

Censoring Israeli Violence: Western Media Outlets Capitulate

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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The cathedral of censorship is a vast, airy one. In its embrace, texts are abridged, images removed, ideas scrubbed. Historical inconveniences are filed and rendered inaccessible. The only sermons tolerated will be those satisfying and serving the dictates of power.

The power Israel disproportionately wields here, notably across a number of Western democratic states, is staggering. It is manifested in moves to not publish material critical of the country's assault on Gaza, and, in some cases, directly target journalists who dare violate such injunctions.

Censorship is a manifold beast. The conventional approach is that of the blanking redaction: the "nothing to see here" school of regulation. Another is that of imposing what is akin to a counterfeit balancing act: to mention the slaughter of thousands of Palestinian children must be, for instance, softened by mention of a dozen Israeli children who were killed, mutilated or kidnapped by barbaric Hamas fighters. Each message, dispatch and broadcast must be accordingly laden with such qualifications.

In some cases, certain matters are simply not mentioned, indexed for being too unsavoury, too challenging, too inconvenient. To also run them would risk careers and put reputations at risk. Moral cowardice is guaranteed to do the rest.

Examples abound in the field. In October, the German media behemoth, Axel Springer, took a dim view of 20-year-old news apprentice Kasem Raad for taking issue with the outlet's crawlingly pro-Israeli line. He had asked questions of the management line regarding Israel's military operations while also posting a video disputing parts of the Israeli narrative regarding the Hamas attacks on October 7.

"It is one of my rights to ask questions. I wanted to stay at Axel Springer," [claimed](#)

Raad, who was fired for his alleged impertinence. “Unfortunately, I was taken in for questioning by senior management, who told me, ‘We are Germans and we need to do this’.”

In November, almost a dozen staffers at the *Los Angeles Times* signed an [open letter](#) condemning the Israeli operations in Gaza, arguing that such efforts alongside the media blockade “threatens news gathering in unprecedented fashion.” In addition to noting the runaway death toll of Palestinians, the letter was also cognisant of the growing number of slain journalists.

“As reporters, editors, photographers, producers, and other workers in newsrooms around the world, we are appalled at the slaughter of our colleagues and their families by the Israeli military and government.”

The letter also goes on to note the “dehumanizing rhetoric” being used by “Western newsrooms” that have “served to justify ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Double-standards, inaccuracies and fallacies abound in American publications and these have been well-documented.”

On November 18, *Semafor* [reported](#) that “staffers who signed the letter have been told by the paper’s management that they will not be allowed to cover the conflict in any way for at least three months.” That’s certainly one way of enforcing balance.

A favourite of news management in such cases is also the non-renewal of contracts. Veteran cartoonist Steve Bell received such treatment from *The Guardian* in October, ending a four-decade association. It involved a submitted cartoon, featuring Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu performing surgery on his own stomach with two scalpels while wearing boxing gloves, revealing a flesh incision in the shape of the Gaza Strip. Internal complaints followed. The [scolding line](#) from management: “Jewish bloke; pound of flesh; anti-Semitic trope.” As Bell [reflected](#),

“It is getting pretty nigh impossible to draw this subject for the Guardian now without being accused of deploying ‘antisemitic tropes’.”

Had the incurious dunderheads at the paper bothered to do their research, they would have realised that Bell was not even referencing the famous Shakespearian remark by Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. It was [inspired](#) by the satirical work of cartoonist David Levine, a frequent *New York Review of Books* contributor who thought it appropriate to, in 1966, mock US President Lyndon B. Johnson’s posing for cameras to sport a scar left by gallbladder surgery. Levine’s little touch-up gave the scar the shape of Vietnam, a country that would come to define his presidency.

The Spectator’s editor, Fraser Nelson, appropriately [remarked](#) that this whole chapter potentially imperilled the glorious savagery of British satire itself, menaced by such forces as the social media juggernaut and doltish editors. To have depicted Netanyahu as an echo of LBJ seemed a “fair analogy: Netanyahu will be defined by what happens next in Gaza just as LBJ was by Vietnam.”

Even in the more rarified climes of academic discussion, the devil of censorship was doing its work behind the thin veneer of bogus integrity. In a November 18 meeting of the *Harvard Law Review*, editors (they number 104) voted by a majority to block the publication of a

piece commissioned from human Palestinian human rights attorney and doctoral candidate, Rabea Eghbariah. The [article](#) asserted that the unfolding calamity in Gaza would satisfy the demanding threshold of genocide and that the Nakba, which involved the expulsion of Palestinians from their territories in 1948, deserved to be recognised as a crime.

Despite reviewing and checking the article for its factual content, the online chairs, Sabrina A. Ochoa and Tascha Shahriari-Parsa, were [taken to task](#) for, among other things, sidestepping standard editorial processes at the Law Review. This stiff and snotty reasoning suggests something else at play. It certainly did not impress some 125 law professors who signed an open letter raising matters of “censorship” and over 25 editors who, in a November 22 statement, [found the decision](#) threatening to “academic freedom and perpetuates the suppression of Palestinian voices.”

In *The Harvard Crimson*, the more revealing concerns of some editors who favoured preventing publication were noted. To publish the item would have put them at risk of a “public backlash or doxing” and that “these consequences would likely disproportionately fall on people of color at the Law Review.” Like censorship, a lack of courage is also manifold.

Within Israel itself, publications such as *Haaretz* are squarely within the government’s sights. Communications minister, Shlomo Karhi, [drew up a proposal](#) last month suggesting that official government notices would no longer be published in the paper. The proposal had not been vetted by the ministry’s legal advisor and would result in the halting of any payments to the paper from Israeli entities within his remit, including the cancellation of state employee subscriptions to the publication.

The reason was outlined in Karhi’s [letter](#) to Cabinet Secretary Yossi Fuchs:

“Since the beginning of the war, I have received many complaints that Haaretz has taken an offensive line which undermines the war’s goals and disparages the military effort and its social fortitude. It is possible that some of the paper’s publications even cross the criminal standard set in those far-flung sections of the penal code reserved for wartime only.”

The Israeli journalists’ union was unimpressed, [pointing out](#) that Karhi had spent much of his time in office trying to close the public broadcasting corporation. “His new proposal to end all government business with Haaretz is a populist proposal devoid of any feasibility or logic, and its entire purpose is to garner likes among his political base at the expense of dedicated journalists who are working night and day right now to cover the war.” Despite possessing some momentum at this point, we can only hope that Karhi, and his ilk, will eventually stall before the blood-drenched realities of this conflict. Some hard-headed, brave news coverage would also be welcome.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and

Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Kampmark](#)

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