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## A Discursive Representation of Reporter ‘Shireen Abu Akleh’ during Conflict between Palestine & Israel

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### ABSTRAK

Kematian jurnalis Al-Jazeera, Shireen Abu Akleh, pada 11 Mei 2022, menimbulkan ketidakpastian di kalangan publik mengenai apakah dia sengaja menjadi target tentara Israel atau terbunuh oleh tembakan Palestina. Studi ini meneliti representasi diskursif tentang Shireen Abu Akleh, warga Palestina, dan tentara Israel selama konflik tersebut melalui lensa analisis wacana kritis sebagaimana diuraikan oleh Fairclough, yang mencakup tiga tahap: deskripsi, interpretasi, dan penjelasan. Analisis ini mengungkapkan bahwa baik Al-Jazeera maupun BBC News membangun identitas positif untuk Shireen Abu Akleh. Namun, BBC News secara khusus menekankan kematiannya sebagai akibat dari perannya sebagai jurnalis. Al-Jazeera secara eksplisit menyalahkan Israel atas kematiannya, sedangkan BBC News lebih menyoroti penggambaran warga Palestina sebagai teroris dan tidak kooperatif. Hal ini menunjukkan adanya bias dalam media online, yang secara halus mendukung pihak yang dianggap sebagai penjahat sambil menunjukkan bagaimana wacana membentuk persepsi masyarakat tentang keadilan dan kebenaran.

### ABSTRACT

*The death of Al-Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh on May 11, 2022, left the public uncertain whether she was intentionally targeted by the Israeli army or killed by Palestinian gunfire. This study investigates the discursive representation of Shireen Abu Akleh, Palestinians, and Israeli soldiers during the conflict through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as outlined by Fairclough, encompassing the three stages of description, interpretation, and explanation. The analysis reveals that both Al-Jazeera and BBC News constructed a positive identity for Shireen Abu Akleh. However, BBC News notably emphasized her death as a consequence of her role as a reporter. Al-Jazeera explicitly attributed responsibility for her death to Israelis, whereas BBC News highlighted portrayals of Palestinians as terrorists and uncooperative. This demonstrates online media biases, subtly favoring the villains while showcasing how discourse shapes societal perceptions of justice and truth.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

On May 11, 2022, Al-Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh was killed while covering an Israeli raid in Jenin, West Bank. Conflicting accounts suggest she was either targeted by an Israeli soldier or hit by Palestinian gunfire, contributing to public uncertainty and revealing potential biases in online news media. This case exemplifies the complexities in discerning truth amidst varied and often partisan reporting.

Online news media bias is shaped by the sensitivities in constructing news stories, including the interests of advertisers, governments, and powerful entities (Paul & Elder, 2006). This study focuses on the third sensitivity: the interests of powerful groups in maintaining a favorable public image [1]. News stories often project a positive image of certain groups while portraying their opposition negatively, potentially manipulating narratives and transforming victims into villains and vice versa.

Using the discourse of language through which power relations are exercised, online media shape narratives that appeal to the public [1]. These outlets influence public beliefs about specific groups or issues, sometimes obscuring the truth. Notable examples include Al-Jazeera and BBC News.

Al-Jazeera, Qatar's second prominent international network launched in November 2006, is known for its Middle Eastern perspective on international conflicts, often countering Western media [2]. It provides a platform for dissenting groups, especially those abroad, to express their views [3]. Some studies suggest that Al-Jazeera tends to favor Palestinian perspectives over Israeli ones, indicating a lack of objectivity [1]. Conversely, others argue that Al-Jazeera delivers more honest and fair news coverage [3].

Compared to Al-Jazeera, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), first launched in October 1991, is often perceived as more Israel-centric in its coverage of Israel-Palestine conflicts. This perspective is rooted in the historical context of the British government's promise to establish a homeland for Jews in Palestinian territories during its mandate from 1917 to 1948, which some argue influences the BBC to frame Israel favorably [4]. Nevertheless, many still consider the BBC a trustworthy and accurate global news provider [5].

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as outlined by Fairclough [6] to reveal how social power and ideology are constructed through language in texts. CDA is particularly suitable for analyzing news reports because it incorporates a three-dimensional framework: description, interpretation, and explanation [6]. By implementing these stages, this study aims to critically construct conclusions about the discourse surrounding Shireen Abu Akleh's death and the portrayal of Palestinian and Israeli groups in news reports from both BBC News and Al-Jazeera.

Drawing on Shireen Abu Akleh's case, this study deliberately analyzes the discourse of news reports published by BBC News, focusing on sensitivity to powerful group interests. It examines how the BBC constructs the narrative surrounding Shireen's death and the portrayal of both Palestinian and Israeli groups. Additionally, news from Al-Jazeera is analyzed to facilitate a clear comparison and deeper understanding of the discourse used by both media outlets. This comparative approach aims to uncover potential biases and the influence of powerful interests in shaping public perception.

## **2. METHOD**

This study uses qualitative approach and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as formulated by Fairclough [6]. CDA seeks to uncover how social power and ideology are constructed and conveyed through language in texts. Texts can enact, reproduce, legitimize, and even challenge inequality and social power abuse in political or social circumstances [10]. CDA is particularly well-suited for analyzing news reports as it employs a three-dimensional framework: description, interpretation, and explanation [6]. By applying these three stages, this study aims to critically analyze the discourse surrounding Shireen Abu Akleh's death and the portrayal of Palestinian and Israeli groups in news reports from both BBC News and Al-Jazeera.

This study employed a three-stage analysis. First, the news reports on Shireen Abu Akleh's death were examined based on vocabulary, including lexical counts and choices, as well as positive and negative representations of each image. Second, the interpretation stage focused on the context, individuals involved, and their relationships as depicted in the text. Finally, the correlation between the interaction in the reports and the broader social context was thoroughly explained.

## **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Description**

The lexical counts and choice for both online media are presented rather inequally. BBC news uses the words 'Israeli' to refer to people of Israel two times more than 'Palestinian' at the ratio of 17 and 8 respectively. In contrast, Al-Jazeera employs the term 'Palestinian' to refer to the Palestine group three times more than 'Israeli'; 23 and 7 respectively. In addition, the word 'kill' is used more frequently at Al-Jazeera, whilst BBC news tends to use 'death' at the proportion of seven fourths. The term 'targeted' is equally distributed in both Al-Jazeera and BBC news, mentioned 3 times in the report.

In terms of the positive representation, BBC news constructs Shireen's image as a well-known, unbiased, kind, brave, professional, prominent, and a journalist with high integrity and regards Israeli's image as cooperative, but does not show any positive representation for Palestinians. In Al-Jazeera, Shireen is also represented as a widely known, widely admired, well-loved, experienced, well-respected, and prominent journalist, but no positive representation is constructed for both Palestinian and Israeli groups.

### **3.2 Interpretation**

The reports from Al-Jazeera and BBC News present different perspectives on the death of Shireen Abu Akleh, an Al-Jazeera journalist killed while reporting on Israeli raids in Jenin, West Bank, on May 11, 2022. This incident, occurring amidst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, implicates both groups, with each media outlet attributing responsibility differently, reflecting their inherent biases.

Al-Jazeera explicitly blames the Israeli army for Shireen's death, using particular lexical choices to underscore their position. They frequently use the word "kill" rather than "death," suggesting clear villainy and victimhood. Words like "target" and "shoot" are also used often, implying that Shireen was deliberately targeted. Al-Jazeera uses more neutral terms to describe each group, referring to Palestinians as "fighters" and Israelis as "army" or "forces."

In contrast, BBC News employs terms with negative connotations for Palestinians, such as "gunman" and "terrorist." They prefer "death" over "kill," suggesting that Shireen's death was not premeditated. BBC frames the incident as still under investigation, indicating that determining responsibility is complex and unresolved. They use the metaphor "killed in cold

blood" to describe Israeli actions, implying ruthlessness, and highlight the inherent risks of journalism, suggesting that the profession's dangers partly contributed to her death.

Regarding grammatical choices, Al-Jazeera frequently uses passive voice when referring to Shireen, emphasizing her role as the target by using the word "kill" about twelve times. In contrast, BBC uses fewer passive constructions for Shireen and more active forms to describe Palestinian actions than Israeli ones. This difference underscores the contrasting depictions of the two groups.

### **3.3 Explanation**

Both Al-Jazeera and BBC News portray Shireen Abu Akleh positively, emphasizing her reputation as a well-known, professional, prominent, and brave journalist. However, BBC uniquely highlights the occupational hazards she faced, suggesting that her death was partly a consequence of the risks inherent in journalism, implying shared responsibility among all parties involved.

When it comes to Palestinians, Al-Jazeera and BBC frame them quite differently. Al-Jazeera uses fewer active forms to describe Palestinians, suggesting they were not the perpetrators of Shireen's death. They present the Palestinian perspective more significantly, giving them a platform to defend against accusations.

In contrast, BBC implicitly portrays Palestinians as the villains responsible for the tragedy. They describe Palestinians as firing indiscriminately, using explosive weapons, and terrorizing. This depiction shifts attention to the possibility that Palestinian actions, or even terrorists, might have caused Shireen's death. BBC also labels them as uncooperative, noting their rejection of a joint investigation and distrust of Israeli investigators. By portraying Palestinians as terrorists and uncooperative, BBC constructs a more dramatic and negative image, potentially provoking readers' suspicion towards them and questioning their motives behind the tragedy.

Al-Jazeera, on the other hand, explicitly constructs a negative image of Israelis, portraying them as premeditated, brutal, and adamant murderers who intentionally targeted Shireen. This claim is supported by an autopsy result suggesting that Shireen was shot in the head, implying deliberate intent. Al-Jazeera frequently uses active forms to suggest that Israelis were the most likely perpetrators.

In contrast, BBC presents a mixed image of the Israeli group. They describe Israelis as cooperative, having initiated a joint investigation to uncover the truth about Shireen's death. BBC also portrays them as victims of Palestinian actions. However, they also depict Israelis negatively as blatant, targeting, and cold-blooded killers. Despite this negative portrayal, the image of Israelis as killers is less dramatic than that of terrorists or uncooperative groups, reducing the suspicion of hidden motives behind the tragedy. This nuanced portrayal suggests a media bias in favor of Israel, as BBC constructs both positive and negative images of Israelis to maintain an appearance of neutrality while subtly favoring Israel [8] [9]

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Overall, media bias plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions by creating a favorable image of a particular group. In the case of Shireen Abu Akleh's death, one media outlet seemingly aimed to uncover the truth, while the other appeared to shield the perpetrators

by depicting them as victims, thereby eliciting readers' sympathy through selective language. This demonstrates how the power of discourse can skew societal views of truth and justice.

For projection of research, it is recommended to employ interdisciplinary approaches, combining insights from media studies, psychology, sociology, and political science, to understand the complex dynamics of media bias and its broader societal implications.

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