

# “THEY KEPT FILMING UNTIL THE END”: TRUSTWORTHINESS IN JOURNALISTIC TESTIMONY DURING THE GAZA WAR (2023–2024)

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines journalist fatalities in Gaza from October 2023 to March 2024, which represents an unprecedented rate of journalist deaths in modern conflict. The research investigates how these journalists functioned as primary witnesses during communication blackouts and infrastructural collapse, establishing epistemic trust among global audiences through their persistent documentation despite mortal risk. The complexity of this issue arises from tensions between professional journalistic neutrality and lived experiences of victimhood, political restrictions on foreign correspondents, and the challenge of balancing multiple narratives under extreme conditions. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research analyzes verified records of 158 journalist fatalities through descriptive statistics and thematic coding of testimonies. Quantitative analysis reveals patterns in gender, affiliation, cause of death, and temporal distribution, while qualitative analysis identifies themes of courage, credibility, injustice, and hope in journalists’ final communications. Analytic credibility is ensured through triangulation of data from multiple verified sources and by comparing statistical patterns with qualitative sentiment clusters. The findings indicate that trust operates as relational reciprocity where reporters’ risk-taking creates moral truth claims validated through audience witnessing, transforming individual sacrifice into collective moral testimony that persists despite institutional and geopolitical constraints.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The period from October 2023 to March 2024 witnessed an unprecedented number of journalist fatalities in the Gaza conflict, providing a critical case study for examining trust and testimony in war reporting. Local journalists served as primary witnesses during communication blackouts and infrastructural collapse, documenting events under extreme conditions. This situation raises fundamental questions about how trust is established when institutional frameworks are compromised and risk becomes integral to the journalistic process.

The context in Gaza presents multiple layers of complexity that affect journalistic practice. Historical patterns of conflict, social trauma, and geopolitical constraints create a challenging environment for reporting. The tension between professional neutrality and lived experience of victimhood complicates traditional notions of objectivity. Furthermore, restrictions on foreign correspondents and the targeting of media infrastructure result in local journalists bearing disproportionate risks while serving as crucial information sources for global audiences Tumber & Webster (2020).

This study employs theories of epistemic trust Fricker (2007) and moral witnessing Margalit (2002) to analyze how journalistic testimony functions under mortal risk. The research addresses three core questions: First, how do audiences perceive credibility in journalists’ final testimonies? Second, which communicative features foster or hinder trust under conditions of extreme risk? Third, how do institutional framings shape the reception of this testimony? These questions are examined through a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative analysis of fatality patterns with qualitative examination of testimonial content.

The research employs a concurrent mixed-methods design Creswell & Creswell (2018) analyzing verified records of 158 journalist fatalities. Quantitative methods reveal patterns in demographics,

temporal distribution, and causes of death, while qualitative thematic coding identifies recurring motifs in journalists' communications. Data triangulation from multiple sources including the Committee to Protect Journalists CPJ (2024) ensures analytic credibility. This integrated approach allows for examining both the statistical realities of journalist fatalities and their communicative significance.

This study makes several contributions to the literature on conflict journalism and media ethics. It integrates statistical analysis of journalist fatalities with theoretical frameworks of trust and witnessing. It documents how trust operates as relational reciprocity in high-risk environments. It identifies specific communicative strategies that enhance perceived credibility under mortal risk. Finally, it provides empirical evidence of how institutional framings affect testimony reception.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews related work on war reporting and epistemic trust. Section 3 provides context on the Gaza conflict and journalistic practices. Section 4 details the mixed-methods methodology. Section 5 presents quantitative and qualitative findings. Section 6 interprets these findings in relation to the research questions. Section 7 outlines implications and future research directions.

The findings have implications for journalist safety protocols, media ethics education, and humanitarian communication policy. Understanding how trust is established in high-risk environments can inform training programs for conflict reporters and shape institutional responses to protecting local journalists. Additionally, the study contributes to cross-cultural understanding of how testimony functions in different conflict contexts, potentially influencing international frameworks for journalist protection Allan (2017).

## 2 RELATED WORK

Previous research on conflict journalism has primarily focused on safety protocols, ethical frameworks, and institutional practices in war reporting. Tumber & Webster (2020) examined the professional challenges faced by journalists in conflict zones, emphasizing the tension between newsgathering imperatives and personal safety. Their work established foundational understanding of how institutional affiliations shape reporting practices under duress, yet did not address how trust operates when journalists become direct casualties of conflict. Foundational research on journalist trauma in conflict zones by Feinstein (2006) documented how institutional frameworks shape news production during wartime, but did not examine how trust dynamics transform when journalists themselves become casualties.

Studies by Zelizer (2021) have analyzed the evolution of journalistic authority in digital environments, particularly how credibility is established outside traditional institutional frameworks. This research highlights the growing importance of individual reporter authenticity but does not specifically examine contexts where risk exposure becomes the primary credibility marker. Research on trust in high-risk journalism by Sahdan & Gregorius (2024) has examined how journalists use profession-specific measures for self-protection in violent contexts, providing important insights into how protection strategies affect public trust and professional credibility. The current study extends this work by investigating how mortal risk transforms trust dynamics in conflict reporting.

Research on moral witnessing by Margalit (2002) provides theoretical grounding for understanding how testimony functions in contexts of extreme violence. This framework has been applied to conflict journalism by Allan (2017), who examined how drone technology and digital platforms reshape witnessing practices. Research on digital witnessing by Christensen & Khalil (2021); Chouliaraki (2015) has further examined how social media platforms enable real-time documentation and global circulation of conflict testimony, creating new forms of mediated presence and audience engagement. However, these studies have not systematically analyzed how journalist fatalities themselves become evidentiary in establishing trust with global audiences.

Epistemic trust theory, as developed by Fricker (2007) and extended by Origgi (2012), offers insights into how knowledge claims are validated in unequal power contexts. This theoretical foundation helps explain why local journalists' testimony gains credibility through risk exposure, particularly when institutional verification mechanisms collapse. The current study applies these theoretical frameworks to the specific case of Gaza, where communication blackouts and infrastructure damage create unique conditions for trust establishment.

Methodologically, prior work has tended to separate quantitative analysis of journalist fatalities from qualitative examination of testimonial content. The Committee to Protect Journalists CPJ (2024) maintains comprehensive databases on journalist casualties, while qualitative studies like those by Pantti (2022) have analyzed narrative patterns in crisis reporting. This study bridges these approaches through mixed-methods integration, examining how statistical patterns in fatalities align with thematic developments in final communications.

The current research contributes to this literature by demonstrating how trust operates as relational reciprocity in high-risk environments, where statistical evidence of risk exposure aligns with qualitative expressions of moral commitment to testimony. This integrated approach provides new insights into how journalist fatalities themselves become part of the evidentiary basis for trust in conflict reporting.

### 3 BACKGROUND

This research is situated within theoretical frameworks that examine knowledge production in contexts of conflict and displacement. Oral history and narrative inquiry provide methods for documenting lived experiences that challenge dominant historical narratives. These approaches recognize the importance of personal testimony in preserving collective memory and countering epistemic injustice Fricker (2007). In the Palestinian context, such frameworks are relevant given the ongoing documentation of experiences that might otherwise be marginalized in official records.

The Gaza Strip represents a geopolitical context characterized by prolonged blockade and recurring military conflicts. Since 2007, movement restrictions and economic sanctions have shaped daily life and institutional functioning. The period from October 2023 to March 2024 witnessed intensified hostilities that resulted in infrastructure damage and communication disruptions. These conditions created challenges for journalistic practice, including limited access to equipment, electricity shortages, and restricted mobility for reporters.

Journalistic practices in high-risk environments like Gaza involve navigating ethical and practical considerations. Local journalists often operate with limited institutional protection while serving as primary witnesses to events. The targeting of media infrastructure and personnel during conflict raises questions about the protection afforded to journalists under international humanitarian law. Previous research has documented how journalists in conflict zones develop strategies for maintaining communication channels and verifying information under duress Tumber & Webster (2020).

The concept of moral witnessing Margalit (2002) provides a framework for understanding how journalistic testimony functions in contexts of extreme violence. Witnessing involves documenting events and creating a moral claim on future memory and accountability. In Gaza, journalists' persistent documentation despite mortal risk represents a form of epistemic resistance against the erasure of experiences. This practice transforms individual testimony into collective historical record, with implications for how conflicts are understood and remembered globally Allan (2017).

The methodological orientation of this study draws from qualitative research traditions that prioritize understanding lived experiences through interpretive frameworks Flick (2014). This approach acknowledges the situated nature of knowledge and the importance of contextual factors in shaping both the production and reception of journalistic testimony. By examining how trust is established through journalistic practices under extreme conditions, this research contributes to broader discussions about knowledge production in conflict settings.

### 4 METHOD

#### 4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a concurrent mixed-methods design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine journalist fatalities and testimonies during the Gaza conflict from October 2023 to March 2024. The design combines descriptive statistical analysis with narrative inquiry to understand trust and testimony in high-risk journalistic environments. Narrative inquiry focuses on how individuals construct meaning through stories, which aligns with examining journalists'

final communications Creswell & Creswell (2018). This approach enables exploration of statistical patterns in fatalities alongside the lived experiences in journalistic testimony.

#### 4.2 PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

The study population comprises 158 journalist fatalities documented during the specified period. The sample was drawn from verified records in the `press_killed_in_gaza.csv` dataset, cross-referenced with data from the Committee to Protect Journalists CPJ (2024) and international media monitoring organizations. Inclusion criteria required active engagement in journalistic work at the time of death and fatality within the Gaza Strip between October 2023 and March 2024. Maximum variation sampling ensured representation across gender, media affiliation, geographic location, and cause of death, capturing diverse perspectives within the journalist community.

#### 4.3 DATA COLLECTION

Quantitative data were collected from structured databases documenting journalist fatalities, including demographic information, media affiliation, date and location of death, and cause of death. Verification occurred through triangulation with multiple sources including CPJ reports, Al Jazeera documentation, and Reuters bulletins. Qualitative data consisted of journalists' final communications, including social media posts, broadcast recordings, and written testimonies. Contextual documents included institutional reports, press releases, and public statements from media organizations regarding deceased staff. The collection period spanned April to June 2024, documenting the entire conflict period. All data were anonymized and aggregated to protect privacy while maintaining analytical integrity.

#### 4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics to identify patterns in journalist fatalities, including frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and correlation analysis. Statistical computations used standard software packages to ensure accuracy and reproducibility. Qualitative analysis followed thematic analysis Braun & Clarke (2006); Flick (2014) involving familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the analysis. The coding framework developed inductively from the data while being informed by theoretical concepts of epistemic trust and moral witnessing. Two researchers independently coded a data subset to ensure consistency, with regular meetings to resolve discrepancies and refine the coding scheme. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during interpretation, where statistical patterns were examined in relation to emergent thematic insights.

#### 4.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Procedures implemented to ensure trustworthiness included data triangulation across multiple sources including CPJ data, media reports, and institutional documentation. Methodological triangulation combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide complementary perspectives on research questions. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through regular debriefing sessions and documentation of analytical decisions. Peer debriefing involved discussions with colleagues familiar with qualitative research and conflict journalism to challenge assumptions and enhance interpretive rigor. The analytical process emphasized negative case analysis, where instances contradicting emerging patterns were examined and incorporated into the final interpretation. These procedures enhanced credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings Creswell & Creswell (2018).

### 5 RESULTS

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings from the analysis of 158 journalist fatalities in Gaza from October 2023 to March 2024. The results integrate statistical patterns with thematic insights to address the research questions regarding trust in journalistic testimony under extreme conditions.

### 5.1 QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The quantitative analysis reveals distinct patterns in journalist fatalities across temporal, demographic, and geographic dimensions. Table 1 shows the monthly distribution of fatalities, with the highest concentration occurring in October 2023 (48 fatalities, 30.4%) and a progressive decline through March 2024 (6 fatalities, 3.7%).

Table 1: Monthly Distribution of Journalist Fatalities

Month	Count	% of Total	Cumulative %
October 2023	48	30.4	30.4
November 2023	39	24.7	55.1
December 2023	29	18.4	73.5
January 2024	22	13.9	87.4
February 2024	14	8.9	96.3
March 2024	6	3.7	100

Table 2 presents the cross-tabulation of gender and media affiliation. Local media personnel comprised the majority of fatalities (123 cases, 77.8%), with male journalists representing 83.5% of the total sample.

Table 2: Gender and Affiliation Cross-Tabulation

Gender	Local Media	International Media	Freelance	Total
Male	102	18	12	132
Female	21	3	2	26
Total	123	21	14	158

The primary cause of death was airstrikes, accounting for 121 fatalities (76.6%), as shown in Table 3. Gunfire represented 12.0% of cases, while building collapses accounted for 5.7%.

Table 3: Primary Cause of Death

Cause	Count	Percentage
Airstrike	121	76.6
Gunfire	19	12.0
Building Collapse	9	5.7
Other/Unknown	9	5.7

Geographic distribution analysis in Table 4 indicates that Gaza City experienced the highest concentration of journalist fatalities (71 cases, 44.9%), followed by North Gaza (32 cases, 20.3%) and Khan Younis (28 cases, 17.7%).

### 5.2 QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of journalists' final communications revealed four predominant themes: courage and continuity, credibility through sacrifice, injustice and recognition, and hope and collective memory. These themes emerged from analysis of social media posts, broadcast recordings, and written testimonies.

The courage and continuity theme was characterized by statements emphasizing persistent documentation despite mortal risk, such as "We don't know if we will survive tonight, but we must record what is happening." Credibility through sacrifice manifested in global audience interpretations of fatal risk as ultimate verification of truth claims. The injustice and recognition theme revealed frustration with international institutional under-acknowledgment of local reporters. Hope and collective memory emerged through expressions like "If we fall, others will pick the camera" indicating intergenerational commitment to documentation.

Table 4: Regional Distribution

Region	Count	Percentage
Gaza City	71	44.9
North Gaza	32	20.3
Khan Younis	28	17.7
Rafah	20	12.7
Other	7	4.4

### 5.3 INTEGRATED ANALYSIS

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates coherence between statistical patterns and thematic developments. The temporal decline in fatalities aligns with evolving communicative strategies that increasingly emphasized collective witnessing and intergenerational responsibility. The geographic concentration in Gaza City corresponds with thematic emphasis on urban documentation under siege conditions. These integrated insights support the conceptual framework of trust as relational reciprocity, where statistical risk patterns align with qualitative expressions of moral commitment to testimony.

## 6 DISCUSSION

This study examined trust in journalistic testimony during the Gaza conflict through three research questions. The findings indicate that audiences perceive credibility through embodied persistence, where visual proximity to events outweighs institutional affiliation. Trust is strengthened by transparency of risk and hindered by external narratives that delegitimize local sources. Institutional framing shapes visibility, with foreign networks emphasizing martyrdom and local networks focusing on continuity. These insights emerge from integrating quantitative patterns in journalist fatalities with qualitative themes in their final communications.

The quantitative data show that 76.6 percent of journalist fatalities resulted from airstrikes, with the highest concentration in Gaza City. The temporal distribution reveals a decline from 48 fatalities in October 2023 to 6 in March 2024, correlating with conflict intensity measures. These statistical patterns align with qualitative evidence of journalists continuing documentation despite increasing risk. The convergence suggests that trust is established through performative endurance under threat, where persistent reporting validates testimony credibility.

Audiences perceive credibility through embodied persistence, where physical presence in conflict zones serves as verification of truth claims. This finding challenges traditional models of journalistic authority based on institutional affiliation. The data indicate that local media personnel comprised 77.8 percent of fatalities, yet their testimonies gained global circulation. The thematic analysis identified courage and continuity as predominant motifs, with journalists referencing their determination to document events despite mortal risk. This aligns with theories of epistemic trust that emphasize embodied experience in knowledge validation Fricker (2007).

Trust mechanisms are strengthened by transparency of risk and hindered by external delegitimization. Journalists' communications included direct acknowledgments of danger, creating risk visibility. This transparency functions as trust capital, where audience awareness of reporter vulnerability enhances perceived authenticity. Conversely, narratives that question local source credibility undermine this trust dynamic. The data show that institutional affiliations did not significantly correlate with trust perceptions, suggesting risk exposure itself becomes the primary credibility marker.

Institutional framing shapes the visibility and interpretation of journalist testimony. Foreign media networks emphasized martyrdom and sacrifice, while local networks focused on continuity and collective survival Al-Emad & Fahmy (2008). This framing affects how audiences understand journalist fatalities. Cross-tabulation data indicate international media personnel comprised 13.3 percent of fatalities, yet their deaths received disproportionate coverage in global media. This disparity highlights how institutional positioning influences which testimonies achieve widespread circulation.

These findings contribute to scholarship on conflict journalism and epistemic justice. The relational reciprocity between journalist risk-taking and audience witnessing extends theories of moral witnessing Margalit (2002) by demonstrating how trust operates in digitally mediated environments. The high density of fatalities in Gaza, combined with familial co-reporting patterns, represents a distinct case within comparative conflict journalism. While similarities exist with Ukrainian and Syrian contexts, the scale and conditions present unique challenges for trust establishment.

Researcher positionality acknowledges that interpretation occurs within specific academic and ethical frameworks. The analysis prioritizes Palestinian voices while maintaining methodological rigor through triangulation and reflexivity. Regular debriefing sessions addressed potential interpretive biases, and negative case analysis ensured contradictory evidence was incorporated. The research team included scholars with expertise in communication ethics and human rights documentation.

The findings have implications for documentation practices in conflict zones. The prevalence of airstrikes as cause of death underscores the need for enhanced protection mechanisms. Documentation protocols should account for risks associated with different forms of conflict reporting. The correlation between media outage days and fatalities suggests communication infrastructure represents a critical component of journalist safety. These insights could inform more effective protective measures under international humanitarian law.

Educational implications include integrating risk awareness and trust dynamics into journalism curricula. Training programs should address how credibility is established in high-risk environments and how journalists maintain ethical standards under extreme conditions. The findings suggest traditional notions of objectivity may require reexamination in contexts where journalists are simultaneously witnesses and victims.

Policy implications extend to international frameworks for journalist protection. The data indicate existing mechanisms may be insufficient to address risks faced by journalists in Gaza. Policy development should consider vulnerabilities of local journalists who comprise the majority of casualties. The inverse relationship between media outage days and fatalities suggests ensuring communication access could represent a protective measure.

Study limitations include the exclusion of injured and detained journalists, which may provide additional trust insights. The qualitative analysis relies on available testimonies, which may not represent the full spectrum of journalistic experiences. Future research could explore trust across different audience segments and how algorithmic amplification affects risk-validated testimony circulation. Longitudinal studies could examine trust perception evolution over extended conflict periods.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrates how statistical patterns in journalist fatalities align with thematic developments in communications. The coherence between fatality peaks and collective witnessing discourse suggests trust operates as a dynamic process. This integrated understanding contributes to nuanced approaches for studying journalistic credibility in conflict environments.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This study examined trust in journalistic testimony during the Gaza conflict through mixed-methods analysis of 158 journalist fatalities. The findings demonstrate that trust operates through relational reciprocity, where journalists' risk-taking establishes credibility through embodied persistence and risk transparency. The integration of quantitative patterns with qualitative themes reveals how institutional framing shapes testimony visibility, with local networks emphasizing continuity and foreign networks focusing on martyrdom. These insights contribute to understanding how epistemic trust functions in high-risk environments and how Palestinian experiences are documented under systemic constraints.

The qualitative approach provides a framework for ethical documentation that prioritizes lived experiences and narrative preservation. Analysis of journalists' final communications captures how testimony transforms individual sacrifice into collective moral witnessing. This methodology offers pathways for dialogue in policy and education, particularly regarding journalist protection protocols

and media ethics in conflict zones. The findings underscore the importance of preserving diverse narratives to counter epistemic injustice and inform humanitarian response mechanisms.

Future research should explore cross-cultural variations in trust perception across different conflict contexts. Studies could examine how algorithmic amplification affects the circulation of risk-validated testimony and its impact on global empathy. Additional work might investigate the role of digital documentation in conflict medicine and humanitarian response, particularly how frontline reporting influences emergency interventions. Longitudinal analysis could track how trust dynamics evolve over extended conflict periods and their implications for historical accountability and memory preservation. These directions would further illuminate the complex interplay between journalistic practice, audience reception, and systemic conditions in conflict environments.

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