

Nygaard Notes

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One Week in February 2022

During the last week of February this year, Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. But that was not the only military action mounted by one nation against another that week. Yemen, Syria, and Somalia saw conflict in the later part of February, as well. And therein lies a lesson. First, a few details about the state violence perpetrated during that fateful week.

One Week in YEMEN: The nation of Yemen “remains the world’s worst humanitarian crisis,” due largely to a brutal war launched in 2015 by a “coalition” of nations led by Saudi Arabia with the support of the United States. The New York Times reported earlier this month that “More than 150,000 people have been killed in the war [in Yemen], including nearly 15,000 civilians, according to an estimate by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.”

Regarding the week that Russia invaded Ukraine, Yemeni journalist Ahmed Abdulkareem wrote on March 2nd, “Since Thursday [Feb 24], when Russian forces began their wide-ranging assault on Ukraine, the Saudi-led Coalition, supported by the United States, has launched more airstrikes in Yemen than Russia has in Ukraine. In Hajjah, a province surrounded by heavy Saudi artillery, Saudi-led coalition warplanes launched more than 150 airstrikes on the cities of Haradh, Heiraan, Abbs, and Mustab, killing scores of civilians, including a father of six killed over the weekend by a Saudi drone that targeted his car as it traveled between Shafar and the Khamis Al-Wahat market.”

[June Update: The New York Times reported on June 7th that “The State Department and the Defense Department have failed to assess civilian casualties

caused by a Saudi-led coalition in the catastrophic war in Yemen and the use of American-made weapons in the killings, according to an internal government report... The new report comes as President Biden is making plans to visit Saudi Arabia this summer. Mr. Biden aims to rebuild ties with the kingdom and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman despite vowing earlier to make the nation a “pariah” for its human rights atrocities, including the mass killings in Yemen and the murder of a journalist who was a U.S. resident.”]

One Week (and more) in SYRIA: During that same week, just a day before the Russian invasion, in fact, on Feb 23rd, Al Jazeera reported that “Israel has fired several missiles at Syria’s border province of Quneitra, causing ‘material damage’”. They added, “Syrian state TV quoted an unnamed Syrian military official as saying that the missiles were fired from Syria’s Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and struck areas around the nearby town of Quneitra. It added that the attack that occurred shortly after midnight did not cause any casualties.”

A little less than a week earlier than that report, on February 17, Al Jazeera reported that “Israel has fired several surface-to-surface missiles targeting sites south of Syrian capital Damascus, Syrian state news agency SANA reported. The shelling struck a town south of Damascus on Wednesday evening, causing material damage.”

Go back one more week, to February 9th this time, when Al Jazeera (again) reported, “A Syrian soldier has been killed and five wounded in an Israeli attack near the capital, Damascus, Syrian state media said.

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Greetings,

A couple of issues back I spoke about what it might mean to start hearing voices that, in our current information systems, are hard to hear. "Like whom?", you may ask. Well, in this issue I quote from statements by the Foreign Press Association, Africa and The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association. When talking about Yemen, I quote Yemeni journalist Ahmed Abdulkareem. And in the course of researching this issue I've read numerous other pieces by people and institutions that typically escape the notice of the casual news consumer in the U.S.

This issue of Nygaard Notes was inspired by what Abdulkareem calls "the grotesque double standard" in the White Western World's coverage—or non-coverage—of the victims of war around the globe. But while war throws such double standards into stark relief, the selective hearing wrought in the White Western World by knowledge systems shaped by racism and colonialism can be seen lurking in every corner of our information system. In the next issue I plan to illustrate by discussing Local and Indigenous Knowledge, Open Science, and other intriguing but little-known avenues to enlightenment that my research has recently revealed.

I continue to learn how to listen, inspired by the words of the amazing Arundhati Roy: "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

Keep breathing; keep listening. You never know what you will hear!

Attentively yours,

Nygaard

One Week from page 1

The Israeli army acknowledged it struck Syrian facilities early on Wednesday using targeting aircraft, including 'radar and anti-aircraft batteries'."

I've said that Saudi Arabia has the support of the U.S. in its ongoing attack on Yemen, and Israel gets more military aid from the United States than does any other country. But that doesn't mean that the U.S. doesn't occasionally do the attacking itself. As in the case of Somalia.

One Week in SOMALIA: The watchdog news site Airwars reported on February 22nd, "At least 60

Al-Shabaab militants were reported killed in a declared US airstrike in support of Somali ground actions, at Fiidow village in Hiiraan on February 22, 2022." The New York Times also reported on the strike, quoting the U.S. Africa command saying that "no civilians were believed to have been harmed." Right-O! I've seen no reports of any journalists from anywhere—let alone the United States—who have even attempted to assess this claim.

I mention Yemen, Syria, and Somalia here because a small investigative news site called MintPress News did a little study that I want to tell you about. Read on... ♦

The Same Week in the Media

I've just summarized three separate military actions that were carried out during the last week of February 2022. There was, of course, a fourth military action that week: Russia invaded Ukraine. I have no doubt that anyone reading this knows about the Russian invasion. I'm quite sure that the average news consumer in this country knows little, if anything, about the other three. How to explain this? As it turns out, back in early March a small independent news organization called MintPress News published the results of a little study that offers a part of the explanation for this awareness gap.

The study examined the reporting by five major U.S. news outlets of the four military actions that I summarized in the previous article: in Ukraine, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia. The five news outlets they looked at were Fox News, The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and MSNBC. The coverage period was the week between Monday, February 21 and Sunday, February 27.

During that week, writes reporter Alan Macleod, "Collectively, the five outlets published 1298 stories about Ukraine, meaning each one printed around one per hour on average over the week studied. FoxNews.com ran the most – 308 – roughly one every 30 minutes. However, there was little significant numerical difference between the outlets, whose front pages and editorial sections were all dominated by headlines about Ukraine. In contrast, only The New York Times mentioned the Somali strike at all, while The Washington Post was the only outlet to cover the attacks on Syria. Fox News, CNN and MSNBC did not cover any of the other nation-on-nation attacks at all."

Focus on Yemen

Macleod notes that "While the Israeli attack on Syria and the U.S. strike on Somalia were relatively minor occurrences in comparison to Russia's invasion, and could therefore be said to deserve less coverage, the continuing Saudi war on Yemen is

not. And while the Ukraine attack is new, the beginning of the Yemen conflict received scant attention at the time. Furthermore, all three are a direct result of American policy and could be stopped immediately if the public were sufficiently aware and engaged, thus rendering coverage of particular importance to U.S. audiences."

How much attention does the war in Yemen deserve? "On February 24, the day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Yemen was hit by 37 separate airstrikes across the country, primarily in Hajjah and al-Bayda. The next day, the Saudi Coalition also shelled Saada using heavy artillery, killing at least six civilians. Saada has been a center of the bloodshed for some time now. In January, the Saudis dropped a Raytheon laser-guided bomb on a detention center there, killing 91 people and wounding hundreds more."

"Yemen," Macleod points out, "has never been a war that has interested American media. Indeed, on MSNBC, there has been more in-depth coverage of Ukraine in one week than of the Yemen conflict since it began in 2014."

"Americans are united in rejecting Russia's attack on Ukraine. A recent poll found that only 6% of the public consider its invasion justified, as opposed to 74% against. This suggests that if the media covered U.S. imperialism in the same way it covers its Russian equivalent, then those wars would end immediately. But they do not. And the Ukraine coverage underlines that this is a choice they are making every day."

Macleod is correct that the media, as an institution, makes all sorts of decisions every day about what is newsworthy and what is not, about whose actions are justifiable and whose are not. And those judgements are often based on widely-shared ideas about who (in a given story) is understood to be "Us," and who is understood to be "Them."

Media from page 3

Macleod states the obvious, that there is a “vast qualitative and quantitative disparity between coverage of the attacks on Yemen, Somalia and Syria and the attack on Ukraine.” As we can see when we look at the Russian invasion, which Macleod notes “received almost 400 times the attention of the other three combined.”

I have recently written about how important it is for journalists to go beyond talking to those who drop the bombs and begin to talk to those on whom the bombs fall. When the people upon whom the

bombs are falling are considered to be “Us,” the U.S. media does a good job of helping us to understand the horrors of war. 400 times better, in fact, than when the victims are considered to be “Them.”

For most of us, journalists are the ones who tell us about the world beyond our borders. So, the final two pieces in this issue of the Notes bring you the words of two groups whose voices are rarely heard in the U.S. media. One is AMEJA, The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association and the other is FPAA, the Foreign Press Association, Africa. We turn first to AMEJA. ♦

Othoring in the Media: AMEJA Statement

I’ve just been discussing reporter Alan Macleod’s study of media coverage of military conflicts around the world. But I didn’t tell you the headline of his article: “It’s Different, They’re White: Media Ignore Conflicts Around the World to Focus on Ukraine.” That kind of says it all, I think, but it’s worth looking a little closer to see exactly how whiteness makes media coverage “different.”

Times of crisis tend to make visible some dynamics that are usually obscured, racism being no exception. Consider a March 2nd piece by U.S.-based writer Moustafa Bayoumi in the London Guardian, headlined “They Are ‘Civilised’ and ‘Look like Us’: the Racist Coverage of Ukraine.” In it he quoted “a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine” who, when asked by the BBC to comment on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, said “It’s very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair ... being killed every day.” Bayoumi points out that “Rather than question or challenge the comment, the BBC host flatly replied, ‘I understand and respect the emotion.’”

I went looking for more such examples to bring home the point (they’re easy enough to find), but along the way I ran across the following eloquent statement issued by the Arab and Middle Eastern

Journalists Association (AMEJA) at the end of February. They say it better than I could, so I offer it, more or less verbatim, here:

The AMEJA Statement

“The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) calls on all news organizations to be mindful of implicit and explicit bias in their coverage of war in Ukraine.

“In only the last few days, we have tracked examples of racist news coverage that ascribes more importance to some victims of war over others.

“On Feb. 26, during a CBS News segment, correspondent Charlie D’Agata commented: *‘But this isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European — I have to choose those words carefully, too — city, one where you wouldn’t expect that, or hope that it’s going to happen.’*

Daniel Hannan, of The London Telegraph wrote: *‘They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations. It can happen to anyone.’* ↗↗↗

→→ Al Jazeera English anchor Peter Dobbie said: *‘What’s compelling is, just looking at them, the way they are dressed, these are prosperous...I’m loath to use the expression... middle class people. These are not obviously refugees looking to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war. These are not people trying to get away from areas in North Africa. They look like any European family that you would live next door to.’*

“‘We’re not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin, we’re talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives.’ Philippe Corbé, BFM TV [of France], reported.

“AMEJA condemns and categorically rejects orientalist and racist implications that any population or country is ‘uncivilized’ or bears economic factors that make it worthy of conflict. This type of commentary reflects the pervasive mentality in Western journalism of normalizing tragedy in parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. It dehumanizes and renders their experience with war

as somehow normal and expected.

“Newsrooms must not make comparisons that weigh the significance or imply justification of one conflict over another — civilian casualties and displacement in other countries are equally as abhorrent as they are in Ukraine.

“AMEJA stands in full solidarity with all civilians under military assault in any part of the world, and we deplore the difference in news coverage of people in one country versus another. Not only can such coverage decontextualize conflicts, but it contributes to the erasure of populations around the world who continue to experience violent occupation and aggression.

“In order to prevent such explicit bias, we call on newsrooms to train correspondents on the cultural and political nuances of regions they’re reporting on, and not rely on American- or Euro-centric biases. Inaccurate and disingenuous comparisons only serve to inflame stereotypes and mislead viewers, and they ultimately perpetuate prejudicial responses to political and humanitarian crises.” ♦

African Journalists on Ukraine

On March 1st, not even a week after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Foreign Press Association, Africa released a document entitled “Our Statement on the Racist and Skewed Coverage of Ukrainian War.”

Although it is addressed to journalists, it also has much to say to those of us who rely on the work of journalists to form our ideas of the world around us. Like I said in regard to the AMEJA statement, their words summarize the issue better than I could. So I publish it here in its entirety. All 429 words!

The FPAA Statement

“The media plays a pivotal role in shaping the way people see the world. The narratives that are published and broadcast not only influence the way people perceive and relate to one another, but they

have a tangible influence on policies that affect how we co-exist. The Foreign Press Association, Africa is disturbed by the unfortunate opinions that our Western colleagues continue to publicly express about the distinction they see between war and suffering in Ukraine and those that have taken place in poor countries. The expressions, namely, various iterations on the theme that it is unthinkable to see violence in countries populated by white people, reinforce views that already exist systematically in societies at large, and consequently perpetuate misunderstanding that causes real human harm and division.

“The idea that war is a thing that happens in lands outside of the West is beyond myopic. It is a gross

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FPAA *from page 5*

misrepresentation of the entirety of human history. People who are not white are not more innately prone and habituated to violence and suffering. People who are not white are no less civil or incapable of solving conflict.

“This attitude has been a feature of Western media coverage of Africa for decades. It is glaring in the lack of dignity afforded to black and brown-skinned victims of conflict. It is also seen in the lack of nuance and empathy given to people suffering from war and other man-made emergencies (including climate change). While its appearance in the case of Ukraine is not surprising, it is irresponsible, reprehensible, and should not be in any way associated with such an important profession as ours.

“News organizations need diversity urgently, and

not just out in ‘the field,’ with black and brown people working for low pay and worse protection as fixers and translators. This diversity must be represented in the organizations’ public faces and voices, and, most importantly, in their leadership. It is clear this leadership is needed to steer Western newsrooms in their international coverage, and it is necessary that it be proactive in putting a lid on racist reporting and commentary, without needing to be prompted by public outrage. Amidst the carnage and terror, these events provide a moment of reckoning to make journalism better—a goal that should be shared by every person who is privileged to ply this trade.

“Journalism is a tool that can break the yoke of racism. The biased and troubling statements made by our Western colleagues must be condemned in equal measure, as must be made clear the suffering that violence inflicts on civilians around the world.”



Race and Power, Us and Them

Just about a year ago I wrote in these pages about what I call the three facets of sociopolitical organization: Policy, Systems, and Consciousness. I said that Policies are like seeds, Systems are like the soil, and Consciousness is like the environment. That is, for seeds to sprout and grow they need to be planted in the right soil, and they need to have the right amounts of rain and sun, as well as the proper temperatures and other conditions.

If we have no seeds, or the wrong seeds, if the soil is too acid, or too alkaline, if it’s too warm, too cold, too wet, or too dry, then the things that we want to grow will not grow, and the things that we do not want to grow will take over. And we will have to live in a world in which a few hearty weeds are thriving while most of us (the flowers in this metaphor) are fighting simply to survive.

When it comes to Consciousness, a fundamental dynamic is the understanding of—or perhaps I should say the beliefs concerning—who is “Us” and who is “Them,” which fuels the never-ending process of Othering and Belonging, which in turn is the basis of the various forms of social oppression. I’ve discussed this

in these pages before, especially in Nygaard Notes #646, back in 2019.

This issue of Nygaard Notes is all about race and how it shapes our understanding of the world. But if you read between the lines, you can see that this issue is about power. And if you read just a little bit closer, you can see that racism is a construction that is used to award power to some and deny power to others. Race and Power. Us and Them.

Orientalism

The word “Orientalism” appears several times in this issue. I was surprised to find, when I looked, that I have never in these pages discussed this concept, which is a key to understanding power in the postcolonial world and to understanding the Othering in the White Western World of Arab people and nations. How could I have failed to mention it?! Well, I’ll mention it now.

A remarkable website (which they call an “online exhibit”) named “Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes,” offers a concise



→→ summary of the concept of Orientalism:

“Orientalism” is a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous. Edward W. Said, in his groundbreaking book Orientalism defined it as the acceptance in the West of “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on.” According to Said, Orientalism dates from the period of European Enlightenment and colonization of the Arab World. Orientalism provided a rationalization for European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which “the West” constructed “the East” as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or “rescue”.

Journalists, as a group, have little role in making policy, and they generally don’t create systems of oppression. Journalists do, however, play a huge role in shaping consciousness, a process hinted at in the examples that I offer in this issue of the Notes of overtly bigoted, ignorant statements by journalists with global audiences.

Some might think that I am trying to suggest that the problem here is the racist assumptions of misguided or evil journalists, and that the solution is therefore to “educate” or replace those misinformed propagandists. Let’s stop right here and talk about systems of power.

The Historical Roots of Racism

As the above quotation points out, Orientalism—like the overarching structure of racism of which it is a part—was born in the Enlightenment. As was the United States itself. As I pointed out in my 2016 essay “Age of Discovery, Age of Conquest, Birth of Capitalism,” there was a “very large problem” here, which I explained as follows:

The Enlightenment was the time during which European philosophers were developing their (very inspiring) ideas about individual rights and a “Social Contract” in which individuals enter freely into agreements about how their lives are governed. The Enlightenment was all about “inalienable” and “natural” rights.

However, the same historical period saw the rise of capitalism in Europe and the subsequent bloody and brutal conquest of the world. So, what of the “inalienable rights” of the dark-skinned peoples who paid—and are still paying—the price for the capitalist development of Europe and its colonial child, the USA? If these subjects of colonialism were considered fully human, then how could the White Western World justify the theft of their wealth, land, and lives? It couldn’t be justified, and thus began the global project of dividing the world into those who are to be considered fully human (“Us”) and those who were somehow less than human (“Them”).

Philosopher Charles W. Mills argues that, in this process of dehumanizing the victims of the imperial project “it was the character of colonial peoples that became crucial. But in all cases ‘race’ is the common conceptual denominator that gradually came to signify the respective global status is of superiority and inferiority, privilege and subordination. There is an opposition of us against them with multiple overlapping dimensions: Europeans versus non Europeans (geography), civilized versus wild/savage/barbarians (culture), Christians versus heathens (religion). But they all eventually coalesced into the *basic* opposition of white versus nonwhite.” [Emphasis in original.]

Over the centuries, journalists, like the rest of us in the White Western World, have become familiar and comfortable with colonialist ideas of both the hostile and benevolent varieties. That’s why the African journalists quoted elsewhere in this issue insist that “news organizations need diversity urgently.” I certainly don’t disagree, but it’s also the responsibility of WHITE journalists to train themselves to notice and report on the suffering of ALL victims of war and oppression, not just those who look like Us.

After all, the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference.

A Change is Gonna Come

I started this essay talking about the three facets of sociopolitical organization: Policy, Systems, and Consciousness. This issue is about Consciousness, specifically how media promotes ideologies that reflect and reinforce—intentionally or not, it doesn’t matter—an environment of enormous inequality and the violence needed to enforce it. to page 8 →→

Race and Power *from page 7*

As the U.S. empire declines and climate disruption threatens all existing systems of wealth distribution, the most powerful people and institutions around the world are fighting to maintain financial, energy, communication, and other systems that will implement the policies that those centers of power believe will serve their needs.

The United States remains the most powerful country in the world, and as long as we are a democracy, what you

and I think and what you and I find acceptable—or *not* acceptable—will have an enormous effect on our future together on this planet. The American Century is drawing to a close, and it's long past time that new voices were heard.

At this historical moment we must ask: Who do we think is “Us” and who do we think is “Them”? A white supremacist system offers one set of answers to that question. It's up to each one of us to think hard, to work hard, to come up with a different answer, an answer that binds us all together in a global community in which we all belong, in which no one is The Other. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: *“Orientalism Is Alive and Well”*

Writing in the Middle East Monitor on March 3rd, Professor Suja Sawafta of the University of Miami, in an essay titled “Orientalism, Ukraine and the Social Disease of Selective Solidarity,” asked a question:

“Why are Europeans — White people on whichever continent they have colonised — entitled to an elite brand of safety, security and humanity while the victims of their foreign policies are doomed to live in a purgatory of poverty and social inequity?”

She went on to say that:

“The level of selective solidarity with Ukraine, one that is not afforded to other vulnerable populations, should be the default benchmark for global solidarity and action. People should not have to have blue eyes and blonde hair to receive our sympathy and support. Yet, the commentary that has been on full display since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated to us otherwise. It has proven that Orientalism is alive and well and that the rhetoric of dehumanisation and cultural superiority that was set in motion with the Crusades is still with us, and is probably here to stay.”

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