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The Coverage of the War on Gaza in British and German Newspaper Editorials

Introduction and Research Questions

‘Regarding your reporting on the war in the Gaza Strip: Why is it so one-sided?’^{*1} asked a reader in a letter to the editor in the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ, 9/1/2009). Indeed, for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, surely one of the most complex in the contemporary world, the statement that ‘In deeply divided plural societies any conflict becomes more complicated and reporting becomes more controversial as there are at least two contrasting definitions of the larger truth’ (Liebes & Anat, 2003, p. 71) seems to be especially true. In this case, the media are often accused of reporting with an either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian bias. Besides letters to the editor, public opposition to a supposedly ‘biased’ media manifested itself in protests outside the London headquarters of the BBC after it refused to show a charity appeal for Gaza on the grounds that this might jeopardize its impartiality (news.bbc.co.uk).

In this paper, I want to examine whether the media, in this case the press, really report either ‘in favour of’ any side in the conflict. Furthermore, this study is going to look at whether and if yes, how newspaper reporting on the conflict differs in the national discourses of Germany and Great Britain. Both countries have a special relationship with Israel, Germany because of its legacy regarding the Holocaust, and Great Britain because of its role in the establishment of the State of Israel. As this statement would assume a coherent national discourse, two newspapers with different political stances will be examined, one on the liberal or left-of-centre end of the spectrum, and one from the more conservative or right-wing angle. For Germany, those papers will be the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and the liberal *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. For Great Britain respectively, I will examine the discourse in the left-wing or liberal *Guardian* and the conservative *Times*.

To show the different ideologies and lines of argument behind the reporting, I will conduct a discourse analysis of editorials and opinion pieces. To analyse the arguments applied in depth, this approach might serve better than a content analysis. An analysis of different argumentations and their underlying structures is significant as those frames constitute and reinforce public discourse on different levels.

¹ Quotes marked with a * are translations from the German by the author.

Generally, this leads to the following research questions:

- 1) Which discursive practices are applied by newspaper editorials regarding the December 2008 / January 2009 war on Gaza?
- 2) Do those discursive practices differ more between Great Britain and Germany or between liberal and conservative newspapers?

Before I am going to conduct a short discourse analysis on four different editorials, one from each newspaper, I will shortly describe the historical background of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and describe the relations of Great Britain and Germany with Israel. In the following paragraphs, I will establish three hypotheses following from a brief literature review.

Literature Review

One important work that this study will draw on is *Bad News from Israel*, published by the Glasgow Media Group (see Philo & Berry, 2004; Philo et al., 2003). The authors of the study have conducted a content analysis and focus group interviews to examine coverage of the conflict and establish the effect of television news on the understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One important insight the study provides is that many people do not seem to understand the background and origins of the conflict. For example, 'It was apparent that many people did not understand that the Palestinians were subject to a military occupation and did not know who was 'occupying' the occupied territories.' (Philo et al., 2003, p. 136). The study even found big misunderstandings. For example, ten per cent of the people surveyed were thinking '... that the Palestinians were occupying the territories and that the settlers were Palestinian' (ibid). Furthermore, the Group found that, in the coverage of the *Second Intifada*, '...that Israelis spoke twice as often as Palestinians and there were many more headlines that expressed the Israeli view than that of the Palestinians' (ibid, p. 144). For the Glasgow Media Group, 'It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the perspective of one side in the conflict occupies a privileged position in many news accounts' (ibid, 148). The Group attributes these findings among other things to a news media whose reporting focuses on violence and action and is restricted by commercial markets.

The Glasgow Media Group concludes that TV news reporting favours the Israeli perspective of the conflict. One consequence of this is that Palestinians, who might regard themselves as resisting a violent and illegal occupation, are frequently portrayed as terrorists, while Israeli forces are portrayed as merely responding to Palestinian violence. Very similar actions will therefore be evaluated differently. A study on news stories in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Peter Manning has

found a very similar pattern. For example, while 'terrorism' 'is accepted as a defining term for Palestinian resistance', the Israeli army 'reacts' with a 'military campaign' (see Manning, 2003, p. 56). Also the Glasgow Media Group has found that the word 'terrorist' has only been used in connection with Palestinian violence. According to Manning, such reporting 'demonises Palestinians as violent Arabs', while legitimizing Israeli actions. The patterns that the Glasgow Media Group has found therefore also seem to hold for newspaper discourse, although the Group shows several examples where newspaper discourse seems to give more background information than TV news (see Philo & Berry, 2004).

Hypotheses

Generally, these studies on the portrayal of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Western media lead to the following hypotheses:

- 1) *An Israeli interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prevails in the coverage.*
- 2) *Background and history of the conflict are largely neglected.*
- 3) *Israeli sources will be more prominent than Palestinian sources.*

Historical Background

Israel and Palestine – Historical Discourses

When having a closer look at the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine, it is better to talk about different 'histories of the conflict' instead of assuming one single acknowledged historical 'truth' (see Philo & Berry, 2004, p. 1). In the same way that journalists rely on different sources and are influenced by their personal convictions, notions of professionalism or their editors, it is also individuals who write history and establish 'historical facts'. Also in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, 'Participants tell the story from their own point of view and often to legitimise their own actions' (ibid).

Those different emphases on telling the story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not only implicitly influenced by the above mentioned factors, but are often made explicit by the authors of historical

accounts of the conflict. For Simha Flapan, for example, 'neither the Arabs ... nor the Israelis ... are able to cut through the web of myth and distortion that envelops their reasoning' (1987, p. 3). Also for Benny Morris, 'Almost from the start the subject has been treated with emphatic partisanship by commentators and historians from both sides, as well as by foreign observers' (2001, xiii). As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still a 'hot issue' and one of the most complex contemporary conflicts, historical distance, detachment and objectivity are obviously not often applied in its analysis, and political affiliations and campaigning may play a role in the desire of many scholars to provide a history of the conflict. The different stances also become clear when having a closer look at some crucial events in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For the Glasgow Media Group, '... to understand the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires a knowledge of at least two historical events' (Philo & Berry, 2004, p. 258). According to the Media Group, this is the displacement of 'large numbers of Palestinians' when Israel was founded in 1948, and, secondly, the military occupation in the Palestinian territories and the resulting restrictions on the daily lives of the Palestinians after the Six-Day War in 1967 (ibid). In both cases, 'both sides give their own accounts of the legitimacy of this' (ibid). Indeed, different histories and discursive practices regarding the conflict date back at least back to the 1920s. According to Hirst, the coexistence of Jewish immigrants and the Arab population was 'from the very outset ... shot through with continuous violence' (Hirst, 1984, p. 13). While it has been claimed that there has been some peaceful coexistence at the beginning, there have also been early outbreaks of violence between Jews and Arabs in 1921 and 1929, as well as a 'full scale Arab rebellion between 1936 and 1939' (Philo & Berry, 2004, p. 9). The reasons why this rebellion broke out are contested and range from Arab xenophobia and failure to compromise to the peasants' poor economic situation and anger because they had been evicted from their land (for a discussion of those different historical positions, see ibid, pp. 10-13).

Generally, one can identify three different major lines of argumentation in historical or contemporary evaluations of the conflict. One is the insistence on Israel's supposed security interests as opposed to Palestinian accusations of Israeli 'state terrorism', which for example manifests itself in discussions whether the recent air raids on Gaza are an 'act of self-defence' or a 'massacre'. The other lines of argumentation relate to the displacement of the Palestinian people as well as the difficult economic conditions in the occupied territories as underlying causes of the conflict, while the other side talks about (religiously motivated) 'terrorism'. A third line of argument advocates a two-state solution as the only possible road to peace, while the other side argues in

favour of Israeli settlement-building and territorial expansion based on Israel's perceived security interests or perceived ancient rights to the country based on religion.

National Discourses regarding Israel in Germany and Great Britain

Benedict Anderson describes the importance of a common national discourse and public sphere as well as common rituals such as newspaper reading for the identification with a nation (see Anderson, 1991). Indeed, '...every country has its own media system – with different specific functions, structures and developments'* (www.bpb.de). So, despite cultural and economic globalisation or monopolisation of the media, it is assumed that '...especially in a media system, cultural and political features stay intact to a high degree'* (ibid).

If one accepts this definition, the above-mentioned special relationship of Germany and Great Britain with the State of Israel should be found in public discourse. This might be especially true for Germany. The following statements are taken from the website of the German Foreign Ministry: 'Germany has very special relations with Israel. The reason for this is Germany's responsibility for the Shoah, the systematic genocide on six million European Jews during the times of National Socialism.'* (www.auswaertiges-amt.de). And further: 'Germany supports Israel's right to exist. It also actively supports the peace efforts in the Middle East'* (ibid). Indeed, also during the recent war on Gaza, Chancellor Angela Merkel made it clear that Germany supports 'Israel's right to defend itself', while at the same time attributing the full responsibility for the hostilities to Hamas (SZ, 30/12/2008). Here is not enough space to elaborate on all the complexities of the discussion on German and Jewish history and memory. But the relationship of Israel and Germany must surely be understood in connection with the Holocaust.

On the official website of the British Foreign Office, responsibility for the 'crisis' is generally attributed to both parties (www.fco.gov.uk). It also states that Great Britain is 'friends of both the Israelis and the Palestinians' (ibid). Furthermore, both countries stress the importance of an ongoing peace process and their willingness to assist in the process.

Methodology - Discourse Analysis

As evident from the Literature Review, most of the research on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been conducted on news. However, the focus in this study lies on newspaper editorials. While research methods based on counting, like a content analysis, might serve well for the purpose of examining news, the argumentative structures of editorials might be better researched with a discourse analysis. In this study, I am going to conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on the approaches of Roger Fowler and Teun A. van Dijk, slightly adapted to my purposes.

The concept of 'discourse' is hard to define, because different people use it in different ways. For Deacon et al., it enables media researchers to focus on 'the use of language in social life' and, as a consequence, examine 'the relationship between language use and social structure' (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 151). This focus on language as social interaction and as constitutive of reality allows a shift in focus, away '... from traditional approaches to the study of languages, which were preoccupied with the technical rules and principles of language structures, and which regarded language as an abstract system in isolation from its concrete social, cultural and historical contexts' (Deacon et al., *ibid.*). Therefore, approaches like critical linguistics, a method for example used by Fowler (see Fowler, 1991), reject a purely grammatical or lexical analysis. The shift in social science research from technical linguistic analysis to poststructuralist approaches is often attributed to the general influence of Michel Foucault's discourse theory, in which he talks about 'discursive formations', discourses that establish what terms and references are appropriate in a certain societal or professional field (see Deacon et al., 2007, p. 152). These discursive formations are 'singularly authoritative and deployed in the interests of existing structures of authority and power' (Deacon et al., *ibid.*).

Van Dijk, one of the most important scholars who developed approaches to discourse analysis, established a workable approach to semantic discourse analysis. In his discourse semantics, a purely linguistic analysis is not sufficient in describing all the 'aspects of meaning and reference of discourse' (van Dijk, 1985, p. 103). One of the properties of a discourse that can be used to describe its deeper meanings is 'discourse coherence', where it is crucial to understand 'sequences of propositions' rather than isolated sentences (van Dijk, 1985, pp. 107-108). 'Coherence' is therefore not merely a matter of grammar and sentence ordering, and the readers or listeners in a communicative situation have to use their universal or individual 'scripts' of world knowledge to fill in possible informational gaps (van Dijk, *ibid.*). For a certain discourse to be understandable, there is not only the need for a 'local coherence' (the 'microstructure' level), but also a 'global semantic structure or macrostructure' (van Dijk, 1985, p. 115). The interpretation of the micro- as well as the

macrostructure of a discourse is based on individual experiences, belief systems, attitudes or personal opinions, and the interpretation of both can therefore differ among individuals (ibid, p. 117). However, '...there is often enough to overlap to guarantee successful communication and interaction' (van Dijk, ibid.).

While, in a communicative situation, a listener must constantly make use of 'interpretation strategies', the speaker uses 'production strategies to remain coherent to motivate apparent deviations from coherence principles' (ibid, p. 118). This conversational model could as well be transferred to newspaper discourse, where similar interpretation and production strategies might be used to make sense of a discourse or get a certain discursive stance across.

For Fairclough, discourse analysis combines 'practices' and 'texts', as it 'can be understood as an attempt to show systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices' (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 16-17). Van Dijk, in a more recent text on critical discourse analysis, also establishes a 'theoretical framework that critically relates discourse, cognition, and society' (van Dijk, 2001, p. 354). In his definition, CDA is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). Van Dijk assigns the media an important role in establishing public discourse and shaping the attitudes of the audience.

Fowler, in his book *Language in the News* (1991), sets out to examine 'the role of linguistic structure in the construction of ideas in the Press', with the premise that 'language is not neutral, but a highly constructive mediator' (Fowler, 1991, p. 1). He points out that news selection is a complex process based on professional routines, editorial stances and subjective criteria of a journalist. Therefore, 'Anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position' (Fowler, 1991, p. 10). The stereotypes that people use to make sense of the world and the routine approach of official and elite sources helps to 'reproduce the attitudes of the powerful' (Fowler, 1991, p. 23). This ideology becomes visible in the language, and hence Fowler establishes some tools for a discourse analysis. One of these is the concept of 'transitivity', which assigns the roles of agent and patient to different participants and is therefore 'ideologically significant' (Fowler, 1991, pp. 71-76). He further elaborates on two different kinds of 'transformation', namely 'passive transformation' and 'nominalization'. While passive transformation mainly serves to change notions of responsibility by omitting the agent, nominalization similarly allows eliminating information like participants, time or modality. Apart from these grammatical categories, Fowler also examines the vocabulary as 'a major determinant of ideational structure' (Fowler, 1991, p. 80).

There are certain problems with CDA, such as the question whether general rules can really be abstracted from linguistic analysis. Results might depend too much on the subjective interpretation of researchers, who, like readers or listeners, draw on their own world knowledge to make sense of texts and media discourse. As Fowler puts it, there is 'no constant relationship between linguistic structure and its semiotic significance' (Fowler, 1991, p. 90). However, as the focus in this paper is put on the ideological backgrounds and implications of newspaper discourse, a discourse analysis can serve this purpose better than content analysis.

Editorials as a Journalistic Genre

There are not many explicit theories of editorials as a media genre. However, Fowler and van Dijk, who have conducted critical discourse analysis on British newspaper editorials, have identified some common features of editorials and methodologies for their analysis.

Firstly, editorials can also be called leaders, leading articles (see van Dijk, 1989, p. 230), 'opinion' or 'comment' (Fowler, 1998, p. 208). Both authors claim that editorials have the main function to express the point of view or opinion of a newspaper (see *ibid.*). To examine political affiliations and hidden ideologies in newspaper discourse, it therefore makes sense to examine editorials, as they are '... THE formulation place for newspaper ideologies' (van Dijk, 1989, p. 252, *emphasis in original*).

As 'Editorials, even more than the news reports on which they are based, precisely offer ... practical, common sense frameworks for making sense of the social situation' (*ibid.*), they are particularly significant in reproducing public discourse. Furthermore, '... editorializing as a form of complex verbal action, is also goal-oriented, viz., to persuade the reading public' (*ibid.*, p. 231). This is realized in 'subgoals' through 'argumentative moves, such as making own positions plausible or by making other positions untenable' (*ibid.*). For van Dijk as well as Fowler, this leads to an organisation of arguments in simplified 'us' vs. 'them' pairs. This is either achieved through linguistic and ideological labelling of certain groups (see van Dijk, 1989), or by establishing a consensus between the editorial voice and the reader, while 'othering' the groups referred to in the editorial (see Fowler, 1998, p. 221). In both cases, this signifies the role of the editorial as 'a discourse of institutional power' with regard to 'the newspaper's claimed authority' (*ibid.*).

To guide the reader to the desired conclusion, 'strategic moves' from '2000 years of rhetoric', such as 'irony, metaphors, comparisons, understatements and overstatements, contrasts etc.' are used

(ibid, p. 231). Also 'stylistic aspects of lexical style and syntactic form' have to be considered in an analysis. However, for van Dijk such a structuralist analysis does not go far enough in exposing hidden ideologies. Therefore, an analysis 'must be complemented with a more dynamic, strategic analysis, in which argumentation is studied in terms of dialogical interaction with real or constructed opponents' (ibid, p. 231). Therefore, 'a sound analysis of argumentation should also be embedded in a socio-cultural and political framework' (ibid, p. 232).

Sample

The time frame for the sample starts on Monday, 29 December 2008, the day of the first reports of Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip, and ends on 19 January 2009, the day after the ceasefire. One editorial of each of the sample newspapers will be examined. The editorials analysed in the following chapter have been published between 29 and 31 December 2008. They have been chosen not so much as they were all published within three days, but because of their topic. All of them refer to Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip and evaluate it morally, in either justifying or criticising Israel's actions, or both. Those evaluations have mostly been prominent in the first days of the war, while later comments mostly centre on questions like the role of the United States and new President Barack Obama or the European Union in establishing peace talks, or on the role of Egypt and other neighbouring Arab States.

The editorials will be taken from the following newspapers:

The *Times* and the *Guardian* will serve as examples for a conservative / centre-right and a liberal / left-wing quality paper in Great Britain.

The respective newspapers in Germany will be the *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)*, one of the biggest German daily newspapers, which has a liberal political stance and is based in Munich, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, which will serve as an example with a more conservative stance.

All of those newspapers are widely read quality dailies, which fulfil an important function as opinion leaders in public discourse. Their political stances should be comparable.

Analysis

How differently the same event can be framed in two different newspapers becomes clear when looking at the front pages of the *FAZ* and *SZ* issues of 30 December 2008. Israel's air raids on the Gaza Strip, which had started the weekend before, feature prominently on the cover page of both papers. But the pictures that illustrate the impact on the people in the region could hardly be more different. The *SZ* shows a picture of three Palestinian women, one of them crying for her little daughter who has been killed in the attack. The picture also shows her little son, who looks distressed and is obviously injured. The photo the *FAZ* has chosen was taken on the other side of the Gaza border. It shows five Israelis in the city of Ashkelon, who are ducking down after a rocket alarm. Each of those pictures shows a different side of the conflict, and only from looking at them, one might get the impression that each newspaper has chosen to report from an Israeli or a Palestinian perspective, at least on that day.

I am now going to examine four editorials in more detail. At first, one editorial from the *FAZ* and one from the *Times* will be compared, to see if there are parallels in conservative newspaper discourse. The same will then be done with one editorial from the *SZ* and one from the *Guardian*. This will show whether there is a bigger difference in national discourse, or whether there is something like a more international conservative or liberal newspaper discourse.

The *Times* published an unsigned 'leading article' on 31 December 2008 with the headline 'Security Dilemmas in Gaza'. The subheading summarizes the editorial, saying 'Israel is entitled to defend its civilians against rocket attacks, but its military options are constrained and shrewd diplomacy would serve its interests'. The argument that Israel is reacting to a provocation of Hamas and therefore has a right to defend itself can be found again at the beginning of the second paragraph: 'No democratic government should underestimate the provocations that Israel has endured from relentless shelling of its civilians.' The *FAZ*, in a signed opinion piece on the front page with the headline 'Cast Lead'* (*Gegossenes Blei*), the name of the Israeli military operation, uses a similar argument one day earlier to describe the 'dilemma that the Israeli government faces'*: 'It ... cannot tolerate that its citizens in the south of the country are constantly under threat from rocket fire – rockets which are launched from the Gaza Strip and have also been launched during the truce with the radical-Islamist Hamas.'* Although stating that the Israeli operation probably will result in high civilian casualties, and therefore bear 'large political and diplomatic costs'*, and besides questioning the success of the air raids in stopping the rocket launches, the editorial goes on to say that 'Israel has the right to defend itself.'* The *Times* says that 'Israel has a right to defend itself but criticism from some European governments that disproportionate force is being used might soon become more persuasive in these

circumstances'. The 'circumstances' are an increased risk for civilians due to a 'diminished number of military targets' should the campaign persist. Therefore, both newspapers do not explicitly condemn the use of force in the highly populated Gaza Strip and its impact on people living there. Civilian casualties are not explicitly evaluated as a moral issue, but as an image problem for Israel and threat to the success of the military campaign. Furthermore, in the *Times* editorial, the use of 'disproportionate force' is criticised, but through the voices of 'European governments' instead of the editorial voice. Moreover, the blame for civilian casualties is attributed to Hamas. The *Times* writes that 'For the nearly 400 Palestinian deaths so far that have resulted from Israel's attacks this week, Hamas must accept a large share of responsibility.' And the *FAZ* says: 'It's true: The suffering of the Palestinian people, for which Israel is partly guilty, is big, but (the Palestinian people's) leadership in Gaza stays fixated at the fight against Israel.' So, although the *FAZ* acknowledges Israel's responsibility for the bad economic situation in the occupied territories, the frame that Israel is only reacting to Hamas provocations and therefore only defending itself is reinforced in both newspapers.

With regard to the framing of Israel as just defending itself, the line of argument in an unsigned *Guardian* editorial, called 'Killing a two-state solution' and published on the 29 December 2008, sounds quite different: 'The death toll by last night had climbed to nearly 290, with more than 700 wounded. This in reply to hundreds of rockets from Hamas militants which killed one Israeli in six months. But the equation is always like this.' This is quite a harsh criticism of Israel's military campaign, condemning the large number of civilian casualties and criticising a disproportionate use of force. The opening lines of a signed opinion piece in the *SZ* called 'Israel's misbelief'* (*Israels Irrglaube*) sound similar, but employ a more subtle criticism: 'For the second time during his term, Israel's premier Ehud Olmert has launched a war this weekend ... During the 33 day Lebanon War two years ago 1300 Lebanese and almost 160 Israelis were killed.'* The *Guardian* continues its line of argument with rather harsh criticism: 'We also know that to have chosen to strike on a Saturday morning, when the streets of this impoverished enclave were full, showed the same indifference to human life that Israel charges its enemies with.' Again, the argument in the *SZ* sounds similar, but more subtle: 'The surprise attack Operation 'Cast Lead' on Saturday, when children have been hit at school, women at the market and Hamas policemen while being sworn in, ended with the highest number of victims on a single day since the Six-Day War in 1967.' Both editorials also point out that the air raids might (*SZ*) or 'inevitably will' (*Guardian*) lead to further suicide attacks inside Israel. Therefore, not only Israel is the one that is provoked to react by violent acts of the opponent, it rather is a vicious circle. Similarly, the *Guardian* classifies Hamas' 'tactic' and 'strategy' as 'resistance'. The *SZ* is again not that explicit, but also provides some background to the conflict: 'It is

quite a simple equation: If there was peace and prosperity in the Gaza Strip, there would be no powerful Hamas.’*

Conclusion

Generally, this analysis points to the conclusion that there are more differences between liberal and conservative newspapers than between national discourses. This may sound surprising, especially when taking into account the different national histories of Germany and Great Britain, their different relationship to the State of Israel and different media cultures and systems. More right-wing or left-wing political stances are obviously more important for establishing a certain newspaper discourse than national media systems.

Similarly, the findings point to the conclusion that a binary opposition between ‘Western’ and ‘Arab’ media might be too simplistic. The findings show that the Western media landscape is not homogeneous, and not only divided along lines of national discourse, but according to certain political lines and stances.

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