

Zionism Will Survive the Legacy Media



HERE WERE NAMES on the letter that I knew, even a few I admired. On June 9, 2021, not long after the escalation between Israel and Gaza-based militant groups ended, scores of journalists signed a public statement decrying the “decades-long journalistic malpractice” of the news industry’s alleged bias in favor of Israel. The media had premised its coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on Israeli narratives of proportionality and legitimate self-defense, the signers suggested, in part through failing to adopt the viewpoints of the letter-signers’ preferred segments of Palestinian society. “These terms—apartheid, persecution, ethnic supremacy—are increasingly gaining institutional recognition after years of Palestinian advocacy, and we, as journalists, need to examine whether our coverage reflects that reality,” the letter instructs. Coverage could be rebalanced only by endorsing a Palestinian-nationalist interpretation of the conflict and ending the scandalous evenhandedness that treated Israel as

if it were a normal country with just as much of a moral, legal, and practical foundation as any other.

The letter currently has more than 500 signatories, with representatives from nearly every major American news outlet, including the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, ABC News, NBC News, *ProPublica*, and, of course, NPR. The letter hinted at the way in which the industry’s growing internal divisions are likely to express themselves in coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and reflected a view of the journalistic vocation that has become uncontroversial among younger practitioners. A new generation of writers and reporters working in institutional media now believes that it is their job to take unambiguous moral stances in situations in which the journalists themselves detect some deeper injustice guiding the course of events. The rising generation of journalists has a power-based analysis of the media’s purpose and role—which is to say, of their own role. The signatories of the letter have effectively accused their editors, bosses, and colleagues of worsening a real-world conflict.

The journalistic revolt against the supposed immorality of their profession’s standards and traditions is a familiar story by now. In a June 2020 *New York Times* op-ed, published as the George Floyd protests still raged nationwide, the journalist Wesley Lowery neatly sketched out the battle lines of an industry-wide reckoning. On one side were the dead-enders who supported “neutral objectivity,” toadies to power and racism whose worldview “trips over itself to find ways to avoid telling the truth.” The opposite value was “moral clarity,” in which journalists treat their profession as a kind of permanent crusade for social improvement.

So far, the moral-clarity camp is winning. In the post-Floyd era, publications from *Bon Appétit* to *Slate* to the *Hollywood Reporter* to the *New York Times* saw leading editors and personalities forced out for alleged sins against the social justice agenda. But the real sign of a shift in attitudes about the media’s role can be seen in more mundane coverage choices. According to an August 2020 analysis by

political scientist Zach Goldberg in *Tablet Magazine*, the appearance of the words “race” and “racism” increased by over 700 percent in the *New York Times* and just under 1,000 percent in the *Washington Post* between 2011 and 2020. A recent NPR report examining the potential racism of white people who use yellow thumbs-up emojis typifies this exciting new frontier of news coverage. The moral-clarity generation has already succeeded in transforming what American news consumers see and hear, succeeding to such a degree that readers barely even notice the transformation anymore, having been conditioned by years’ worth of earnestly reported stories about what kinds of prom dresses might be racist.

The Holy Land has long been treated as the ultimate in metaphors, a blank slate for the dreams and delusions of ideological projects that have little to do with the place itself. The ascendant moral-clarity faction in American journalism seeks to draft Israel into its broader mission, with the Jewish state serving as the perfect stand-in for racism, Western militarism, and the outdated moral and political structures that the newsroom insurgents are in the process of replacing.

But just as significantly, this approach is running up against the limits of anything centered around the crumbling legacy outlets that constitute what was once thought of as “the media.” The insurgents matter. But they matter only within the context of a profession that is fading in stature and authority. The anti-Zionists are in a comfortable position atop a fracturing and distrusted industry. If they “win,” that victory might prove to be meaningless.

During the 2021 Gaza flare-up and its aftermath, it was clear that the moral-clarity agenda had filtered into coverage of Israel. An article in *Slate* in May 2021, published toward the end of the fighting, explored how journalists covering the Hamas–Israel war for major American media now saw themselves as upholding a morally indefensible Israeli interpretation of events. “The collective political

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consciousness has shifted largely because of Black Lives Matter,” an anonymous former *New York Times* journalist told the online magazine. “Last summer, our newsrooms as a reflection of a larger society had to take a hard look at state violence, how we perceive it, how we cover it, in a way we haven’t done before.”

Framing of the Gaza escalation as a racial conflict pitting white settlers against a darker-skinned native population started cropping up even in mainstream media. As the violence crested last May, a *New York Times* news story quoted a 26-year-old Jewish-American left-wing activist on the total interchangeability of the United States and the Middle East: “In the protest movements last summer, ‘a whole new wave of people were really primed to see the connection and understand racism more explicitly,’ she said, ‘understanding the ways racism plays out here, and then looking at Israel/Palestine and realizing it is the exact same system.’” In the months after the fighting, more left-leaning mainstream outlets didn’t hesitate to use racism as an interpretive key to any alleged Israeli wrongdoing: In early 2021, a columnist for MSNBC wrote that “Netanyahu’s Covid plan is even more racist than Trump’s.” The column was based on

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the false premise that Israel had withheld Covid-vaccine doses from the Palestinian Authority. But it illustrated a “morally clear” perspective that was just too convenient to be corrected.

Such breezy equivalencies between Israeli and American racism, and their elevation to something newsworthy, is to be expected by now, and not only because of the rapid reorganization of coverage priorities in the wake of the George Floyd protests. American media is essentially solipsistic; it long ago lost the ability to discuss complex events in other parts of the world as if they existed outside a narrow and often partisan American domestic framework. The American media treats Israel as if it's no more than an hour's drive from New York or Washington, D.C.

Believers in the moral-clarity vocation are inevitably driven by a specifically American set of concerns and by a sense of their own society's innate injustice. The rising generation of scribes believes that their country is wracked with unpurgeable sins of structural racism, white supremacy, slavery, and, to a lesser extent, capitalism and social inequity. To export the analysis to a close ally of the United States that is riven with its own active ethnic and sectarian conflict, and that governs the geographic locus of seemingly the entire world's feverish imagination, was probably inevitable.

Thousands of years of experience tell us Israel is an easier and more natural target for frustration toward one's own society than, say, Jamaica or Norway. As discontent in America continues, and as the media are increasingly squeezed by shrinking budgets and demoralized by their declining prestige, it should surprise no one if the focus on Israel, and on the alleged kinship of Israeli and American sins, deepens in years to come.

The moral-clarity agenda assumes that the values of major American newsrooms will reverberate through society as a whole—that the media can essentially serve as a vanguard for the transformation of American morals and sentiments. So far, they've been wrong. Polls indicated that the Black Lives Matter movement was about as popular in late 2021 as it had been before Floyd's killing—and this was after more than a year of the media's championing the priorities of the movement and accepting its basic outlook on American life. The U.S. media are now less trusted than they have ever been, with a mere 7 percent of adults telling Gallup that they had a “great deal” of “trust and confidence in newspapers, television, and radio news reporting.” Audiences are shrinking: A Knight-Gallup poll tracking news consumption found that 2021 was perhaps a record year for Americans ignoring the news media, with just 33 percent of respondents saying they paid attention to national news.

Moral clarity's defining product has been the 1619 Project, the *New York Times'* attempt to reorient the American national story around slavery and racism, so named because of the project's stated goal of showing that the true founding was in 1619, when the first slaves from Africa were brought to the United States. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the project's organizer and public face, is listed as a signatory to the May 2021 journalist's letter decrying the news industry's coverage of Israel. But use of the 1619 Project's materials in just 3.5 percent of public schools and its appearance as a book must be weighed against

the project's ultimate impact, which was to expose and sharpen deep polarities in how experts and the general public understand American history. The 1619 Project blew open a new front in an elite-level culture war. It is still unclear, however, how many readers it really convinced, or even how many it actually reached.

The 1619 Project, along with the controversy it stirred, is a microcosm of legacy media's current status. News consumers largely treat the *New York Times*, CNN, and other former gold standards as if they're simply one option among many. Substack, Patreon, and other self-publication platforms are filled with journalists who understood that they didn't need institutional support to reach large audiences, or who realized that their old employers were probably underpaying them. As a result, consumers are attaching less importance to the relative prestige of their news sources. Perhaps the most-listened-to figure in American media, the podcaster Joe Rogan, is also among the media industry's most openly reviled figures, the target of a notably ineffective takedown attempt across the legacy media in early 2022.

On Israel, the media's moral-clarity revolution has created an opportunity in the form of an audience repelled by the partisanship and ideological stridency of the outlets it no longer trusts. In an environment in which news consumers treat the *Washington Post* as if it's just an especially large Substack, it is possible that a handful of Substacks, as subscription numbers rise, will soon be able to counteract the narratives and distortions of outlets with the size, reach, and resources of the *Washington Post*. The psychic monopolies of the major broadcasters and newspapers have been broken, and it's possible that the moral-clarity insurgents have won out so easily because their bosses now have only a vague and ever-shifting sense of what their job is supposed to be.

Medium and small-scale media projects can now gain vast followings and credibility within a very short time. But believers in the importance of a Jewish state can't assume that old approaches will work within this new world. The most successful breakaways from legacy media haven't thrived because their ideas are compelling, or

their reporting is especially thorough or fact-based. Whether it's a brainy liberal such as Heather Cox Richardson or a more libertarian-minded everyman like Rogan, the winners in the new ecosystem get across by being personally immediate—by speaking in their own voices and with a refreshing lack of mediation. They're community builders with no house style. They believe that their own individual sense of purpose doesn't need the validation of someone else's corporate machinery. Most important, and somewhat counterintuitively, the winners of the great media unbundling don't have an agenda, or at least they don't present themselves that way. For their readers and listeners, these writers and podcasters are providing the unvarnished version of the world that traditional media is withholding from them. Richardson already has 500,000 readers of her newsletter—while Rogan proved impossible to cancel, despite many people's best efforts.



If believers in Israel treat the new media ecosystem as nothing but the newest front in the same ongoing ideological battle, they will risk re-creating the dynamics that have taken hold in legacy media in the past few decades. The fight over how Israel is covered is worth having, but the next round shouldn't necessarily be focused on persuading people of the justness of the country's existence or on correcting every flaw in a maliciously distorted public record. Better to invest in what's coming rather than what's declining. The way to succeed might be through appealing to the need for human connection and the open-mindedness of the growing number of readers who no longer trust the old system. Journalists and editors dedicated to a truthful depiction of events in Israel should seek to understand how to appeal to a new type of readership in an ecosystem that is only a couple of years old. It will probably be a better use of their time than investing in whichever side of the media industry's culture war happens to inherit an empty and unimpressive ruin. *