

## **In Wars, Quest for Media Balance Is Also a Battlefield**

Photographs in Time showed the casualties among civilians on both sides of the border in the Israeli-Hezbollah fighting.

By [LORNE MANLY](#)

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Wars in the modern media age often come complete with their own journalistic difficulties.

Although doctored and stage-managed photographs out of Lebanon garnered their share of headlines last week, they are just a part of a larger, underlying issue: the role of images in fairly portraying the conflict incited nearly five weeks ago by [Hezbollah](#)'s raid into Israel and its kidnapping of two soldiers.

Particularly vexing for many American news organizations is the struggle to determine how and in what proportion images of civilian dead and injured should be displayed in their coverage, when one side's casualties greatly surpass the other.

The journalistic calculus is made tougher by the involvement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a topic that bedevils news editors like no other, and an organization, Hezbollah, that is considered a terrorist group by the United States government. But the decision-making becomes even more fraught because of the power of photographs and TV images, which are evocative — and provocative — in ways the written and spoken word are not.

“Still photos and TV images are what sway people,” said Jane Arraf, the Edward R. Murrow press fellow at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), whose eight-year tenure at CNN included a stint as Baghdad bureau chief. “At the end of the day, people retain very simple images in their minds when they're not really engaged or focused on an issue.”

Editors and executives at newspapers, newsmagazines and the broadcast and cable networks say they do not impose a formula for fairness on coverage of this conflagration. “This is not a sporting event, where we're toting up the scores of both sides,” said Jonathan Klein, president of CNN for the United States.

But, they concede, they are very conscious of keeping a rough balance over time, whether that is a 24-hour cable news cycle or a week's worth of evening broadcasts and newspapers. And they pay special attention to images because of their potency.

“Photos are trickier than words, because their content is in large measure emotional, visceral, and because you can't edit their content,” said Bill Keller, executive editor of [The New York Times](#). “You can't insert a ‘to be sure’ paragraph in a photo.”

On a continuing news account like this, Mr. Keller said, the paper bases its photography choices on an array of factors, including a picture's quality, originality and relevance. “You don't say, ‘Yesterday we fronted dead Lebanese innocents, so today we have to

front dead Israeli innocents,' ” he said. “But you aim over time to portray the full range of the war’s consequences.”

That goal is even more challenging when dealing with still photographs, which better than any other medium convey the eloquence and meaning of horrific situations, said David Friend, editor of creative development for Vanity Fair and a former director of photography for Life magazine.

“They succinctly capture so many layers of meaning in a confined space,” said Mr. Friend, whose book, “Watching the World Change: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11,” will be published next month. “It’s the artistic equivalent of atomic power, where you have so much energy in a small space that it has to explode.”

In an article entitled “Unintended Targets” in last week’s issue of Time, the newsmagazine offered readers two photos next to each other. On the left-hand page a crying girl clings to her mother in an Israeli emergency room, both of them injured by a Hezbollah rocket. On the right, amid a scene of body bags after an Israeli attack on a building in Qana, a dead boy can be glimpsed through a plastic shroud.

Richard Stengel, Time’s managing editor, said that while concerns about fairness enter into his judgment, that was not the prime factor in this case.

“Even though the pictures are side by side, there’s a kind of aesthetic balance, not necessarily an ideological one,” Mr. Stengel said. “It’s not about taking sides, but about the terrible poignancy for people on both sides.”

Jon Banner, executive producer of “World News With Charles Gibson” on ABC, said he could not think of a news event in recent memory more difficult to cover, given the complexity of the issues and powerful nature of the images. Usually ABC has run one segment from Lebanon and one from Israel as a way to tell both sides of the fighting.

That, to some, is a dereliction of journalistic duty. Some critics of Israel argue that because the death tolls and destruction are greater in Lebanon, a proportionality of sorts should inform the resulting reports; anything else betrays a pro-Israeli stance. But supporters of Israel say such an approach bestows a misguided moral equivalence. Israel is a democratic nation exercising its right to self-defense, they argue, while Hezbollah is a terrorist organization that uses the Lebanese people as human shields.

Ibrahim Hooper, national communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a civil rights and advocacy organization, said Israel was using disproportionate force in its battle with Hezbollah, needlessly killing civilians and jeopardizing Lebanon’s fledgling democracy by destroying the country’s infrastructure. “It should be shown in proportion to the killing and destruction,” he said.

In the nearly five weeks of fighting before a cease-fire resolution by the [United Nations](#) was set to take effect today, more than 1,000 Lebanese have died, many of them civilians,

while a total of about 150 Israelis, mostly soldiers, have been killed.

Given that, the idea of a numerical balance in photos “equates false moral equivalence,” Ms. Arraf of the Council on Foreign Relations said. “The loss of hundreds of civilian lives does not quite equal the loss of dozens of civilians’ lives and loss of soldiers’ lives.”

But to others that argument belies an understanding of the true stakes of this battle. “Proportionality is a meaningless term in a conflict of this type,” said Charles Johnson, whose blog Little Green Footballs showed that a freelance photographer for [Reuters](#) had altered images to make the damage from Israeli air strikes on Beirut appear worse than they were. Hezbollah, in his and others’ view, is a nihilistic group that has no qualms about sacrificing civilians.

“Hezbollah is winning the war of images because it’s not being pinned with immoral and unconscionable war tactics, not to mention the genocidal war aim to wipe Israel off the map,” said Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Both Mr. Boot, who writes a weekly column for The Los Angeles Times, and Victor Davis Hanson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford and a syndicated columnist, argue that civilian casualties, while regrettable, have never been a factor in determining the justice of a war. In their view, if the news media during World War II had displayed photo upon photo of the German and Japanese victims of Allied bombing raids, it would not have altered the morality of the cause.

Mr. Hanson said there appeared to be more images showing anguish from Lebanon, and he would like to see more balance. “It’s not my fault that Katyushas are still primitive and don’t have a nuclear payload yet,” Mr. Hanson said.

Executives at news organizations, long steeled to complaints about their Middle East coverage from various sides, said they tried to avoid pandering to critics. “They don’t want you to be balanced in your coverage,” said Mr. Keller of The Times. “They want you to portray the morality of the war as they see it.”

Added Mr. Banner of ABC News: “Our job is not to decide whether or not one side deserves more or less. Our job is to report the news.”