



Media Report Card

Accuracy in Israel/Palestine Reporting *San Jose Mercury News* October 2002 - March 2003

Abstract

This study consists of a statistical examination of the *San Jose Mercury News*' coverage of the last quarter of 2002 and the first quarter of 2003. The categories examined were: (1) coverage of deaths and (2) the U.S. connection to this conflict – U.S. aid to Israel and the Palestinians.

The study found that while over three times as many Palestinians were killed during this period as Israelis, the *Mercury News* reported a nearly identical number of Israeli and Palestinian deaths in headlines and/or first paragraphs (247 and 253, respectively). In other words, coverage that may have appeared balanced to readers, in reality covered Israeli deaths at a rate three times greater than that of Palestinian deaths.

Front-page headline coverage of deaths during the study period was found to be even more distorted. In fact, the study found that Mercury News coverage in this category actually inverted the real death rate in Israel/Palestine. While 85 Israeli deaths (or 70%) received front-page prominence, only 14 Palestinian deaths (or 3.6%) were so reported. In other words, the study found that the killing of an Israeli was over nineteen times more likely to show up in a front-page headline than the killing of a Palestinian. As a result, *Mercury News* readers were being given the impression that Israelis had been dying in far greater numbers than Palestinians, when the reality was the direct opposite.

Regarding coverage of the American connection to this conflict – U.S. financial aid – the study found that only 1.1% of the 174 *Mercury News* articles on Israel/Palestine contained information on this topic. In addition, it was found that neither of the two mentions concerning this aspect provided full, accurate information.

Introduction

We recognize that reporting on Israel/Palestine has been an exceptionally controversial topic. The fact that the media have been criticized by partisans on both sides of the issue, has made it difficult for the largely non-aligned public to evaluate the quality of reporting they are getting on this issue.

Because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is at the center of one of the most strategically important regions of the world, and because American tax money is a central factor in this issue, If Americans Knew¹ believes that it is essential that Americans be accurately and fully informed on this issue. As part of this effort, we have undertaken the task of examining the accuracy with which major American media cover it.

In 2003, If Americans Knew began issuing report cards to major media outlets on their reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These reports are meant to assist members of the media in their quest to accurately report the news and to help readers evaluate the reliability of the information provided by their news sources.

This is the second study conducted by If Americans Knew on the *San Jose Mercury News*. Our first study covered the second and third quarters of 2002 and examined only front-page coverage of deaths. During that time, the *Mercury News* covered 73% of Israeli deaths and 5% of Palestinian deaths in front-page headlines. These findings were presented to *Mercury News* editors in January of 2003.

This study covers the final quarter of 2002 and the first quarter of 2003. Like our first report, the findings of this study will be provided to the *San Jose Mercury News*, as well as to the public.

¹ If Americans Knew is dedicated to providing full and accurate information to the American public on topics of importance that are underreported or misreported in the American media. Our primary area of focus at this time is Israel/Palestine. For more information, contact 310-441-8580, contact@IfAmericansKnew.org, or 914 Westwood Blvd., #235, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

Methodology

Due to the controversial nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the conflicting pressures brought to bear on the American media, we have chosen to measure accuracy according to yardsticks that would be universally acknowledged as valid and that can be evaluated quantitatively.

1. Coverage of Deaths

We counted the number of Israeli and Palestinian deaths the *San Jose Mercury News* reported on:

- In absolute numbers, and
- As a percentage of total deaths for Israelis and Palestinians respectively.

We broke these numbers down into two categories:

- All headlines and/or first paragraphs, and
- Front-page headlines.

We chose this yardstick because it is simple, quantitative and relatively immune to subjective interpretation. In addition, we wanted to discover whether the *San Jose Mercury News* demonstrates even-handed respect for human life, regardless of ethnic or religious origin. Finally, because headlines (and particularly front-page headlines) are often among the most prominent aspects of coverage that the reader absorbs, we believe they play a disproportionate role in generating an overall impression about the conflict and the relative consequences for Israelis and Palestinians.

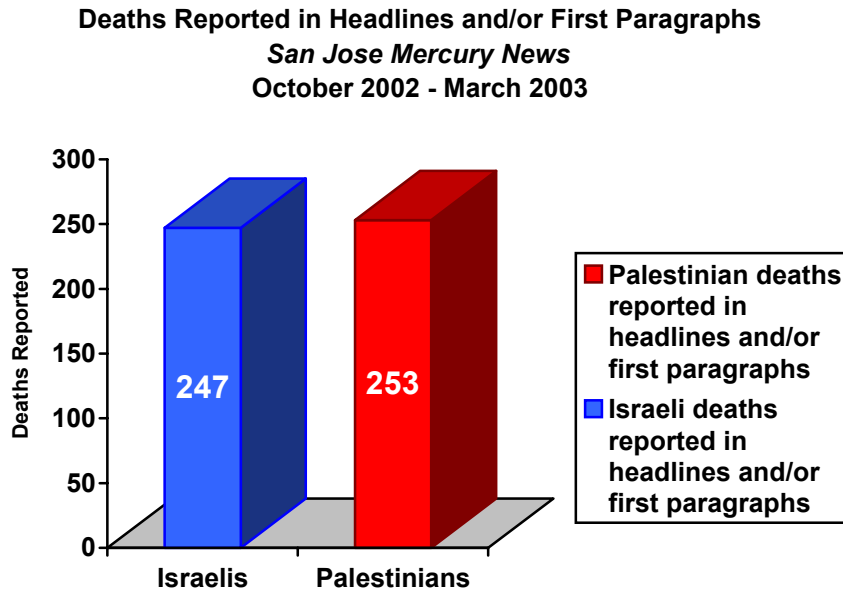
2. U.S. Connection

Finally, we looked at how often the specific American connection to the conflict – U.S. aid to Israel and the Palestinians – was covered fully and accurately. We counted the number of times such aid was mentioned, and then evaluated whether the sums presented were accurate; for example, whether aid to Israel reported both major segments of U.S. assistance – military and foreign aid – as well as additional subsidies such as loan forgiveness programs (see Appendix B).

Coverage of Deaths in Headlines and/or First Paragraphs

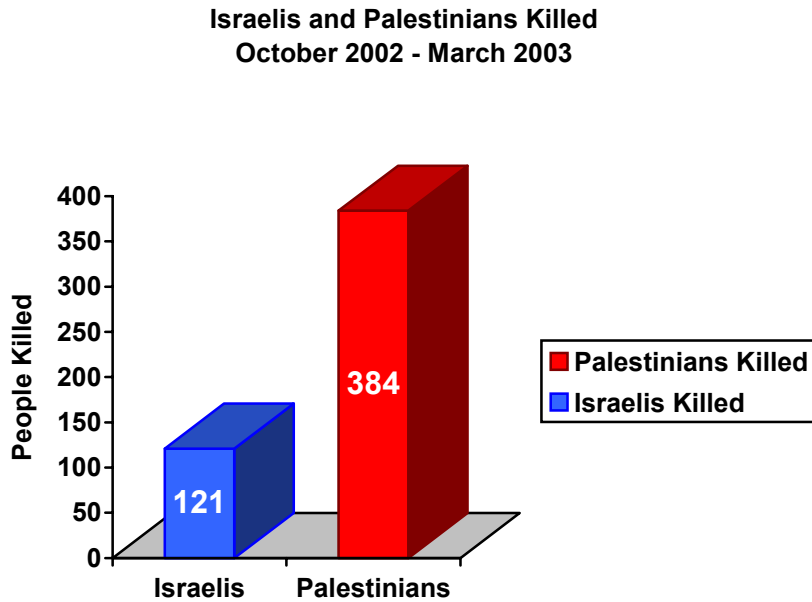
Between October 1, 2002 and March 31, 2003, the *San Jose Mercury News* reported 247 Israeli deaths and 253 Palestinian deaths in the headlines and/or first paragraphs of articles covering the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Figure 1



According to the leading Israeli human rights organization B'tselem², during this time, 121 Israelis and 384 Palestinians³ were actually killed.

Figure 2



² For more information about this group visit their website at www.btselem.org

³ These numbers do not include Palestinians civilians who died as a result of inability to reach medical care due to Israeli road closures, curfews, etc. The figure for Palestinian deaths is extremely conservative given that it was difficult for this organization to report on deaths in the Palestinian territories. Palestinian medical organizations report a higher number for this period.

Thus, the *San Jose Mercury News*, on average, covered every Israeli death twice⁴, reporting 204% of Israelis killed in the headlines and/or first paragraphs of relevant articles, compared to 66% of the Palestinians killed.

Figure 3



⁴ In actuality, some Israeli deaths were never covered and others made it into headlines or the first paragraph more than twice.

Coverage of Deaths in Front-Page Headlines

The underreporting of Palestinian deaths was even more dramatic in front-page headlines. During the six-month period studied, 85 Israeli deaths were covered in front-page headlines, while only 14 Palestinian deaths received such prominent coverage.

Figure 4



In other words, 70% of the Israelis killed and only 3.6% of the Palestinians killed were reported in front-page headlines.

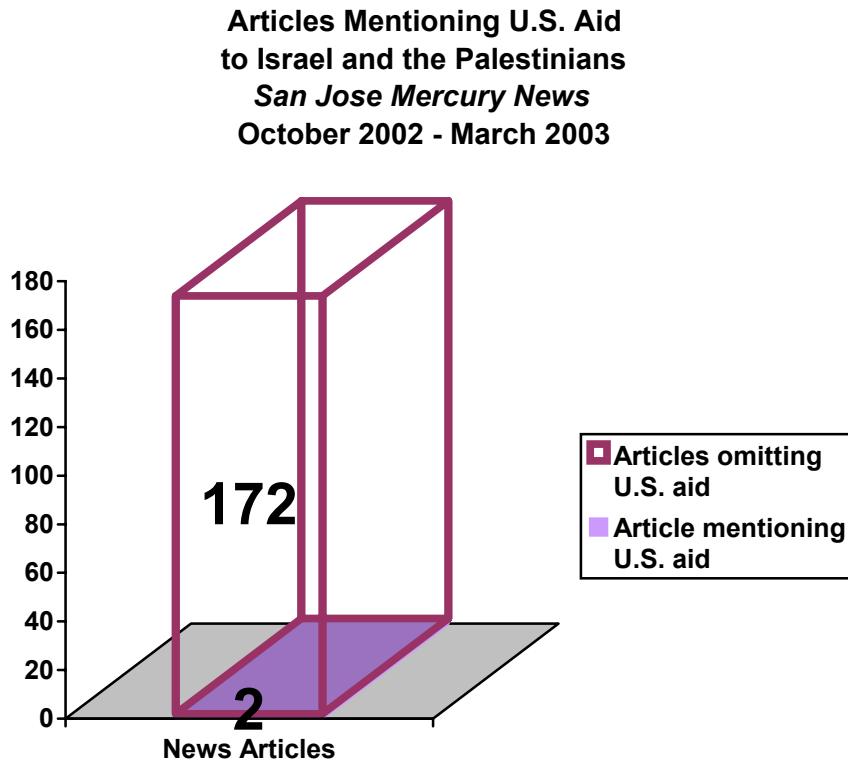
Figure 5



Coverage of the American Connection

During the six months covered by this study, the *San Jose Mercury News* printed 175 articles on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During this time, the major American connection to the conflict – U.S. aid to Israel and the Palestinians – was mentioned only twice, or in 1.1% of its articles on the subject. Never were full, accurate numbers given (See Appendix A – Tally Sheet B, and Appendix B).⁵

Figure 6



⁵ The Israeli government is the number one recipient of U.S. financial assistance, receiving over \$10 million per day. The Palestinian government receives no money from the U.S. government, although selected NGO's receive a total of less than \$200 per day.

Conclusion

We are concerned by the results of this examination. We believe that all Americans are entitled to full and accurate reporting on all issues, including Israel/Palestine.

Our studies have found a significant and consistent degree of distortion of this conflict in the *San Jose Mercury News*. We found there to be a disparity in the likelihood of a death receiving coverage based on the ethnicity of the person killed: the killing of an Israeli was three times more likely to receive prominent coverage in the *San Jose Mercury News* than the killing of a Palestinian. Front-page headline coverage showed Israeli deaths featured at a rate nearly 20 times that of Palestinian ones.

Such a pattern was also found in our initial study of the Mercury News, covering the previous six months, April 1 through September 30, 2002. That study found that front-page *Mercury News* headlines covered Israeli deaths at a rate almost 15 times greater than the rate at which Palestinian deaths were covered.

Overall, our studies of the *Mercury News* indicate a highly disturbing pattern of inverting the comparative death rates of Israelis and Palestinians. While Palestinians have consistently been killed at a rate of three to four times greater than Israelis, *Mercury News* front-page headlines have portrayed the conflict in such a way as to reverse the roles of the two groups by presenting six times as many Israeli deaths as Palestinian ones.

Finally, it was found that the *San Jose Mercury News* failed to inform Americans accurately and adequately about the specific connection Americans have to the conflict – U.S. aid to Israel and the Palestinians. Given that such aid is extraordinarily large, viewed within the context of foreign aid expenditures, and that it is central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we find this omission over a six-month period particularly troubling.

We expect that the *San Jose Mercury News* is as concerned as we are with providing its readers full and accurate coverage. Now that we have alerted the paper once again to consistent shortcomings in its news coverage of Israel and Palestine, we hope that it will begin whatever steps necessary to bring its coverage of this critical issue up to acceptable journalistic standards.

We hope that future reports show significant improvement. We will be pleased to report this to the public.