

Dual Framing and Gatekeeping in Crisis Coverage: Analyzing BBC and CNN's Strategic Narratives of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital Incident

Javad Alipoor¹ | Hatef Pourrashidi²

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Abstract

This study examines the news coverage strategies adopted by BBC World Service and CNN and seeks to identify the dominant news frames that shaped the representation of the incident across the two outlets. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of agenda-setting, framing, and gatekeeping, it analyzes how bias, selection, and emphasis were employed in constructing news narratives related to the incident. The study corpus consists of all news reports and articles published by BBC World Service and CNN in the immediate aftermath of the incident on October 17, 2023. A qualitative content analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify and interpret both explicit and implicit themes in the selected media coverage. The analysis yielded four main organizing themes: factual reporting, attributing the explosion to resistance forces, emphasizing Israeli responsibility, and casting doubt on the causes and contributing factors. These themes reveal the distinct editorial strategies employed by each media outlet. The findings indicate that, by presenting contradictory narratives and accommodating opposing viewpoints, the BBC attempted to preserve its claimed neutrality, a strategy characterized as "playing a double game." In contrast, CNN's coverage focused on questioning established accounts of the incident and generating uncertainty, thereby advancing a strategy described as "countering reality and creating ambiguity." Overall, the study highlights how different framing and agenda-setting practices influenced the construction of meaning and public understanding of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital bombing within international news discourse.

Keywords: BBC World Service, CNN, Al-Aqsa Flood, Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, Thematic Analysis

¹ . Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. javadalipur@gmail.com

² . Assistant Professor, Department of Communication, University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran. h.pourrashidi@gmail.com (Corresponding author)



Introduction

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the world's most enduring and complex geopolitical disputes, shaped by intertwined historical, religious, political, and national dimensions. Its origins can be traced to the late nineteenth century, when the Zionist movement sought to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, then part of the Ottoman Empire (Pappe, 2025, p. 12). The issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 by the British government further advanced this objective by expressing support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. This declaration intensified tensions with the indigenous Arab population and laid the foundation for decades of political conflict and competing national aspirations (Keshavarzinia et al., 2019, p. 258).

During the British Mandate, increasing Jewish immigration substantially altered the demographic and political landscape of Palestine, intensifying resistance among Palestinian Arabs. The subsequent political and military developments, culminating in the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, resulted in the mass displacement of Palestinians. This event, commonly referred to as the Nakba ("catastrophe"), remains a defining element of Palestinian collective memory and continues to constitute a central source of grievance within the broader conflict (Mostafa, 2018, p. 402). In the decades that followed, a series of major wars—including the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, the 1967 Six-Day War, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War—reshaped the geopolitical landscape, leaving Israel in control of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights (Euronews, 2023).

These territorial transformations intensified Palestinian displacement and contributed to the emergence and expansion of resistance movements, giving rise to prolonged cycles of violence. Two major Palestinian uprisings, the First Intifada (1987–1993) and the Second Intifada (2000–2005), together with repeated military operations and the continued expansion of Israeli settlements, further entrenched the conflict (Joudaki & Fallahi, 2018, p. 42; Al Jazeera, 2025). More recently, the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip has deteriorated significantly following the blockade and successive rounds of armed confrontation. Among the most consequential incidents was the explosion at al-Ahli Arab Hospital in October 2023, which generated widespread international attention and renewed debate regarding the role of media organizations in framing conflict-related events (Reuters, 2025; BBC, 2023).

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict extends far beyond a regional dispute and constitutes a major issue in international politics. The policies and strategic interests of global and regional powers—including the United States, European states, and key Middle Eastern actors—have significantly influenced both the dynamics of the conflict and efforts toward conflict resolution (Ziadah, 2021, p. 214; CFR, 2025). Despite numerous diplomatic

initiatives, including the Oslo Accords and the Camp David Summits, a durable political settlement has remained elusive because of persistent disagreements over territorial boundaries, the status of Jerusalem, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and broader security concerns (Baker Institute, 2025, p. 14).

Media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of the conflict and influencing political discourse. International news organizations, including BBC World Service and CNN, have frequently been criticized for exhibiting ideological or political bias, with their reporting often emphasizing either Israeli security concerns or Palestinian humanitarian suffering. Such editorial choices influence audience perceptions and contribute to broader international policy debates (Wolfsfeld, 2011, p. 93; Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 105). Against this background, the present study examines the media representations produced by BBC World Service and CNN through the theoretical perspectives of agenda-setting, framing, and gatekeeping, using the al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident as a case study of contemporary conflict journalism.

The study is guided by the hypothesis that significant differences exist in the framing and gatekeeping strategies employed by BBC World Service and CNN in their coverage of the al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident. More specifically, it investigates whether the BBC sought to balance competing narratives in ways that reinforced its institutional image of editorial impartiality, whereas CNN's reporting placed greater emphasis on questioning established interpretations of the incident. Accordingly, the central research question is as follows:

How do the framing and gatekeeping mechanisms employed by BBC World Service and CNN differ in their representation of the al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident, and how do these differences reflect their institutional and geopolitical contexts?

Understanding how influential international news organizations frame conflict-related events provides valuable insight into the complex relationship between media, politics, and humanitarian crises. Previous research has shown that media framing frequently reflects broader ideological and geopolitical orientations, thereby shaping audience interpretations in different ways (Knüpfer & Entman, 2018; Vladisavljević, 2015). For example, studies suggest that Al Jazeera tends to foreground Palestinian experiences of resistance and humanitarian suffering, whereas CNN has often framed the conflict through narratives emphasizing Israeli security concerns (Ibrar, 2025, p. 48). Such framing practices contribute to the construction of culturally and politically meaningful narratives that resonate with audiences' existing beliefs and ideological orientations (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 13).

To examine these differences systematically, the present study draws upon three complementary theoretical perspectives. Agenda-setting theory

explains how media organizations determine which issues receive public attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Framing theory examines how particular modes of presentation influence audience interpretation (Entman, 1993). Gatekeeping theory, in turn, explains the institutional and editorial processes through which information is selected, filtered, and prioritized before publication (DeFulius, 2015). Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing how BBC World Service and CNN constructed competing narratives surrounding the al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident.

By critically examining the news narratives produced by BBC World Service and CNN, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on media bias, conflict reporting, and international communication. It further demonstrates how framing and gatekeeping practices can shape public opinion, influence diplomatic discourse, and affect humanitarian advocacy during periods of armed conflict.

In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of balanced, transparent, and analytically rigorous reporting in the context of protracted conflicts. It highlights the challenges posed by polarized narratives while emphasizing the media's dual role as both a reflector and a constructor of social and political realities. Ultimately, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions of media literacy, critical news consumption, and journalistic practices that support more inclusive and evidence-based public discourse.

1. Review of the Literature

1.1. Empirical Review of the Literature

In recent years, a growing body of empirical research has examined international media coverage of the Gaza war and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. These studies have primarily focused on news framing, media bias, and the role of global news organizations in shaping public opinion and political narratives surrounding the conflict.

Abdrabu (2026), in a comparative study entitled *Digital Media Coverage of the Gaza Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Arab and Western Digital Platforms*, examined the role of information control and algorithmic bias in shaping digital representations of the Gaza conflict. The findings suggest that digital platforms tend to amplify sensational and emotionally charged content while constructing two competing and often polarized narratives of the conflict. The study further argues that platform moderation practices and algorithmic curation reduce the visibility of graphic images depicting Palestinian casualties, particularly children, and frequently portray Palestinian civilians as a depersonalized collective rather than as identifiable individuals. According to Abdrabu (2026), these forms of digital gatekeeping and algorithmic filtering may distance global audiences from the humanitarian consequences of the conflict, thereby diminishing emotional engagement and empathy toward civilian victims.

Pourrashidi Alibigloo and Alipoor (2025), in a study titled *Framing Analysis of International Media Coverage of the Gaza War*, examined how Western mainstream media and non-Western outlets represented events in Gaza. Their findings demonstrate that Western media largely relied on security-oriented, confrontational, and political frames, frequently portraying Israeli military actions within narratives of "legitimate self-defense" or "security response." In contrast, regional and non-Western media emphasized humanitarian and victim-centered frames, focusing on civilian casualties and the human consequences of the conflict. The study concludes that media ownership structures, political affiliations, and geopolitical interests play a decisive role in the selection, emphasis, and omission of news elements.

Mohammadi and Nezhadsalari (2024) conducted a discourse-oriented analysis of international media coverage of the Gaza war, focusing on linguistic and narrative strategies. Their findings reveal that Palestinian casualties are often reported in abstract, statistical, and depersonalized terms, whereas Israeli casualties tend to be described through personalized, emotional, and human-interest narratives. According to the authors, such linguistic patterns contribute to the normalization of violence against Palestinians and reduce the moral significance of civilian deaths in dominant media discourse. This asymmetrical representation, they argue, reflects a form of structural bias embedded in mainstream international news narratives, particularly in the coverage of asymmetrical conflicts.

Cherkaoui (2024), in a study entitled *Framing the Gaza Conflict: Media Bias, Violence, and the Battle of Narratives*, investigated the role of framing, gatekeeping, and editorial decision-making in Western media coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Drawing on a quantitative analysis of more than 2,900 news reports, the study argues that major Western news organizations, including the BBC, exhibit structural patterns of representation that tend to marginalize Palestinian suffering. The findings identify a substantial disparity in casualty reporting and suggest that media coverage frequently sanitizes or decontextualizes acts of violence through selective patterns of emphasis and omission. Cherkaoui concludes that these editorial practices reflect institutional gatekeeping mechanisms that contribute to the construction of narratives broadly consistent with prevailing geopolitical perspectives, thereby influencing public interpretations of the conflict.

Finally, Dostri (2024), in *Israel's Struggle with the Information Dimension and Influence Operations During the Gaza War*, published in *Military Review* (Army University Press), analyzed Israel's challenges in countering Hamas-led information warfare following the events of October 7, 2023.

The study documents how Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran allegedly orchestrated cyber and propaganda campaigns, including the use of 15 attack

groups that employed social media for psychological warfare, fake profiles, and the dissemination of false narratives (e.g., “ Hamas terrorists in hospitals”). According to the study, some UNRWA staff members were allegedly complicit in the October 7 attacks, during which approximately 1,400 Israelis were killed and 236 were taken hostage, and Hamas allegedly exploited UN facilities to support its operations. The study concludes that Israel’s information operations (IO) were ineffective in countering international narratives, thereby contributing to increased global anti-Israel sentiment. It recommends strengthening counter-narratives and expanding international partnerships to address hybrid threats during the ongoing Gaza conflict.

1.2. Synthesis and Research Gap

While existing studies provide valuable insights into media framing and bias in the coverage of the Gaza war, they largely adopt a macro-level approach by focusing on general trends and long-term patterns in conflict reporting. Less attention, however, has been paid to specific, highly symbolic humanitarian incidents that serve as critical turning points in global public discourse.

More importantly, no independent and systematic study has yet examined media coverage of the bombing of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in a focused manner, particularly through an integrated theoretical framework combining framing and gatekeeping, with specific attention to influential international broadcasters such as BBC World Service and CNN. Existing research has tended to rely on single-theory approaches—most commonly framing theory—while giving insufficient attention to the role of gatekeeping processes in source selection, narrative construction, and strategic ambiguity.

Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by focusing on the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident as a critical humanitarian event in the Gaza war and by integrating framing and gatekeeping theories. Through this approach, the study seeks to illuminate how global news media construct, filter, and strategically narrate humanitarian crises and how these processes shape international understanding and political responses to large-scale civilian harm.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Framing Theory

News framing theory offers a foundational perspective in media studies for understanding how meaning is constructed and conveyed through news coverage. Broadly defined, framing refers to the process by which media organizations select particular aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicative text, thereby shaping the interpretive framework through which audiences perceive an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 106). Frames function as cognitive schemas that influence how

individuals process information, direct attention, and form opinions. This cognitive role of frames is particularly significant in contentious and complex issues such as international conflicts, where framing affects not only public discourse but also policy debates and diplomatic responses (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Rooted in the work of early scholars such as Erving Goffman (1974), who conceptualized frames as "schemata of interpretation," framing theory has evolved through contributions that emphasize both the construction of frames by media practitioners and their reception by audiences (Goffman, 1974, p. 21; Tankard, 2001, p. 97). Media frames encapsulate particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations, collectively directing how an issue is socially understood (Entman, 1993, p. 52). For example, framing a protest as a "riot" rather than a "movement" carries divergent connotations and predisposes audiences to different emotional and evaluative responses.

Complementing framing theory, gatekeeping theory enhances the understanding of media influence by explaining how information is filtered and prioritized by media actors before reaching the public. Initially conceptualized by Lewin (1947) as a psychological and sociological process, gatekeeping has been widely applied in communication studies to describe the editorial decisions and organizational constraints that determine which news is published or broadcast (DeJuliis, 2015, p. 6). Editors, journalists, media owners, advertisers, and political pressures act as gatekeepers, consciously or unconsciously shaping the flow and content of news. This process influences not only the topics that receive coverage but also the narratives constructed around those topics (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 12).

In recent decades, the rise of social media platforms and non-journalistic actors has transformed traditional gatekeeping by redistributing power while also introducing new forms of gatekeeping through algorithms and platform policies (Wallace, 2017, p. 705). Nevertheless, legacy media organizations, especially major international broadcasters such as the BBC and CNN, remain central gatekeepers in international news dissemination, retaining substantial agenda-setting power and shaping geopolitical narratives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176; Roberts & Forde, 2019, p. 45).

The theoretical synthesis of framing and gatekeeping provides a robust analytical framework for deconstructing news media representations of conflict and humanitarian crises. It enables scholars to examine how editorial ideologies, political contexts, and organizational routines generate particular portrayals that either legitimize or challenge dominant power structures (Reese, 2007, p. 150). For instance, in covering the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital bombing, these theories facilitate an examination of how the BBC and CNN reinforced or challenged prevailing Israeli and Palestinian narratives, thereby influencing international public opinion and political responses.

Empirical studies reveal that media framing in conflict zones often reflects national or ideological alignments and is guided by gatekeeping processes that are sensitive to governmental, commercial, and audience pressures (Entman & Rojecki, 2001, p. 65). Such framing may selectively emphasize victimhood, security threats, resistance, or claims of legitimacy, thereby shaping public perceptions and influencing policy advocacy (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 13). Furthermore, the concept of "strategic framing" suggests that media organizations consciously construct particular narratives to advance political or ideological agendas, sometimes employing ambiguity or dual framing to balance competing interests and maintain audience trust (De Vreese, 2005, p. 106).

Applying these theoretical perspectives enables a deeper understanding of the power of news media not merely as conveyors of information but also as active agents in the social construction of reality within conflict settings. This complex media dynamic plays a pivotal role in either perpetuating or mitigating conflicts by shaping public understanding and influencing policy discourse (Wolfsfeld, 2011, p. 23).

2.2. Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory is one of the most influential theories in the study of mass communication. In essence, it explains that the media do not necessarily tell us what to think but rather what to think about. This concept was first introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their groundbreaking 1972 study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). They found a strong correlation between the issues emphasized by the media and those that the public considered most important.

At its core, agenda-setting theory is concerned with influence and priorities. The media repeatedly highlight specific events or issues, making these topics more salient to the public. For example, if news coverage focuses heavily on environmental issues, people are more likely to perceive them as urgent concerns (Oliver et al., 2020, p. 75). This is known as the first level of agenda setting, which concerns determining which issues appear on the public agenda.

However, agenda setting also operates at a deeper level. The second level concerns the attributes or aspects of those issues that the media emphasize. By framing stories in particular ways, the media shape not only what people think about but also how they think about it. For instance, the media may portray a political candidate more favorably or less favorably depending on which personal qualities or policy positions they choose to highlight (Oliver et al., 2020, p. 12). This second level of agenda setting demonstrates how subtle media cues influence the formation of public opinion.

Over time, scholars have expanded agenda-setting theory beyond traditional mass media to include digital environments and diverse fields

such as health communication and environmental policy. For example, research has shown that during health crises, media attention to particular risks can increase public awareness and encourage behavioral change (Eadie, 2009, p. 325). Agenda-setting therefore plays a critical role not only in shaping public discussion but also in influencing societal action.

The rise of social media has added further complexity to agenda-setting processes. Social media platforms empower individuals and communities to participate in setting public agendas, sometimes challenging the agenda-setting power of traditional media. As a result, agenda setting has become increasingly dynamic and interactive, with multiple actors influencing which topics gain prominence and how they are framed (Gilardi et al., 2021, p. 4). These developments have encouraged communication scholars to adapt the theory to a media environment in which influence is more widely dispersed.

Additionally, the theory is closely related to concepts such as the policy agenda and agenda building, which describe the processes through which issues move from media attention to political action. Policy agendas reflect the issues that policymakers prioritize, often in response to media coverage and public demand (Firdaus, 2004, p. 14). Agenda building refers to the broader network of stakeholders—including interest groups, journalists, policymakers, and citizens—who collectively influence which issues rise to prominence.

In summary, agenda-setting theory provides a powerful framework for understanding the media's role in shaping public awareness and priorities. It highlights the media's agenda-setting power at both the level of issue selection and the level of attribute emphasis, with important implications for democracy, policymaking, and social behavior. As the communication environment continues to evolve, further research remains essential for refining the theory and examining how digital and social media continue to reshape public agendas.

2.3. Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory in media and communication examines how information travels from its source to the public, recognizing that this process is far from straightforward. Consider the journey of a news story—from the moment a newsworthy event occurs to the point at which it is read, watched, or heard by an audience. Along the way, there are "gatekeepers": individuals or mechanisms that determine which information proceeds and which is filtered out. The term dates back to the 1940s, when Kurt Lewin used the metaphor of gates and gatekeepers to illustrate how, like a series of checkpoints, each stage in the communication process gives someone the authority to allow or prevent information from moving forward (Lewin, 1951, p. 14). A gatekeeper may be a journalist deciding to cover one story rather than another, an editor determining which headlines receive the greatest prominence, or even an algorithm on a social media platform that determines which posts users see first. Although these decisions may appear routine,

they have significant consequences, shaping which events, individuals, and ideas become part of public discourse and which remain largely invisible (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 84).

These decisions are, of course, not random. Gatekeepers rely on professional experience, journalistic standards, social expectations, and personal judgment when selecting and filtering information. Institutional affiliations, ideological orientations, commercial interests, and advertising pressures also influence decisions regarding what is covered and how it is presented. Moreover, gatekeeping theory is no longer limited to traditional mass media. In the digital era, almost anyone can function as a gatekeeper: social media users choose to share, endorse, or ignore content, while influencers and platform algorithms determine which stories receive greater visibility within their respective communities. Despite these technological transformations, the central premise of the theory remains unchanged: information is continuously filtered and shaped, and those who control these filtering mechanisms exercise considerable influence over what becomes public knowledge (Shoemaker, 1991; Barzilai-Nahon, 2009, p. 35).

The implications of gatekeeping are substantial because it influences how societies understand reality and determines which issues receive public attention. When gatekeepers repeatedly privilege certain perspectives while overlooking others, they contribute to constructing dominant narratives, shaping social priorities, and, at times, marginalizing voices that deserve greater attention. Consequently, scholars continue to examine who the principal gatekeepers are in the contemporary media environment—whether powerful media organizations, platform algorithms, political actors, community leaders, or ordinary users. Understanding this process requires examining the criteria and motivations underlying decisions made at each gate and recognizing the profound influence of information selection on collective understanding. Although gatekeeping theory has evolved alongside technological change, it remains an indispensable framework for analyzing media influence and the power dynamics that determine what societies ultimately come to know.

3. The Israel–Palestine Issue

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is deeply rooted in intersecting historical grievances and competing nationalist claims, making it one of the most enduring and complex geopolitical conflicts in contemporary history (Bordas, 2024, p. 130; Adelson, 1995, p. 45). The formal establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 catalyzed the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians—a calamity referred to as the Nakba—and set in motion a series of territorial disputes that have profoundly influenced regional and international geopolitics (Mostafa, 2018, p. 399). Israeli state policies involving settlement expansion, land confiscation, and military enforcement have been extensively analyzed in the academic literature for

perpetuating significant asymmetries of power and exacerbating human rights violations against Palestinians (Shalash, 2025, p. 22; Salame & Zilber, 2024, p. 96).

Academics note that Israeli strategies have sought not only to assert sovereignty but also to reshape the demographic and political landscape through coercive measures. These measures include systematic house demolitions, restrictions on movement, and the establishment of checkpoints and barriers across the occupied territories, all of which collectively impose structural constraints on Palestinian autonomy and economic development (Shalash, 2025, p. 25). Scholars further argue that these policies constitute a form of settler colonialism aimed at marginalizing the Palestinian population and consolidating Israeli territorial control (Salame & Zilber, 2024, p. 100).

Media and academic framing play vital roles in shaping narratives surrounding the conflict. Research has identified a notable divide between the narratives that predominate in Middle Eastern and Western academic circles. Middle Eastern scholars often foreground narratives of dispossession, colonial injustice, and the enduring trauma of the Nakba, thereby emphasizing historical and ongoing Palestinian grievances (Mostafa, 2018, p. 405). Conversely, Western academic discourse tends to prioritize Israeli security concerns, state sovereignty, and counterterrorism narratives, reflecting the geopolitical alliances and ideological orientations prevalent within Western institutions (Shalash, 2025, p. 27). This polarized framing reinforces binary perceptions of the conflict by portraying Israelis predominantly as security actors and Palestinians as either victims or terrorists, thereby entrenching mutual distrust and perpetuating the conflict (Wodak, 1999, p. 55).

Such dichotomous narratives significantly limit the scope of dialogue by framing the conflict in zero-sum terms, whereby recognition of one party's rights is often perceived as implying the negation of the others. This binary framing hampers diplomatic efforts by reducing complex historical and sociopolitical realities to adversarial identities (Wolfsfeld, 2011, p. 90). The media's repeated reinforcement of these frames not only influences global public attitudes but also constrains policymakers within entrenched ideological positions (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 110).

Nevertheless, more recent scholarship highlights the transformative potential of reframing and balanced narratives. Emerging studies propose approaches that emphasize shared sovereignty, mutual recognition, and peacebuilding through dialogue and justice-based frameworks (Farsakh, 2023, p. 52). For instance, Leila Farsakh's examination of one-state and two-state solutions critically engages with the limitations of entrenched dichotomies, suggesting that reframing the conflict through models of coexistence may broaden opportunities for resolution (Farsakh, 2023, p. 56). Similarly, Boaz Hameiri's research underscores the importance of acknowledging historical grievances and narratives of victimhood on all

sides as a prerequisite for genuine reconciliation and lasting peace (Hameiri, 2024, p. 260).

These academic perspectives suggest that media and scholarly representations exert a double-edged influence: while they often reproduce conflictual polarization, they also possess the capacity to foster nuanced understanding and constructive international engagement. The reframing approach involves challenging prevailing simplifications and encouraging discourse that integrates diverse historical narratives and political claims (Wodak, 1999, p. 58). This approach not only challenges dominant power structures embedded within traditional media and political rhetoric but also supports the development of more inclusive peace processes.

In conclusion, the Israel–Palestine conflict, as examined through academic perspectives, demonstrates the indispensable role of framing and narrative construction in shaping both the perpetuation of conflict and prospects for conflict resolution. The existing literature underscores the need to move beyond binary oppositions in media and academic discourse and to embrace pluralistic, justice-oriented narratives that more accurately reflect the complexities on the ground. Such a paradigm shift has important implications for journalism, diplomacy, and international policymaking aimed at achieving a just and lasting peace in the region.

4. The Al-Ahli Arab Hospital Incident

On October 17, 2023, just ten days after the start of the "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation in the occupied territories, a series of explosions occurred at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital (also known as the Baptist Hospital) in Gaza at 7:00 p.m. local time. The incident resulted in the deaths of nearly 500 people who had sought refuge in the hospital or were receiving medical treatment there at the time. The majority of the victims were women and children. The incident, which was described by hospital doctors as a massacre (BBC, October 18, 2023), was immediately questioned by some Western media organizations and governments.

The widespread international condemnation of Israel prompted the Israeli government to deny responsibility for the incident, claiming that the explosion had been caused by a misfired rocket launched by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement. Statements issued by several Western governments broadly supported this claim. According to the BBC, the United Kingdom stated that its assessment, based on information and analyses provided by weapons experts, indicated that the explosion was likely caused by a rocket launched from within Gaza toward Israel. French military intelligence reportedly reached a similar conclusion. The United States had previously stated that Israel was not responsible, citing "overhead imagery, intercepts, and open-source information" (Horton et. al., 2023).

However, these statements by Western governments did not diminish the anger and outrage expressed by governments and public opinion around the

world. These assessments, which were widely perceived by many observers as unconvincing, intensified criticism of Israel's conduct in relation to the incident, not only across the Muslim world but also among broader segments of international public opinion (The Guardian, October 18, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2025).

In this regard, previous studies have extensively examined international media coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and have identified recurring patterns of representation. Wolfsfeld (2011) argues that Western media often oscillate between narratives that foreground Israeli security concerns and those that emphasize Palestinian suffering, while rarely providing integrated or nuanced representations. Similarly, Entman (1993) contends that media framing fundamentally shapes the interpretation of international events by legitimizing particular power structures while delegitimizing competing claims. In addition, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) observe that gatekeeping processes are frequently influenced by political and economic considerations that constrain journalistic autonomy and prioritize narratives consistent with national interests.

5. Research Methodology

To investigate the approaches adopted by BBC World Service and CNN in their coverage of the events in Gaza—specifically the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident—a thematic analysis was employed. Over the past two decades, thematic analysis has become an increasingly popular method for analyzing qualitative data (Joffe, 2012, p. 213). It is a flexible analytical approach that enables researchers to identify and construct themes—that is, patterns of meaning—in order to interpret qualitative datasets.

Thematic analysis assumes that data, whether derived from interviews, focus groups, or documents, reflect a reality that can be explored and described (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2031). It is particularly appropriate for a study of this nature, in which the objective is to extract the underlying meanings and core themes from a corpus of news reports (Cernasev & Axon, 2023, p. 752).

This study followed a systematic process of thematic analysis. First, 40 news reports from each network, covering the period from the date of the incident until the end of October 2023, were collected. The researcher then familiarized himself/herself with the data through repeated reading. Initial codes were generated by identifying key phrases, concepts, and ideas. These codes were subsequently grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data. Finally, the themes were defined and named, and the findings were reported. This process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from the data.

6. Findings

The analysis of BBC World Service's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident revealed a highly cautious and balanced approach, ultimately characterized by the overarching theme of "playing a double game." This duality emerged through the systematic inclusion of four organizing themes: reflecting the facts (covering the scale of the tragedy and the international condemnation it generated), attributing the explosion to resistance forces (focusing on the alleged responsibility of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad), emphasizing Israel's responsibility for the explosion (including Israeli claims alongside criticism and the consequences of the incident), and casting doubt on the causes and contributing factors of the explosion (highlighting contradictions and ambiguities). The BBC's effort to maintain its claimed neutrality by presenting competing narratives resulted in this distinctive dual-sided reporting strategy.

6.1. Extracts from BBC News Reports

BBC news reports consistently juxtaposed humanitarian descriptions of Palestinian civilian casualties with official Israeli statements denying responsibility for the hospital explosion. While the reports acknowledged international condemnation and eyewitness accounts, they simultaneously emphasized uncertainty through the use of conditional language and indirect attribution. This discursive pattern illustrates how humanitarian framing and strategic ambiguity coexisted in the coverage, thereby providing the empirical foundation for the subsequent thematic classification.

Based on the coding conducted to identify the basic themes in the BBC news reports, 24 basic thematic codes were identified. According to the classification presented in Table 1, four organizing themes were defined with regard to BBC World Service's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident. These themes were: reflecting the facts, the resistance's role in the explosion, Israel's responsibility for the explosion, and casting doubt on the causes and contributing factors of the explosion. This thematic configuration demonstrates the BBC's dual approach to covering the incident. Consequently, "playing a double game" was identified as the overarching theme of the analysis.

To clarify how the overarching theme of "playing a double game" was derived, Table 1 presents the hierarchical structure of the themes extracted from BBC World Service's news coverage. The table illustrates the analytical progression from basic themes to organizing themes and, ultimately, to the overarching theme. At the level of the basic themes, the BBC repeatedly addressed the humanitarian dimension of the tragedy by reporting the number of casualties, international condemnations, and global protests, all of which were grouped under the organizing theme of "reflecting the facts." Simultaneously, the coverage emphasized competing narratives regarding responsibility for the explosion, including claims concerning the role of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Israel's responsibility, and uncertainty

surrounding the causes of the incident. The coexistence of these contradictory organizing themes within the same body of coverage illustrates the BBC's effort to balance opposing perspectives. As shown in Table 1, this simultaneous inclusion of factual reporting, attribution of responsibility to multiple actors, and deliberate emphasis on uncertainty ultimately led to the identification of the overarching theme of "playing a double game."

Table 1- Themes Extracted from BBC News Reports

Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	General Theme
Mentioning the number of deaths and the depth of the tragedy	Reflecting the facts	Playing a double game
The hospital massacre		
Coverage of protests from other countries		
International condemnations		
Islamic Jihad's responsibility	The resistance's role in the explosion	
Western countries' claims about Islamic Jihad's responsibility		
Failure to find parts of the projectile		
Investigating the nature of the explosion		
Contradiction in both sides' reports		
Rejection of Israel's responsibility by others' opinions		
Publishing the claims of the Zionist regime		
Palestinians as victims of Hamas		
Hamas not being allowed to control Gaza		
Labeling Hamas as terrorists		
Israel's responsibility	Israel's responsibility for the explosion	
Rejection of Israel's claim by Hamas and Islamic Jihad		
Threat of the crisis remaining unresolved due to the incident		
Cancellation of the Jordan summit		
The incident being accidental		
Israel crossing red lines		
The U.S.'s responsibility		
Doubts about the number of deaths	Doubting the causes and factors of the explosion	
Hamas seeking propaganda victory		
Doubts about the report by Hamas		

Based on the results of the analysis of news reports published between October 7 and November 1, 2023, the coverage focused predominantly on the number of casualties and the scale of the tragedy, using the phrase "hospital massacre" while reporting on protests and international condemnations from various countries. A notable feature of the coverage, however, was its emphasis on the alleged responsibility of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the extensive reporting of claims made by Western governments regarding its culpability. In addition, several reports covered field investigations at the explosion site, which ultimately highlighted the failure to identify projectile fragments, perceived inconsistencies in the accounts provided by both sides, and the rejection of Israel's responsibility based on the assessments of external experts.

Although the published reports also included Israeli claims and arguments—such as assertions that Palestinians were victims of Hamas's policies and that Hamas would no longer be permitted to govern Gaza—the BBC did not directly characterize Hamas as a terrorist organization, although the term appeared in quoted statements. The coverage also addressed allegations concerning Israel's responsibility for the explosion and its subsequent consequences, including the continuation of the crisis. Furthermore, it reported the positions of Hamas, other resistance groups, and several Islamic countries regarding Israel's alleged crossing of red lines, while also emphasizing claims concerning U.S. responsibility.

Overall, four organizing themes emerged from the analysis of the published reports: reflecting the facts, the resistance's role in the explosion, Israel's responsibility for the explosion, and casting doubt on the causes and contributing factors of the explosion. The BBC's approach suggests an effort to maintain its claimed neutrality by presenting the perspectives of all parties involved. Consequently, "playing a double game" was identified as the overarching theme of the analysis. Such reporting strategies are not unprecedented among major Western international media outlets. Previous studies have similarly argued that these organizations have often overlooked serious human rights violations and alleged war crimes committed by Israel in Palestine (Said, 1997; Philo & Berry, 2011). In the present case, however, widespread international condemnation appears to have prompted coverage that presented competing narratives rather than adopting a single perspective.

Furthermore, based on the coding conducted to identify the basic themes in CNN's news reports, 29 basic thematic codes were identified. The thematic analysis of CNN's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident revealed the overarching theme of "countering reality and creating ambiguity," reflecting a reporting strategy that systematically supported Israeli narratives while simultaneously generating uncertainty regarding the factual circumstances of the incident. This strategy was operationalized through three organizing themes: supporting Israel (primarily by emphasizing claims that Israel was not responsible, attributing the explosion to a misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket, and presenting technical explanations), creating a dichotomy between reality and ambiguity (by emphasizing the difficulty of distinguishing verified facts from competing narratives and highlighting uncertainties surrounding the incident), and expressing sympathy for the victims (by acknowledging the humanitarian tragedy without challenging the dominant pro-Israel framing). Through this approach, CNN employed ambiguity as a means of deflecting attention from immediate allegations of Israeli responsibility.

6.2. Extracts from CNN News Reports

CNN's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident frequently relied on conditional and speculative language when discussing responsibility for the explosion. The reports repeatedly questioned Palestinian casualty figures and cited Israeli and U.S. officials as authoritative sources, while Palestinian accounts were presented as disputed or unverified. Through the use of hedging expressions such as "according to Israeli officials" and "there is no independent confirmation," CNN constructed a narrative of uncertainty that challenged prevailing humanitarian accounts and systematically blurred the attribution of responsibility. These discursive patterns provide the empirical foundation for the thematic classification presented below.

According to the classification presented in Table 2, three organizing themes were identified in CNN's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident: supporting Israel, creating a dichotomy between reality and ambiguity, and expressing sympathy for the victims. Together, these themes indicate the network's effort to construct a tension between the established reality of the event and uncertainty surrounding its interpretation. Consequently, "countering reality and creating ambiguity" was identified as the overarching theme of CNN's coverage.

To further clarify how the overarching theme of "countering reality and creating ambiguity" was derived, Table 2 presents the hierarchical relationship between the basic themes, organizing themes, and the overall reporting strategy reflected in CNN's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident. The table demonstrates that a substantial proportion of the basic themes questioned allegations of an Israeli airstrike by emphasizing the absence of conclusive physical evidence, presenting alternative technical explanations, and highlighting official statements issued by U.S. and Israeli authorities. These elements were grouped under the organizing theme of "supporting Israel." At the same time, CNN repeatedly emphasized the difficulty of establishing factual certainty by highlighting conflicting sources, ambiguous video evidence, and the perceived unreliability of early reports, thereby forming the organizing theme of "creating a dichotomy between reality and ambiguity." Although references to civilian casualties and humanitarian suffering were included, they remained secondary and did not alter the dominant framing strategy. As illustrated in Table 2, the convergence of pro-Israeli narratives with the systematic amplification of uncertainty ultimately led to the identification of the overarching theme of "countering reality and creating ambiguity."

Table 2- Themes Extracted from CNN News Reports

Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	General Theme
Missile as the cause of the explosion, not an airstrike	Supporting Israel	Countering reality and creating ambiguity
Explosion site not matching an airplane bomb strike		
Lack of evidence to investigate the incident		
U.S. and Israeli video not related to the explosion		
U.S. government's claim of Israel's non-responsibility		

Islamic Jihad's misfired rocket		
Lack of visual evidence of missile impact		
Explosion caused by a rocket fired from Gaza		
Reflecting Israel's claim Airstrike's non-involvement in the destruction		
Wild terrorists in Gaza responsible for the hospital attack		
Difficulty separating fact from narrative	Creating a dichotomy between reality and ambiguity	
Citing multiple foreign sources		
Ambiguity in the entire process		
Reaction to media silence		
Emphasizing Western media's incorrect understanding		
Emphasizing the correction of the initial airstrike news		
The hospital explosion shrouded in ambiguity		
Insisting on the ambiguities of the hospital explosion		
Multiple evaluations of the explosion videos		
Horror and massacre	Showing empathy for the victims	
Burial of the dead		
Israel dropping bombs		
Mentioning the number of hospital deaths		
Describing the hospital's dire post-explosion conditions		
Mutilation of hospital victims		
Countries expressing horror		
Anger in the Middle East		
Strengthening Hamas's claims		

In summary, CNN's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident reflects a dual strategy of generating doubt and skepticism regarding the details of the event while simultaneously attempting to present the available facts. In other words, although the network sought to convey the scale of the tragedy and express sympathy for the victims, it consistently supported Israeli narratives, making this the central axis of its coverage. While this support was most evident in its extensive reporting of pro-Israel perspectives, it also reflected a broader pattern of support for Israel's position throughout the incident. Furthermore, CNN's effort to determine the factual dimensions of the event can be interpreted as an attempt to construct a dichotomy between reality and ambiguity. This dichotomy places the audience at a crossroads between accepting the available evidence and focusing on uncertainty,

thereby diverting attention from allegations of Israeli responsibility toward the purported culpability of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Consequently, the overarching theme identified in CNN's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident is "countering reality and creating ambiguity."

Conclusion

This study was guided by the null hypothesis that no significant difference exists between BBC World Service and CNN in their framing of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident, implying that both outlets would exhibit comparable levels of objectivity or bias. However, the findings of the qualitative content analysis, which identified the distinct overarching themes of "playing a double game" for the BBC and "countering reality and creating ambiguity" for CNN, provide sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis. The finding that the BBC adopted a strategy of calculated ambivalence, whereas CNN employed a more explicitly pro-Israel and ambiguity-oriented framing strategy, demonstrates a clear qualitative difference in the gatekeeping and narrative construction practices of the two media organizations. The rejection of the null hypothesis further suggests that structural characteristics, including ownership models (public versus commercial) and broader national foreign policy orientations, influence both the degree and the nature of media bias in the coverage of high-profile international conflicts.

The analysis of BBC World Service's and CNN's coverage of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital incident reveals distinct, yet strategically comparable, approaches to framing this highly sensitive and contested event. The findings indicate that the BBC adopted a strategy characterized as "playing a double game," which was implemented through four principal organizing themes within the frameworks of framing and gatekeeping: (1) reflecting the facts; (2) emphasizing the role of Palestinian resistance; (3) acknowledging Israel's responsibility; and (4) cultivating doubt and ambiguity regarding the causes of the explosion.

Among the 40 BBC news reports analyzed, 24 basic thematic codes were identified. These findings indicate that although part of the coverage focused on factual reporting and acknowledged Israel's possible responsibility (seven basic themes), a larger proportion emphasized narratives concerning Palestinian resistance (ten basic themes) and promoted uncertainty regarding the causes of the explosion (three basic themes). This dual pattern of reporting is broadly consistent with the United Kingdom's historical foreign policy, which has often balanced criticism of Israeli policies with the preservation of its geopolitical alliances in the Middle East (DeJuliis, 2015, p. 15; Wallace, 2017, p. 712). The BBC's dual framing strategy also illustrates a sophisticated application of gatekeeping by managing competing narratives in a manner that avoids overt partisanship while subtly influencing audience interpretation in accordance with broader political considerations (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

By contrast, CNN's coverage more consistently reflected a strategy described in this study as "countering reality and creating ambiguity." This strategy was implemented through three interrelated organizing themes: supporting Israel, creating a dichotomy between reality and ambiguity, and expressing sympathy for the victims. The 29 basic thematic codes identified in CNN's coverage reveal a clear imbalance: eleven themes emphasized pro-Israel narratives, nine promoted uncertainty regarding the causes of the incident, and nine highlighted the humanitarian suffering of the victims. Overall, the coverage prioritized statements issued by Israeli officials while giving comparatively less attention to Palestinian counter-narratives. In doing so, CNN constructed a news agenda that implicitly legitimized Israeli claims while diverting attention from possible Israeli responsibility for the explosion (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 110; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 23). This dual framing strategy placed audiences in an interpretive position in which factual evidence was continually juxtaposed with strategic uncertainty, thereby obscuring clear attribution of responsibility.

The comparative analysis indicates that, despite differences in ownership structure—with CNN operating as a commercial broadcaster and the BBC functioning as a publicly funded broadcaster—neither organization adopted a fully impartial approach to reporting. Instead, both engaged in strategic framing and gatekeeping practices that shaped international public opinion. Notably, the findings suggest that CNN exhibited a more pronounced degree of bias, thereby challenging assumptions that commercial media necessarily enjoy greater editorial independence and raising broader questions regarding the neutrality of influential international news organizations in highly politicized conflict reporting (Wolfsfeld, 2011, p. 120; Reese, 2007, p. 150). This pattern further illustrates the extent to which media narratives may align with prevailing political and ideological interests regardless of ownership structure, particularly in the context of armed conflict (Entman & Rojecki, 2001, p. 65).

These findings are consistent with previous research on international media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Wolfsfeld (2011) argues that Western media frequently alternate between emphasizing Israeli security concerns and highlighting Palestinian suffering, while rarely presenting integrated or balanced representations. Likewise, Entman (1993) maintains that media framing shapes the interpretation of international events by legitimizing particular power structures and delegitimizing competing claims, a dynamic clearly reflected in the reporting strategies adopted by both the BBC and CNN. Similarly, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue that gatekeeping decisions are often influenced by political and economic considerations that constrain journalistic autonomy and privilege narratives aligned with national interests.

Furthermore, the ambivalence observed in the BBC's "playing a double game" strategy is broadly consistent with Wallace's (2017) concept of

"strategic balance," whereby public broadcasters seek to preserve domestic and international credibility while navigating competing political pressures. In contrast, CNN's more polarized framing is consistent with critiques of U.S.-based media organizations that prioritize state-centered security narratives in their international reporting (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 115).

The implications of these findings extend beyond media studies to broader issues of international conflict, public diplomacy, and global public opinion. Media framing has a significant influence on both public attitudes and policymaking by shaping perceptions of legitimacy, responsibility, and victimhood among state and non-state actors (Reese, 2007, p. 160). Consequently, news organizations can either intensify conflict polarization or encourage greater empathy and understanding. The selective patterns of representation identified in this study therefore have important implications for peacebuilding efforts, as they may reinforce existing divisions while legitimizing the continuation of conflict.

In conclusion, this study provides an empirical assessment of how two major international news organizations framed one of the most controversial humanitarian incidents of the Gaza war. The findings demonstrate the limitations of journalistic neutrality in politically sensitive contexts and underscore the importance of media literacy and critical engagement with international news. Future research could examine audience reception of these narratives and investigate the role of digital and alternative media platforms in reinforcing or challenging dominant news frames. Ultimately, news organizations bear an ethical responsibility to recognize and minimize bias while striving to produce balanced conflict reporting that promotes informed public debate.

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