

Behind Every Number... A Story: Humanizing Media Coverage During Wars and Conflicts

By Bakr Abdul Haq

Media coverage of hostilities and wars is a complex task that combines the journalist's obligation to maintain credibility and professionalism with the demands of humanitarianism. Journalists are responsible for more than just transmitting battle events and human losses; they must also explain the impact of war on individuals and communities.

This was the case in the clashes in Gaza and Lebanon, which erupted following the "Operation al-Aqsa Flood" on October 7, 2023, and lasted more than a year, in addition to the ongoing military escalation in the West Bank, both before and during the conflict.

The media closely covered these events, each according to its own perspective. Journalists from various media organizations worked diligently to report the details of the war—not only from a military standpoint, but also by striving to highlight its human dimension.

War and conflict coverage is reduced to cold numbers concerning casualties and material losses, removing the human dimension and limiting the emotional and moral impact. This emphasizes the significance of humanizing journalistic coverage of conflicts and battles, which necessitates a distinct perspective that recognizes victims and survivors as more than just numbers.

In this method, journalists concentrate on human stories and both individual and collective tragedies, while adhering to professional norms and ethical responsibilities and avoiding propaganda or bias against any party participating in the conflict.

In this report, we highlight the importance of humanizing journalistic coverage during wars and conflicts, as well as the difficulties journalists experience when attempting to bring out the human dimension in their reporting. The most significant challenges include balancing neutrality and empathy, dealing with sensitive images and videos, and dealing with the pressures of fieldwork in hazardous conditions.

The report also includes insights from field journalists who have witnessed this personally, as well as a practical example of humanizing journalistic reportage through the story of martyr Adam Faraj. This is a real-life example of the function of humanitarian journalism in documenting crises in a way that draws the audience closer to the event, rather than leaving them as simple observers.

Dr. Hanadi Dwikat, Dean of the Faculty of Modern Media at Arab American University, defines humanization of journalistic coverage as an approach that aims to restore victims' dignity by portraying them as individuals with experiences and stories rather than reducing them to numbers and statistics. This approach emphasizes the human side of events by stressing the emotions and suffering involved with wars and conflicts, as well as allowing victims the opportunity to tell their stories, dreams, and hopes, not only emphasizing their suffering.

Humanization is important because it allows journalists to create more relatable and impactful content, increasing the audience's emotional and sympathetic connection to the topic. This approach helps express the voices of victims to the world in a way that goes beyond standard event reporting, providing true human sorrow that leaves a significant impression on public consciousness.

Aspects of Humanizing Journalistic Coverage

Human-centered storytelling is essential while reporting on conflicts. Its objective is to elevate victims from numbers to human persons with past, present, and futures altered by war. This narrative method focuses on individual tales rather than dry news coverage, emphasizing the daily lives of those who have lost loved ones and how their lives have been changed by conflict. This, in turn, strengthens the audience's connection to the issue.

Regarding the ethical dimension and journalistic responsibilities, journalists Jivara al-Budeiri and Khaled Bdeir underline that journalists must approach victims with care and avoid pressuring them to make statements during times of shock and extreme emotion. Al-Budeiri argues that while some journalists may search out impactful statements, this can equate to exploiting the victim's suffering rather than respecting it.

She believes that Arab media should pay more attention to emphasizing martyrs' life before their deaths, rather than simply repeating how they were killed, because these details have a more emotional impact on the public.

Khaled Bdeir believes that journalists must carefully choose their words and questions, as even tiny phrasing errors might exacerbate the victim's pain. He highlights the necessity of preserving privacy when filming or distributing testimonies, stressing that the goal is not to exploit pain for sensationalist reporting, but rather to depict the victims' experiences in a way that honors their dignity and accurately reflects their reality.

The visual aspect is particularly important in humanizing journalistic coverage, since photos and footages must be carefully chosen to be moving without disrespecting the dignity of the victims. Events should be documented responsibly, with human rights in mind, and graphic photos should

not be published unless absolutely necessary to represent the truth, so that they do not become a tool for sensationalism.

Victims' identities must also be protected by blurring faces or obtaining prior consent before publishing any images, especially when exposure could compromise their psychological well-being or personal safety.

Journalists must also consider the psychological impact of media content, particularly when covering terrible events that are watched by audiences such as children and affected communities. As a result, it is critical to give balanced information that not only depicts suffering but also emphasizes relief and recovery attempts, ensuring that the impact is not confined to sorrow but also includes aspects like hope and resilience.

Humanizing journalism coverage includes highlighting how conflict affects underprivileged populations such as children, women, the elderly, and minorities. It also addresses crucial themes such as displacement, loss of education, and the impact of conflicts on the social fabric. Furthermore, this method helps to dismantle military propaganda by giving coverage that focuses on the human dimension of conflict, rather than reducing it primarily to political or strategic analysis.

Ethical and Professional Standards in Humanizing Journalistic Coverage

Humanizing conflict coverage requires a balanced approach that ensures an accurate presentation of the truth without bias or emotional manipulation. To accomplish this, it is critical to follow a set of ethical and professional standards that enhance the credibility and impact of coverage. These include a comprehensive narrative, which ensures that humanitarian coverage is not restricted to direct victims but also includes all groups affected by the crisis, such as displaced people and journalists working in the field who are constantly threatened.

Fact-checking and avoiding misinformation are core elements of responsible journalism. Journalists must ensure that the narratives they report are accurate, particularly when covering war crimes and human rights violations. Reporting information from warring parties without verification can help disseminate military propaganda rather than offering a balanced, evidence-based view. Rigorous fact-checking not only supports journalistic credibility, but also shields public discourse from manipulation and guarantees that conflict coverage is grounded in truth and objectivity.

Journalistic coverage of conflicts necessitates an intricate balance between neutrality and humanity: a journalist must be objective without losing sight of humanity, and humane without compromising professional accuracy. Jivara Al-Budeiri notes that objectivity does not imply

blind neutrality, particularly when violations are identified. It is ridiculous to equate victim and perpetrator in the name of neutrality; instead, the journalist must be clear and competent in reporting the facts.

On this issue, Khaled Bdeir believes that humanitarian journalism entails more than just reporting on tragedies; it also requires a strong ethical sensibility when scheduling interviews with victims. Journalists should avoid conducting interviews immediately after an incident, when victims are still in shock and unable to articulate themselves clearly or quietly. Journalists must also be conscious of the impact their words and queries may have, ensuring that they do not exacerbate victims' pain or abuse their emotional state.

The Role of Images and Multimedia in Enhancing the Humanization of Conflicts in Journalistic Reports

Images and multimedia play an important role in humanizing wars and turning suffering into tangible narratives. A single image can capture an entire catastrophe, adding a human dimension that words alone may not communicate emotionally. In humanitarian journalism, an image is more than just a visual record; it is a way of transmitting emotions and personalizing events, allowing audiences to perceive the conflict from a closer and relatable perspective.

Al-Budeiri believes that images and videos are more effective than words for communicating the truth. A single image, she claims, can be worth a thousand words, whereas video adds depth to the human experience. However, she notes that she avoids focusing on shocking scenes or images of blood, since she believes that human-centered images are the most powerful.

“A photograph of a child smiling before being killed, or a family gathered around a dinner table before their home is destroyed, can be more powerful than any scene of corpses or victims,” she continues. “When I see an old photo of a victim smiling, I always think of his life before he was killed—his daily moments, the minute nuances that made him a person, not simply a number in a news report. This demonstrates the actual power of images in humanitarian journalism.”

According to Bdeir, an image should be more than simply a momentary depiction; it should be comfortable, natural, and honest, reflecting reality as it is, without exaggeration or modification. He goes on to say that the way images are taken, arranged, and sequenced all have an impact on how the audience perceives and interacts with the human story.

He emphasizes the importance of images, noting that “an image may speak for itself, even in silence. When accompanied by sound, it takes on a new level, increasing its depth and intensity. Every image has visual evidence that supports the human story, enhancing the emotional

impact.” Field coverage may be forgotten over time, but images persist in memory and continue to communicate the story even years later.

Dr. Hanadi Dwikat points out that the media could enhance humanitarian understanding of conflicts by providing responsible and in-depth coverage, with journalists being objective and standing on the side of truth and humanity. Therefore, media coverage should move beyond superficial portrayals of conflicts by providing thorough analyses and discussing possible solutions, with the participation of experts and specialists, to ensure a more complete and accurate image.

Dwikat emphasizes the importance of the media fulfilling its informative duty by informing the audience and teaching them how to distinguish between authentic and fake news. This helps to improve media literacy and gain a better understanding of events, but it must be done in a balanced manner that avoids falling into bias or propaganda.

While humanizing journalistic coverage during conflicts and wars is important, journalists face complex challenges in doing so—challenges that intersect across field-related, ethical, and professional dimensions.

On the one hand, al-Budeiri acknowledges that the nature of the field requires prioritizing crew and broadcast equipment safety before a journalist can begin seeking for human stories amid the chaos. She adds that dealing with victims' families presents another challenge because it is difficult to elicit genuine emotions from those who have suffered a loss that cannot be expressed in words, especially when they are asked to express themselves in ready-made phrases that diminish the depth of their grief. The crowded environment filled with mourners adds to the difficulty of finding quiet moments that highlight simple details but nonetheless hold memories of life before the tragedy.

On the other hand, Bdeir emphasizes that protecting victims' privacy is a critical component of humanizing reportage. A competent journalist does not simply document events in the traditional sense, but also seeks to capture the invisible emotions and hidden truths that cameras cannot express.

Given the rapid rate of news dissemination via social media, journalists must delve deeply into the story in order to find a delicate balance between professional accuracy and the human factor.

Professional Challenges in Humanizing Conflict Coverage

From an academic perspective, Dr. Hanadi Dwikat points out that the challenges are not limited to the field alone, but also extend to ethical and professional considerations. The most

challenging task for journalists is to strike a balance between accurately conveying hardship while preserving impartiality and avoiding overwhelming emotion. This necessitates protecting victims' privacy and gaining the proper authorization before publicizing any sensitive information, particularly if it involves children.

In addition to these professional and field challenges, journalists confront strict security restrictions that limit their ability to report on conflicts. Journalists are frequently prohibited from accessing combat zones on the pretense of "security necessities," which hampers their ability to report straight from the field.

The targeting of journalists, whether through arrest or direct violence, has been an increasingly regular practice against those who expose war crimes and human rights violations. Furthermore, the difficulties of reaching victims and survivors amid shelling and security concerns makes it difficult to document live testimonies, reducing the credibility and quality of coverage.

In addition to field risks, journalists must deal with a continual information conflict that includes media deception and psychological warfare. Conflicting parties frequently attempt to utilize the media as a propaganda tool to promote biased narratives, leaving journalists subject to deception or information manipulation. The spread of false news and fabricated testimonies complicates verification of stories amid media chaos, especially with the dominance of social media, which intensifies the circulation of untrustworthy information.

At the professional level, economic and political pressures are among the most significant barriers to journalists' capacity to deliver comprehensive humanitarian coverage. In some circumstances, media outlets are subject to political directions that dictate the tone of their coverage, preventing journalists from reporting the truth objectively.

The quest of "sensational headlines" to increase engagement and viewership has come at the expense of humanitarian principles, with a preference for sensationalism over providing a balanced coverage. Furthermore, reduced investigative journalism funds limit journalists' ability to write in-depth reports, lowering the quality of media content and forcing reliance on rapid coverage that lacks the depth and analysis required to grasp the humanitarian aspects of conflicts.

Dealing with professional pressures and criticism in humanitarian coverage of conflicts

Humanitarian coverage of wars and conflicts imposes complex professional and editorial demands on journalists, limiting their capacity to portray the human dimension of a story. According to al-Budeiri, the rapid pace of events may drive journalists to deliver "rigid" coverage that lacks emotional depth, because developing a human-interest story requires

adequate time for preparation—an excellence that is not always possible in the midst of continuing news cycles.

At the editorial level, there is frequently a gap between the field correspondent's perspective, which is based on firsthand experience, and the newsroom's treatment of the material. This can result in varying coverage angles. However, al-Budeiri maintains that the correspondent, as the prime witness to the event, is best positioned to portray the human narrative in its true form. This demands the correspondent to defend their editorial vision and seek to strike a balance between objective reporting and showcasing the story's human dimensions in an honest and professional manner.

In addition to professional demands, journalists suffer frequent criticism in the age of social media, which Bdeir sees as a natural aspect of journalism. However, he feels that dealing with criticism requires awareness and careful evaluation of its source. Criticism based on objective grounds can help improve coverage and eliminate accidental errors, but other criticism that lacks true comprehension of the context or incident is frequently driven by predetermined attitudes or ignorance, rendering it unworthy of attention or response.

Sometimes criticism refers to cultural or religious sensitivities that the journalist is unaware of during coverage, demanding a certain level of knowledge of these factors when presenting the topic. However, Bdeir emphasizes that, while a journalist should be open to criticism, they must not allow it to compromise their accuracy or independence. The key job remains to tell the truth in a balanced and fair manner, respecting professional standards and not surrendering to emotional or political influences.

Specialized Training as a Tool to Enhance Humanitarian Coverage

In this context, Dr. Hanadi Dwikat emphasizes the importance of media organizations offering specialized training programs for journalists—focusing on the ethics of humanitarian reporting and raising awareness of victims' rights—to ensure that their suffering is not exploited for journalistic scoops or irresponsible emotional sensationalism.

She also highlights the importance of training journalists in how to handle delicate subject and manage graphic visuals, as well as the use of balanced language to retain objectivity and prevent emotional or propagandistic bias.

She underlines that journalists must acquire human-centered storytelling abilities in order to present human experiences in an honest and balanced manner, avoiding exaggeration. Furthermore, they must be taught fact-checking procedures that allow them to discriminate between actual and false news, particularly given the spread of misinformation during conflicts.

She also considers that media organizations provide training on journalistic safety and field risk assessment to protect journalists while covering conflicts. Journalists should also learn how to use digital tools and artificial intelligence in data analysis and media content production, assuring the utilization of the latest technologies to give accurate and comprehensive coverage.

In addition, she highlights the significance of training for slow and in-depth coverage, which relies on thorough evaluation rather than chasing breaking news that may be inaccurate. This method ensures the production of high-quality, credible reporting and reinforces the media's role in covering conflicts in a compassionate and responsible manner.

Humanization in the Digital Era

Digital media has provided an unprecedented space for sharing human stories, free from traditional censorship constraints, allowing victims themselves to narrate their suffering directly through photos and videos.

Social media has also stimulated cross-border public engagement; stories about conflicts are no longer confined to official coverage, as individuals can now share their own experiences, generating media momentum capable of influencing public opinion and driving advocacy campaigns that impact political decisions.

Furthermore, modern technologies play an important role in advancing humanitarian journalism. Artificial intelligence allows for analysis and verification of photos and videos, preventing forgery and the spread of misinformation. Interactive reports allow audiences to engage with human stories through tools such as interactive maps, recorded interviews, and documentary content, deepening understanding of conflicts and their effects.

The use of drones has also become an important tool in media coverage, providing aerial footage that documents destruction and reveals the impact of wars on urban areas, giving reports a stronger and more realistic visual dimension.

However, despite these advantages, Dr. Hanadi Dwikat warns of the risks of information manipulation, as inaccurate or biased news can be easily disseminated. This necessitates intensifying efforts to verify sources and content, ensuring that digital coverage follows professional and ethical standards and does not become a tool for misinformation rather than a method to uncover the truth.

Human experiences: The journalist at the heart of tragedy

Jivara al-Budeiri: Hadiya Murad... A "Seedling" That Sums Up the Story of Life and Death

Throughout my years of field reporting, I have witnessed many painful stories, but there is one story that remains etched in my memory. It happened during a military operation in the north of the West Bank, in al-Far'a refugee camp, last July. As usual, I asked about the victims—their ages, their names—and I was shocked to learn that among the victims were two brothers: one was thirteen years old, the other fifteen.

They were children in every sense of the word. They posed no threat, carried no weapons, and were not part of any battle. They were simply standing on the roof of their home, observing the scene, when an Israeli missile struck them, ending their lives in an instant.

I did not want to go to the place where they were killed. I did not want to see the blood and the remains; such scenes, despite their brutality, have become all too familiar in our daily coverage. But what one can never get used to is the pain of mothers and the torment of families. So I decided to go directly to the boys' mother. The mourners informed me that the mother refused to speak, which I respected, but I only wanted to see her. The instant her eyes met mine, she burst into tears. I couldn't hold back my tears, so I cried with her. After a few moments, I composed myself out of respect for the circumstance, but I felt like there were certain comments that needed to be heard.

When I asked her about her two sons, she didn't need many words to describe her pain. She simply said, "The two most beautiful flowers in my life." That sentence alone was enough to sum up everything. She didn't need emotional words or a detailed account of her suffering; those simple words carried an indescribable sorrow.

While I was sitting with her, I noticed an old cheese box on the table containing small seedlings. I asked her about them, and she replied, "These are Murad's seedlings." Murad, the thirteen-year-old boy, used to plant basil seedlings and give them to those he loved, and to the mothers of martyrs, as if he was comforting them before he himself became one of them.

I asked her for a seedling, and when I held it, I broke down in tears again. I imagined the dreams of this child—how he wasn't thinking about playing or football, but about planting basil for those who had lost their children. As I was about to leave, the mother followed me, holding a cup of water and a seedling wrapped in a napkin, saying, "This is Murad's gift for you."

It was the most beautiful and most difficult gift I have ever received in my life. The seedling stayed with me throughout the period I spend in reporting in the West Bank; I watered it every morning. When I got home, I didn't go to meet my daughters first; instead, I went straight to a plant bed and asked to have it potted.

The seedling has grown and now looks out my kitchen window. Every morning, I welcome it in Murad's name, since he represents all of Palestine's children who have lost their childhoods and dreams.

Khaled Bdeir: A Wedding Suit Left Hanging... A Dream That Never Came True

In Jenin Camp, preparations for Farouq Salami's wedding had already begun, and all the arrangements were proceeding as they should. But he did not know that his life would end before his future could even start.

Special Israeli units assassinated the young man before his dream could come true, in a moment that turned a wedding into a funeral, and joy into sorrow.

Usually, the story is told from a traditional angle: "A Palestinian youth killed by special forces in Jenin Camp," and the coverage ends there. But I knew the story did not end here; a life was stolen, a dream left incomplete.

I visited his family's home, where his father was so overcome with sadness that he couldn't even greet us. We entered the house in quiet, and my gaze was drawn to the most human scene: Farouq's wedding suit hanging in the closet, never worn and never to be worn.

I stood there for a few moments, as if time had frozen. That suit was not just a piece of fabric; it was the embodiment of a shattered dream, of a life that ended before it began.

This was not just another story of martyrdom. It was the story of a Palestinian father who dedicated his life to making his son a groom, to celebrating his wedding. But instead, he was forced to bid him farewell forever.

When people saw this story, they did not only see the scene of the killing; they felt the father's pain, and in that hanging suit, they saw a symbol of stolen dreams. I could have written a report detailing the military incursion, the clashes, the gunfire, but that suit said everything without the need for words.

Adam Farraj: When a Wedding Turns into a Funeral

In one of the cruelest ironies a person can witness, the joy of a wedding in Balata Camp turned into mourning and grief when the Israeli occupation reached out to the young man Adam Faraj, assassinating him in cold blood at the entrance to the hall that was about to host his sister's wedding celebration.

Adam's story is not just one of martyrdom; it is the continuation of a life that began as an orphan. He experienced loss from a young age, growing up surrounded by memories of his father, who was also killed at the hands of the occupation.

"Adam was born an orphan and only knew his father through photos," says his uncle, Faraj Faraj, recalling Adam's upbringing after his father, Salah al-Din Faraj, who was killed on February 19, 2002.

His father was on guard duty inside Balata Refugee Camp, east of Nablus, when Israeli special forces, disguised in clothing that blended with the surroundings, infiltrated the area, making themselves invisible to the eye. During the clashes, Salah was struck by a direct bullet to the heart and was killed as he tried to withdraw with his companions.

Adam grew up without his father, but he was not alone. "He was surrounded by his mother's love, his family, and the community, yet he always carried within him a sense of loss," his uncle explains.

Adam was full of life, despite the pain of loss that stayed with him throughout his life. He joined the Yafa Cultural Center in the camp, participated in dabke dances and various activities. Still, he was not an ordinary child; he carried within him many questions about his father, about the meaning of loss, and about the path his father had left unfinished.

As the years passed, Adam became increasingly influenced by the stories of the resistance fighters and by bidding farewell to his friends, one after another. His uncle explains: "We—his mother, his siblings, and I—tried to keep him away from this path, but his determination was stronger than any attempt to persuade him." He always used to say: "My soul belongs to God, and my father was killed by their hands. I will not rest until I avenge."

Adam became wanted by occupation forces in his final months after helping to thwart their invasions into Balata Camp and many other areas in the northern West Bank. He understood that being pursued was simply a matter of time, yet he opted to persevere till the end.

On the day of his sister's wedding, he returned to the camp to see her as a bride before she left her wedding hall. No one knew this would also be his last night. The family was filled with joy, but the occupation was lurking, watching their every move like a hunter waiting for his prey.

"The night before, I spoke with him and told him: Don't go! the situation is not safe. But he replied confidently: Uncle, don't worry, I'll be fine, and I want to attend my sister's wedding," says his uncle Faraj.

Precautions had been taken to ensure he would reach the hall safely, but it seems the occupation had tracked his movements. His uncle adds, "When we arrived at the hall, special forces had completely surrounded the area. I tried to get through, but the road was blocked. At that very moment, his mother's and aunt's car came under a hail of bullets, and the groom's mother was shot in the shoulder."

Within minutes, gunfire rang out, and Adam was declared martyred. "We weren't even allowed to see him; the occupation seized his body, leaving behind an unforgettable scene: the wedding suit still hanging, the bride whose joy turned into mourning, and the mother who bid farewell to her son just as she had to her husband before."

Today, months after his death, the family still lives in endless anticipation. Adam's body remains withheld, forbidden from burial—as if killing him was not enough, the occupation insists on keeping the pain alive in the hearts of those who loved him.

Faraj describes their pain by saying: "The hardest part is that we have not yet received his body. If only we could have buried him, we would have felt some peace. Every time we see the funeral of a martyr, it feels as if we are reliving Adam's martyrdom all over again."

Despite the pain, his sister decided to name her upcoming child Adam, so that he would remain alive in future generations, just as the memory of his father lives on before him.

"Adam was not just a family member; he was part of the spirit that unites us, and his departure left a deep mark. But we believe that martyrs never die; their memory remains eternal within us," Faraj concludes, as he gazes at Adam's photo hanging on one of the walls of Balata Camp—as if it is still pulsing with life.

