

Complicit Coverage

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How to Sell a Genocide: The Media's Complicity in the Destruction of Gaza. Adam H. Johnson, 2026, Pluto Press, London

The Complicit Lens: U.S. Media Coverage of Israel's Genocide in Gaza. Robin Andersen, 2026. OR Books, New York & London; co-published with the Institute for Palestine Studies

The titles of two new books about Israel's genocide in Gaza succinctly state their shared argument: Corporate, mainstream media have been complicit in the horrific violence the Zionist state has inflicted and continues to inflict on Palestinians in Gaza. Print and online media, as well as cable news, have sold the genocide to their readers and audiences, turning reality on its head by portraying the Israeli perpetrators as victims of bloodthirsty terrorists and their Palestinian victims as bloodthirsty terrorists, terrorist sympathizers, or terrorists-to-be. As Deputy Speaker of the Knesset Nissim Vaturi [said in a televised 2025 interview](#), "any child" born in Gaza is "already a terrorist from the moment of his birth."

Adam Johnson, a media analyst and co-host of the podcast *Citations Needed*, and Robin Andersen, professor emerita of media studies at New York's Fordham University and contributor to various independent media, have meticulously documented how U.S. media enable Israel's mass killings. Their reviews of print, online, and cable coverage illustrate how media have acted as virtual mouthpieces for Israel's government and its military as well as for the U.S. State Department.

Israeli government and military sources are invariably quoted and treated as credible, even unimpeachable. Their typically evidence-free claims about alleged Palestinian transgressions are rarely scrutinized, much less refuted. On rare occasions, patently ridiculous charges are later debunked, but the damage has already been done. Meanwhile, Palestinian sources are either ignored or treated as unreliable. How many times have we read or heard the qualifier " Hamas-run health ministry " in stories about casualties from the latest Israeli attack on a hospital?

Johnson and Andersen show how the prevailing pro-Israel/anti-Palestine consensus in mainstream media coverage exemplifies the process of manufacturing public consent to genocide. Journalist Walter Lippmann originally coined the concept of manufactured consent in the 1920s, and Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky gave it a new spin in their [1978 book](#). Herman and Chomsky identified five "systemic filters" corporate media employ to set the boundaries of acceptable coverage and suppress dissenting views.

Coverage of Gaza and of Israel and Palestine mainly passes through three filters: *ideological fear* (the mobilizing of fear against a purported common enemy, e.g., " Hamas terror "); *flak and the enforcers* (corporate pressure to intimidate journalists and punish those who don't toe the ideological or political line); and *sourcing mass-media news* (treating official sources, like government, police, or corporate spokespersons as automatically credible, thereby allowing them to control the media narrative). The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, MSNBC, the three broadcast networks, and magazines like *The Atlantic* and other pro-Israel outlets have filtered news about the Gaza genocide along these lines. Johnson and Andersen provide the damning specifics.

Both authors take the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas and other armed Palestinian forces as their starting point while situating them in their context: as a violent response to decades of Israel's vastly greater state violence against Gaza, the 141-square-mile territory populated mostly by refugees from other parts of historic Palestine that former UK Prime Minister [David Cameron called "a giant open prison."](#) But as Andersen and Johnson note, providing context is anathema to the media construction of the Good Israel/Savage Gaza binary. Journalists have been fired for adhering to that basic tenet of journalism.

Andersen says that although Palestinian journalists "brought us nearer to experiencing" the war on Gaza than any other information source, Israel took "extreme measures to silence these voices." Killing them, as Israel continues to do ([more than 200 since October 2023](#)), certainly qualifies as extreme. Israel tries to discredit those they kill (or haven't yet killed) by labeling them as Hamas members. Or, in the case of Palestinian-American *Al Jazeera* correspondent Shireen Abu Akleh, "accidentally" killed because she got in the way of the Israeli military.

When an Israeli soldier shot and killed Abu Akleh in 2022 while she was reporting on an IDF raid of a refugee camp in the West Bank town of Jenin, Israel claimed she'd been hit by stray Palestinian gunfire, though she was wearing a helmet clearly marked "Press." When that ludicrous claim was contested, Israel acknowledged that an IDF soldier may have accidentally shot her while exchanging fire with Palestinian "gunmen." As is its custom, the Israeli military closed the case without ever investigating Abu Akleh's murder or charging any soldier.

President Joe Biden, who greenlit the Gaza genocide to demonstrate the U.S.'s "ironclad support" for Israel, called for "a full and transparent accounting" of Abu Akleh's death. But he never called for an actual independent criminal inquiry.

In addition to killing Palestinian journalists, Israel controlled media coverage by denying foreign reporters access to Gaza while it was carpet-bombing the Strip. Most corporate media, Andersen reminds us, “never mentioned they were blocked from reporting from Gaza, a form of censorship their publics had a right to know.”

Debunking atrocity tales

Johnson and Andersen examine what the latter calls “ Hamas atrocity tales,” including the two most notorious, the purported decapitation of 40 Israeli babies on October 7 and the mass rapes of Israeli women. Andersen writes that the fabricated narrative of the beheaded infants harkened back to the false story of Iraqi soldiers throwing 300 babies from their incubators, which was used to justify the U.S. Desert Storm invasion. Biden not only bought the lie of the beheaded Israeli babies; he stubbornly claimed to have seen the nonexistent evidence. That lie and its widespread acceptance, says Andersen, “allowed Israel to perpetuate the type of atrocities it had fabricated.”

Johnson identifies the purpose of these government-promoted media distortions, calling them part of “a broader PR campaign to obscure the antecedents of Palestinian violence and index the conflict in a plug-and-play ‘war on terror’ framework.” The “gruesome tale” of beheaded infants “didn’t need to be true – it just needed to serve the function of ISIS-ifying Hamas in the mind of the general public.”

Andersen observes that while Biden perpetuated the headless babies fabrication as well as other similar atrocity tales fed to him by Israeli government figures, “the US abetted Israel’s openly stated plans to punish civilians and decimate Gaza.”

How to Sell a Genocide and *The Complicit Lens* dismantle one of the biggest Hamas atrocity tales, the purported systematic, mass rapes of Israeli women on October 7, 2023.

Andersen devotes a chapter to the *New York Times* front-page article, “Screams without Words: How Hamas Weaponized Sexual Violence on Oct.7.” The Dec. 28, 2023, article by *Times* staff writer Jeffrey Gettleman and two Israeli freelancers alleged that Hamas had brutally raped and murdered Israeli women. However, the article’s “extravagant claims to evidence” that the reporters did not provide soon produced a backlash. When media critics, investigative journalists, and human rights organizations analyzed the article, the *Times*’ credibility “would take a beating.”

Andersen notes that “Screams without Words” draws on the investigations and analyses by many other journalists, as well as her own work. Jeffrey Gettleman’s two Israeli collaborators had “little to no journalism experience.” One, Anat Schwartz – a former Israeli air force intelligence official – reported “lurid tales of gang rape and dismemberment.” Her stories were uncorroborated and contained major inconsistencies.

The *Times*, Andersen says, “relied on known fabricators.” Gettelman and his collaborators claimed to have interviewed 150 Israelis, but they also relied on ZAKA, an Israeli volunteer organization, that was “instrumental in spreading atrocity propaganda” after October 7. ZAKA, which works through the Israeli Government Press Office, acknowledges that it disseminates hasbara (government propaganda). ZAKA’s founder was charged with dozens of rapes and other sexual assaults. Other international and even Israeli media, including *Haaretz*, debunked the ZAKA-sourced atrocity tales. But the *New York Times* referred to ZAKA cadres as “volunteer medics,” which they were not, and even excused the lack of evidence for the atrocities ZAKA supposedly uncovered.

The *Times* would later sever its relationship with the fabulist freelancer Schwartz, though it never formally retracted “Screams without Words” despite widespread debunking of its incendiary claims.

Meanwhile, numerous sources, including human rights organizations, United Nations investigators, independent media, and Palestinian prisoners, have exposed Israel's widespread use of sexual violence and torture against Palestinian women and men.

Liberal media as cheerleaders for genocide

While Andersen and Johnson cover much of the same terrain – the pervasive pro-Israel biases of corporate media and how they distort reality, criminalization of pro-Palestine solidarity, attacks on free speech and dissent in the name of fighting “antisemitism” – Johnson aims his critique squarely at liberal media and liberalism itself.

In his analysis of how “American media helped create the political, ideological, and moral conditions for mass death in Gaza,” Johnson doesn't bother with “conservative or MAGA media's dehumanization of Palestinians” because their “pernicious nature” and “openly genocidal” stance are clear and indisputable. Center-left media are his targets because they tend to be Democrat-friendly and influence the choices of Democratic voters. In addition, the genocide began with a Democratic president in office; ample support from Democrats in Congress and in the think-tank and media world was decisive in continuing it.

Johnson excoriates media consumed by Democrats (*New York Times*, CNN, CBS, MSNBC, among others) that “rationalize, negotiate, obscure, and ultimately deny the most inconvenient truths: a genocide carried out, defended, and authored by elite liberals and liberal institutions.” These media have erected an “elaborate framework of excuse-making, deflection, faux-savvy realpolitik, orientalist tropes, and glaring double standards...to justify the White House's lockstep support for producing carnage everyone could witness across their social media timelines on a daily basis.”

Social and independent media have been doing the work that mainstream and center-left media have refused to do. They include *The Intercept*, *Electronic Intifada*, *Mondoweiss*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Nation*, *Counterpunch*, *+972 Magazine*, *Haaretz*, *The Guardian*, *The Palestine Chronicle*, *The Grayzone*, *Zeteo*, *Democracy Now!*, and other print and online sources. Palestinian creators like Bisan Owda and Motaz Azaiza provide real-time, on-the-ground coverage of the genocide and ethnic cleansing, often at the risk of their lives.

The work of these media and creators has not only offered alternatives to mainstream media biases but also has helped shape public perceptions. Despite the suppression and censorship, the world has seen entire neighborhoods flattened by U.S.-made 2,000-pound bombs, families and communities wiped out, and the destruction of hospitals, schools, mosques, and churches. The heartbreaking story of five-year-old Hind Rajab, killed with her family, her body riddled with 355 bullets, went global.

Polls show that most people in the United States now view Israel unfavorably and sympathize more with the Palestinians. A clear majority of Democratic voters opposes additional military and economic aid to Israel. Democrats in Congress are discovering their backbones and voting against arms sales and other assistance. Still, the weapons and impunity still flow freely from Washington to Tel Aviv. Democratic congressional leaders Sen. Chuck Schumer and Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, both lavishly funded by the Zionist lobbying group AIPAC, continue to ignore their voters' wishes. Schumer was one of only seven Senate Democrats to vote against a resolution blocking certain weapons sales to Israel. Jeffries strongly opposed an amendment to the 2027 State Department appropriations bill that would cut \$3.3 billion in military aid.

Neither *The Complicit Lens* nor *How to Sell a Genocide* is easy reading. Their forensic dissections of mainstream media's biased coverage, their bland and unquestioning repetition of falsehoods and distortions, can be rage-inducing. But both

books are immensely valuable for their thorough and unsparing indictments of how powerful media have worked to manufacture consent for one of the most atrocious campaigns of mass murder in recent memory.

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Two new books document how U.S. media enable the Gaza genocide.

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