



PALESTINE IN THE PRESS

A HANDBOOK FOR ACTION ON BETTER
REPORTING ON PALESTINE IN AOTEAROA.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE

- 01** Intro
- 04** Quick Guide to Action
- 05** What We're Seeing
- 11** What We Can Do
(How to Complain)
- 17** What We Can Ask
For Instead
- 21** Last Thoughts

INTRO

If you have picked up this handbook, there's a high chance you're feeling the gap between what's being broadcast from the ground in Gaza right now - what we are seeing - and how it's being reported in our news media in Aotearoa.

If we want to see that gap close, we need to be strategic. This handbook hopes to support the vast organising efforts around our country and adding a drop to the wave of change, by focusing on how the story is being told.

The bombardment of Gaza is a crisis for those managing to live through it, and for the humanity of our world. One way of finding control in a crisis is to make sense of it. If we don't have reliable facts or context to help us do that, the door opens for misinformation. This benefits those profiting from our crises; not only from the occupation of Palestine and ongoing colonial projects the world over, but from all global issues including worker exploitation and the collapse of our ecosystem. Those in power benefit because the further we are from understanding reality, the further we get from changing it. Words are powerful.

While many people are right now looking to journalists on the ground as well as Palestinian educators and thinkers to give a picture of what's happening and how we got here, others are receiving information filtered through the lens of the Israeli military and those with economic and political interests in the occupation - most notably the United States.

Many social media platforms are driving the spread of this information, as they are accountable to shareholders, not principles of journalistic integrity. (In fact, we know that Meta is actively working to silence Palestinian voices and supporters to the point where people are using numbers and symbols in place of letters in words such as 'g3noc1de', occupat!on, and '!sr@el' to avoid censorship.)

Ethical journalism, which is accountable to principles of thoroughness, accuracy, and fairness, can act as an anchor in a sea of information and noise. The news still matters to a huge number of people in Aotearoa - many of whom are unlikely to come across raw footage from Gaza, and so are reliant on hearing factual stories the old school way - on their TV screens, on the radio or in the newspaper. But right now, many of our news sites are (whether consciously or unconsciously) mirroring the imbalance in our world, tilting toward imperialist power, and echoing a worldview which prioritises the lives and human rights of Israelis over Palestinians, and does not hold Israel accountable for its actions in the same way other states are held accountable when their leaders breach international law. This is where people power comes in. If we understand what we're seeing, and know how to ask for better, not only will we upskill our movement, but we might actually begin to see a shift in reporting.

In the short term, a shift in reporting would help increase public understanding of the occupation in Palestine.

The more understanding there is of the historic context for events in Gaza, the more likely we are to see support grow, and therefore stronger action from our representatives for a permanent ceasefire.

Long term, growing public understanding would strengthen the movement for a free Palestine: starting with the official recognition of Palestinian statehood by our government.

Contextually accurate and courageous reporting could help end the bombardment, and move us toward justice. This is why we need our media to be the best that it can be. To give us the full picture, and to be brave.

We hope this handbook provides the information and tools necessary to help you take action to shift journalism in Aotearoa. We hope it empowers those making decisions in newsrooms and putting together headlines, to tell the story of Palestine through the lens of fact - however difficult that task may be, and however strong the current of colonial narratives remain. We hope these lessons will help you to continue to take action in love, and with strength and resolve.

As has been repeated through these past weeks, after this - things will never be the same. We can't take back all the pain and precious lives lost.

What we can do is use what we have, and take action from where we are at. One step in front of the other, toward a world where justice is the seed, peace is the flower, and everyone is free.



A QUICK GUIDE TO TAKING ACTION

You read, see or hear concerning reporting on what's happening in Palestine from a news outlet in NZ. **01**

Find out who covered the story, address a complaint to them. Be specific, be human, give them the benefit of the doubt. **Section: How to Complain**

03

02

Identify the key parts that trouble you - try to be specific. **Section: What We're Seeing**

04

Include suggestions for how coverage could be better. **Section: What We Can Ask for Instead.**

WHAT WE ARE SEEING

Many people are watching events in Gaza and the Occupied Territories unfold via raw footage captured by citizens and journalists on the ground - and then feeling confused and upset or angry when news reports don't seem to reflect the urgency of the reality they're witnessing. **Dissatisfaction with media reporting can stem from many things, but some common issues are:**

USE OF THE PASSIVE VOICE

Many people feel that there is a discrepancy between the way Israeli and Palestinian deaths are reported. For example, it is not uncommon to see Israelis killed in the October 7 attacks by Hamas as "murdered" while Palestinians killed by Israeli bombing in the aftermath of those attacks are described as having "died". This softer language often conceals the identity of the perpetrator, holding Israel less accountable for its actions.

A 2021 study looking at 50 years of New York Times coverage of the conflict found "a disproportionate use of the passive voice to refer to negative or violent action perpetrated towards Palestinians".

We can also see passive language being used to talk about the effects of Israel's siege on Gaza, namely the shutting off of fuel, water and power, and the blockade of entry of food. Palestinians starving, dying of thirst or unable to receive life-saving treatments in hospitals for example, are often talked about as though they are naturalistic, passive events, rather than the direct result of the decisions and actions of the Israeli government and defence force.

SLANTED LANGUAGE

Words matter, and how we talk about something can have a huge impact on how an event or people are perceived. Subtle - perhaps even unconscious - humanising of Israelis and dehumanising of Palestinians is a common complaint. For example: Palestinian prisoners released during a hostage swap were commonly referred to as being "under the age of 18" where Israeli hostages of the same age were referred to as "children" - a subtle but dehumanising difference. Ordinary people in Gaza are also often accused of being "human shields", a term commonly repeated in media reporting, while ordinary Israeli citizens are referred to, correctly, as civilians.

LACK OF CONTEXT

There's a tendency for reporting on the current Israel-Palestine situation to act as if history began with Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7. But these terrible attacks happened in a very specific historic context. Israel has occupied both West Bank Palestine and Gaza for nearly 60 years, since the Six Day War of 1967. This war itself was born from the establishment of Israel in 1948, an event which killed and displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and is referred to as the Nakba (catastrophe). Palestinians currently live under a system of apartheid and military repression - with those in Gaza surrounded by an armed wall, making it, for many, impossible to leave. This is why it is common to hear Gaza referred to as an 'open air prison'. Leaving out this context, or using language which implies everything started out of the blue on October 7 2023, stops people from being able to contextualise and gain a deeper understanding of why what is currently happening is happening.

FALSE SYMMETRY

The current attacks on Gaza by Israel are commonly described as being a "conflict" or "war" between two equal entities. In reality, Israel is one of the world's most powerful military states, waging war against people within a territory it currently occupies.

Many reports use terms like "clashes" to describe Israeli police and military attacks on Palestinian civilians, with an implication that the impacts of this are felt equally on both sides, or that the might of each party is equally matched.

The fact is that Israel's Iron Dome system has managed to protect Israeli citizens from most of Hamas' rocket attacks, while Israeli bombing campaigns have destroyed 18 per cent of Gaza's civilian infrastructure including more than 60 per cent of residential housing and 77 per cent of its hospitals, and killed more than 19,000 civilians - many of whom are buried beneath the rubble and not currently counted among the dead. Israel has the ability to restrict food, water and fuel to the region- while manning a concrete wall that stops anyone from leaving or entering.

The power imbalance of 'occupier' and 'occupied' was also overlooked through the prisoner and hostage swaps. During the four days of prisoner exchange, Israel reportedly arrested 133 Palestinians, almost the same amount as the 150 released. They were able to do this because of Israel's draconian military laws which allow the arrest and detention of Palestinians for long sentences for as little as posting on social media or throwing stones. Save the Children has estimated that Israel has detained over 20,000 children over the past two decades, with 880 detained this year alone. Many outlets reported on the swap without including any of this context. Furthermore, this article from Stuff not only leaves the context out, but centres on quotes from an Israeli minister characterising the Palestinian detainees as terrorists. This works to both give false symmetry, while misleading the reader about who Israel detains and why.

UNCRITICALLY PUBLISHING UNSUBSTANTIATED CLAIMS

It is difficult to quickly know the facts on the ground in the middle of an active conflict - and this is something both Hamas and Israeli leaders are conscious of exploiting. In Western media, official statements from the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and Israeli officials are treated with very little scepticism, despite the fact that Israeli officials have been found to lie about events repeatedly - often only admitting that previous statements were untrue long after the story has moved on, and people are no longer as engaged with the issue. Meanwhile, all Palestinian voices are treated with suspicion and subjected to much more rigorous questioning. There is a clear double standard applied when it comes to reporting or repeating claims which have not yet been 100% verified.

When you see reporting that you feel isn't up to scratch, **you can do something about it**. But it can be hard to know how to engage with the media in a way that feels like someone is really listening.

WHAT WE CAN DO

HOW TO COMPLAIN

There are several ways you can complain: you can get in touch with a journalist directly (their emails are usually linked to their stories, or you can find them online; the format is usually `firstname.lastname@mediacompany.co.nz`), or you can get in touch with the newsroom directly. You could email the generic feedback or complaints email on a news organisation's website, or you could find out who is the news director, chief reporter or editor at a publication and contact them directly.

Every news organisation will have a code of conduct and ethics outlined on its website - you can read through this to understand which standard you believe has been breached, and refer to it in your complaint.

If you get in touch with the editor of a publication - whether that be print, radio, online or TV - and you are unhappy with their response, you can then escalate your complaint to either the Media Council or the Broadcasting Standards Authority. Instructions for how to make a complaint can be found online at each of their websites.

Zionist lobbyists in New Zealand are already highly adept at using the complaints process to not only try to get a right of reply or parts of stories changed, but also to exert a consistent pressure which will make journalists consider how to frame a story or what to write in the first place. This is a case of the squeaky wheel getting the oil - if you consistently complain effectively about certain kinds of coverage, news organisations and journalists will start to reflexively consider how to cover something in such a way that it won't receive a complaint, whether that's making sure to have certain kinds of voices quoted, or to avoid certain kinds of language.

And, if you don't hear back - **keep following up**. The more people get in touch, the clearer it becomes to those making the decisions in newsrooms that this is an issue people care about and want better on.

WHY CAN'T I SEE WHO WROTE THE STORY?

The vast majority of the “on the ground” reporting on Palestine and Israel is being done by overseas journalists, not local journalists. Republishing stories by the BBC, Associated Press (AP), Reuters, the New York Times or other big overseas media companies is how local organisations cover most world news - this is referred to as using “wire copy”. You can tell if a story on a local news website is wire copy, because it will have the name of the media company it came from at the top of the story, instead of a journalist’s name or just “NZ Herald”, “TVNZ” or “Stuff”.

In these instances, you can contact the newsroom or editor directly.

The contracts our local newsrooms sign when they pay to use wire copy stipulate that the copy (the words in the article) cannot be changed. However, we can request that headlines and standfirsts (the sentence or two that goes above the article, which shows up on a news organisation’s home page) be more responsibly framed and worded.

It can also be requested that TV packages, which are often cut together using pre-recorded reporting from TV reporters on the ground, be put together with more balance, and that the hourly bulletins read out on the radio be responsible and balanced in their wording and framing.

HOW TO GET A BETTER RESPONSE FROM A PUBLICATION

(SO THAT A FORMAL COMPLAINT ISN'T NECESSARY)

Formal complaints take a while to be adjudicated on, and the breach would have to be very serious to be upheld. It would be better to try to meaningfully engage with the author or publisher of a story you believe is harmful or poorly reported.

To successfully engage with a journalist, first think about how you want to engage before you fire off an email. The way you approach communication is important - you may rightly feel upset or angry; however, remember that journalists are people too, and most people don't respond well to being subjected to generalised accusations such as that they are lazy, stupid, or enabling genocide. Reporters deal with negative feedback from the public every day, and most will disengage immediately if the tone is rude, aggressive or makes sweeping statements.

Be cordial, constructive, relatively brief and specific about what it is that you have an issue with. For example, it's hard as a single journalist to remedy a complaint that says the organisation you work for is "enabling genocide", but it is possible to fix a headline which uncritically repeats comments from the IDF which are currently contested. Give background information to bolster your case, but be aware of length and complexity - journalists are busy, and won't necessarily have the time to read a long email.

Humanise yourself - say why you care about this issue, and make it clear you're raising an issue from a place of caring about good journalism. If the journalist you are writing to has done other work you admire, you could reference that work to show that you believe they are capable of doing better (you could also contact them just to thank them if you come across a story you thought was good!). Most journalists want to do a decent job, and feel a responsibility to their readers, listeners and viewers (us!).

Ask them to be brave -

What we are currently seeing unfolding is unlike anything most journalists will have had to cover in their lifetimes. The norms around how the media reports and the public receives information about Israel and Palestine is changing in real time, and the opportunity to tell a more truthful version of history has never been more possible.

Where you have respected voices such as those from the UN, or organisations like the Red Cross, use them to lend legitimacy to your arguments. A powerful quote or use of terms such as "genocide" from institutionally respected figures or organisations carries weight in journalism. Terms like apartheid, persecution, or ethnic supremacy have gained institutional recognition after years of Palestinian advocacy, and there's an argument that journalists need to examine whether coverage reflects that reality.

Similarly, journalists value the opinions of other journalists - and we have so far seen open letters signed by journalists in Australia, the US and the UK asking for better coverage of this conflict since October. **Read the letters and take lines from them to underscore the importance of journalistic principles, in the language used by their own colleagues.**

If you are a paid subscriber to a news organisation, your word should carry extra weight, especially if you are contacting an editor or someone higher up in a newsroom. You may want to say you are considering cancelling a subscription, but don't make empty threats. It can be powerful to explain why you paid for this organisation's news in the first place, and then outline how you feel they are not upholding the standards you expect.

After you have outlined the nature of your complaint, suggest what you would like to see - it's easy to say what we don't like, but it's more helpful to be proactive about outlining what it is that we'd like to see instead.

WHAT WE CAN ASK FOR INSTEAD

- **For more local reporting which includes Palestinian voices** – and a diversity of them too – to be included.
- **Local Palestinians have said they wish that journalists would work harder to form relationships** with their communities, and feature Palestinian voices more prominently. We should expect that journalists seek out and call upon relationships with representatives from groups such as (for example) Justice for Palestine, and Palestinian Youth Aotearoa.
- The Palestinian community has also expressed concern about genocidal language from Israeli government officials being repeated uncritically. It's important to know what leaders are saying, but it has to be considered that this language, if repeated without challenge, has a direct impact on their safety and lives in Aotearoa.
- **To hear from a wider variety of Jewish voices** – because Jews are not a monolith, and not all Jews are Zionists. The Jewish Council of NZ is a Zionist lobby group, and does not represent all Jews in NZ. Some other groups representing Jews in Aotearoa include Alternative Jewish Voices and Dayenu.

- **For journalists to check their internal biases when it comes to anti-Arab or anti-Palestinian language and sentiments.** There is a mismatch where pro-Palestinian voices, especially if they are Arab or Palestinian, must walk a tightrope in order not to be accused of anti-semitism (for example, the reflexive request to condemn Hamas), and reporters seem to intuitively understand when language could be construed as anti-semitic or bordering on hate speech. This is, on balance, a good thing; however, this same instinct isn't present when quoting Zionist interviewees - a lot of very charged, racist language is treated as acceptable when the reverse would never pass muster.
- **That the Israeli government's claims be treated with the same scepticism as those from Hamas,** as both are actors in this conflict. The Israeli government routinely lies and no one appears to hold them to account for that. This is not the case for most governments or political organisations.
- **For language that treats Palestinian lives as equal to Israeli lives.** For example, the horrific attacks by Hamas on October 7 are often described using appropriately critical language to reflect the violence of the perpetrators, but the Israeli government's response is often described in more passive or opaque language, which means the reader is invited to feel more strongly or sympathetically to one side than the other. Point out that the public is really picking up on this discrepancy, despite the fact that the assault on Gaza is so aggressive. People are horrified by what they are seeing and they do not feel that the press is reflecting this reality at all.

- **For the conflict, as well as responses in Aotearoa, to be given priority** by making an effort to report on local demonstrations and responses accurately, and dedicating a sufficient amount of time and space in news segments.
- **For language which makes it clear that all of this didn't start on October 7!** While not every news story can give 75 years of history, it's important not to frame Israel's current actions as mere retaliation for Hamas' latest attack - all of this is occurring in the context of 75 years of occupation and subjugation. People are beginning to understand this in greater numbers, but they are not seeing it reflected in a lot of reporting.
- **We can ask for the kind of journalism which can provide deeper context** - ask for more feature writing or op-eds which help to explain the historical context and why it matters.
- **For the western support of Israel to be allowed to be questioned.** To do this is a brave stance to take, but it's the right one! So ask them to be brave! To run pieces which are out of step with official US or Israeli lines but which reflect the reality of the enormity of what's happening.
- **For there to be a focus on the brutal and inhumane consequences of the violence, that emphasises its scale and devastating effects on families and communities.** To humanise Palestinians wherever possible - so that they are seen as people, not just numbers. Really insist on pointing out the humanity of Palestinians and their inherent worth as people.

- **Ask journalists to engage with the conflict on a deeper level** so that they are able to ask more informed questions in interviews and get better, more nuanced and complex answers - and also so that they are able to challenge or more deeply engage with Zionist arguments when they get made. Suggest reading you personally found useful or illuminating.
- **For stories to be contextualised by perspectives from human rights experts.** International law is central to the understanding of many aspects of the Gaza-Israel violence. The International Committee of the Red Cross is the internationally recognised authority on this stuff, and various UN bodies can also speak with authority on these matters. For example, United Nations experts say Palestinians in Gaza are facing the risk of genocide, and UN special rapporteur Francesca Albanese is very clear that everything currently happening must be put into the context of the ongoing occupation.

Point out that where people feel there is too much of a discrepancy between what they can see happening and how it's framed by the media, it can undermine people's faith and trust in news organisations. Emphasise that you respect and value the fourth estate, but that news organisations must do their jobs to avoid eroding their own power.

SOMETHING TO KEEP IN MIND

Newsrooms can shape public opinion - but they can also be shaped by public opinion. A growing number of people are noticing the discrepancies between raw footage coming out of Gaza and what they are seeing reported in the news. If enough people point out that this difference is eroding their trust in media organisations, they will have to listen, as most newsroom leaders are sensitive to the idea that the public is losing trust in their institutions.

And the media can follow people-led movements: for example, the impact of #MeToo on the way sexual violence was treated and covered in journalism, and whose stories were deemed worth telling and how was enormously impacted by the social change that followed it.

And, while the news reflects the status quo, which in the west is currently reflexively pro-Israel, individual journalists often lean left and do care deeply about justice and standing up for the underdog. Thoughtful, well articulated criticism can have a huge impact on an individual journalist, because a decent journalist cares about doing meaningful work and about serving the public well.

Enough voices can make a difference!

This resource was put together by a group of concerned journalists in Aotearoa in collaboration with ActionStation. Shout out to Justice for Palestine and Dayenu: NZ Jews Against Occupation for supporting this project.

JUSTICE THE SEED
PEACE THE FLOWER.

