

BADIL Occasional Bulletin No. 24

December 2004

Take the Microscope to Both Sides

This Bulletin aims to provide a brief overview of issues related to Palestinian Refugee Rights

While the Middle East peace efforts may again rev into gear, a new start has to include a new kind of reporting that looks at the facts, not fabricated facts and myths.

Until now, one side has been able to get away with limited critical review of its position and statements. The other side is held up to microscopic scrutiny. Fair and balanced reporting means holding both sides to the same standards of truthfulness says Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR).

Carl Bernstein who wrote on Watergate for the Washington Post believes that the media needs "to serve the public good by telling the best obtainable truth". He says that, for example, support for the war in Iraq is the result of poor media coverage because most people still aren't truly informed. "Deal with facts first, then have the debate," says Bernstein. In the Guardian of 15 December, David Edwards and David Cromwell "Balance in the Service of Falsehood" ask "how is it possible that a free press could fail to challenge even the most transparent government deception in the run-up to the attack (on Iraq)?"

Both tourists and journalists are held hostage when visiting Palestine/Israel. They see only what they are taken to see. They see no Palestinian refugee camps and hear only one version of history. There is little effort at providing balance for the visitor. Journalists visiting Palestine only interview those made available by their Israeli guides or the Palestinian elite. They only get part of the story while there is something else going on says Prof. Greg Philo, University of Glasgow, in *Bad News from Israel*.

Nobody hears our side

The cries for balanced reporting often come from people who feel their point of view is not getting heard. In the reader's view, the failure of a journalist to be neutral is when the journalist isn't on their side, observes Serge Schmemmann, a former New York Times correspondent in Jerusalem. Jane Christo, the station manager of a National Public Radio affiliate in Boston says: "There are people who don't want us to be fair." Some people feel that there are good guys and bad guays. If you're not on the side of ones they see as good, you're letting the bad guys win, reports Ms. Christo.

The Columbia Journalism Review says: "What was consistently found is that the loudest demands for objectivity are made by groups or lobbies who want to ensure that they get equal time in any story." Some people's viewpoints do not get through. At the same time as some cry that Israel is misrepresented, others see that Palestinian life (and death) is underreported.

Is "balance" possible?

Is it possible to provide a "balanced" report of South Africa under Apartheid? How does one provide a "balanced" report of planes crashing into the World Trade Center in New York?

How does one provide a "balanced" report of a powerful nation and its relations with a dispersed community under military occupation or deal honestly with an asymmetrical situation? Can one provide "balance" when little attempt is made to give the reasons for unresolved conflicts, only one side of the conflict is presented, or ceasefires and negotiations are reported as the end of a conflict when it is only one step to the end?

Edwards and Cromwell, in the Guardian (see above and reference on p.5) say that there are two major biases in the new concept of "neutral, professional journalism. First the actions and opinions of official sources were (are) understood to form the basis of legitimate news. As a result, news came to be dominated by mainstream political and business sources representing establishment interests...Second, carrot-and-stick pressures from advertisers, business interests and political parties had (have) the effect of steering journalists in the corporate media away from some issues and towards others."

There are ways of reporting stories truthfully if one is willing to invest the effort, says John Petrovato in the Palestine Chronicle. The "West" fails to understand that the most elementary fact of life for people in the occupied territories is that "Palestinian people live under a harsh and brutal military occupation by a foreign army...As long as journalists are not willing to take a risk and report contrary to Israeli interests or travel to areas forbidden by the Israeli government, the world will never gain the objectivity and knowledge which it needs in order to truly understand this conflict..."

Will history show that Arafat was a partner for peace or is it a myth that there was "no partner for peace"? Will Israel, asks Neve Gordon of Ben Gurion University take steps to address Palestinian grievances or continue myth-making? Will the myth prevail? he asks.

Gordon says: "Like every political myth, the 'no-partner' one has been used to conceal rather than to reveal. It aimed to obscure the fundamental grievances fueling the conflict, namely that Israel has been occupying Palestinian land for 37 years and that the number of Jewish settlers actually doubled during the Oslo process—the years Israel was ostensibly preparing to withdraw from the territories.

"The 'no-partner' was also used to undercut basic Palestinian demands, which Arafat represented: Israel's full withdrawal to the 1967 borders, the establishment of a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, and the recognition of the rights of Palestinian refugees."

Using international law to measure balance

What does "balance" mean and what is it measured against? Is it only measured against the feelings and prejudices of one's readers/viewers? In the case of the Middle East and elsewhere, balance can easily be measured against a huge body of international humanitarian and human rights law that lays out clear standards for everyone.

For example, the Institute for Public Accuracy, in a report of the International Court of Justice's ruling on Israel's separation wall declares: "The court appropriately found violations of both humanitarian law and the law of human rights. The wall seriously violates international law...The fact that the Court ruled that the Wall is illegal is no surprise; it could hardly rule anything else given where and how the Wall is being built, and the weight of international law..."

"This ruling will not by itself change the balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians. But it gives the citizens of Europe, the U.S., and other countries whose policies allow the Israeli occupation of Palestine to continue a powerful way of holding their governments accountable for their trade with and aid to Israel so long as it insists on occupying Palestinian land."

Where is the microscope when Israel is described as the only democracy in the Middle East? Does this mean that a democratic country can deny equal rights to 20 per cent of its population? Where does the media report on the lack of rights for Palestinian Arabs who are citizens of Israel? Does it report on the school system where Arab schools are denied equal funding; where Arab villages and cities are called "unrecognized villages" or where Palestinians who lost their homes and lands in 1948 are called "present absentees"?

"Our media," says University of Illinois professor Robert W. McChesney, "are responsible for giving us a balanced inspection of all claims, careful fact checking and reasoned analysis." Are we getting this in the Middle East conflict?

Readers/viewers often rely on one source of information. Does the outsider realize that there is lively debate within Israel on whether a Jewish state can be a democratic state? Does he/she realize that in public opinion polls the majority of Israelis say they favor the so-called disengagement plan? Does the reader know that there is a Palestinian and an international perspective on disengagement? Prof. Philo reports in *Bad News from Israel* that his research found there is a wider range of arguments in the Israeli media than there is on the mainstream channels of the BBC which the bulk of the UK population watch.

“Palestinians ignored”

FAIR argues that the media’s tendency to downplay—or completely ignore—Palestinian suffering and death is nothing new. In late 2001 to early 2002, for example, a ceasefire led to a period of “very few Israeli deaths, but sustained Palestinian deaths—and the American media repeatedly referred to it as a time of ‘relative calm’.” “In order to convey the Mideast crisis in all its complexity, journalists need to take seriously the violence suffered by all communities. References to ‘relative calm’ while Palestinians are being routinely killed only serve to trivialize human life and obscure the cycle of violence that afflicts the region.”

In other North American studies and reports, it has been found that the deaths of Jewish children are often run on front pages of newspapers and are replayed over and over on TV while reports of the deaths of Palestinian children are often ignored or put on inside pages of newspapers. *Killing children is no longer a big deal*, Haaretz 17 October 2004 (www.haaretzdaily.com), reports that even before attacks on Jabalia camp in Gaza, 557 Palestinian minors (below 18) have been killed in the recent Intifada while 110 Israeli minors have been killed. Is this balanced use of force and if the reader or viewer did not know this, how fair and balanced then has the reporting been?

“The argument over what news organizations call Israel’s wall/fence/barrier,” maintains the Columbia Journalism Review, is another example of how persistent lobbying and complaints about Middle East reporting—claims of bias and ‘anti-Semitism’—produce a tortured lexicon of ‘safe’ words. Thus, reports from the Arab-Israeli dispute are often incomprehensible to the average reader and viewer. Why is it that U.S. TV calls the edifice snaking through Jerusalem a ‘barrier’ when a ‘Martian’ would identify it as an (8 to) 15-meter-high concrete ‘wall’?

“As the Independent’s Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk has observed, by turning colonies into ‘settlements’ and then into ‘neighborhoods’—by turning occupied territory into ‘disputed’ territory—we de-legitimized the Palestinian argument, presenting Palestinians guilty of senseless violence...A journalist’s job is always to inform the powerless about that which the powerful would rather keep secret. If objectivity is the bold standard, then we must associate that word with fairness, honesty, an acute sense of injustice—and not an all-encompassing and spurious right of reply designed to protect reporters and their news organizations from powerful interests and their own governments.” In addition to “safe” terms, a lexicon of inflammatory terms has developed, especially in referring to Palestinians. They are usually called terrorists, they are always moving suspiciously and they infiltrate rather than enter an area. Only Palestinians and Arabs incite, the media says, although there is daily incitement from every level of Israeli society Cabinet.

Challenge, not amuse

The Middle East conflict is a victim of journalists’ lack of aggression in searching for the truth. Carl Bernstein says that journalists today will accept news that will amuse rather than inform. “I believe it’s the role of journalists to challenge people and not amuse them.” In the Middle East, there is a need to challenge the reader or viewer with a balanced inspection of all claims, careful fact checking and reasoned analysis.

References:

Al Jazeera.info (U.S. web site). Al Jazeera Glossary of Terms, 24 September 2004. (aljazeera.info)

American Journalism Review, Days of Rage. News organizations have been besieged by outraged critics accusing them of unfair coverage of the violence in the Middle East. Are they guilty as charged? July/August 2002 (www.ajr.org)

Arab Media Watch: Misreporting Violence 3 September 2003 (www.arabmediawatch.com)

Columbia Review of Journalism, Columbia University, New York (www.cjr.org)
Brits vs. Yanks: Who does journalism right? May-June 2004
Questions of Balance in the Middle East, May-June 2003

Common Dreams, 9 November 2004. (commondreams.org)
On Media and the Election by Robert W. McChesney.

Editor & Publisher, 12 November 2004 (editorandpublisher.com)
"Journos Might be 'Biggest Threat to Truth Today, Bernstein Tells Texas Audience"

Fair: Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (fair.org)
Euphemisms of Israeli Settlement Confuse Coverage, 26 June 2002
Journalists Find 'Calm' When Only Palestinians Die, 22 August 2003,
Finding Fault on Both Sides Can be False Balance, 30 September 2004

Guardian, 15 December 2004 (www.guardian.co.uk)
Balance in the Service of Falsehood. The Media's failure to challenge official deception over Iraq was the product of a journalism with built-in bias.

Haaretz, 17 October 2004 (haaretzdaily.com)
Killing Children is no longer a big deal.

Institute for Public Accuracy, Washington, D.C. (www.accuracy.org)
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Dynamics of Violence, 3 August 2001
International Court to Israel: Tear Down This Wall, 9 July 2004
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: US Veto and Election, One State? 6 October 2004

In These Times, 12 November 2004 (inthesetimes.org) The No-Partner Myth.

Media Beat, Bias and Fear Tilting Coverage of Israel, 19 April 2001 (fair.org/media-beat)

The New York Times, (nytimes.com) When No Fact Goes Unchecked, 31 October 2004

Palestine Report (palestinereport.org) "A failure by the Western media", interview with Greg Philo, author of *Bad News from Israel*, 21 October 2004

Tufts Journal, Tufts University (tuftsjournal.tufts.edu)
The delicate balance of covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, November 2002

There are references to fair and balanced reporting in a number of other publications. The above is only a brief summary of pertinent literature.
