The Complicit Lens: US Media Coverage of Israel’s Genocide in Gaza

Transcript

Eugene Rogan

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to the Middle East Center. It's the Thursday of first week and this is the first of our Thursday seminars for the academic year 26-27. So welcome back for the old timers and welcome for the newcomers. It's a great pleasure to see you all here, to hear from Robin Anderson, Robin Anderson is a professor emeritus of media studies at Fordham University and an award-winning author of a dozen single-authored or co-authored books. Her book, A Century of Media, The Century of War, came out in 2006 and immediately swiped the Alpha Sigma New Book Award for 2007. Her work examines film, television, and media coverage of war, the environment, and elections. She edits the Routledge focus book series on media and humanitarian action, serves as a project-censored judge, and contributes to the annual State of the Free Press. Robin Anderson is on the board of directors of Fairest and Accuracy in Reporting, or FAIR. where she also regularly was scholar.

Robin Andersen

Contributes.

Eugene Rogan

There we go. And is the award judge for the Park Center for Independent Media. Her writing has appeared in Counterpunch, LA Progressive, The Progressive, Salon, Common Dreams, and Cheer Post, among others. Her latest book is The Complicit Lens, US media coverage of Israel's genocide in Gaza published earlier this year with OR Books and of course gives its title to tonight's seminar. I would add that we have 20 copies of the book and I'll make sure that we give Robin time to do a signing at the end of this session. So for those of you who would like to take a copy home, all I can say is it's an extremely important and heavy-hitting book that does justice to the way in which the press has failed in its duty to hold government to account around the question of Gallus' genocide. But I don't want to say more on that. We'd rather hear it from Robert herself. Please join me in accepting a very warm welcome to Robert Magazine.

Robin Andersen

Thank you so much, Eugene, for that wonderful introduction. And I am really so pleased to be here and thanks everybody for coming. I think we're just going to start out and

jump right in and talk about the way that UN legal experts and others on the prevention of genocide who study that know very well that genocide doesn't happen without first a language to incite it and then a language to justify it. The common denominator of any mass atrocity event globally is inflammatory rhetoric and propaganda campaigns. Three days after October 7th, Defense Minister General Ghassan Alon declared Hamas has turned into ISIS. And the residents of Gaza, instead of being appalled by Hamas attacks, they're celebrating. And so we are going to treat them as human animals. And there's not going to be any water, no food, and no electricity And then another Israeli official, Yo Gallant, also said, since we're fighting human animals, we're going to act accordingly. US legacy media did not push back on any of these expressions of hate, even when they continued to tell the world that they were going to turn Gaza into rubble and a tent city, and they were going to just make Gaza hell, which we've seen in the last three years has actually happened. Gazans are living in that hell now. But destroying civilian infrastructure and removing necessities of human life while destroying culture and identity is the definition of genocide. Yet establishment really never pointed out that the rhetoric coming out of state officials and printed over broadcast, printed and aired over broadcast media at a time of great tension, these are the components that define incitement to genocide. Dehumanization of a so-called enemy of course, is also the engine that drives genocide. Hamas was labeled a terrorist organization and the demonization spread rapidly to encompass Palestinians and their culture. The Wall Street Journal op-ed writer was probably the most explicit and the most outrageous when he made this connection and this assertion. said Israel was entitled to do whatever it takes to uproot this evil, depraved culture that resides next to it. So therefore he turned the demonization of Hamas into all the Palestinians. And as we know, they're all over social media. Now many of members of the Knesset and other members in the Israeli cabinet have said things like, Palestinians should not exist. A baby born will be a terrorist. They should be wiped out. You know, those kinds of things. We find them on the internet. Palestinians were undervalued in ways great and small, and media facilitated the disregard for Palestinian life and dignity in many ways. They used abstract numbers and those numbers, they dehumanized people and the abstract numbers were further discredited by adding always by the media that they came from the Gaza Health Ministry or even worse, they came from the Hamas-led Gaza Health Ministry. They egregious imbalances in favor of Israel has been documented in study after study. One content analysis of three major newspapers, US newspaper, found that in the first six weeks, the New York Times, for example, used massacre 53 times to indicate that the death of Israelis killed by Palestinians. but only once to describe a Palestinian killed by Israelis. Keep in mind that in the first 25 days, all of this started happening right away, in the first 25 days, Israel had killed 5,000 Palestinians. There is evidence that US journalists recognize the statements made by Israeli officials as genocidal language. At CNN, for example, as reported by the intercept. There was an all hands on deck meeting six months into the genocide and a reporter objected to the

network's uncritical coverage of the statements made by Israeli officials at the time. The CNN staffer said, a lot of us felt very strongly that very senior CNN anchors We're not challenging the defense minister's use of what is considered under international law to be genocidal language. Terms like human animals and all of the things that made-up the first 7 pages of the South African suit filed in the International Court of Justice. that Israel was committing genocide. US establishment press would not draw out the simple point that if these threats to civilians were carried out, it would result in crimes of war, of such brutality, it would be virtually immeasurable. The outcome has been as heartbreaking as it was predictable. As the US supplied hyper-destructive 2,000 pound bomb that should never be used in civilians, Israel began bombing the Gaza Strip, home to 2.2 million Palestinians and one of the most densely populated places on earth. What I point out in the book also is that basically what we saw as global publics, two very different realities. One was the reality that we found mostly over internet outlets and on our handheld devices live streamed by Palestinian journalists in Gaza and also international news outlets and the reporting primarily of Al Jazeera, but many other Arabic language newspapers and outlets. It was the Palestinian journalists on the ground documenting the destruction and suffering of civilians. They bore witness to the way civilians helped one another, shot together, pulling each other out of the rubble, finding their friends and families, doing what they could to help bury the dead. Journalists, including citizen journalists, suffered displacement, hunger, and illness, all the while live streaming visual evidence and real-time testimony. of the lived experiences and the realities of a genocide. In doing so, they created a new genre of journalism. I believe it's a new genre, and it's based in testimony, civilian care, and international justice. And they did this while suffering threats of certain death from the bombs and direct and deliberately targeted Israeli strikes on them and their families. According to Al-Zeera, Israel has killed at least 3,000 journalists in the slaughter never previously seen in modern conflict. The other reality, the second reality that went over mainstream and legacy and what I call establishment media was a constructive view. It was assembled at a distance, choreographed in newsrooms, and based on editorial decisions that shaped the news frame. As it turns out, they were telling journalists what they could and could not say. The US relentlessly repeated Israeli talking points, quoted from IDF spokespersons, and accepted pseudo-evidence without investigation and often reported as fact. False charges with no verification. A livestream genocide was contained and encapsulated with an approved reading narrative. To accomplish this, media had to abandon their journalistic mission to provide accurate information. And what we know about journalism, what do you want from journalism is information and democracy. We want the facts. We want what they do, when they do it, why did they do it, and where they do it. Who did this? Yet they reported on Israeli massacres using fake, mystifying language that often spoke in a passive voice. There was an explosion, as though nobody knew where it came from. They became adept at inventing language that conveyed very little meaning during the flower massacre, if you recall, February

2024, when Israel shot into hungry Palestinians trying to receive humanitarian aid. They were hungry and they needed flower. CNN wrote, it was a chaotic aid delivery and it turned deadly. When Israeli soldiers shot into crowds of hungry Palestinians who were starving because Israel was restricting food and aid and weaponizing hunger, media came up with variations of aid-related deaths, or chaos befell an aid drop. One user posted that the New York Times just can't bring itself to write clear headlines when Israel war crimes are involved. Establishment media followed Israeli talking points and they blamed the victims. IDF snipers weren't responsible for over 100 deaths. Instead, Palestinians had essentially killed themselves by trampling each other in a stampede. Such claims were easily exposed by going to the hospital where the bodies were found and they were found to be killed not by trampling, but bite Israeli bullets. That's what young Al Jazeera journalist Ismail al-Gould did, easily exposing Israeli denials and fabrications. Al-Gould reported the ground truth in Gaza until July 1924, when Israel fired a missile directly into his car. killing Ismail and his colleagues, Rami El-Rifi. They blew them into bits. So let's get back to the way this pro-Israel media frame and justifications were formulated by design. Journalists who worked at the New York Times leaked the editorial directives they were receiving that told them what they could and could not say. They absolutely could not say genocide. That was a taboo word. Most of the lexicon of humanitarian law, such as ethnic cleansing, refugee camps, and occupied territories, were not what they could say. They were banished from news outlets. One Times journalist said in frustration, if you can't say occupation, you are basically taking the occupation out of the coverage which is the actual core of the conflict. Essentially, New York Times editors erased an entire verbiage of humanitarian principles and the international rules of war established over the latter half of the 20th century. Editors banned the very words journalists needed to explain what Israel was doing in Gaza and how the IDF was committing war crimes. From the early US muckrakers, right in at the beginning of the 20th century, all the way through to Eye of Stone, journalists have understood that governments lie. And it's up to journalists to expose why they are lying and how they are lying. But standards of reporting warned journalists not to return to, and the standards of reporting. Journalists are not supposed to return to the sources that have falsified evidence to them before. They're not supposed to return to spokespeople or sources that they know to be fabricators. Yet that's exactly what establishment media did all through the genocide and continued to do. And I don't mean to talk about the genocide in the past tense because it is still going on. IDF spokesperson Daniel Hagari is a good example of this, who was the New York Times favorite source, relentless fed them fabrications to the international press and they repeated his statements over and over again without question. The Zaka, the propagandist organization with direct connections to Netanyahu's PR industry, were also presented as volunteer first responders, as if they had humanitarian training and they knew how to deal with forensic evidence at incidents of mass. of mass murder. But as I mentioned, the Zaka was tied to Netanyahu's PR government outlet. And the

organization had actually already sued the Israeli government for carrying out autopsies. They were completely against forensics. evidence. Netanyahu can be seen on tape commending the Zakka volunteers for their work shaping international public opinion and thereby buying the government time to complete its work, he said. The leader of the Southern Command and the most effective tale killer was a fellow named Yasi Landau, identified by Heretz, Israel's newspaper, the oldest newspaper in Israel, as the person most responsible for spreading the fabrications about October 7th. From the 40 beheaded baby story to the mother whose fetus was cut from her belly and stabbed to the burning of infants, none of it was true. The New York Times said Landau used Landau later by December, end of December, to confirm its highly discredited December 2023 rape story, Screams Without Words, a piece purporting to prove that Hamas weaponized sexual violence and rape and assault on October 7th. In fact, the story was likely based on a focus group research findings into the most effective anti-Hamas propaganda. Studies indicated that Hamas ****** women was found to be more effective in evoking outrage than saying that Hamas had merely killed civilians. With that story, over 70 journalism professors signed a petition along with many others demanding that the Times retract the story and investigate how it was published. Screams Without Words was also released in late December and distracted the world from the South African genocide case that was being filed at the International Court of Justice at that time. Another kind of key aspect that I talk about in the book is the way that the origin story of the genocide. So October 7th was used as an origin story. Hamas was the only perpetrator of violence, and all that violence began on October 7th. US establishment media repeated the claim that Hamas had no reason to attack Israel. The attack had come from nowhere, even though Amnesty International, for example, and Human Rights Watch, had found the Israeli regime to be a brutal occupation and an apartheid system. Here we find that censorship is the other side of a coin to a propaganda environment that creates mythic media frames. The assertion that Hamas started the war required the erasure of history and context. Just one detail of that history is the fact that Israeli had killed more than 7,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip from the year 2000 up until October 7, 2023. And that's according to Israel's own human rights organization, Bet-e Salam. Without historical context, Hamas was portrayed as a gang of cardboard characters, the brutal bloodthirsty Arab terrorists, the villains of action adventure films and videotapes. This made them culpable of any invented atrocity tale, from beheading babies to weaponizing rape. The October 7th frame became a mantra that justified every Israeli bomb and strike that killed aid workers, teachers and journalists, doctors and nurses. Everything was justified because media would repeat that mantra that Hamas had killed 120 Israelis, mostly civilians, on October 7th. Israeli strikes and bombs were forever targeting only Hamas. And they were trying to prevent, of course, civilian deaths, which of course they were not. And Israeli strikes and bombs therefore were always presented as retaliatory, defensive, and therefore justified. What's so fascinating is that That narrative had been dismantled

already in the Israeli media early on after October 7th. Israel killed its own civilians. They called for the Hannibal directive, the military command that hostages should be killed so as not to be used for negotiations. Ironically, Israeli hostage testimony confirming this was published widely in Heretz on channel 12, other Hebrew language media. The testimony of a young woman from Kibbutz Beri, Yasmin Poret, survived an Israeli military attack there that killed almost a dozen of her fellow hostages. And Israeli pilots flying Apache helicopters bombed the music festival site, even though they admitted that they couldn't tell whether they were hitting Hamas or Israeli hostages. The latest leaks about October 7th confirmed the ones we've been seeing lately that were about a week and a half ago also published in Haaretz. that Netanyahu was warned about October 7th. In the same story, Hamas also reported that Hamas had offered to release the hostages after that first day with nothing in return, but the Israelis refused. That story really wasn't picked up as much as the Netanyahu story that Netanyahu knew. But the other part of the report was not really picked up in Western media. Keep in mind that when I'm talking about US media, there are actually more content analysis of the BBC and UK media. And they follow much of the same, almost verbatim, that what I'm outlining and identifying here. And as early as January 2024, and what I wrote in the book then was that 52 family members of those killed at the music festival sued the IDF for allowing the festival to take place, even though there was a lot of chatter and the military actually knew that something was going to happen. Hamas did not know there was a music festival there at the time. Media abandoned basic fairness when they erased the voices of Palestinians. Occasionally A Palestinian was allowed to break through the barrage of Israeli messaging. But as Palestinian-American writer Hala Alyan pointed out, each time the rare Palestinian activist, lawyer, or professor actually appeared on media, They were baited and interrupted on air, if not silenced altogether. They are being made to sing for the supper of airtime and fair coverage, she said. They were begging reporters to simply do the most basic tasks of their job. Media reporting taken altogether amounts to a body of fiction and laid the groundwork for the denials of genocide that Netanyahu repeats today. most recently at the 81st UN General Assembly in New York on Thursday, September 24th of this year. So today, instead of getting a standing ovation like he did in July 2024 in front of the US Congress, in which all he did really was tell the same propaganda, Netanyahu stood at the lectern and saw delegates from 77 countries that were attending the General Assembly walk out on the UN. Israel is increasingly reviled as a rogue state around the globe, and the list of countries imposing sanctions has grown from to 54 with 110 sanctions. And Israel can only descend further into a world of pain, boycotts, isolation, and decline. When I think about this genocide, I have often been drawn to the words of the Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Palestinian territory. Francesca Abenez, who I believe was here earlier this week. Because of her courage, her moral compass, and her unfailing dedication to the truth, I use these words to open the book. Israeli has written one of the darkest pages of human history, and the world is

still holding the pen. Gaza is probably the most well, certainly, the most well-documented genocide in history, and yet it remains the most denied, even as Israel claims not to be doing what we can all see with our eyes that they're doing. We also see with our own eyes on media outlets the words of many rabidly anti-Palestinian Israeli officials, who continue to say that they should all be slaughtered and God should be damptied and the entire Palestinian lands should be annexed. So we live in this very strange, at this moment, we're kind of on this cusp of How is this going to end? When will they start admitting the truth? And I don't think that the Israelis will stop or start admitting the truth until US media and Western media, establishment media begins also to tell the truth. We found that our Western media does not really represent global public opinion, the global anti-genocide movement. And yet, mainstream media continues to simply tell their side of the story. So as it gets harder and harder for pro-Israeli groups to justify the genocide and the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, they are resorting to claims that the images and evidence of Gaza's destruction are simply not real. They are particularly threatened by a few recent accounts published in reliable pro-Israeli outlets like the New York Times. Currently, the Times is being sued by a Florida investment group for anti-Israel bias. I know it seems crazy. The pretzel logic that refuses to believe what they are seeing forces them to assume that a paper like the New York Times owned by a prominent New York Jewish family, the Salzburgers, is inventing facts about Gaza just to put Israel in a bad light. Depleted of plausible defenses, Israeli Hasbara is now making war in reality. They've spent 3/4 of a billion dollars just this year on Hasbara. any of the messengers, they're making one, any of the messengers holding them responsible, including actors, celebrity performers, authors, writers, advocates, including the UN, as Trump is doing, attacking the International Criminal Court. As Netanyahu takes his battle into the information sphere, as he calls it, Israel fights for time to complete the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian lands. We know that Israel can't sustain what it's doing, but I wish that it would just stop engaging in genocide now, but they're holding out as much as they can. The complicit lens makes the connection between those who wield the weapons currently destroying our world. And those who control the discursive language used to justify that world. The journalist's job should be to represent the casualties of this order, not to ignore, condone, or celebrate the spectacles of destruction, or forever present only the words of the perpetrators and those who benefit from it. There must be a journalism that works against the justification for genocide that refuses to obscure its causes, its realities, and to understand its consequences for all of us. Thank you.

Eugene Rogan

Do you want to take questions from the podium or Want to sit at the table?