When We Started to Lie

From Phyllis Chesler.

This is an important piece from [Matti Friedman at the Free Press]

Exactly ten years ago, during an Israel-Hamas war that seemed major at the time but seems minor now, I published two essays describing my time reporting on Israel for the Associated Press. “Is there anything left to say about Israel and Gaza? Newspapers this summer have been full of little else,” I wrote at the time. “Television viewers see heaps of rubble and plumes of smoke in their sleep.” It wasn’t the volume of coverage that unsettled me in the summer of 2014. I was writing about something that had gone unreported, and which has done much to shape reality in the decade since—a change not in the news but in the newsroom.

Journalists observe the Israeli military operation in the Nur Shams refugee camp in the West Bank on August 29, 2024. (Photo by Jaafar Ashtiyeh via Getty Images)

The essays—the first for Tablet, and the second for The Atlantic—described my experience as a reporter watching from the inside as a major news organization lost its way in one of the world’s most heavily covered stories. To this day, nothing I’ve ever written has been quoted back at me more often. The essays go back into circulation every time there’s an explosion of violence here, and it happened again after the Hamas attack of October 7.

I reread them recently, as the new tragedy in Gaza balloons into a moment that feels like a civilization shift, as rallies against “Zionism” become a staple of life in cities across the

liberal West, and as a war launched by Muslim fundamentalists is recast with global success as a story of Jewish brutality, influence, and mendacity.

The most important thing I saw during my time as a correspondent in the American press, it seemed to me, was happening among my colleagues. The practice of journalism—that is, knowledgeable analysis of messy events on Planet Earth—was being replaced by a kind of aggressive activism that left little room for dissent. The new goal was not to describe reality, but to usher readers to the correct political conclusion, and if this sounds familiar now, it was both new and surprising to the younger version of myself who was lucky to get a job with the AP's Jerusalem bureau in 2006.

The story I found myself part of proposed, in effect, that the ills of Western civilization—racism, militarism, colonialism, nationalism—were embodied by Israel, which was covered more heavily than any other foreign country. (Israel takes up one one-hundredth of one percent of the surface of the world, and one fifth of one percent of the landmass of the Arab world.)

By selectively emphasizing some facts and not others, by erasing historical and regional context, and by reversing cause and effect, the story portrayed Israel as a country whose motivations could only be malevolent, and one responsible not only for its own actions but also for provoking the actions of its enemies. The activist-journalists, I found, were backed up by an affiliated world of progressive NGOs and academics who we referred to as experts, creating a thought loop nearly impervious to external information. All of this had the effect of presenting a mass audience with a supposedly factual story that had a powerful emotional punch and a familiar villain.

"The lasting importance of this summer's war, I believe, doesn't lie in the war itself," I wrote as the fighting petered out in 2014. "It lies instead in the way the war has been described and responded to abroad, and the way this has laid bare the resurgence of an old, twisted pattern of thought and its migration from the margins to the mainstream of Western discourse—namely, a hostile obsession with Jews." It's possible that I understated the problem.

Looking back at my essays ten years later, it's clear that what I saw in Israel wasn't limited to Israel. Starting out as

a journalist, I knew the fundamental question to ask when reporting a story. It was: What is going on?

When I left the AP after nearly six years, I'd learned that the question was different. It was: Who does this serve?

You may think that a news story is meant to serve readers, by conveying reality. I thought so. What I found, however, was that the story was more often meant to serve the ideological allies of the people in the press. If your ideology dictates that Israeli Jews are symbols of racism and colonialism, and Palestinians symbols of third-world innocence, then a story that makes Israelis seem constructive and Palestinians obstructive must be avoided even if it's true, because it serves the wrong people.

This explains the examples of journalistic malpractice I reported in my essays, and which many found hard to understand. Why, for example, our staffers were ordered not to report a peace offer proposed by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in 2008 and deemed unacceptable by the Palestinian leadership—even though this was clearly a major story. Or why we censored news from Gaza because of Hamas threats to our staff without telling our readers that this was happening, and indeed telling them instead that Hamas was becoming more moderate. Or why we claimed the Palestinian goal was a state alongside Israel, when the Palestinian goal has always been a state that replaces Israel.

Telling the truth would make Israelis look sane, and Israelis are the wrong people. People writing letters complaining about press errors and demanding corrections, then and now, miss the point: These aren't errors. They're the result of the press doing a different job correctly.

One effect of what I saw as a reporter was the creation of a news story that happens to press one of the deepest buttons in Western civilization—the idea that the evils of a given time are personified by Jews, and thus doing something about Jews isn't bigotry but virtue. Early Christians employed this narrative technique, as did late-medieval kings, Enlightenment philosophers, Karl Marx, Henry Ford, Arab dictators, Soviet propagandists, and many others. It's a common phenomenon that usually signals a regression from rational problem-solving into mythical thinking.

What I saw, to my surprise, was this mental virus catching on

again, among educated people who viewed themselves as liberal, as if history had never happened. In keeping with the spirit of the era, this time the charges against the Jews were presented as a matter not of religion, race theory, or economics, but of human rights.

Ten years later, as we've seen, these ideas have conclusively caught on. The presentation of this story as factual has allowed it to be embraced by people who consider themselves scholars and experts, who teach it to students, who now see it on TikTok and in the classroom and in the press, with effects clear to anyone paying attention—from rallies for Hamas on college campuses, to frequent graffiti and firebombs at synagogues, to the appearance of "anti-Zionist" blacklists in educated professions. Reporters are crippled in reporting these phenomena because doing so would help the wrong people.

As we've seen since October 7, the echo chamber has now expanded to include much of the United Nations apparatus and supranational legal institutions like the International Criminal Court—which can cite reporters citing human rights groups citing reporters, who then report that international courts agree with their opinions, now referred to as "international law." As a result, it has become nearly impossible for a normal person to understand what's going on, or identify the many real problems here in Israel or anywhere.

What's possible to see now, and which wasn't apparent to me 10 years ago, is that these instincts shape almost every area of coverage, and that Israel was just an early symptom. This is why the growing derangement about Israel and the plummeting credibility of the press have progressed in tandem over the last decade: These are related phenomena.

Asking "Who does this serve?" instead of "What is going on?" explains why a true story about a laptop belonging to the president's son was dismissed as false: This story would help the wrong people. It explains the reticence in reporting the real effects of gender medicine, or the origins of Covid—stories that could help the wrong people and hurt the right ones.

It explains why much of the staff of *The New York Times*demanded the ouster of talented editors for publishing an

op-ed by the wrong person, a conservative senator. It explains why a story about an opposition candidate colluding with Russia was reported as fact—the story wasn't true, but it helped the right people. It explains why President Biden's cognitive decline, a story of obvious importance to people of any political affiliation, was avoided until it became impossible to ignore. And it explains why journalists rarely pay any price for these shortcomings. If the goal is ideological more than analytic, these aren't shortcomings. They are the point.

This thinking also explains why the growing fear of violence perpetrated by Muslim extremists, a fact of life throughout much of the Middle East, Africa, and increasingly the West, has to be presented whenever possible as a figment of racist imagination—a fictionalization that requires intense mental efforts and serves as one the key forces warping coverage of global reality in 2024. In the strange world of the doctrinaire left, adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism are the wrong people, while adherents of Islam have a point.

The ideas I saw shape Israel coverage, in other words, have spread through the press and tamed the formerly independent and unruly world of journalists—a world where we may have been wrong most of the time, but not all the time, and never all in the same way.

In some cases, it's not just the ideas that have moved from here across the media world, but the same people. One example is the editor who oversaw all Mideast coverage for much of my time at the AP, and who bore overall responsibility for much of the reality I described in my essays. From the Mideast, that editor, Sally Buzbee, went on to head the AP's Washington bureau as most of the American press botched coverage of the 2016 election in an attempt to help the right people. She was then promoted to lead the entire Associated Press. More recently Buzbee became executive editor of *The Washington*

Post, which has descended into a state of abject ideological confusion that became acute during Israel's current war with Iran and her proxies, and which has been hemorrhaging money and readers. (She resigned in June.)

It's not that ideological fantasy doesn't afflict outlets affiliated with the right—just last week Tucker Carlson enthusiastically introduced his mass audience to a "popular historian" more sympathetic to the Nazis than the Allies.

The world has always been rife with fantasy and conspiracy, but the mainstream press was meant to be where you went to become oriented—to get what journalists called "the first rough draft of history," that is, an account of what happened as best understood at the time of telling. The activists who now hold sway have mostly abandoned that role but still want to claim the mantle, appending the attribution "experts say" to their own ideology, and dismissing dissent as disinformation.

That's why the transformation I witnessed matters. When I began working for the American press in 2006, someone with my center-left Israeli opinions may have been someone to disagree with, like a conservative Democrat or moderate Republican. In 2024, someone like me is a suspected racist who probably wouldn't be hired. With some exceptions, the institutions have sunk into the Manichaean fantasy world they helped create.

It took me several years at the AP, and then a few more after I left, to grasp the change and put it into words. What was true of the Israel story ten years ago is now true of almost everything. Most journalists have abandoned "What's going on?" for "Who does this serve?" The result is that huge swaths of the public know what they're supposed to support, but lack the tools to grasp what's going on.