

On Israel/Palestine, New York Time's Public Editor Seems Reluctant to Heed Own Advice

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Did the New York Times publish a photograph of Palestinian children killed by Israeli bombs because it was “trying to arouse pity for the Palestinians”? (photo: Tyler Hicks/NYT)

One of New York Times public editor Margaret Sullivan's recommendations ([11/22/14](#)) to her paper for improving its coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is “Stop straining for symmetry.” It's advice she seems reluctant to take herself.

“The Times sometimes looks like its running scared,” Sullivan notes, and she certainly gives the impression that writing about Mideast media bias intimidates her:

This is the column I never wanted to write.... I have searched for a way to write something useful and productive amid all this emotion and criticism, and have-until now-put it off.

Is what she finally came up with useful and productive? I suppose if you're interested in the range of complaints a New York Times ombud gets, it's helpful to hear from three pro-Israel readers who thinks Times reporting is missing context, followed by a critic of Israel who also feels Times reporting is missing context.

One gets a sense of the plight of the reader representative when you learn that a story that was criticized because the headline was changed to remove the fact that four Palestinian children had been killed was also criticized as “another instance of the Times trying to arouse pity for the Palestinians.”

But surely the job of a public editor is not to convey how tough it is to be a public editor, but to evaluate criticisms made about the paper. There's remarkably little of that in this particular column; she does say that's it's a “deficiency” that the Times' Jerusalem bureau doesn't employ a native Arab speaker-though she pairs this with the observation that the Times decades ago had a rule against sending Jewish reporters to cover Israel.

The one example she offers of how the Times “sometimes fall[s] short” is one that FAIR brought to public attention (though she doesn't mention our role-FAIR Blog, [11/18/14](#)):

A [headline](#) last week about a Palestinian boy who was shot called him only a “Palestinian”; that's not untrue, but it failed to get across an important element of the story: that the victim, who was badly wounded, is 10 years old.

3,834targets in Gaza
struck by Israel**2,927**rockets launched at
Israel from Gaza**1,881**

Palestinian deaths

67

Israeli deaths

How the New York Times conveyed the carnage in Gaza.

But take an issue that was an ongoing problem during the last major round of Gaza violence: the way the New York Times displayed the death toll. The Times accurately noted that far more Palestinians were being killed than Palestinians, but above these figures, the Times gave a number for “targets in Gaza struck by Israel” and “rockets launched at Israel from Gaza.” Those numbers, unlike the numbers of deaths, were in the same ballpark, giving credence to the idea that Israel’s assault on Gaza was a proportionate response to Palestinian violence that just happened not to be very effective.

Was this, as a post on the website Mondoweiss ([8/2/14](#)) quoted by Sullivan asserts, “suggestive of a desperate effort by the New York Times to provide a counter to the...stunning disparity between the number of Palestinian and Israeli deaths”? Rather than providing her own opinion of that charge’s validity, Sullivan turns to Times foreign editor Joseph Kahn, who gives not so much a defense of the practice, but a rationalization:

Mr. Kahn said it’s true that Times editors have become sensitized to complaints that they show the suffering of Palestinians only, and sometimes make an effort to balance it.

“It’s partly a result of decades of very intensive scrutiny from both sides,” he said.... But he sees no harm in it: “When we default to symmetry, we don’t really do the objective reader a disservice.”



Margaret Sullivan

This is what you call [“working the refs”](#): The Times had gotten so much criticism that “they show the suffering of Palestinians only” that it was afraid to accurately report that Palestinians were, in fact, enduring far more suffering. So they added the false “symmetry” of a rocket count—false not only because Israeli weapons were far more lethal, but also because when Israel “struck” a “target” in Gaza, it often did so with far more than a single weapon. One could have as accurately conveyed the “symmetry” of a massacre of a Native American tribe by comparing the number of arrows fired with number of US Army cannon.

I *think* that Sullivan agrees with me that the Times' "default to symmetry" in this case does "do the objective reader a disservice." I assume that's why she says that "sound journalism isn't a matter of hewing to the middle line," and why she says that "straining for symmetry...doesn't reflect the core value of news judgment above all."

But I have to put disconnected lines from her column together to reach the tentative conclusion that she doesn't think it's a good idea to play down the disparate human toll by prefacing it with an apples-to-oranges comparison of targets and munitions. But I'm not sure that she actually feels that way, because on this subject the [normally forthright](#) public editor is elliptical and opaque. Because "this is the column I never wanted to write."

It's not very effective to advocate that journalists reporting on a controversial subject "play it as fairly and straightforwardly as possible" if you're afraid to say what fair and straightforward coverage would look like.

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