

The DEC Gaza Appeal: Why The BBC Was Right To Refuse (Guest blog)

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When the BBC refused to show the Disaster Emergency Appeal for Gaza last year it was accused of cowardice and even partiality towards the Israelis. But is there an ethical and even humanitarian case for the line taken by the BBC in defence of its journalistic values? [Polis Summer School student Lindsay Page](#) here examines the moral arguments and asks whether the BBC actually made the right decision according to cosmopolitan principles.

Mediating a ‘managed disaster’: the BBC and the DEC’s Gaza crisis appeal by Lindsay Page



Lindsay Page

On January 27, 2009, nine days after a unilaterally declared ceasefire between Israel and militant groups in Gaza, Palestine, much public and media attention – both mainstream and citizen-generated – concerned the BBC’s decision not to air a Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)’s appeal for aid to Gaza. Public groups instantly sprang up on the social networking website Facebook, to mobilize young people in voicing their opinions against the BBC’s decision. One user wondered what the BBC was “afraid of”; another commented that the BBC was “trying to force a balance when there is no balance.”

Such a public reaction against the BBC reflects the notion that mass media create the way in which the world is viewed and construed by many of its citizens. Rapid developments in media technologies and structures have established of a new sphere for civic engagement and experience.

Welcome To The Mediapolis

Increasingly interactive and novel, it is what Roger Silverstone calls the *mediapolis*: the public space where contemporary political life finds its place, where the materiality of the world is constructed through (primarily) electronically communicated public speech and action. This paper will argue that, within this context, the BBC considered and made a controversial yet sound decision not to air DEC’s Gaza appeal.

In general, mediation is responsible for cultural transformations of our time, and the new media landscape – where ideally, questions are asked, debate takes place, and differences of time and geography are nearly negated – may foster more cosmopolitan societies.

Dynamic Cosmopolitanism

If mediation is about lifting people from their idiosyncratic interests and moving them toward the realm of “universal” values, cosmopolitanism may even be an organic development. Cosmopolitanism is, however, itself an ostensibly dynamic concept. For Appiah, two elements intertwine within the notion:

One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kind, or formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives.

Thus, when considering the how political conflict zones are viewed, the potential for cosmopolitanism is presumably derived from representing sufferers (Appiah’s “particular human lives”) using values, motivating spectators to take a public stance vis-à-vis the sufferers’ misfortunes

Nuanced Response

In reality, as reactions to the BBC's decision on aid to Gaza showed, progress is more nuanced. While cosmopolitanism may be an aspiration, politics, media literacy, and journalistic pressures often preclude suffering from being presented in a way that inspires well-informed societal action.

Adding further complexity to the mediated understanding of conflict in Gaza is the idea of intimacy at a distance: catastrophes are viewed almost immediately, often at the expense of complex analysis or context.

Cohen proposes that the media in effect create a disaster when they recognize it, packaging it in ways that perpetuate notions that suffering is the norm in many parts of the world. Indeed, social psychologists have noted the powerful effects exerted by the way in which a problem is framed on human decision-making and rationality. The problem with these particular images is not their multiplicity but their psychological and moral distances; suffering is rendered immeasurably remote and action futile.

Casualty Is Truth

The mediated space of Gaza-related issues is a carefully constructed one in which, as with many representations of conflict, the first casualty is the truth. Coverage is poststructuralist in nature, that is, there seems to be no reality accessible other than through systems of interpretation.

Indeed, it is true that for many, there is no Israel without controversy or collective history, and there is no Palestine without conflict or oppression. As Chouliaraki argues, the subject of analysis in such cases becomes the multiple effects of power – of freedom as well as subjectification. These patterns of mediation often yield space for public debate, misunderstanding, and distortion.

The December 2008-January 2009 offensive began upon the expiry of an Egypt-brokered six-month ceasefire. In response to rockets fired with the approval of Hamas, Israel launched an aggressive air and missile attack in Gaza. It lasted three weeks, left 1300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis dead, and sparked global protests for peace.

Managing The Conflict

It also began what Channel 4's Jon Snow referred to as a "new chapter in managing the conflict" (indicative of the precarious role media play in the situation). After a ubiquitous media presence in its war in Lebanon against Hezbollah in 2006, Israel banned all foreign journalists from entering Gaza.

Thus, Israel sought to control the narrative of the conflict, acting on the idea that by denying media access, the world's understanding of the war could be qualitatively changed. As such, coverage of the escalating suffering of Palestinians was primarily the product of journalists whose ability to do their job was enormously hindered.

Al-Jazeera, however, considers Gaza an issue of ongoing newsworthiness. Journalists already inside Gaza had access to developing stories, which were made available for use by other networks. Consistent with Silverstone's perspective that the West receives Al-Jazeera – and its reversal of customary representation in which the West does the defining – with dismay, most news organizations declined using the material.

Distant Observers

Thus, with Western media poised as distant observers, Israel sculpted its desired war and attempted to infuse public discourse with the notion that news emerging from Arab media in Gaza was predictably biased. Indeed, photographs emerging from Gaza indeed presented the situation as a genuine humanitarian crisis.

DEC, which represents thirteen UK aid organizations, deemed Gaza a crisis worthy of public appeal for humanitarian aid. Their decision making criteria articulates that the crisis must be of such urgency to call for swift international assistance, DEC agencies must be in a position to provide effective assistance, and there must be sufficient public awareness of, and sympathy for, the crisis so as to conclude that a public appeal would be successful.

While UK networks Channel 4, Channel Five, and ITV aired the three-minute appeal, Sky News (which maintained that DEC appeals are to be carried by all broadcasters or none) and the BBC did not, citing concerns about the aid reaching Gaza and their impartiality. The tone of the appeal clearly engendered:

Help Needed

The children of Gaza are suffering. Many are struggling to survive, homeless and in need of food and water. Today this is not about the rights and wrongs of the conflict. These people simply need your help. Several hundred people have been killed in Gaza in recent weeks. A large number of them have been children.

Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC, concluded they could not “broadcast a free-standing appeal without running the risk of reducing public confidence in the BBC’s impartiality in its wider coverage of the story.”

The public response to the BBC’s decision was immediate and animated. The BBC received 15,000 complaints, calling on the BBC to reverse its decision and expressing disappointment. Criticism came from Archbishops, journalists, celebrities and politicians.

Appeal Reporting

Ironically, journalists that would have been reporting on the Gaza conflict itself found airtime occupied by stories over the cancelled aid appeal.

These early reactions erroneously construed the BBC’s decision as politically motivated: for example, to support Israel, express cowardice toward Hamas, or put forth an egregious denial of aid to sufferers. The BBC’s public rationale, however, was weak. Aid did reach Gaza and DEC raised £5.4 million in the first week of the appeal. Further, would the public not recognize the difference between a humanitarian appeal and support for Hamas? DEC appeals are clearly not messages from broadcasters.

The decision was justified on a political, perhaps morally sophisticated level. Since the second *intifada*, Gaza has been governed by strict regulations that, while requiring that life remains bare, also require that life be sustained sufficiently to ensure the population does not descend into a humanitarian catastrophe.

Agency and Power

This brings up two important implications. First, “managed disaster” is the norm in Gaza. Politics momentarily notwithstanding, DEC’s appeals are for urgent humanitarian crises, not to aid what could be construed as a “norm”. Second, while it is generally an asymmetrical war, the conflict is still reciprocal. As humanitarian discourses often depoliticize conflicts, would deeming Gaza a humanitarian crisis dispossess citizens of political agency and power? Would this compromise the integrity of the conflict or further curtail peace negotiations? Above all, the tension in Gaza is political. The BBC was right to not endorse it as a humanitarian crisis.

This is not to propose that the BBC made the right decision for the wrong reasons. As a public service organization, they have strenuous and unique considerations relating to impartiality. Their decision, however, was perhaps a missed opportunity to foster a bold new public dialogue about the conflict and enhance cosmopolitanism.

The BBC is likely more self-aware than they seemed, but did choose a predictably reasoned approach to this dilemma. The challenge continues to be the mediation of the “managed disaster”: to begin with reflexivity and move beyond, have the best arguments possible, and to amplify civic voices from both sides.

By Lindsay Page,

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