Artificial Intelligence and a Big Data Approach Highlight

Biased Coverage of the Middle East War by the RTBF in Belgium

The Institut Jonathas is publishing today a report entitled *"The RTBF, Israel and Gaza: The Original Bias"*, which analyses the coverage by the RTBF website of the first year of the war in the Middle East, encompassing 2,181 articles published between October 7th 2023 and October 7th 2024.

The RTBF was selected for this study because it is a public broadcaster funded by taxpayers and because, in French-speaking Belgium, it is the media outlet subject to the most stringent obligations in terms of information standards (CSA, CDJ[1], RTBF Code of Ethics).

The report highlights the biased treatment of a complex, sensitive and polarising subject—one that is highly inflammatory and carries the toxic potential to generate antisemitism in Belgium.

In the aftermath of the longest and deadliest war of the Israeli–Arab conflict, and in the current context of a fragile and uncertain ceasefire, The **Institut Jonathas seeks to engage in constructive dialogue with the RTBF.** The objective is to reduce the bias identified in the report, to restore serenity in public discourse on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and to reject Manichaean narratives in which support for Palestinians necessarily entails detestation of the State of Israel.

The Institut Jonathas' report is based on **a Big Data study**, conducted by Innohives, that replicates, for the RTBF corpus, a study conducted in 2024 on BBC articles in English and Arabic addressing the same subject. The same team of specialists in Artificial Intelligence, neuroscience and data science carried out the two studies. **Its approach is innovative:** to have an Artificial Intelligence system (ChatGPT) perform a binary (YES/NO) assessment of the sympathy generated by the articles toward the various actors in the war (Israel, Gaza, etc.). This methodology makes it possible to analyse a large corpus, to move beyond human subjectivity, and to obtain robust and reproducible results.

In Belgium, ChatGPT's assessment of the sympathy generated by each of the 2,181 articles in the RTBF corpus shows, overall, twice as many articles generating sympathy for Gaza as articles generating sympathy for Israel. This result could be explained by the great imbalance between the two sides in terms of casualties and destruction.

All other findings produced by Innohives are **consistent and convergent**. Together, they constitute **indicators of a bias** in RTBF's coverage of the Middle East war:

• Nearly 20% of articles generate sympathy for Hamas, and for 10 weeks out of a total of 53, these articles outnumber those generating sympathy for Israel, even though Belgium recognises Hamas as a terrorist organisation.

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[1] Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (French-speaking Audiovisual Council), Conseil de Déontologie Journalistique (Code of Journalistic Ethics)

- From October 14th 2023, just one week after October 7th, articles generating sympathy for Gaza outnumbered those generating sympathy for Israel.

- Throughout the year, several peaks indicate a very high ratio of articles generating sympathy for Gaza compared to articles generating sympathy for Israel.

- Conversely, there were no peaks indicating greater sympathy for Israel compared to sympathy for Gaza, not even in October 2023, following the Hamas massacres.

- The RTBF's quest for balanced coverage was one-sided and only at the very beginning of the war, in order to contextualise or 'compensate' for the horror of the massacres of October 7th.

- The headlines of the articles amplify the sympathy created for Gaza compared to that created for Israel... yet many readers only read the headlines.

- The ratios of sympathy created for Gaza compared to sympathy created for Israel are higher at the RTBF than at the BBC in English, both for articles and headlines, even though the BBC's coverage of this war has been highly controversial.

- The ratio of sympathy generated for Gaza compared to sympathy generated for Israel is much higher for titles at the RTBF than in several leading media outlets, including CNN, CNBC, The Times and The Telegraph (other results from the BBC report).

The Institut Jonathas has named the bias identified at the RTBF **"the original bias"**, as it attributes this bias to a framing of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict **that predates October 7th 2023**. This framing associates strong sensitivity to Palestinian narratives with sympathy for their cause and their struggle.

The report presents several case studies (the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on October 17th 2023, accusations of famine against Israel in August 2025, the selection of photographs used to illustrate articles, etc.) that demonstrate the effects of this bias and its persistence in 2025.

A bias is not an error, and even less a deliberate attempt to make a mistake. Often, a bias is unconscious. The bias that emerges from our study **leads to misinformation**. The biased coverage of the Middle East war that ensued stands in contradiction with the principle of impartiality promoted by RTBF in its Code of Ethics and in statements made by its journalists[2].

Bias cannot be corrected in the same way as an error, by erasing it and starting again. It is a matter of becoming aware of the bias, identifying its manifestations, and then working to reduce them. Adopting a resolutely open posture toward dialogue, the Jonathas Institute concludes its report with several proposals aimed at achieving this objective.

The report *"The RTBF, Israel and Gaza: The Original Bias"* (98 pages, 21 charts) and its executive summary (4 pages) are available in French and in English for free download on the Institut Jonathas' website.

Created in March 2024 following the massacres of 7 October and their repercussions in Europe, the Institut Jonathas is a centre for study and action against antisemitism and everything that promotes it in Belgium.

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[2] See two articles and one video in the RTBF website :
- 10 October 2023 : Guerre Israël-Gaza : quels termes et quelles images la RTBF choisit-elle d'utiliser ?
- 7 November 2023 : Comment la RTBF traite-t-elle de la guerre au Proche-Orient ?
- 14 July 2014 : Conflit Israël-Palestine : "La RTBF n'a aucun parti pris"