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Chapter 19

A Count: Data-Driven News Audits of ‘War on Terror’ Coverage

Abstract: This chapter theorizes two different frames of understanding ‘data journalism’ and associated media practices through the long tail of the ‘War on Terror,’ from 9/11 up until the Israeli occupation and genocide in Gaza. We first propose a frame of ‘data from above’ to document the ways that mainstream media used statistics and objectivity to dehumanize and underplay civilian death and manufacture consent for the continuous US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the expansion of drone warfare. This is contrasted with contemporary practices of ‘data from below’—data-driven audits and visualizations functioning as public, data-driven discourse analysis, exposing systematic lexical biases in mainstream accounts. By juxtaposing these findings with ‘data from above,’ we show how numbers and ‘media objectivity’ naturalize state violence and militaristic discourses while marginalizing entire regions of the world. Taken together, these practices function as public forms of media literacy and resistance, catalyzing boycotts, resignations, and newsroom introspection. Reconciling bottom-up audits with elite outlets’ retrospective investigations reveals the press’s entanglement with state power even as it occasionally exposes it. We thus propose ‘data from below’ as a durable framework for auditing power in news production and cultivating alternative evidentiary publics capable of contesting hegemonic frames.

Keywords: War On Terror, data journalism, media discourses, social media practices, resistance, data from below

Introduction

In 2024, *The New York Times* won the International Reporting Pulitzer Prize for seven stories published between October and December of 2023. Some of the winning stories were about the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, and some were about Israel’s subsequent massacres in Gaza. As is the norm each year, the official @PulitzerPrizes X account posted a thread of all the Pulitzer winners. The post about *The New York Times*’ win was flooded with quote-posts. X users called the award a joke; some added screenshots of various *New York Times* headlines about the war, which had been heavily criticized for their lack of clarity; the @nywarcrimes X account, which is a project of the group Writers Against the War on Gaza posted an edited screenshot of the original post, changing the text to “The New York Times has been awarded the 2024 Pulitzer Prize in Manufacturing Consent” (Figure 1).

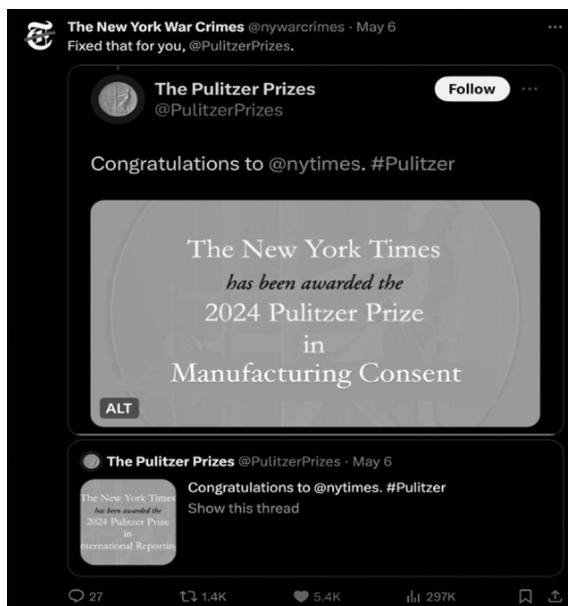


Figure 1: A screenshot of the @nywarcrimes X account responding to The New York Times winning a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting.

This causticity was not new by this time. Just days after the October 2023 attack on Israel, those following news about the violence started to see data-driven criticism about *The New York Times*' coverage of the violence in Gaza. While news organizations around the world counted dead Palestinians and Israelis, University of California, Berkeley, researcher Holly Jackson counted which words *New York Times* journalists and editors used to report these deaths. Her counts measured how many Palestinians had to die to get one mention in *The New York Times*, which synonyms for 'killed' were used for different people, and whose names were omitted from the newspaper.¹ Jackson's data findings were illustrated by reporter Mona Chalabi and posted on Instagram on October 19, 2023 (Figure 2).

Chalabi, a Pulitzer winner herself, added context from Jackson's work: "The articles rarely mention the names of Palestinians who die—instead using terms like 'mourner,' 'resident,' 'assailant' or 'militant.'"² Pairing Jackson's counts with former US president Joe Biden's early public statements casting doubt on the reported number of dead Palestinians³ evokes Mimi Onuoha's work on 'missing datasets': it is in *how* news is reported that "we find cultural and colloquial hints of what is deemed

¹ Jackson, "GitHub - Hollyjackson/Casualty_Mentions_Nyt."

² Chalabi, "Mentions of Israeli and Palestinian Deaths in the New York Times."

³ Mason, "Biden Says He Has 'No Confidence' in Palestinian Death Count."

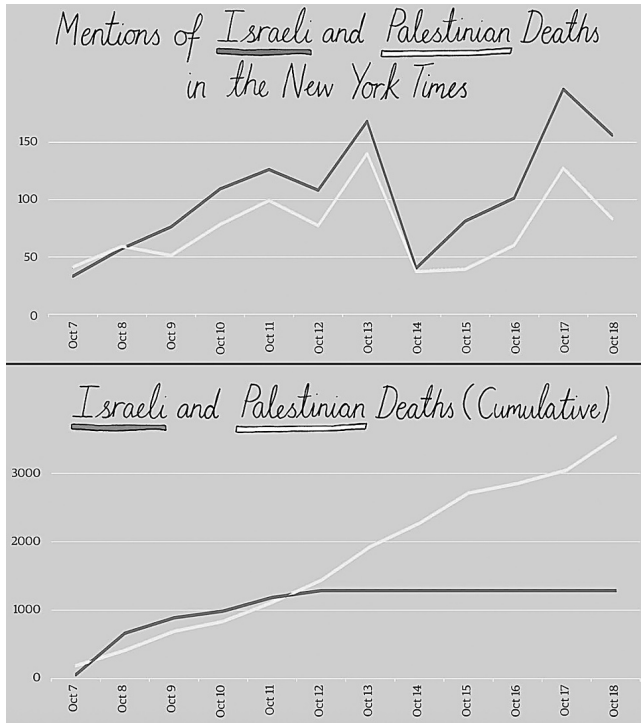


Figure 2: A screenshot of a post from Mona Chalabi's Instagram account. In the post, she displays a data visualization showing the how frequently Palestinian and Israeli deaths are mentioned in The New York Times.

important”.⁴ Counting specific decisions of journalists and editors, whether regarding words, phrases, or sources used in coverage, is one way to push back on the stories we are told by our most powerful storytellers. This chapter juxtaposes the data readers were given by agenda-setting news outlets about the ongoing and expanding ‘War On Terror,’ with the data collected by public scholars about this very coverage, including coverage of the Gaza genocide.

We situate this work by Jackson and Chalabi within the tradition of counter-data action, which consists of acts of resistance to politically dominant datasets.⁵ D’Ignazio and Klein⁶ trace this tradition from the work of Ida B. Wells, who tracked data on lynchings of Black people in the late 1800s, to the collection of data on femicides in Mexico by María Salguero. Counter-data action focuses on the ‘missing datasets’ to

⁴ Onuoha, “Missing-datasets.”

⁵ Currie etc., “The Conundrum of Police Officer-involved Homicides.”

⁶ D’Ignazio and Klein, *Data Feminism*.

which Onuoha refers: data that should exist in order for society to be able to solve, or even just see, a problem, but doesn't.

The early months during which Israel conducted its currently ongoing and worsening military campaign against Gaza, resulting in hundreds of thousands of Palestinians killed, saw an unprecedented frequency of analyses of Western news coverage of the violence. Often, this analysis lived on social media platforms and would involve 'editing' words in a headline or counting how many Palestinian sources were quoted in a story in comparison to Israeli sources, among other methods. In fact, Writers Against the War on Gaza started a website (The New York War Crimes) dedicated specifically to qualitative and quantitative news analysis of *The New York Times*, contemporary and historical. These writers use a form of data-driven critical discourse analysis to audit news stories, providing easily available public education on media literacy and encouraging readers to find alternative news media to consume. The authors of this chapter see this work as unique and valuable for resistance movements in the field of journalism.

We are calling examples of these analyses data 'from below' employed as a tactic to keep news coverage itself accountable, as opposed to data 'from above,' data imposed on readers by agenda-setting news outlets. We follow both of these forms of data from the early post-9/11 era of the 'War on Terror' to the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Gershkoff and Kushner⁷ have noted that the Bush administration repeatedly used the events of 9/11 to justify the invasion and occupation in Iraq, rhetorically linking the two events. Many have argued that the United States' ongoing financial support of Israel, in the name of protecting civilians from Hamas, despite Israel's heavily-documented war crimes in Gaza and the West Bank, is part and parcel of the ongoing American 'War on Terror.'

This chapter will explore when and how news audits have been wielded during this time frame to allow readers to understand how major events are framed, often to favor those already in power. We will first consider what data-driven journalism was available to readers during the ongoing 'War on Terror' ('data from above'), including data journalism from three important points after 9/11: the invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (early 2003), the beginning of American drone warfare (from 2004 onwards), and ten or more years after 9/11. We will then delve into the published news audits, qualitative and quantitative, of elite journalism during this era ('data from below').

Our work fits into the wider work of journalism studies, specifically as an analysis of the ability of the American newsroom to be independent of the state. The Vietnam War, for example, was the first in which "reporters were routinely accredited to accompany military forces yet not subject to censorship" and was one during which

7 Gershkoff and Kushner, "Shaping Public Opinion," 525–537.

the media 'came of age' in becoming autonomous in relation to the government/.⁸ Of course, this doesn't mean that the American reporter has always reported on American aggression in a critical manner. Our most recent wars, including the 'War on Terror,' and the oft-deferential news coverage of them, have been famously explained to the public by the likes of Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, among others. We are particularly interested in how *data-driven* audits of news could help change how readers understand the stories they are being told.

Data 'From Below' and Data 'From Above'

Our discussion of 'data from below' and 'data from above' in the context of the American-led 'War on Terror' requires some setting of parameters. State-sponsored surveillance and targeting of Arab and Muslim populations in the US, as well as American invasions of Muslim-majority countries, had occurred long before the attacks on September 11, 2001. But after the 9/11 attacks, former president George W. Bush started using the phrase 'War on Terror,' and over time, American journalists transmitted, reified, and naturalized it.⁹ The phrase has come to be shorthand for a set of post-September 11 foreign and domestic policy decisions which reverberate around the world even today, from the invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Iran to the surveillance of Americans and non-Americans alike under the guise of heightened national security fears. These policies and invasions specifically target Muslims, though their consequences have spread beyond these populations. It is important to note that the 'War on Terror' has not ended and continues to expand.

We limit our scrutiny here to American news sources that would be considered 'agenda-setting,' though we assess at times how alternative media described certain events. We use the terms 'elite' or 'agenda-setting' media interchangeably; these were defined by Noam Chomsky as the news outlets that "set the framework in which everyone else operates."¹⁰ Chomsky cites *The New York Times* and CBS News as examples but more widely states that he is referring to media companies that are either themselves large, profitable corporations and/or are owned by large, profitable corporations. Their audiences are generally privileged people or the 'political class.'

Alternative media, on the other hand, are news outlets that are not corporate- or state-controlled. This can include daily news organizations like *Democracy Now!*, independent online magazines like *The Intercept*, or even more narrow, topic-focused websites, like the UK-based *Iraq Body Count*, which has independently tracked civilian casualties in Iraq since 2003. Funding sources for alternative media are generally var-

8 Hallin, *The Uncensored War*.

9 Reese and Lewis, "Framing the War on Terror."

10 Chomsky, "What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream."

ied; many have donation campaigns or apply for funding from nonprofits or academic institutions. The definitions of alternative media continue changing as funding sources change.

In this chapter, we focus specifically on what American agenda-setting media told readers about the ‘War on Terror,’ and the subsequent analyses and critiques of them over the years by scholars and journalists. The chapter considers two forms of data in relation to agenda-setting media: data given to readers by these news outlets, ‘data from above,’ and data that explains how agenda-setting media frame stories about the ‘War on Terror’ for its readers, ‘data from below.’ Data from above, by virtue of being distributed by elite media, is information that shapes mainstream agendas—it is didactic because it tells readers what is important to care about and how to understand the world. Data from below, on the other hand, is revelatory—it is data that reveals to the public how American agenda-setting media are encouraging readers to accept their corporate and state agendas. The data from below strategy of digital media criticism, particularly when it comes to the criticism of American news coverage of the Gaza genocide, has leaned on the spreadability and global reach of public scrutiny on social media, building a ‘community of critics.’¹¹ This groundswell of immediate, digital critique means that “there are possible consequences and challenges . . . that have implications on news production today.”¹² Similar to other forms of digital media criticism, we argue that data from below can reveal insights that ultimately encourage resistance *against* agenda-setting media.

The tension between data from above and data from below was arguably never as apparent as it was in early 2024, months into Israel’s sustained violence upon Gaza. Similar to Jackson and Chalabi’s quantitative analysis, Johnson published an analysis of words used by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times* to describe the deaths in the war. The analysis, published in alternative news outlet *The Intercept* focused on more than 1,000 news articles and found “a gross imbalance in the way Israelis and pro-Israel figures are covered versus Palestinians and pro-Palestinian voices.”¹³ For example, each Israeli death resulted in eight mentions of Israel or Israelis in these news outlets. Conversely, every two Palestinian deaths resulted in one mention of Palestinians. In this example, the data from above would be the numbers of deaths reported by these agenda-setting outlets. The data from below, then, is the data-driven analysis of *how* the story of these deaths is given to readers.

Data from below often focuses on the decision-making of journalists and their editors: What is placed at the top of the article? What verbs are used to describe the actions of different entities? Who is quoted frequently and who is never quoted?

¹¹ Cheruiyot, *Criticising Journalism*.

¹² Cheruiyot, 7.

¹³ Johnson, “Coverage of Gaza War in the *New York Times* and Other Major Newspapers Heavily Favored Israel, Analysis Shows.”

These questions and newsroom decisions are crucial in media framing and media literacy¹⁴ and revealing them through data is a form of public education. Through the revelation of data from below, groups like Writers Against the War on Gaza have pushed for concrete forms of resistance to certain elite media—namely, to unsubscribe from and boycott *The New York Times*,¹⁵ going so far as to urge those who work there to quit their jobs.

Critical theorists have long underscored the tightly coupled relationship between the flow of information and institutional power. Especially relevant for our discussion is Edward Said’s work examining Islam- or Middle East–related news coverage in the West. In “Covering Islam,” he states that media consensus draws “invisible lines beyond which a reporter or commentator does not feel it necessary to go.”¹⁶ These lines have been much less invisible during the latest mass violence in Gaza: Scahill and Grim reported that senior editors at *The New York Times* instructed reporters in a memo not to use the words ‘genocide’ or ‘ethnic cleansing’ in their reporting.¹⁷ We place our data-driven assessment of Western news on top of Said’s qualitative work. The dehumanization and demonization of those who challenge American foreign policy is facilitated by news distributors under claims of disseminating ‘objective’ news. We hope that our scholarly participation and intervention “in interrogating established data sources and re-imagining which issues are accounted for through data”¹⁸ can help the public to take a critical stance against elite news.

Data From Above: Newsworthy Numbers Given to Readers about the ‘War on Terror’

While ‘data-driven journalism’ has especially gained traction in recent years, our conception of imposed data encompasses a range of practices, including the use of statistics and numbers to frame news headlines or contextualize events. By considering the ways data was reported on during the ‘War on Terror,’ we lay bare stark patterns of biased framing. We also focus our attention on what types of data were notably absent in elite media narratives—past and present.

¹⁴ FAIR, “Media Literacy Guide.”

¹⁵ Writers Against the War on Gaza, “Boycott, Divest, Unsubscribe!”

¹⁶ Said, *Covering Islam*, 53.

¹⁷ Scahill and Grim, “Leaked NYT Gaza Memo Tells Journalists to Avoid Words ‘Genocide,’ ‘Ethnic Cleansing,’ and ‘Occupied Territory.’”

¹⁸ Bounegru et al., *The Data Journalism Handbook*.

Case study 1: The post-9/11 US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq

While hindsight has now led to many evaluations of pro-war bias in mainstream coverage,¹⁹ some independent organizations such as Fairness And Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), an American media watchdog group dedicated to “challenging corporate media bias, spin and misinformation,” sounded the alarm on systematic biases in coverage as they occurred. Less than four months after the US invasion of Afghanistan, infamously branded Operation Enduring Freedom, FAIR noted a lack of even “rough tallies” of civilian casualties in Afghanistan in network coverage.²⁰ Investigations during the same time period suggested that civilian deaths may already have been in the hundreds and rising with some independent investigations suggesting that there may have already been over 3,500 civilian deaths by January 2002.²¹

Similarly, after the US invaded Iraq in 2003, FAIR noted that while the rising death toll of US soldiers was often meticulously reported across news outlets, the deaths of Iraqi civilians were repeatedly undercounted. For example, on March 18, 2005, CBS noted, “Today, US deaths number more than 1,500. There are no exact figures for Iraqi fatalities, but estimates are for every American killed, 11 Iraqis died.”²² In the same vein, NBC stated, “1,513 American military personnel have been killed, 11,344 injured, and many of those are amputees. Estimates of the Iraqi death toll is hard to come by officially, but the civilian toll is thought to range from 17,000 to nearly 20,000 dead and beyond.”²³

In the example above, we see that the death toll of American military members is reported as a precise number, while the death toll of Iraqi civilians is presented as a range with a margin of three thousand people ‘and beyond.’ Additionally, while NBC’s reported US military casualty toll was broken down further to discuss injuries and amputations, there was no such breakdown for Iraqis. Although NBC stated that ‘official’ sources for Iraqi casualties are hard to come by, according to a 2004 study published in the respected British medical journal *The Lancet*, “about 100,000 excess deaths, or more, have happened since the 2003 invasion of Iraq.” The study further notes that “violence accounted for most of the excess deaths and air strikes from coalition forces accounted for most violent deaths.” American agenda-setting media chose not to cite these as ‘official’ sources. These patterns in reporting are important as they have the power to shape public perception of the war: a 2007 AP-Ipsos poll found that Americans were “keenly aware” of US death tolls in Iraq but underestimated the number of killed Iraqi civilians by the tens of thousands.²⁴

19 Hayes and Guardino, “Whose Views Made the News?” 59–87.

20 FAIR, “How Many Dead?”

21 Herold, “A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States’ Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan”

22 FAIR, “Counting the Iraqi Dead.”

23 FAIR, “Counting the Iraqi Dead.”

24 NBC News, “Americans Unaware of Iraqi Death Toll.”

These patterns persisted throughout the course of the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Civilian casualties were often undercounted or overlooked altogether in elite news coverage. When civilian casualty numbers were mentioned, they were prefaced by subjective qualifiers—'as many as,' 'beyond,' 'at least'—or were described as 'unofficial' or 'unverified' statistics.²⁵

Another way that data was reported during this phase was through polls measuring American sentiments toward the Iraq war. The war in Iraq was presented in agenda-setting narratives as fairly popular, at least in early years, due to public sentiments after the 9/11 attacks. Statistics played a role in selling this narrative. In September 2002, Bill O'Reilly incorrectly told viewers that the results of a poll showed "66 percent of Americans support going into Iraq, even without UN mandates," when in fact the poll showed that 37 percent support a war in Iraq without a UN mandate.²⁶ On the other hand, FAIR noted that there were also patterns of undercounting public dissent and anti-war sentiment. They noted a discrepancy between accounts of the numbers of protesters at an October 2002 anti-war march in Washington, DC, with *The New York Times* estimating thousands in attendance and that "fewer people attended than organizers had said they hoped for."²⁷ This is contrasted with *The Los Angeles Times*, which reported more than 100,000 protesters at the rally.

We see that data has played a role in public news framing from the very early days of the US invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan. Civilian deaths largely went uncounted and unreported, and when they were present, they were couched in doubtful language. The use of these qualifiers surrounding civilian death data creates a sense of uncertainty around these numbers. This is coupled with the very objective framing of military death data, which serves to reinforce the hierarchy between American and non-American lives lost.

Case study 2: The start of American drone warfare

In addition to the 'boots on the ground' military strategy employed in regions across the Middle East, the use of drone strikes has become a defining characteristic of the long tail of the 'War on Terror.' While drone strikes had been employed under the Bush administration, this program was expanded over the course of Barack Obama's two terms in office. A total of 563 strikes targeted Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, compared to fifty-seven strikes under Bush.²⁸ A 2013 ProPublica report noted that 95 percent of targeted killings since 9/11 had been conducted by drones.²⁹

²⁵ FAIR, "Iraq War a Critical Timeline."

²⁶ FAIR, "Iraq War a Critical Timeline."

²⁷ FAIR, "NPR, New York Times Count Out Anti-War Activists."

²⁸ Ross, Serle, Weizman, Schuppli, and Burns. "Where the Drones Strike."

²⁹ Currier, "Everything We Know so Far About Drone Strikes."

In part, drone strikes were publicly embraced by the Obama administration because they seemed to offer a method of precise attack that could reliably strike suspects while sparing civilians. This claim has since been refuted by human rights organizations, and reports logged by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism show that between 384 and 807 civilians were killed by drone strikes—not including air strike deaths in ‘active battlefields’ such as Afghanistan.³⁰

Ahmad documents that journalists often repeated inaccurate figures of civilian deaths by official sources during the US drone strikes in Pakistan from 2004 to 2015. This served to downplay the significance of civilian casualties and so denied the public an “opportunity to fully assess its humanitarian and ethical implications.”³¹ When they did address problems with statistics, these stories were “relegated to the back pages.”³² He also notes that one of the ways in which data on civilian casualties from drone strikes is muddled is through conflating “all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants,” leading to headlines that refer to all victims of drone strikes as militants without clarity on specific details.³³

But the mid-2010s also saw the emergence of some large-scale data journalism leaks and data visualization projects in relation to the US drone strike program. For instance, in 2014, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism published an interactive data project titled “Where the Drones Strike” to map the types of spatial targets that had been reportedly attacked by CIA drones in Pakistan prior to May 2014 (Figure 3).

Case study 3: The waning of support for ‘War on Terror’ foreign policies

As temporal distance was put between the acute emotional aftermath of 9/11 and the US occupation and military attacks across regions in the Middle East, public support for the never-ending ‘War on Terror’ declined. Elite news narratives also began to shift and, in the 2010s, a number of large-scale data leaks and investigative journalism projects served to retrospectively reframe the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. These public-facing data leaks trace their success in part to the legacy of the leak of the Pentagon Papers, a secret study of US political and military involvement in Vietnam and Southeast Asia from 1945 to 1967, to *The New York Times* in 1971. The publishing of the Pentagon Papers was central in shaping public discourse on the Vietnam War and ongoing conversations around government accountability, public access,

³⁰ Ross, Serle, Weizman, Schuppli, and Burns. “Where the Drones Strike.”

³¹ Ahmad, “The Magical Realism of Body Counts,” 18–34.

³² Ahmad, 22.

³³ Khan.

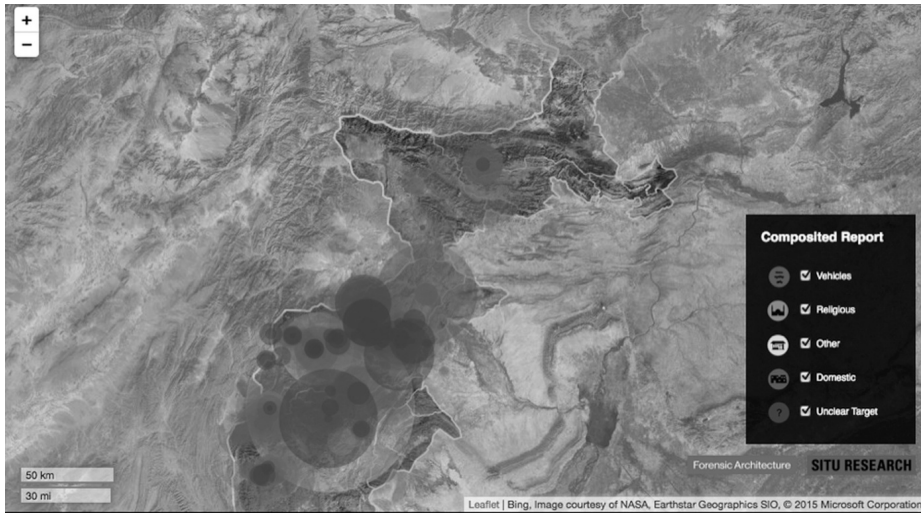


Figure 3: Screenshots from the “Where the Drones Strike” website. Visually presenting spatial data through an interactive map allows readers to experience data rather than merely read it.

and press freedom³⁴ and in creating a template for subsequent leaks and journalistic exposés.

One of the largest of these leaks during the ‘War on Terror’ was the “Afghan War Diary,” a collection of more than 91,000 internal US military logs from the war in Afghanistan, covering the period between January 2004 and December 2009, published by WikiLeaks on July 25, 2010. Prior to releasing the initial 75,000 documents, WikiLeaks made the logs available to *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*, which published reports in line with an agreement made earlier the same day. *The New York Times* described the leak as “a six-year archive of classified military documents [that] offers an unvarnished and grim picture of the Afghan war.” The “Afghan War Diary” was shortly followed by another disclosure to WikiLeaks, referred to as the “Iraq War Logs,” of more than 300,000 US Army field reports from 2004 to 2009. The leak resulted in the Iraq Body Count project; it added 15,000 civilian deaths to their count, bringing their total to more than 150,000.³⁵

In addition to these large-scale data leaks, republished by Western media outlets, a number of critical journalistic investigations were published. Azmat Khan’s “Civilian Casualty Files” project, published in December 2021 in *The New York Times*, drew from hundreds of Pentagon files and reviewed these files against on-the-ground field-

³⁴ Sheehan, Smith, Kenworthy, and Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers*.

³⁵ Reynolds, “Wikileaks.”

work to reveal the hidden civilian toll of US bombing campaigns across the Middle East from 2014 to 2017.³⁶

In the exposé, Khan and her team highlight systematic issues of bias and incompetence from the US military when assessing and reporting casualty data. For instance, Khan notes that casualties in several towns were not assessed because military reviewers had difficulties locating the neighborhoods or confused them with other areas. Khan found that “many allegations of civilian casualties were erroneously dismissed . . . even when civilian deaths were acknowledged, they were often significantly undercounted.”³⁷ Through on-the-ground reporting over five years, Khan was able to unearth discrepancies within the official military account.

Projects such as The Civilian Casualty Files, the “Iraq War Logs,” and the “Afghan War Diary” cast claims of elite news’ objectivity under scrutiny. Throughout the ‘War on Terror,’ we see that data in reporting has been used as a tool to reinforce the pro-war bias of the US government. Although many of the largest critical investigative projects were published in agenda-setting outlets like *The New York Times*, data from below shows us how these same outlets were enmeshed in publishing pro-war reporting during earlier points of the ‘War on Terror.’ However, it is notable that these aforementioned cases of retrospective counter-reporting were largely spearheaded by journalists within elite media organizations. In the next section we will see how scholars and independent journalists have become key in current iterations of data-based critiques of American hegemony.

Data From Below: News Audits of ‘War on Terror’ Coverage in Elite Media

In December 2019, *The Washington Post* published “The Afghanistan Papers,” an investigation that revealed that American officials were lying to the public about their decadeslong lack of strategy in Afghanistan. Whitlock et al. used interviews obtained via the Freedom of Information Act to show readers that military officials had “described explicit efforts by the U.S. government to deliberately mislead the public.”³⁸ Just one week later, FAIR summarized its own reporting of how often *The Washington Post* had published pro-war opinion pieces. The piece accused reporters and editors at the outlet of conveniently forgetting how often the paper gave space to the same military talking points it was now criticizing: “Doesn’t it have a responsibility to ex-

³⁶ Khan, “Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes.”

³⁷ Khan, “Hidden Pentagon Records.”

³⁸ Whitlock, Shapiro, and Emamdjomeh, “The Afghanistan Papers.”

amine how it served as a primary vehicle for those officials to spread these same ‘talking points’ to spin the coverage in the desired fashion?”³⁹

In the FAIR summary, the author recalled a 2009 study that found that *The Washington Post* published ten pro-war columns for every one anti-war column within the first ten months of 2009⁴⁰ when an escalation of 40,000 troops in Afghanistan was being debated. Almost a decade earlier, another FAIR study found that in the three weeks after 9/11, *The Washington Post* published thirty-two opinion pieces urging military responses and two pieces⁴¹ arguing for non-military responses, both written by guest writers. In the 2001 and 2009 studies, as well as the wider 2019 summary, this ‘data from below’ is juxtaposed with public polls. In 2009, more than 50 percent of respondents from two different polls did not support the war in Afghanistan. In 2001, the American public had different responses depending on what options they were given: “In polls that offered a choice between a military response or nothing, it’s true that overwhelming majorities chose war. But given the choice between either military assault or pressing for the extradition and trial of those responsible, a substantial minority either chose extradition (30 percent) or were undecided (16 percent).”⁴²

FAIR’s act of counting these decisions made by editors working for this agenda-setting newsroom and publishing them helps readers understand that, despite some critical reporting by *Washington Post* journalists, like “The Afghanistan Papers,” this elite news outlet shaped a yearslong narrative for its readers that is inaccurate: that most Americans want to be embroiled in war. Cho⁴³ uses this instance to criticize the “mutually beneficial relationship between the need for corporate media outlets like the Post for ‘access’ to US official sources, and US officials who need corporate media outlets to propagate their preferred spin on US foreign policy to manipulate public opinion.” The data from below, tracked by FAIR and others, is crucial for our understanding of how readers are lied to not only by military officials, but also by elite media, who draw our invisible intellectual borders beyond which we cannot explore. Assembling the data from above and the data from below side-by-side becomes a kind of revelatory public education.

Besides FAIR, which has tens of examples of releasing this kind of data from below for readers interested in analyzing what narratives they are being fed, academics have also used both qualitative and quantitative analyses over the past two decades of the ‘War on Terror’ to reveal how agenda-setting media are framing the world, and our own foreign policy, for us. Reese and Lewis⁴⁴ collected data in the years directly after the 9/11 attacks to understand the use of the phrase ‘War on Terror,’

39 Cho, “Afghan Papers Inadvertently Document WaPo’s Role in Spreading Official Lies.”

40 Rendall, “In Afghan Debate, Few Antiwar Op-Eds.”

41 “Op-Ed Echo Chamber.”

42 “Op-Ed Echo Chamber.”

43 Cho, “Afghan Papers Inadvertently Document WaPo’s Role in Spreading Official Lies.”

44 Reese and Lewis.

which typically refers to a series of responses to the attacks, including military action, foreign and domestic policies, etc. Questioning the framing of Bush's actions could have involved questioning his use of this descriptor, but the researchers found that tactics used in writing to scrutinize the phrase itself—using quotes around the phrase (like we chose to do in this work) or adding 'so-called' before using the phrase—rarely happened. Out of almost 230 mentions in *USA Today*, selected at random for deeper analysis, four were critical in this way. The majority were used to 'transmit' Bush's policy, and lesser shares were classified by the researchers as being used to 'reify' or 'naturalize' the idea of a 'War on Terror.' 'Transmittal' was defined by the authors as using the phrase to reference a set of policies pushed by the Bush administration, whereas 'reification' was defined by the authors as establishing a 'War on Terror' as a concrete event, not something conveyed by an administration. Lastly, 'naturalization,' the most sinister of these, took the 'War on Terror' as just the state of affairs in the US, rather than connecting it to policies or Bush. The acceptance and use of this phrase mostly uncritically by agenda-setting news is notable because "choosing the words that the news media must rely on controls the discourse at a basic level."⁴⁵

What language agenda-setting media choose to avoid is just as important for the public to understand as what they use. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston⁴⁶ analyzed the use of the word 'torture' during American news coverage of the 2004 revelation that American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were utilizing torture tactics against Iraqis who were incarcerated there. Framing these instances as 'torture' in elite media, instead of 'abuse,' 'mistreatment' or 'scandal,' was remarkably uncommon, according to the report. In *Washington Post* stories about Abu Ghraib, 'abuse' was most frequently used as the frame for relevant news stories. In the months following the revelation, 60 percent of the almost 900 news stories produced by other national news outlets did not mention the term 'torture' at all: "Within days of the release of the photos, the story began to fall into a familiar pattern of indexing and the counterframe of torture was pushed out of the news by a deluge of official events that promoted the terms abuse and mistreatment."⁴⁷

With some of the benefit of hindsight, Glazier and Boydston⁴⁸ found that the agenda-setting media was neither a watchdog of the administration nor entirely a lapdog during the 'War on Terror.' These researchers found a general decline over time in alignment between Bush's framing of the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq and the press' framing of the same events. The press tends to employ diverse frames over time simply because the press is incentivized by its need to succeed financially: it is "structured in a way that encourages it to change frames as elites change frames, as

⁴⁵ Reese and Lewis, "Framing the War on Terror," 777–97.

⁴⁶ Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, "None Dare Call It Torture," 467–85.

⁴⁷ Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 480.

⁴⁸ Glazier and Boydston, "The President, the Press, and the War," 428–46.

the public demands new news, and as events develop.”⁴⁹ It is not useful for elite media to *only* scrutinize government policy, nor to *only* support it.

These studies tend to be published in academic journals, and reporters and editors working in agenda-setting newsrooms are unlikely to report on them in order to explain their findings to the public. There is no tradition within American newsrooms to seek out these kinds of analyses of their own coverage for their own edification. This is precisely why the data-driven analysis of news coverage in social and alternative media of Israel's destruction and ongoing apartheid of Gaza—a part of the 'War on Terror' that has been most at the forefront recently—has been so remarkable. This analysis has served as an immediate and public education on what we are and are not allowed to say in our most elite media.

News Audits of Gaza's Coverage Are a Form of Public Education

Almost ten months into Israel's sustained and horrific violence against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, historian Assal Rad wrote a piece in *Zeteo News* about why she had been, for months, posting images of 'fixed' headlines from *The New York Times* about Israel's violence on social media platform X (Figure 4). Calling *New York Times* editors' decisions about headlines “misleading by design,” she said that “language matters, and the words the news outlets use—especially in headlines—shape how people understand events.”⁵⁰

Her critiques of the headlines were consistent: editors seemed to avoid placing blame on Israel, revealing the number of Palestinians killed, and naming locations of strikes, particularly if they were places where vulnerable people were sheltering, like schools or refugee camps. For each of the leading elite news outlets' vague headlines, she'd cross out certain words and 'write in' more precise language in red. Though Rad's edits are not data-driven, each one shows the reader what choices editors made, what choices they *could have* made, and what effect these choices have on the way each story is received. Within the context of *The Intercept* breaking the news that *New York Times* editors instructed reporters via an internal memo to avoid specific words, like 'ethnic cleansing' or 'refugee camps,'⁵¹ Rad's editing is even more pointed. Similar to data-driven news audits, these fixed headlines are a form of public education, and they happen with an immediacy that traditional studies cannot have.

⁴⁹ Glazier and Boydston, 433.

⁵⁰ Rad, “I Fixed the New York Times' Pro-Israel Headlines on Gaza.”

⁵¹ Scahill and Grim, “Leaked NYT Gaza Memo Tells Journalists.”



Figure 4: A screenshot from Assal Rad's blog post on Zeteo titled "I Fixed the New York Times' Pro-Israel Headlines On Gaza."

Despite it being more time-consuming than fixing headlines, data-driven analysis about *The New York Times'* coverage of Gaza happened soon after Israel's assault began. A March 2024 post on The New York War Crimes website found that for every one quote by a Palestinian official about the violence in Gaza there were nine quotes by Israeli or American officials. The data engineers responsible for this news audit also found that Palestinians were referred to using passive voice—with 'killed' being one of the most commonly passive verbs used about them—almost twice as much as Israelis. Further, analysis of the more than 2,200 articles between October 2023 and February 2024 revealed that antisemitism was the topic of news five times more than Islamophobia.⁵² Lastly, hearkening back to 'naturalizing' certain words and phrases, one finding from Johnson focused on when and how news outlets used strong verbs to describe the killing of Palestinians and Israelis: "The term 'slaughter' was used by editors and reporters to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 60 to 1, and 'massacre' was used to describe the killing of Israelis versus Palestinians 125 to 2."⁵³

These discrepancies between words used to describe American allies and those used to describe American enemies are nothing new, and media analysts have been writing about them since directly after the attacks of 9/11 at least. Solomon called it "the media lexicon of self-justification" in FAIR: "By implicit definition, Washington's actions against 'terrorism' can only be righteous—and a penumbra of virtue extends to Uncle Sam's allies."⁵⁴ But that American readers now have quick, accessible, 'data from below'-driven analysis of the agenda-setting news outlets they choose to read is power-

⁵² The New York War Crimes, "The *Times* Quotes Israeli and American Sources More Than Three Times as Often as Palestinians."

⁵³ Johnson, "Coverage of Gaza War in the *New York Times* and Other Major Newspapers Heavily Favored Israel, analysis shows."

⁵⁴ Solomon, "Six Months Later, the Basic Tool Is Language."

ful. Besides the explicit call to boycott *The New York Times* by groups like Writers Against the War on Gaza,⁵⁵ data from below help us remember the question we should be asking when we are reading elite news coverage: when we think we are reading objective reporting by our most advanced newsrooms, what are we actually reading?

Public Education that Can Lead to Resistance: “No More Warmongering Lies”

The public-facing news audits and criticism of elite media, and specifically *The New York Times*, has had an effect. Since November 2023, writers and editors have resigned from their jobs there, and others have refused projects with the outlet. Former *Times* poetry editor Anne Boyer published her resignation letter on Substack: “I can’t write about poetry amidst the ‘reasonable’ tones of those who aim to acclimate us to this unreasonable suffering. No more ghoulish euphemisms. No more verbally sanitized hellscapes. No more warmongering lies.”⁵⁶ There have been several different sets of journalists and writers publishing letters that call for solidarity with Palestinians, for Israel to cease its targeted killings of journalists, and for elite media to provide less biased coverage to readers. In March 2024, more than one hundred people protested in the *Times*’ headquarters in New York City. The authors of this chapter see these examples of public resistance against agenda-setting outlets as a form of media literacy via peer pressure—the more readers see this kind of media criticism, the more they may think longer while choosing where to get their information.

Within the growing field of critical data journalism⁵⁷ the idea that scholars should publish work that interrogates the hegemonic structures of power that are illuminated through data in news is not novel. Even in newsrooms, where it is much less common to internally assess an institution’s coverage using data, editors have reflected on their coverage of Black and other marginalized communities as well as their overreliance on the “law enforcement industrial complex,”⁵⁸ which pushes specific narratives about crime. By interrogating the ways that journalistic data practices can both resist and reify dehumanizing narratives of the Middle East, we add to the growing literature of work that has called into question the neutrality of data.⁵⁹ The framework of ‘data from above’ and ‘data from below’ in coverage of the ‘War on Terror,’ among other topics, can engender in readers and journalists themselves more curiosity toward what narratives they are swimming in and what alternative narratives exist.

55 Writers Against the War on Gaza, “Boycott, Divest, Unsubscribe!”

56 Boyer, “My Resignation.”

57 Bounegru et al., *The Data Journalism Handbook*.

58 Brown, “Newsrooms Begin to Reflect on their Roles in Systemic Racism.”

59 Couldry and Mejias, “Data Colonialism,” 336–49.

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