

The RTBF, Israel and Gaza: The Original Bias

Analysis of RTBF's Coverage of the
First Year of the War in the Middle East
7 October 2023 - 7 October 2024

Executive summary

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The war of 7 October 2023 in the Middle East was also an **information war** of unprecedented intensity throughout the world. National public opinion is clearly one of the issues at stake. It is shaped by the representations conveyed by the media and social networks.

Hence the central and essential role of media coverage of this war.

Why this study on RTBF?

In Belgium, the media were very quickly called into question and criticised, with some accusing them of favouring Israel and others of favouring the Palestinians and being hostile towards Israel, or even towards its very existence. In response, while explaining the difficulties of covering this war, RTBF affirmed its commitment to providing "*verified, clear, balanced and impartial information*",¹ in line with its obligations (CSA, CDJ) and commitments (RTBF Code of Ethics).

Media coverage of the war in the Middle East is a subject of debate, but **ultimately, is this coverage biased?** Answering this question presents several difficulties.

Some difficulties are inherent in any human evaluation, quantitative or qualitative, of media content, as each evaluator has their own subjectivity, biases, prejudices and assessment of the criteria to be evaluated. Others are specific to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the war of narratives that has been raging for decades, and to the imbalances between the two sides in the war of 7 October, particularly in terms of the number of deaths and destruction.

Nevertheless, the question remains: is there a bias? This is a central issue for the Institut Jonathas, which fights against anti-Semitism in Belgium. Coverage in our country of a war more than 3,000 km away can influence perceptions of Jews and arouse hostility towards them.

In the United Kingdom, the Asserson Report (September 2024) examines the BBC's coverage of the war in the Middle East from several complementary angles. In light of this report, we decided to **focus on RTBF** because it is also a public company and because it is the most restricted media outlet in terms of information in French-speaking Belgium.

An innovative Big Data approach with solid and reproducible results

The Asserson Report studies **the emotional effect** of BBC web articles on the public and, in particular, the sympathy created by these articles – an essential topic in any information war.

Conducted by specialists in AI, neuroscience and data science, this study uses ChatGPT to assess, through six binary questions (YES/NO answers), whether each article, and then each article title, creates sympathy for six actors in the war: Israel, Gaza, the Israelis, the Palestinians, the Israeli army and Hamas.

We decided to **replicate in Belgium the sympathy analysis that was carried out in the United Kingdom for the Asserson Report**. To this end, we engaged Innohives, the research firm that brings together the team of scientists who worked on the Asserson Report. By applying the same methodology as that used for the BBC, our study benefits from all the work and checks that were carried out to ensure the robustness and reliability of the Asserson Report's results: comparisons with human assessments, ten iterations on ChatGPT, explanation of ChatGPT's responses, etc.

This Big Data approach provides an innovative response to the difficulties inherent in any media corpus analysis and to the difficulties specific to the media coverage of the war of 7 October.

¹ [How does RTBF cover the war in the Middle East?](#), RTBF, 7 November 2023

It allows us to study a large corpus, free ourselves from human subjectivity, obtain solid and reproducible results, and objectify phenomena invisible to the naked eye.

It produces results that can **indicate impartiality or bias, not for an individual article, but for a large corpus of articles as a whole.**

Highlighting biased coverage of the war by RTBF

The Innohives study covers **all articles on the RTBF website between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024** relating to the war in the Middle East and its repercussions around the world.

The corpus comprises 2,181 articles. 74% of them are based on news agency reports. Nearly 70% are attributed to the editorial team collectively. The remaining 622 articles were written by a total of 209 journalists. Forty of them wrote at least five articles. These high numbers are striking. It is difficult to imagine that RTBF has so many specialists on the Middle East.

ChatGPT's assessment of the sympathy generated by each article shows that, overall, **twice as many articles generate sympathy for Gaza as for Israel.** This result could be explained by the great imbalance between the two sides in terms of the number of deaths and destruction.

However, we find several other Innohives' results striking:

- 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.
- From 14 October 2023, just one week after 7 October, 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.
- 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 7 October.
- The headlines of the articles proportionally 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 RTBF than at the BBC in English (results from the Asserson Report), 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 at RTBF than in several leading media outlets, including CNN, CNBC, The Times and The Telegraph (other results from the Asserson Report).

These results, which are all consistent, indicate a bias in RTBF's coverage of the war in the Middle East. We attribute this bias to a framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that predates 7 October and is widely shared within the RTBF editorial team, an old framing that combines a strong sensitivity to Palestinian narratives with sympathy for their cause and their struggle.

We have named this bias "the original bias".

This bias results in RTBF's partial treatment of the war in the Middle East, which contradicts the impartiality advocated in its Code of Ethics and in the statements of its journalists.

Some illustrations of the original bias and some proposals to reduce it

The biased coverage of the war in the Middle East takes various forms. We wanted to illustrate some of these and show the persistence of bias during the summer of 2025 through **three case studies**: RTBF's coverage of US sanctions against Francesca Albanese, the elimination of Anas al-Sharif, and the declaration of famine by IPC, a UN agency.

With the same objective in mind, we conducted a qualitative analysis of RTBF's coverage of **the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza on 17 October 2023**, one of the defining events of the early stages of the war. RTBF's coverage of this explosion and the reactions that followed, as well as its analysis of its own coverage, perfectly illustrate the **original bias**, as well as a **confirmation bias**.

The ChatGPT results say nothing about the accuracy, clarity, completeness or objectivity of the articles, nor about the distinction between facts and opinions in the articles. RTBF's treatment of the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital and the three examples from the summer of 2025 **nevertheless give us a glimpse of how much could probably be said** about compliance or non-compliance with these other principles.

The analysis of media corpora using artificial intelligence tools **is still in its infancy**. But the approach is promising, as shown by a recent study on the pluralism and neutrality of the morning slots on France Info, France Inter and France Culture radio stations.

It could soon include photographs, which also play an important role in the sympathy created by the media for a particular actor. We looked at **three photographs** illustrating RTBF articles that we cite in this report. Our analysis shows **biased choices**, deviations from the principles set out by RTBF and the value of a more extensive study.

A bias is not an error, and even less so a deliberate attempt to make a mistake. More often than not, a bias is unconscious. The bias that emerges from our study **leads to misinformation**. However, this does not mean that there is an explicit and deliberate intention to misinform.

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. Our report concludes with **a number of proposals** aimed at achieving this objective.

In light of our study, we wish to engage in **constructive dialogue** with RTBF and other Belgian media outlets. We hope that they will share this desire. Our goal is to **provide accurate, clear, comprehensive and unbiased information** on a complex and polarising subject that is highly inflammatory and has the toxic power to generate anti-Semitism in Belgium.