

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Amahl A. Bishara. *Back Stories: U.S. News Production and Palestinian Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 344 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8140-4; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-8141-1.

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## Stories behind the Stories

Those who follow news about the Israel-Palestine conflict know there is virtually no undisputed fact, unchallenged opinion, or unimpeachable source. Indeed, a hotly contested front in the conflict is its representation in the news media. Few assignments subject journalists to such close scrutiny by editors and criticism from activist readers and viewers. In this fraught arena Amahl A. Bishara contributes a remarkably enlightening ethnography of news from the Palestinian point of view.

Her book, *Back Stories: U.S. News Production and Palestinian Politics*, will be of value to journalists, media scholars and students, and news consumers. The book goes beyond the “how the sausage is made” cliché to tease apart the strands of the complex relationships among international (mostly U.S.) journalists, their Palestinian collaborators, and the Palestinian people. She shows how these relationships affect and are affected by the news international audiences see and the actions stateless Palestinians take. The book’s unique value is its vantage point: looking at U.S. journalism from the point of view of its Palestinian subjects and sources. Along the way the book looks at how U.S. news values of objectivity, disinterest, and distance of journalist from subject, and assumptions about freedom of the press are reinterpreted in the Palestinian context.

The setting for Bishara’s study is the second Intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation that began in 2000. Bishara, an anthropologist, exhibits a keen

understanding of the exigencies of reporting from the region for the international media as well as of the social, political, and functional realities of Palestinian life in the occupied West Bank. As is common for anthropologists—but not for journalists—she changed names of some of the journalists who were her sources. The book, grounded in anthropological and media theory, combines her vivid first-person, on-scene observations with critical analyses of the situations and practices she observes. Her fieldwork took place in the West Bank and Israel from 2003 to 2005 and in 2007 and 2009.

The book examines the practices of knowledge production shaped by the realities of life in the Palestinian territories because, as Bishara writes, “Palestinians are integral to the production of U.S. news in the occupied territories, even though they are only occasionally recognized as authors of U.S. news, and though they rarely shape its narratives” (p. 3). Ironically, Palestinians, frequently the objects of orientalist stereotypes in the media and, since Sept. 11, 2001, generalized American distrust of Arabs, contribute journalistic texts and images that help inform Americans and shape public policy.

In the first chapter Bishara questions use of traditional journalistic values of “balanced objectivity” which in this context means getting quotes or facts from “both sides” (pp. 39-41). The problems with this approach are 1) it ignores the diversity of Palestinian and Israeli societies; 2) alternately quoting Israelis and Palestinians misrep-

sents the reality that the two peoples rarely can talk to one another; and 3) It obscures the difference in power between the sides. Bishara also refutes the notion that American journalists, however well-intended, are neutral in the conflict, just as the United States is not neutral in its policies: “While the United States poses as an even-handed negotiator, in fact it has long deemed that its interests align with Israel’s” (p. 46). Factors further skewing coverage in Israel’s favor, she contends, are most journalists’ residency in Israel, not the occupied territories, and Israel’s much more sophisticated public relations operation.

In a chapter called “Working from Home,” the book shows how the journalistic value of “disinterest,” that is, a separation between journalists’ lives and the stories they cover, is both impossible and undesirable for Palestinians. “The boundary between work and social life is permeable for journalists and many others in Palestinian society because familial, social, professional and political networks are dense and valuable, and the politics of sovereignty reaches so far into everyday life” (p. 119). Vignettes of journalists, photographers, drivers, and others show the varied ways they negotiate the demands of U.S. journalism as well as political and familial pressures to tell the Palestinian side of the story.

These details of the work of Palestinians who work with international correspondents are one of the book’s strengths. Using the term “accumulated authorship,” Bishara deconstructs some U.S. news stories to show how Palestinians, whose work is seldom credited, recognize and pass on key quotes or observations that are reframed in the final product that appears in the United States. “Accumulated authorship ... recognizes that before editors see a text, it is often already the product of many hands and minds, that the one or two perspectives represented in a final news text necessarily flatten out much more complex stories and positions”(pp. 64-65).

Bishara describes in detail Palestinian journalists’ duties and constraints. Because of Israeli limits on freedom of movement and the danger involved, Palestinians were often the eyewitnesses to conflicts in the West Bank, phoning their descriptions to journalists in Jerusalem (p. 22). The Palestinians used their local knowledge and social skills to set up interviews with sources unobtainable by Westerners, to conduct international journalists safely around Israeli roadblocks and closures.

Using what Bishara calls “skills of proximity” (In another context it might be called street smarts) she shows how Palestinian journalists use their knowledge of lo-

cal geography and society to cover fast-changing stories. She describes photojournalists positioning themselves to take compelling photos of martyrs’ funerals, talking their way through checkpoints or out of threatened arrests. She notes the social skills required for them to approach the grief-stricken or the distraught.

Subsequent chapters discuss Palestinians as actors seeking representation in the world’s news media. Bishara notes that even the potential presence of news media influences how demonstrations against the Israeli separation barrier take place. This desire goes far beyond seeking publicity: “The only way for protestors to make their ideas heard to anyone but each other was by way of the journalists who covered the event” (p. 185).

The funeral of Palestinian Authority leader Yasir Arafat in 2004 provides the frame for Bishara’s discussion of Palestinian representation in the media. It shows both how international media influence Palestinians and how Palestinians, aware of the power of the media, seek to shape events to affect coverage. The book’s discussion of freedom of the press goes beyond the conventional concerns about government censorship to address topics pertinent to Palestinian journalists such as freedom of movement and physical harm. Speech and violence, separate concepts to Americans, are mingled in the experience of Palestinians as stateless people, as she shows. In one long section she details how the perception of Palestinian journalists as “threats” leads to Israel withdrawing their press passes. This makes it impossible for them to move outside their home areas to work. Moreover, Palestinian journalists were branded by Israeli authorities as “biased” if they had taken part in liberation activities or been jailed for political reasons. Bishara contends such activities are, for stateless Palestinians, analogous to serving in the Israeli army for Israelis. “Palestinian journalists have been presumed inadequate as journalists essentially because they have been associated with a liberation project in much the same ways that journalists from other places might have been affiliated with a state” (p. 83).

Between each of the book’s six chapters is an “interlude,” a short essay in which Palestinians tell their impressions of an American news story. The ethnocentrism of some stories becomes glaringly apparent when seen through the eyes of Palestinians. Other stories won praise for humanizing Palestinians for international audiences. Critical Palestinian readers variously fretted that stories were unrepresentative of their lives, lacked context, depicted them as too violent, relied more on Israeli

sources than Palestinian ones, or portrayed a false equivalency between the far stronger Israeli state and Palestinian people. Through these interludes readers can appreciate how the news resonates with its subjects.

In her conclusions Bishara presents valuable lessons for journalists and news consumers alike. Though she is writing about Palestinians, her words could apply to many peoples and places: Palestinian journalists' "readings of the landscape can illuminate politics and history and also ensure that foreign correspondents arrive at their destinations safely. They know the back roads, the unlikely routes that knowledge must take when a territory is littered with obstacles.... Without their work, U.S. news would include fewer glimpses into Palestinian life under occupation and fewer Palestinian voices.... Yet

Palestinians' experiences as people living under military occupation are not only a foundation for their expertise; they are also a foundation for U.S. and Israeli skepticism about their ability to know and communicate properly" (p. 251).

*Back Stories* provides a vivid look at the collaborative process that shapes news from Israel/Palestine as well as the complex interactions among Palestinian journalists, newsmakers and Israeli occupying authorities. It reveals aspects of the news-gathering process well known to foreign correspondents but largely hidden from their audiences, analyzes challenges to traditional journalistic values, and requires us to reassess traditional notions of freedom of expression.

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