این پژوهش استدلال می‌کند که در مراحل اولیه جنگ، انتخاب‌های ساختاری مانند گزینش منابع و دامنه پوشش خبری، سازوکارهای حیاتی در قاب‌بندی هستند که افکار عمومی را، پیش از آنکه پیچیدگی‌های جنگ به طور کامل درک شود، شکل می‌دهند.

کلمات کلیدی: روزنامه نگاری جنگ، چارچوب بندی رسانه ای، منازعه اسرائیل و حماس، افکار عمومی، الجزیره انگلیس، سرازاز.

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Introduction

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ، وَالصَّلَاةُ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَى سَيِّدِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ وَعَلَى آلِهِ وَأَصْحَابِهِ أَجْمَعِينَ

When a violent conflict begins, the initial scarcity of information creates a gap that news media rush to fill. It is in these first hours and days that the most durable public narratives are forged. Scholars of political communication have long established that these early frames do not simply organize information; they define the very boundaries of legitimate interpretation for audiences (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). In the context of the latest Israel–Hamas war beginning on October 7, 2023, the global media landscape became an immediate battleground for meaning. Psychological research on the priming effect suggests that the criteria audiences use to judge political actors are set almost immediately (Higgins et al., 1985; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Once an interpretive frame such as unprovoked terror or resistance against occupation is established in the public mind, it becomes cognitively resilient, often resisting contradictory evidence that emerges later (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Therefore, analyzing the immediacy of coverage is not just about journalistic speed; it is about understanding the formation of public perception.

The contemporary media environment intensifies the significance of early coverage. The rapid circulation of news through digital platforms and social media amplifies initial narratives, allowing early frames to spread widely and solidify quickly across transnational audiences. As multiple news organizations compete to define what is happening in real time, divergent political, cultural, and ideological orientations often result in sharply contrasting representations of the same event. Consequently, understanding media coverage in the immediate aftermath of conflict is essential for assessing how public meaning is constructed rather than merely reported. The Israel–Hamas war that began with the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, represents a salient case for examining these dynamics. The conflict rapidly escalated into a major international crisis, drawing intense global media attention and provoking polarized public reactions across different regions. Within this highly charged context, international news organizations played an important role in framing the conflict for their audiences from its very first moments.

This study focuses on the first three full days following the outbreak, because of their formative psychological and communicative significance. While audiences may continue to follow news about a conflict for weeks or months, research suggests that the earliest exposure often establishes the dominant interpretive schema through which later information is processed (Entman, 2004). Thus, examining media framing during this initial period provides critical insight into how enduring perceptions of the war may have been shaped.

To explore these processes, we conducted a comparative content analysis of news coverage published on the English-language websites of CNN and Al Jazeera English (AJE). CNN, as one of the most influential Western news organizations, plays a central role in shaping public opinion among American and broader Western audiences. Al Jazeera English, while rooted in the Global South, also addresses a global, English-speaking readership and has become a significant counterpoint to

Western-dominated news narratives. By comparing these two outlets, this study seeks to illuminate how different media systems frame the same conflict during its most consequential early phase, focusing on source selection, news tone, framing strategies, and depth of coverage.

Research Questions

Building on framing theory (Goffman, 1974), this study examines how early media coverage contributes to the construction of meaning in the initial phase of armed conflict. In this study, we try to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1:** What differences can be observed in the selection and use of news sources between CNN and AJE during the initial phase of the conflict?
- RQ2:** To what extent did the tone of coverage differ between CNN and AJE in terms of neutrality or partiality?
- RQ3:** What differences exist in the depth and scope of coverage between CNN and AJE as reflected in word count and narrative elaboration?

Literature and Theoretical Framework

Research on war journalism and media coverage of armed conflict has long emphasized the role of news framing in shaping public understanding of violence, responsibility, and legitimacy (Bishop & Fedorocsko, 2020; Nygren et al., 2018). Within communication studies, framing theory has provided a foundational lens for examining how media select, emphasize, and organize certain aspects of reality while marginalizing others (Entman, 1993). Closely connected to this perspective, agenda-setting and priming research demonstrates that media influence not only what audiences think about, but also how they evaluate political actors and events, particularly during periods of crisis and uncertainty (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). A substantial body of empirical research has applied these theoretical frameworks to the study of war and conflict reporting, frequently through comparative content analysis. News media operating in different political, cultural, and ideological contexts tend to construct divergent narratives of the same conflict, particularly with respect to source selection, attribution of responsibility, and the prominence of humanitarian consequences.

Fornaciari (2012), for example, conducted a content analysis of Al Jazeera English and the BBC's coverage of the Egyptian revolution in early 2011. Focusing on five dominant frames (attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality) the study found that while both outlets emphasized conflict-related frames, they differed in narrative emphasis. AJE devoted greater attention to mutual condemnation among political actors, whereas the BBC placed more focus on outcomes and the identification of winners and losers (Fornaciari, 2012). These findings illustrate how even broadly similar news organizations can produce distinct versions of reality through framing choices, particularly during moments of political upheaval. Similarly, Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007) examined online news coverage of the Iraq War across coalition countries and the Arab world. Their comparative framing analysis revealed that Arab media outlets predominantly emphasized military conflict and war violence, while coalition-country media focused more heavily on reconstruction and

post-war governance. The authors suggest that these differences reflect not only journalistic norms but also prevailing public opinion and political alignments within each media system. This study underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping how wars are narrated, especially in their early and most volatile phases.

Comparative research has also explored distinctions between war journalism and peace journalism across different regions. Lee et al. (2006), analyzing coverage of the Iraq War and Asian conflicts across eight Asian newspapers, found that hard news reporting was largely dominated by war journalism frames, whereas editorials and opinion pieces more frequently employed peace journalism perspectives. Notably, their findings indicate that foreign-sourced news content relied more heavily on war frames than locally produced stories, highlighting the role of source origin in framing conflict narratives.

Source selection itself has been identified as a critical mechanism through which media framing operates. Ryan’s (2004) analysis of U.S. newspaper editorials during the early stages of the War on Terror revealed a strong reliance on official government sources and a largely unidimensional framing of the conflict. Editorial narratives frequently implied that military retaliation was both necessary and inevitable, while moral and humanitarian consequences received limited attention (Ryan, 2004). This pattern demonstrates how early media framing can narrow the range of interpretive possibilities available to audiences at the outset of a conflict.

More recent scholarship has further emphasized differences between mainstream and alternative media in their framing of war. Alitavoli (2020), comparing opinion articles on “cnn.com” and “antiwar.com” during the Syrian conflict, found that CNN predominantly framed Bashar al-Assad as a villain and highlighted strategic dilemmas facing U.S. leadership, whereas antiwar.com advanced a more cohesive anti-intervention narrative by invoking the failures of previous wars and identifying actors who stood to benefit from continued military engagement (Alitavoli, 2020). This contrast illustrates how framing strategies vary not only across national contexts but also across media types and institutional orientations. Recent studies in the field of war reporting show that media narratives are deeply divided over geopolitics, as news organizations do not simply reflect developments on the battlefield but actively frame them through ideological prisms (Qiu et al., 2025; Rudakova, 2024).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that media coverage of war is shaped by a complex interplay of framing practices, source selection, journalistic norms, and broader political and cultural contexts. However, while existing research has extensively examined differences in war framing across media systems, relatively little attention has been paid to the *immediate post-outbreak phase* of conflict, the critical period during which public perceptions are first formed and initial interpretive frames become cognitively entrenched. Building on this literature, the present study addresses this gap by focusing explicitly on the earliest days of the Israel–Hamas war in October 2023. By examining how CNN and AJE framed the conflict during this formative period, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how early media narratives may shape enduring public interpretations of war.

This study operationalizes framing theory through three observable and measurable dimensions: source selection, news tone, and depth of coverage. First,

source selection is treated as a mechanism of authority and attribution framing, as the inclusion or exclusion of particular actors (e.g., government officials, experts, or affected individuals) implicitly assigns credibility and shapes interpretations of responsibility and legitimacy within the conflict. Second, news tone is conceptualized as evaluative framing, reflecting how media texts subtly signal alignment, neutrality, or partiality toward the actors involved, even within the constraints of professional journalistic objectivity. Third, depth of coverage, measured through article length and narrative elaboration, is linked to the distinction between episodic and thematic framing. Shorter, event-driven reports tend to promote episodic framing by focusing on discrete incidents, whereas more extensive and context-rich coverage facilitates thematic framing by situating events within broader historical, political, and humanitarian contexts. Together, these dimensions provide a structured framework for empirically examining how early-stage war narratives are constructed and communicated.

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative content analysis approach (Riffe et al., 2024) to examine how the Israel–Hamas war was framed by international news media during the earliest stage of the conflict. Content analysis is particularly well suited for this research as it allows for the systematic, replicable, and objective examination of manifest and latent meanings in media texts, making it a widely used method in studies of war journalism and news framing (Krippendorff, 2019). Although the conflict began on October 7, 2023, this study focuses on coverage from October 8 to 10 in order to ensure consistency and completeness in the dataset. The first day of the conflict was characterized by highly fragmented and rapidly evolving information flows, with many news reports published in incomplete or continuously updated formats (e.g., live blogs and breaking news alerts). In contrast, the subsequent three days represent the first full news cycles in which relatively stable, fully developed articles became available across both outlets. Focusing on this period allows for a more systematic and comparable analysis of framing practices, minimizing inconsistencies caused by real-time reporting dynamics on the day of the outbreak. Although this time frame is limited, prior research in communication and political psychology suggests that early media exposure plays a disproportionate role in shaping durable public perceptions during periods of crisis (Entman, 2004; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Accordingly, this period is treated as a theoretically meaningful window for analysis.

Sampling

The study examines news articles published on the English-language websites of CNN and AJE. These two outlets were selected due to their global reach, international influence, and distinct institutional and geopolitical orientations. CNN represents one of the most prominent Western news organizations with substantial influence on American and Western audiences, while AJE addresses a global English-speaking audience and often provides alternative perspectives to Western-dominated news narratives. The data corpus comprises news articles related to the Israel–Hamas conflict published on the English-language websites of CNN and Al Jazeera English.

(AJE) between October 8 and 10, 2023. Articles were retrieved using a structured search strategy combining keywords such as “Israel,” “Hamas,” “Gaza,” and “war,” applied within the internal search functions of each website. To ensure topical relevance and comparability, only articles published within the primary news sections were included.

The initial sampling frame consisted of all relevant articles published within this timeframe. From this data, a stratified random sampling procedure was employed to ensure equal representation across days and outlets. Specifically, 10 articles per day were randomly selected from each outlet, resulting in a total sample of 60 articles (30 from CNN and 30 from AJE). Randomization was conducted using a random number generator in Microsoft Excel to minimize selection bias and ensure replicability. While a sample size of 60 articles might appear limited for a general corpus analysis, it provides the necessary data for a micro-analysis of the critical 72-hour window. Only straight news reports were included in the sample. Opinion pieces, editorials, live blogs, videos, pictures and analytical commentaries were excluded in order to maintain consistency and focus on routine news framing practices.

Unit of Analysis

The primary unit of analysis in this study is the individual news article. Each article was coded in its entirety, including headlines and body text, as these elements collectively contribute to framing effects and audience interpretation. Drawing on established framing research (Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007), the coding scheme was designed to capture key dimensions relevant to early-stage war coverage. The following variables were coded:

News Sources: The sources of information were categorized into: Media, War-affected individuals, Palestinian officials, Israeli officials, United States officials, Other official authorities, and Experts.

News tone: The articles were classified into three distinct categories: Neutral, Favorable toward Israel, and Favorable toward Hamas. In addition, articles were coded for the presence or absence of humanitarian emphasis, including references to civilian casualties, human suffering, destruction of infrastructure, and economic consequences.

Depth of Coverage: Depth of coverage is operationalized using article word count as a proxy for narrative elaboration. While word count does not fully capture all dimensions of framing depth, it provides a measurable indicator of the extent to which coverage moves beyond brief event reporting toward more detailed contextualization. Word count serves as an indicator of narrative elaboration and informational density, particularly relevant in the context of early conflict reporting where space allocation reflects editorial priorities. It should be clarified that the depth of coverage in this study was not assessed solely through word count. The concept also involved broader indicators related to narrative elaboration and contextualization. However, because aspects such as source selection and narrative detail were already addressed through separate analytical categories and research questions, the depth of coverage category specifically emphasized measurable indicators, such as article length and the extent of textual development, to avoid analytical overlap.

Coding Procedure

Following Neuendorf (2017) and Riffe et al. (2024), this study operationalized news tone, source selection, and depth of coverage through systematic quantitative coding categories. To ensure consistency and replicability, explicit decision rules were developed for each variable prior to analysis. A ‘source’ was defined as any explicitly cited or quoted individual, institution, or document providing information or interpretation within the article. Sources were categorized based on their institutional affiliation and role. ‘Officials’ included representatives of governments or formal political institutions, whereas ‘experts’ referred to academics, analysts, or independent specialists not directly affiliated with government bodies.

News tone was coded based on evaluative framing cues present in the text. Articles were classified as ‘neutral’ when they presented information without explicit evaluative language or asymmetrical attribution. Articles were coded as ‘favorable’ toward one party when they contained consistent positive or legitimizing language for that actor or disproportionately emphasized their perspective. Humanitarian emphasis was coded as present when the article included at least two references to civilian casualties, human suffering, infrastructural destruction, or economic consequences. This threshold was established to distinguish between incidental mention and sustained thematic emphasis. These coding rules were applied systematically across all articles to ensure analytical consistency.

Reliability and Data Analysis

Given the collaborative nature of this study, both authors were involved in developing the coding scheme and conducting the coding process. Comparative analysis focused on variations in source selection, tone, framing, and depth of coverage across the two outlets. Coding categories and decision rules were discussed and refined jointly prior to and during the analysis to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency. Throughout the coding phase, ambiguous cases were resolved through discussion and consensus between the authors, contributing to a shared understanding of category boundaries.

Findings

Source

The analysis reveals a striking disparity in who was granted a platform to speak during the initial 72 hours of the conflict. Both networks relied on official accounts to establish credibility, but the composition of these officials differed significantly. As shown in the data, CNN’s sourcing reflected a deeply state-centric orientation. In the sample of 30 articles, American officials were the dominant external voice, cited 14 times, nearly double the frequency found in Al Jazeera English (8 citations). This heavy reliance on U.S. perspectives effectively framed the conflict through the lens of Western diplomatic and strategic interests from the outset. Furthermore, CNN’s coverage was notably limited regarding non-state actors; the network did not cite a single independent expert in the sampled articles and included victim perspectives in only 10% of reports (3 citations total). In contrast, Al Jazeera English (AJE) constructed a far more diverse sourcing narrative. AJE utilized a significantly higher

volume of sources overall (averaging four per report compared to CNN’s lower density) and moved beyond official narratives. AJE integrated 12 citations from experts and academics, a category entirely absent in the CNN sample, allowing for historical and political contextualization beyond the immediate violence. Additionally, AJE amplified the voices of those on the ground, citing war victims 16 times in a total of 30 news articles, approximately five times more than CNN. This suggests that while CNN prioritized the geopolitical dimension (what governments say), AJE focused on humanitarian and contextual aspects (what people experience and experts analyze). See figure 1 and figure 2 for more details.

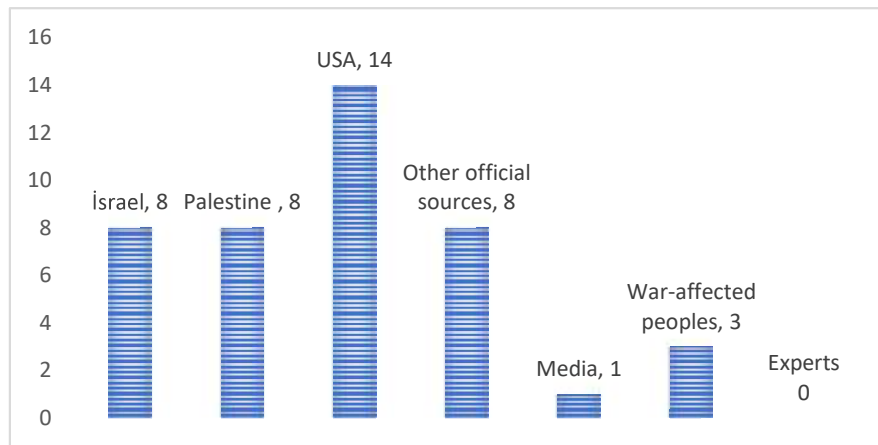


Figure 1. CNN sources

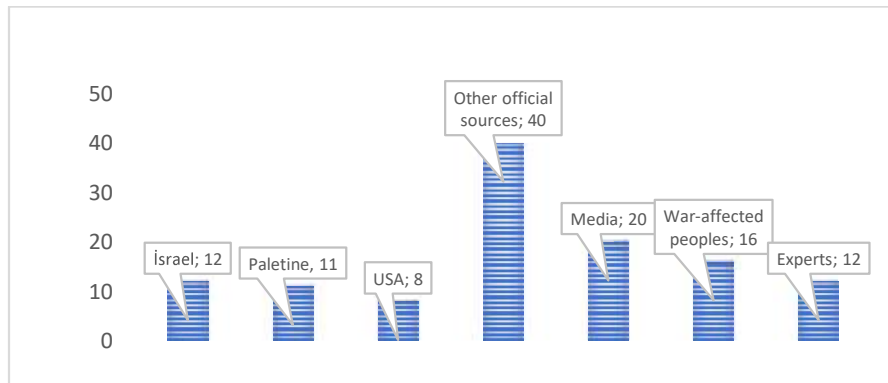


Figure 2. Al Jazeera English sources

News Tone

Linguistically, both outlets adhered to the professional norms of objective journalism. The vast majority of articles in both samples employed a neutral tone, with overt bias appearing only sporadically (one instance in CNN favoring Israel; four in AJE favoring Palestine). However, this linguistic neutrality masked a deeper divergence

in thematic emphasis. The data indicates that neutrality did not equate to detached observation for AJE. The network demonstrated a significantly sharper focus on the humanitarian consequences of the war. Approximately 36% of AJE's coverage centered explicitly on human rights, casualty counts, infrastructural damage, and economic fallout. In comparison, CNN addressed these humanitarian themes in only 20% of its reports. This suggests that AJE's framing strategy was to immediately foreground the *cost* of the conflict, whereas CNN's framing kept the focus tighter on the *events* of the conflict.

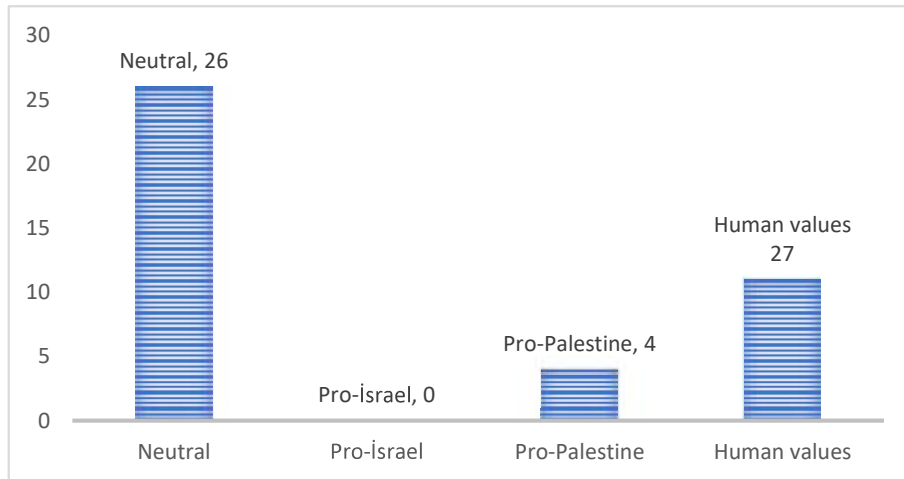


Figure 3. Al Jazeera English news tone

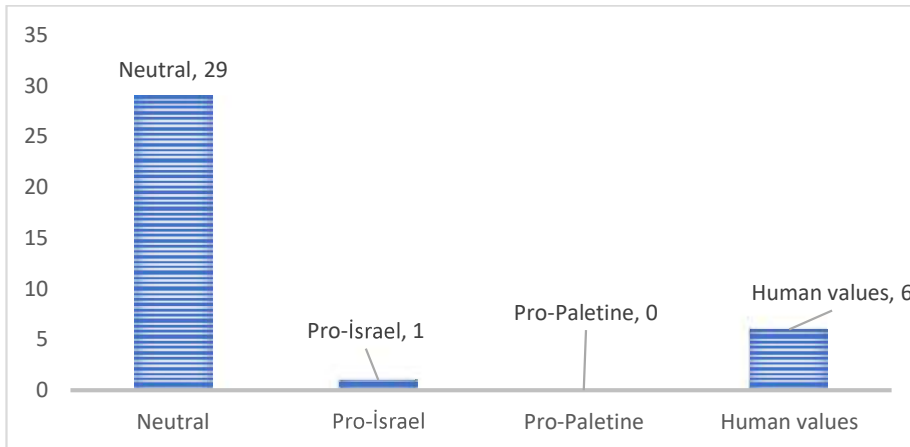


Figure 4. CNN News tone

Word Count

Perhaps the most quantifiable indicator of the differing editorial priorities lies in the depth of coverage. Although both networks covered the same three-day period, the

informational density provided to audiences varied drastically. AJE published a total of 17,682 words across the 30 sampled articles, averaging approximately 600 words per report. Conversely, CNN's total volume was less than half that figure, at 7,529 words, with an average article length of just over 250 words. This stark difference implies two distinct communicative functions: CNN's shorter reports functioned primarily as breaking news updates; rapid, episodic, and concise. AJE, on the other hand, utilized its lengthier format to provide thematic framing, likely offering the background, context, and nuance necessary to understand a complex historical conflict, rather than merely reporting on the latest exchange of fire.

Discussion

This study sought to capture the onset of war narratives, examining how CNN and AJE framed the Israel–Hamas conflict before standard media scripts fully hardened. The findings confirm that even in the first 72 hours, distinct editorial patterns emerged, challenging the notion of a uniform global information flow.

RQ1: *What differences can be observed in the selection and use of news sources between CNN and AJE during the initial phase of the conflict?*

The most significant divergence lay in the constructed narrative of sources. CNN's heavy reliance on American officials aligns with Ryan's (2004) observations on the "indexing" of Western media, where news coverage tends to strictly follow the parameters of elite political debate. By prioritizing U.S. and official state voices, CNN effectively framed the conflict as a geopolitical crisis requiring management, rather than a lived human catastrophe. This sourcing bias creates a hierarchy of credibility, where state actors are presented as the primary definers of truth. In contrast, AJE's inclusion of victims and experts suggests a deliberate emphasis on an alternative narrative. By broadening the source pool, AJE did not just report the news; it broadened the range of represented perspectives, validating the experiences of those suffering the violence (Lee et al., 2006).

RQ2: *To what extent did the tone of coverage differ between CNN and AJE in terms of neutrality or partiality?*

Our analysis indicates that while both CNN and AJE adhered to professional standards of linguistic neutrality, this objectivity did not result in uniform narratives. Consistent with Entman's (1993) definition of framing as selection and salience, the divergence was structural rather than stylistic. While CNN achieved neutrality by focusing on diplomatic protocols, AJE did so by documenting humanitarian impacts. This suggests that in early conflict reporting, neutrality is not a fixed variable but a flexible framework that allows distinct media systems to prioritize different aspects of reality such as humanitarian versus geopolitical, while retaining journalistic credibility.

RQ3: *What differences exist in the depth and scope of coverage between CNN and AJE as reflected in word count and narrative elaboration?*

The main difference in narrative depth indicates a fundamental difference in the assumed role of the journalist. CNN's brevity served the function of an alert system, prioritizing speed and factual updates, which tends to favor *episodic framing*. As Iyengar & Kinder (2010) notes, episodic coverage discourages audiences from assigning societal or historical responsibility, focusing instead on immediate acts.

Conversely, AJE's long-form approach allowed for thematic framing, providing the context necessary to understand the structural roots of the violence. This depth is crucial because, as Entman (2004) argues, framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient. AJE selected context and consequence, CNN selected event and reaction.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the coverage of the Israel– Hamas war in its immediate aftermath, showing that public narratives began taking shape during the initial period of uncertainty. By examining the first 72 hours of reporting on CNN and Al Jazeera English, the research illustrates how distinct media systems emphasized different aspects of the conflict. While both networks adhered to professional standards of linguistic objectivity, their framing strategies differed fundamentally. CNN employed a state-centric approach, prioritizing U.S. official sources to frame the conflict primarily as a geopolitical crisis. Al Jazeera English adopted a thematic approach, utilizing broader sourcing including victims and experts to highlight humanitarian and historical dimensions.

The findings suggest that neutrality is not a uniform standard but a variable practice shaped by institutional priorities. Although this study focused on a micro-analysis of the outbreak, these early editorial choices are critical as they likely establish the initial frameworks for public interpretation. The divergence in coverage may indicate that global audiences are somehow witnessing two different versions of reality. Future research should expand this inquiry by incorporating audience reception studies to measure how deeply these initial frames influence public opinion as the conflict continues to evolve.

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