


# Unseen Gaza: the debate continues

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 [Channel 4's Dispatches](#) on the media coverage of the Gaza dispute was an excellent exposition of the effects of the Israeli media blockade. Now Channel 4 have staged a debate with members of the public, experts and media practitioners.

Here is a report on the debate by Polis researcher Molly Kaplan.

[Imagining the Gaza: News Coverage from a Hill](#) The Israeli government relegated international coverage of the Gaza to one hilltop. The view from the hilltop, known among some journalists as the "Hill of Shame" or the "Hill of Same," captured the breadth of the Gaza landscape and the pockets of billowing smoke. What it could not show were the faces of war.


"[Dispatches: The Unseen Gaza](#)," screened last night at Channel 4 for a theatre of journalists, news directors, students, and humanitarian aid workers, posed the question of whether restricted access biased coverage. The BBC had three staffers already in the Gaza when the strikes began; SkyNews and Channel 4 relied on Arab journalists permanently based in the Gaza.

According to Martin Fewell Deputy Editor of Channel 4 News, the conversations about where the journalists should go would have been the same had those journalists been Channel 4's own. Safety dictated the coverage not restricted access. While the voice of Hamas would have enriched the story, Israeli strikes were aimed for Hamas, and any journalist who sought out Hamas leaders would have been a target.

The bias for Tim Marshall of SkyNews was not in the coverage; it was in the audience. News organizations may not have had direct access, but the torrent of images streaming in from journalists trapped inside meant that news organizations had something of the ground story.

For the panel of BBC, Channel 4, and SkyNews representatives, the difficulty of covering the conflict was in gaging how much the British viewership could stomach. Audience tolerance for bloodied and charred bodies is not what it used to be.

Fran Unsworth, Head of the Newsgathering at the BBC, pointed out that in the 1970s the British audience could handle shots of corpses strewn across the street after an IRA bomb exploded on a bus; now that footage would meet opposition. The issue for the news gatekeepers on the panel centered on what news tells the most accurate story. Does the deformed body of a dead Palestinian baby tell the story of war more than the tears of a bereaved father? Most of the panelists seemed to think not, but audience member Martin Bell, formerly a war correspondent himself, seemed to think otherwise. The British press is "still getting it a bit wrong." They are "not just sanitizing" war; they are "prettying it," he said. Bell concluded that politicians go to war as easily as they do because, like the rest of Britain, they do not see the true face of war and cannot know its horror.

Trevor Barnes Standards Manager at OFCOM added that regulation should not be blamed for the editing of gore as was implied in "Dispatches." According to Barnes, even pre-watershed, imagery is judged, not by its content, but by the context in which it is placed. Unsworth agreed with Bell and fellow panelist Inayat Bunglawala of the Islam Channel that good reporting should challenge, but if people cannot handle the imagery, they will not watch. If the news has no audience, then "all the good is gone." 



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