Newspaper Provides Balance In Palestinian/Israeli Reports

by H. Denis Wu, Judith Sylvester and John Maxwell Hamilton

This content analysis in the Philadelphia Inquirer found that the portrayal was balanced overall, as both parties had a roughly equal percentage of positive, neutral and negative coverage.

Reader complaints are as much a fact of life in newsrooms as are deadlines. Editors normally deal with these through well-established mechanisms such as publishing critics' letters or giving dissatisfied readers an opportunity to vent over the telephone or via email, which also provides editors an opportunity to assess the validity of a reader's concerns. With some intensely emotional issues, however, discontent can be fiery and difficult to allay. Readers' letters negative comments can erode credibility, a matter of profound concern among the nation's editors who have worried about declining public esteem for newspapers for some years now.[1]

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* faced such intense criticism in the 1990s from two mutually antagonistic sources. Active, highly vocal Jewish and Palestinian groups holding opposing views were intensely unhappy with news coverage of the Mideast. The newspaper tried various approaches. Its editor, ombudsman and assistant managing editor for readership sought to explain the newspaper's coverage in public forums, columns and email exchanges with disgruntled readers. Nothing seemed to work. Critics "were ripping me up," the newspaper's editor Robert Rosenthal said. "I had people spit at me."[2] At one point he received a death threat and had to make a presentation in a synagogue flanked by two detectives. Reporters and editors, believing that they were doing a good job in their reporting, were frustrated and bewildered. When the *Jewish Exponent*, a newspaper that circulates in the community, set up a Web site to assail the

Wu and Sylvester are assistant professors in the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. Hamilton is a professor and dean of the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University.

Inquirer,[3] the assistant manager editor for readership, Arlene Morgan, concluded that new, more drastic steps had to be taken. Her editor agreed.

The newspaper subsequently did unto itself what it daily does to public figures and institutions – submit itself to outside scrutiny. This was an unusual step. As the limited use of a news council demonstrates,[4] newspapers dislike having outsiders judge their work. They fear losing invaluable press freedom and being misjudged by people who may not understand the norms and routines of journalism. In another unusually bold step, the newspaper sought help from a source often regarded as irrelevant to their day-to-day workings, university journalism professors.[5]

Eager to ensure that the study would not fuel more criticism, the _Inquirer_ was particularly concerned that the assessment should avoid the appearance of bias. The editors accomplished this by selecting researchers from a university far from Philadelphia, Louisiana State University. None of the three professors in the research team was identified with any political cause in the Mideast. Also to preserve the integrity of the study, the _Inquirer_ adopted a hands-off policy, giving the investigators free rein to design, implement and publish the study.

From the outset, the research team understood that it would be impossible to deal effectively with such concepts as truth or bias, which, like beauty, are in the eye of the beholder. As empirical study indicates,[6] one person's factual statement can be another's lie; one person's authoritative source is someone else's propagandist. And, as everyone knows from real life, it is possible that one side can be in the right and one not. Accordingly, the research team decided to evaluate the newspaper by standards of fairness and balance, which are measurable and make up the foundation of media credibility.[7] The team defined fairness and balance as equal treatment or representation of both parties and tested for these with different coding items.[8] As part of its initial understanding with the _Inquirer_, the team presented its findings to the newspaper staff as well as to interested members of the Philadelphia community.

This article presents a case study of a newspaper's using academic research to deal with irate critics. It reports the results of the assessment of the _Inquirer's_ Mideast coverage and the newsroom and the public reaction to the study. The authors hope the article will invigorate discussion on ways newspapers can address criticism and on ways academic research can be beneficial to professionals.

Method

Prior to determining the study's orientation, the researchers reviewed Israeli and Palestinian criticism. The criticisms, like the nature of Mideast conflict, are understandably emotional. Readers with distinct perspectives, background knowledge and mind-sets have different versions of truth. As the _Inquirer_ editorial page editor astutely pointed out, these groups of readers do

not demand fair or objective coverage of the region; they want a *positive* portrayal of their side.[9] Other studies of similarly emotional criticism support the editor's view.[10] The researchers concluded that it is unfruitful and unrealistic to analyze coverage based on readers' opinions.

The researchers decided, instead, to investigate whether the paper achieved balance and fairness. In line with the views of many media scholars and practicing journalists, they defined the concepts of fairness and balance as equal treatment or representation of both parties. In practice, they used two coding items – sources and "general reading" of text and pictures – to see whether fairness and balance were reached in the *Inquirer*'s Mideast coverage. Using sources with different points of view on a controversial issue helps reporters avoid bias[11] and is a standard way for reporters to strike balance.

The rule of thumb for coding the general reading of each news story and photo toward political entities was to record the overall impression that an average reader would form. In addition, the researchers also were interested in the story frames reporters used in describing the long-term conflict. Story frame is defined as the context or background upon which a story is based. For example, the topic of a story may be a riot, and the context may be the impact of the event on the peace negotiation process. The peace process is the story frame. Research shows that newspaper readers may not be as careful as news professionals in noticing source use,[12] but they pay close attention to a significant frame in a story. A great number of empirical studies[13] justified the choice of coding frames used in news stories. Researchers contrasted coverage by individual *Inquirer* correspondents and the Associated Press, whose Mideast reports are used frequently by the *Inquirer*. The researchers were interested in finding out whether a consistent pattern of coverage of the two groups existed.

The research team conducted a pilot study prior to designing the final coding scheme to identify the topics, frames and judgments embedded in the news stories. The researchers extensively trained three graduate student coders—none of them had prior knowledge or interest in the Mideast beyond that of an average newspaper reader—until all demonstrated satisfactory coding quality. An agreement rate of 90 percent or higher in each coding item was achieved. The coders were instructed to select stories that may fall into any of the following categories: (1) Israel (excluding stories about the holocaust and other related topics when they were entirely unrelated to Mideast conflict); (2) Palestine; (3) general Mideast conflict (related to Israelis and/or Palestinians). The sample of the *Inquirer* content during the study period included 387 items of news stories, news briefs and photos/graphics published during the period of January-October of 1998.[14]

The coding scheme[15] contained the following coding items: date, story type, dateline, news provider/writer, story length, news provider, source of information used in the story, mention of each political entity, topic, story frame and general reading of the whole story. Whenever a photo/graphic was present,

coders identified the source and evaluated the headline and the photo content and its caption.

Findings

The *Inquirer* prominently displayed most Mideast news stories. Seventy-one percent appeared in the first four pages of the A section; 15 percent appeared on the front page. Most of the news stories had datelines from inside Israel (excluding disputed territories), with the greatest percentage in Jerusalem (49 percent of the news stories). *Inquirer* correspondents and the Knight-Ridder group contributed about one-third of the content, the AP contributed nearly as much and the remaining one-third originated from a variety of other wire services. Although several *Inquirer*/Knight-Ridder reporters had bylines, one reporter – Barbara Demick – wrote the majority of bylined stories (32 out of 69).

General reading of articles

After reading an entire article, coders categorized it as positive, neutral, negative or mixed for each political entity involved in the story. As noted above, this coding captures the overall impression of the event that *an average, impartial reader* would form. For example, a story about a leader calling for peace talks generally would be coded positively for the political entity to which that leader belonged. Similarly, setbacks to peace generally were coded negatively.

Except for the stories about the United States and the United Nations, the coders determined that more than one-third of the stories negatively portrayed the political entities included (see Table 1). Significantly, nearly the same percentage of stories on Israel and the Palestinians were considered negative. Nearly two-thirds of the U.S. stories and 82 percent of the U.N. stories were considered neutral. The briefs tended to be neutral more frequently than regular news stories. However, the briefs were coded more negatively toward Palestinians and other Mideast political entities than were the news stories.

Table 1
General Reading by Political Entity

	Positive	*Neutral*	*Negative*	*Mixed*
Israel	42 (17%)	97 (39%)	97 (39%)	12 (5%)
Palestinians	30 (14%)	97 (44%)	84 (39%)	8 (4%)
Other Mideast entity	14 (21%)	28 (41%)	24 (35%)	2 (3%)
U.S.	41 (34%)	71 (59%)	8 (7%)	
U.N.	2 (18%)	9 (82%)		

N=280

Sources used

Table 2 illustrates heavy use of Israeli sources in the *Inquirer* stories. The total number of Israeli sources (677) was roughly twice as great as the total number of Palestinian sources (360). In addition, only 20

Table 2
Analysis of Sources in the 280 Articles

Political entity	Articles in which a source from this entity was not present	Total times a source from this entity was used	Average number of sources per article
Israelis	53 (20%)	677	2.5
Palestinians	111 (41%)	360	1.3
Americans	170 (63%)	236	.87
Other Mideast political entities	242 (90%)	51	.18
U.N. officials	261 (96%)	18	.06
Other nationalities	242 (90%)	40	.15

percent of the stories did not use any Israeli sources, while twice as many lacked Palestinian sources.

Topics

The coders identified twenty-three topics (either primary or secondary). Twenty-four percent of the stories focused on peace initiatives as the primary topic. Arab or Palestinian terrorism (politically motivated violence by Palestinian factions against Israelis) was the second most frequent topic (11 percent). The next most frequent topics (about 7 percent each) were Israeli politics, Arab/Palestinian riots, Israeli West Bank settlements and U.S. reaction. News stories were most likely to focus on peace (14 percent), while the briefs were more likely to focus on Arab/Palestinian terrorism (22 percent) and Israeli military action (16 percent). Among the stories containing a second topic, peace was the most frequent theme (about 11 percent of all stories). The next most frequent secondary topics were U.S. reactions and Israeli West Bank settlements.

Frames

The pilot study identified the following frames:
- The peace process–initiatives or setbacks in trying to achieve peace in the Mideast.
- Israel's security–threats to Israel's security from terrorism, borders or political entanglements.
- Palestinian terrorism.
- Palestinian independence.

• Israeli religious fundamentalism –fundamental political or religious groups that might be decisive in policymaking or domestic politics. More than one frame might be included in a single story; hence, the percentages presented in Table 3 do not equal 100 percent. One instantly notices in Table 3 that the peace process is the most used frame, followed by Israel's security and Palestinian terrorism.

Table 3
Frames Appearing in the 280 Articles

Frame	n	%*
Peace Process	131	48%
Israel's Security	88	32%
Palestinian Terrorism	81	30%
Palestinian Independence	44	16%
Israeli Fundamentalism	27	10%

*Will not equal 100%

Photographs and graphics
Overall, when the headline, photo and caption were considered together (see Table 4), the Palestinians' image was slightly more negative than that of the Israeli counterpart while Israel received more neutral photos. The photo headlines for other political entities (including the United States and United Nations) were mostly positive or neutral.

Table 4
Headline, Photo and Caption by Country

Headline	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Israeli	11 (20%)	33 (61%)	10 (20%)	54 (100%)
Palestinian	8 (19%)	23 (54%)	12 (28%)	43 (100%)
Photo & Caption	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Israel	12 (20%)	36 (60%)	12 (20%)	60 (100%)
Palestinians	13 (24%)	21 (39%)	20 (37%)	54 (100%)

Comparison of Coverage
The Associated Press accounted for 30 percent of the 3,762 paragraphs included in this study.[16] About 44 percent of both the AP and *Inquirer*/Knight-Ridder staff stories had Jerusalem datelines. Both entities relied more on Israeli than Palestinian sources, although this tendency was more pronounced with *Inquirer*/Knight-Ridder staff. A higher percentage of staff stories originated in the United States than was the case with AP stories (26 percent compared to 4 percent).

The peace process was the dominant frame for the Associated Press (45 percent) and staff reports (63 percent). Similarly, the highest concentration of topics for both was the peace process (for the AP, 24 percent as the primary topic and 12 percent as the secondary topic; for the *Inquirer*/Knight-Ridder staff reports, 30 percent as the primary topic, and 16 percent as the secondary topic). Next in the AP's topic frequency after peace process was Israeli politics and

Israeli West Bank settlements (about 11 percent). The *Inquirer*/Knight Ridder favored U.S. reactions and Arab/Palestinian riots (about 10 percent each).

In the general reading, *Inquirer*/Knight-Ridder stories presented Israel more positively coverage and less negatively than Palestinians, but the majority for all political entities was neutral. AP stories were slightly more negative toward Israel and a little more neutral toward Palestinians than was the *Inquirer* coverage overall. The result was that the two entities cancelled each other out, making overall coverage equally positive and negative for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Discussion

The *Inquirer* provided its readers with ample information about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, continuously reporting major developments in the peace process and providing rich background on the U.S. role. Such in-depth coverage requires a major commitment by the newspaper and is commendable. The study also found that the portrayal of the two political entities was balanced overall as both parties had a roughly equal percentage of positive, neutral or negative coverage in the time period studied. Weakness of the coverage lay in heavy reliance on Israeli sources and viewpoints compared with those of the Palestinians. The peace process was the most dominant frame, followed by Israel's security and Palestinian terrorism frames. Based on these observations, the paper seemed to advocate latently for peace in the region.[17]

Conclusions

First, studies repeatedly have shown that international coverage in the U.S. press is filtered through the American political prism.[18] However, stories examined in this study presented Israeli and Palestinian perspectives more frequently than the U.S. perspective, and the study did not encounter many stories that explored explicit U.S. political interests in the Mideast. This is striking because the United States has been heavily involved in the peace-negotiation process.

Second, the finding that AP stories tended to be more negative toward Israel than did the *Inquirer*/Knight Ridder-produced stories is intriguing. AP is often assumed to have a great influence on U.S. media's international coverage. Perhaps, it is worth doing separate research to examine the entire AP wire on the subject.

The study results do not suggest that the *Inquirer* should have avoided covering negative events or the wrongdoings of any political entity. The purpose of the audit was simply to determine whether the coverage about the involved political entities achieved fairness and balance. It should be kept in

mind that in a given period one political entity or another may have acted in ways that make negative or positive "general reading" inevitable.

Impact of Audit

The content analysis was only half the job. The research team also had to present the findings to the public and the *Inquirer* newsroom. The reaction of each group was an important test of the success of the project.

The researchers sent the complete report to the paper's Assistant Managing Editor for Readership, Arlene Morgan, and subsequently traveled to Philadelphia to make presentations, beginning with sessions with top management and the staff. The editor, Robert Rosenthal, and Morgan apparently had read the study carefully and expressed no reservations about it. On the contrary, Morgan was pleased with the researchers' methodological approach, which looked particularly at such issues as balance and fairness, rather than bias. "The decision to judge 'fairness of the total coverage' during these ten months, rather than the emotional issue of bias in each and every story, was one of the smartest decisions that was made during this process," she concluded.[19]

The audit findings that the Inquirer's coverage emphasized the peace process in the Mideast gave the editors an insight that they had never had before.

The staff, nevertheless, was initially wary. When Rosenthal gave the go-ahead to commission the study, many reporters and editors had said, "no good will come from this."[20] Most staff members did not see the completed study before hearing the researchers' presentation to them. They asked basic, pointed questions about how the study was done and questioned some findings. Some of this seemed to stem from the natural defensiveness expected in any organization; some, Rosenthal believed, came from working journalists' lack of enthusiasm for academic research. Although new to his job and therefore not entirely responsible for coverage during the period covered by the audit, the foreign editor was particularly skeptical.

Detailed explanations of the study as well as the passage of time, however, muted defensiveness and criticism. "The results of the survey were taken quite well," according to Rosenthal, with very little debate about the value of the exercise afterward. Rosenthal viewed the study as part of an on-going effort to sensitize his journalists and said it was "to some extent an exercise aimed at reminding them that one word or bad headline could be offensive to a community; that we should be conscious of that and we should make an effort to cover the stories from both sides."[21]

The audit finding that the *Inquirer's* coverage emphasized the peace process in the Mideast gave the editors an insight that they had never had before. "That [emphasis], we found out, is not necessarily a good thing to Jews," Morgan said, "who are more concerned with Israel's security than they are with a peaceful settlement to the conflict. This realization was particularly useful since both the foreign editor and his deputy were new to their jobs and had never been foreign correspondents."[22] The editors also heeded the finding that Israeli datelines and sources dominated in the stories. Assignment editors and copy editors started to police copy with these concerns in mind. Rosenthal, who had talked to various editors about the problems, often pointed out cases when stories had not achieved objectives of balance and fairness in datelines and sourcing.

In making the audit public, the *Inquirer* arranged two on-site presentations by the research team and subsequently put the entire report on the paper's Web site and summarized the findings on its op-ed page. They videotaped these presentations and offered them to the public. The *Inquirer* was, as Morgan later said, "totally surprised by the low turnout at the two events we staged." Only about 20 people attended altogether. Just nine citizens asked for the videotape later, and about 30 called for copies of the report.

This seeming lack of interest was not a sign of failure, however—or so the newspaper's management felt. Nor did continued criticism of bias lead the editors to believe that the study was not worth the effort.

The study did not satisfy the most vocal critics on either side. Pro-Israeli critics challenged the study's findings that their side had been slightly better represented in the *Inquirer*. They believed just the opposite. *Jewish Exponent* reporters covering the public presentation asked provocative questions about methodology and claimed that the period of time under review was not representative. Some Palestinian advocates took an I-told-you-so attitude about the finding that fewer sources on their side were used.

But there were positive reactions as well. "The feedback that surprised me the most," Morgan said, "were the letters and e-mails of congratulations that were sent, even from those who disagreed with the audit's conclusion but praised us for the courage we showed in putting ourselves in front of the readers the way we did."[23] The mere fact that the *Inquirer* opened itself to scrutiny, it seemed to the editors, raised its credibility with the public. Moreover, the editors now could defend their reporting with an independent analysis. "Empirical evidence is important and much more solid than merely anecdotal

evidence," said Lil Swanson, who succeeded Morgan as assistant managing editor for readership. "In my role, I try not to be defensive or argue with readers, but I do like to point out facts and numbers when I have them, as in this case."[24]

Although criticism of the newspaper's Mideast coverage did not stop, it lessened. "I think the audit helped defuse what was perceived in some readership circles as a problem," said the once-skeptical foreign editor.[25]

Conclusion

This study of Mideast coverage by the *Inquirer* builds on existing literature to show the effectiveness of content analysis to assess cardinal tenets of journalism, fairness and balance.[26] It underscores the significance of academic research by showing that such work can be used to help professional journalists improve the quality of their reporting and to build confidence with their readers. Indeed, *Inquirer* management maintained that using independent academics rather than in-house researchers substantially enhanced the newspaper's credibility.[27]

This approach—incorporating academic research to self-examine and address the criticisms from the readers—suggests a path that other news organizations may follow in seeking to build their credibility and otherwise evaluate how well they are serving their readers, viewers and listeners, a mounting concern of journalism professionals. Such studies, in turn, provide researchers with projects that keep them current on newsgathering practices and problems, which make them better teachers of the next generation of journalists.

"Unfortunately, too often the academy and the newsroom are viewed as distinct sides without much relevancy to each other," concluded Morgan, who has been deeply involved in industry studies of newspaper credibility. "Imagine, if you will, the medical profession feeling this way about the research of its academics and the studies that are published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Or the legal profession ignoring its law reviews and journals. This attitude the industry has for its academy is quite puzzling and, to my mind, an opportunity for growth and understanding that we are allowing to waste away."[28]

This case study demonstrates what positive benefits can come when professionals and academics set out to solve problems together.

Notes

1. For example, see a study commissioned and published by the Associated Press Managing Editors Association: MORI Research, Inc., *Bridging the Credibility Gap* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Associated Press Managing Editors Association, 1985). Similar publications underwritten by the American Society of Newspaper Editors: Christine D. Urban, *Examining Our Credibility: Perspectives of the Public and the Press* (Reston, Va.: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1999); and Michele McLellan, *The Newspaper Credibility Handbook: Practical Ways to Build Reader Trust* (Reston, Va.: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2001).

2. Robert Rosenthal, *Inquirer* editor, phone interview by author, 3 November 2000.

3. *The Jewish Exponent,* <http://www.jewishexponent.com> (26 February 2002).

4. Only one news council, the Minnesota News Council, exists. The National News Council lasted only eleven years, 1973 to 1984.

5. A discussion of this lack of intellectual cooperation between working journalists and university professors is found in Pew Center for Civic Journalism, *Cracking the Code: Creating New Lifelines Between Journalists and Academics* (Washington: Pew Center for Civic Journalism, 2001). Also, news professionals' lack of interest in academic research was observed by Tom Dickson and Wanda Brandon, "The Gap between Educators and Professional Journalists," *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* 55 (Autumn 2000): 50-67; Tom Dickson, *Mass Media Education in Transition* (Mahwah, N.J.: LEA, 2000), 97-125; and Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News,* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 231-234.

6. Robert L. Stevenson and Mark T. Greene, "A Reconsideration of Bias in the News," *Journalism Quarterly* 47 (spring 1980): 115-21.

7. The researchers did not examine the more difficult-to-determine issue of accuracy, a concern discussed in Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), xxx.

8. Todd F. Simon, Frederick Fico, and Stephen Lacy, "Covering Conflict and Controversy: Measuring Balance, Fairness, Defamation." *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (summer 1989): 427-434; Stephen Lacy, Frederick Fico, and Todd F. Simon, "Fairness and Balance in the Prestige Press," *Journalism Quarterly* 68 (Autumn 1991): 363-370; Frederick Fico, Linlin Ku, and Stan Soffin, "Fairness, Balance of Newspaper Coverage of U.S. in Gulf War," *Newspaper Research Journal* 15 (winter 1994): 30-41.

9. Jane Eisner, former *Inquirer* editorial page editor, email interview by author, 4 January 2001.

10. This, for example, is echoed by Dane Claussen in *Standing on the Promises* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995).

11. Donna Rouner, Michael D. Slater, and Judith M. Buddenbaum, "How Perceptions of News Bias in News Sources Relate to Beliefs about Media Bias," *Newspaper Research Journal* 20 (spring 1999): 41.

12. See Rouner, Slater, Buddenbaum, "Beliefs about Media Bias."

13. For instance, Douglas M. McLeod, and Benjamin H. Detenber, "Framing Effects of Television News Coverage of Social Protest," *Journal of Communication* 49 (fall 1999): 3-23.

14. The January start date was chosen because that was the date Robert Rosenthal assumed editorship of the paper.

15. The entire coding instruction and coding sheet are available upon request.

16. It is possible that some of the briefs were supplied by AP, but not identified as such.

17. This tendency may well be one reason why some Jewish readers—who are more concerned with Israel's security than with peaceful settlement to the conflict—dislike the *Inquirer* coverage.

18. For instance, Abhinav Aima, "The Framing of Saddam Hussein: U.S. Foreign Policy and Coverage of Iraq in *Time* Magazine, 1979-1998" (paper presented at the AEJMC annual convention, New Orleans, La., August 1999).

19. Arlene Morgan, *Inquirer*'s former assistant managing editor for readership, interview by author, 15 September 2000.

20. Rosenthal, interview.

21. Paul Nussbaum, *Inquirer*'s foreign editor, interview by author, 24 November 2000.

22. These are direct quotes from Arlene Morgan's remarks to the advisory board of the Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University, 2 October 1999.

23. Ibid.

24. Lil Swanson, *Inquirer*'s assistant managing editor for readership, email interview by author, 16 November 2000.

25. Ibid.

26. For an example of academic research on balance and fairness, see Frederick Fico and Stan Soffin, "Fairness and Balance of Selected Newspaper Coverage of Controversial National, State, and

Local Issues" *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 72 (Autumn 1995): 621-633.

    27. Morgan, interview.

    28. Morgan, untitled remarks.