

Local newspapers across the U.S. refuse to cover movement for ceasefire

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New York, February 22 (RHC)-- The movement for a ceasefire to end Israel's war on Gaza has shone a spotlight on the role of corporate media in spreading pro-Israel narratives and minimizing the U.S. public's access to accurate information about pro-Palestinian perspectives and those organizing in solidarity with Palestine.

Protests have targeted legacy papers like The New York Times, Palestinian writers have lambasted Western journalists, and researchers have exposed a clear bias in national coverage against Palestinian voices and views sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle.

Across the country, ceasefire activists are finding that these biases in media coverage also extend to their local news outlets. Especially for organizers outside of major cities, it has been a challenge to get any coverage of actions in support of a ceasefire or sympathetic to the plight of Palestinians. When coverage does happen, it often implicitly conveys support for Israel or may even be outright hostile to those supporting the Palestinian struggle.

Against all odds, the wealthy suburbs of New Jersey have become a site of regular demonstrations calling for a ceasefire to end the war on Gaza. Particularly in the state's 11th congressional district, the eighth wealthiest district in the United States, dozens of newly politicized community members have endured harassment while trying to build support for a ceasefire in their community.

This was recently made apparent to several organizers in NJ11 for Palestine, a coalition of activists working to get their representative, Mikie Sherrill, to support a ceasefire. In January, NJ11 for Palestine held a vigil outside of Sherrill's office in Livingston to honor the (at the time) more than 22,000 Palestinians killed in Israel's offensive. Upon announcement of the action, local Zionists organized a counter protest. The day of the vigil, hundreds of Zionists showed up to yell over those who were mourning the loss of Palestinian lives, going as far as to call a 7-year-old girl a "future generation's terrorist" as she read the names of dead Palestinians. According to several organizers, Zionists also spit on a Palestinian who was acting as a safety marshal while he was walking alone and told an anti-Zionist Jewish couple that they did not count as Jews.

None of that harassment was mentioned in two different write-ups by local reporters. In fact, the vigil itself was not mentioned in either article. Both ignored all existence of protesters demanding a ceasefire which the pro-Israel rally was organized to counter. Though one local blog has covered subsequent vigils.

Immy Moustafa, an organizer with NJ11, sees it as an intentional omission on the part of local reporters.

"With the vigil, we were right across the street from each other," Moustafa told Truthout. "You can't claim you didn't know. You can't claim you didn't see. There's no reason other than an intentional deleting of what the full story is."

Ali Aljarrah, one of the founders of NJ11 for Palestine, explained how this erasure of pro-Palestine activism contributes to the ongoing violence against Palestinians.

Especially for organizers outside of major cities, it has been a challenge to get any coverage of actions in support of a ceasefire.

"There's this constant erasure of Palestinian history," Aljarrah said. "So, when we're talking about local media and its impact on Palestine, that's one thing to keep in mind. If local media's not being honest in showing an event and demonstrations that are happening in support of Palestine ... then it's really showing that they're complicit in this genocide and the erasure of Palestinians here in America."

Over in Hudson County, it has been easier for activists to organize support for Palestine. Earlier in February, Ceasefire Now NJ, a coalition of organizations, succeeded at getting Union City to pass a ceasefire resolution. They did not, however, succeed at getting coverage of this victory from the county's

main newspaper, The Jersey Journal.

The struggle to get local media coverage extends beyond New Jersey.

Adnan Ahmed has been involved in a Minneapolis-based coalition that got the city to pass a ceasefire resolution. He also wrote an op-ed to try to grow support for Palestine in Minnesota, which was published in the independent news outlet UNICORN RIOT. Before giving the piece to UR, Ahmed pitched it to several different Minnesota-focused outlets, all of which either ignored or declined his piece.

“I thought I wrote a very mild essay,” Ahmed said. “I wrote it like I’m just gonna send it to some of the mainstream news outlets because they’re for Minnesota readers. So I purposely watered it down.”

Ahmed was declined by the Star Tribune, MinnPost and the Minnesota Reformer, which he described respectively as Minnesota’s right-leaning, centrist and more progressive outlets.

The widespread decline of local newspapers also limits opportunities for sympathetic coverage. Researchers at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications at Northwestern University have found that more than half of all counties in the United States have limited access to local news sources. This problem is exacerbated by corporate and often right-wing investors buying up local news outlets.

Even when activists have been able to get local reporters to cover the movement, they have found that the coverage does not provide sufficient context. For example, before the Union City ceasefire resolution, Ceasefire Now NJ attempted to get a ceasefire resolution passed in Jersey City. The Jersey Journal did cover that campaign, but did so in a way that organizers viewed as an obstacle.

An article published on November 28, ahead of the city council’s vote on the resolution, begins by claiming that, “the war began Oct. 7 when Hamas staged unprovoked attacks...”

Meera Jaffrey, an organizer with Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) North Jersey, was involved in the Jersey City campaign and criticized the local media coverage.

“The media bias definitely has an impact on the movement and people’s perception of the truth,” Jaffrey said. “Not only does this type of reporting thwart the ceasefire effort, its main intention, but it also helps to propagate anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic sentiment. Mainstream media is making activists in the ceasefire movement have to work harder for peace.”

Activist Kaitlin Blanchard has taken issue with similar coverage in Chattanooga, Tennessee. “Centering Hamas as the reason for Israeli aggression is the biggest trope,” Blanchard told Truthout. “It is present in every single article.”

Even when activists have been able to get local reporters to cover the movement, they have found that the coverage does not provide sufficient context. She said that the lack of context means even when equal weight is given to pro-Palestine activists and Zionists, it creates an implicit bias in support of Zionists.

“It is such a neutral blank slate that it ends up getting pulled right.... The dynamic between Palestine and Israel is presented without any analysis whatsoever, and so people don’t have the opportunity to engage with their own existing biases.”

This was also an issue for Wassim Hage, an organizer with the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) in the San Francisco Bay Area. Hage believes that the Bay Area is a rare place where local reporting has been mostly sympathetic to the movement. He credits this to the work that organizers have done over years to normalize support for the Palestinian struggle in Oakland and San Francisco. Despite his view that media coverage in these cities has been mostly sympathetic to the movement, the

occasional negative tropes he sees are the same ones organizers throughout the country have encountered.

“In San Francisco, I think it would be like 800 to 1,200 public comments in person in support of a ceasefire resolution versus one public comment in opposition ... [but it's covered] as if they're equal in terms of the political weight that they have.”

Another trope that Hage, Blanchard and several activists in New Jersey highlighted was the conflation of Zionists with “the Jewish community,” even as anti-Zionist Jews have played a prominent role in the ceasefire movement.

“AROC will always get the quote because we are the Arab center locally, but we've found that reporters are sometimes more reticent to quote anti-Zionist Jewish organizations,” Hage said.

Several different outlets in New Jersey have used this false conflation. Liz Cooper, who organizes with JVP North Jersey, believes that local media's doubling down on this trope is due in large part to the growing anti-Zionist sentiment within the Jewish community. She said that while Jewish communities are divided over Palestine, most Jewish institutions remain staunchly Zionist and work to repress anti-Zionist Jewish voices.

“There is no doubt in anybody's mind that the influential players in Jewish institutional life and local politics have been pointedly, aggressively hostile to Jewish Voice for Peace, and it's precisely because the actual Jewish community consensus on Israel is breaking down,” Cooper told Truthout.

Having grown up in the wealthy North Jersey suburbs, Cooper felt a need to write about the surprisingly left-leaning actions that have taken place. She wrote for a blog created by Ceasefire Now NJ about a weekly rally that has been held in South Orange, New Jersey.

“I was really motivated to try to speak on it because I felt like it was an important change in the political landscape of North Jersey that has not been reported on particularly thoroughly,” Cooper said.

Cooper added that Ceasefire Now NJ created their own blog not just to ensure that actions get coverage, but to make sure that the coverage accurately gets out the movement's message. Several activists shared the sentiment that putting out their own media is essential considering the poor job local outlets have done.

“That is an opportunity that we need to take more seriously,” Blanchard said.

“The media is part of the problem,” Hage said. “The movement in general is starting to come around to the notion that we need to take media, whether it's social media or popular media or press media, seriously, and kind of struggle on that terrain.”

Moustafa drew inspiration from the journalists in Gaza.

“On a much smaller scale, it's the same thing that is happening in Gaza,” Moustafa said. “It is up to the average person to become a journalist and to show what is happening.... That's kind of the coverage that we as pro-Palestinians are relying on because we're not getting much coverage otherwise.”

<https://www.radiohc.cu/en/noticias/internacionales/347958-local-newspapers-across-the-us-refuse-to-cover-movement-for-ceasefire>



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