

# The media and Israel

## A Case Study

## A watchingthewarmakers information sheet

### Gaza appeal

The BBC has recently been heavily criticised for its refusal to broadcast a humanitarian appeal for Gaza. Its justification, that it had a responsibility to be impartial, was regarded by many people as completely misjudged.

This sheet argues that:

- The ignorance of so many people in this country about the reality of the Palestinian question indicates a failure to inform by the BBC and other TV companies
- The coverage of Gaza is a prime example of this failure
- One cause of the failure is a refusal to stand up to the pro-Israeli lobby.

None of the above applies solely to the BBC. Other broadcasters and media are as bad or worse. Neither does it imply that individuals working in the media are themselves biased. Some may be but it is the context within which they work – the strong backing of Israel by the West – that structures how stories emerge.

### A failure to inform

In 2001 a Glasgow University Media Group survey of students studying social sciences, arts and history found that:

- Only 9% knew that the Israelis were occupying the Occupied Territories and that the settlers were Israelis, while 11% thought the occupiers and settlers were Palestinians
- Only 18% knew that Palestinian refugees had been forced from their homes by Israel. The remaining 82% had an idea that the refugees were the product of war or conflict in the region, but no idea who the conflict was between.
- 22% thought casualties were about the same on both sides, with 32% thinking a few more Palestinians were casualties.

It seems likely that the general population would know as little as, or even less than, these students about what is going on and why. The fact that 82% gave television news as a major source for their images of the conflict suggests that TV news is failing to adequately cover what is going on.

By presenting individual incidents in Palestine as part of an endless circle of violence, an unfortunate tragedy bereft of context, coverage obscures the expropriation of the Palestinians which is the cause of the situation. <sup>1</sup>

### Gaza and the BBC

John Kampfner, chief executive of Index on Censorship, recently said of the BBC's Gaza coverage:

'Language, as any propagandist knows, is the most important tool. Hamas fighters are called "militants". That, I am told, is a halfway house between "terrorist" and more sympathetic labels such as "guerrillas". The Israeli army is often referred to by its formal title, the Israel Defence Forces. The bombardment of Gaza has regularly been described as "the Israeli operation". Such language denudes coverage of impact.

The reporters, led by the experienced Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, are operating in the most frustrating of environments. At the time of writing, they had still not been allowed inside Gaza. When it comes to Zimbabwe, each presenter's cue into a reporter's package invariably

states: "The BBC is banned from reporting inside Zimbabwe, and so here is X from South Africa". The refusal by the Israelis to allow correspondents access inside Gaza has been mentioned, but not as a matter of course and not as prominently.' <sup>2</sup>

### Headless chickens

#### the BBC and the Zionist lobby

The Evening Standard recently carried an article on the BBC and Israel which pointed out how affected the BBC is by the Zionist lobby.

'According to sources inside the corporation tensions over Israeli-Palestinian coverage have induced a state of near psychosis among BBC executives and policy-makers. One insider told the Standard:

"They are in a complete white funk. To describe them as like headless chickens running all over the place would be to convey an impression of too much order and cohesion. They are cowering in corners. The fear is palpable."

How did it come to this? A view held by a number of BBC veterans suggests pressure applied by Israel and its supporters has created nervousness and led executives and editorial managers to over-compensate in the face of allegations of pro-Palestinian bias.

A former senior editor said "Whatever we did was contentious. There was a formidable lobby backing Israel and the letters would stream in. The pressure was immense." <sup>3</sup>

### How bias works

The devil, as they say, is often in the detail. The language used in the headline, the positioning of the story and the order in which facts are presented all have an impact on the overall effect. Some recent examples:

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- On the 1<sup>st</sup> January the BBC website carried a story headlined “ Hamas leader killed in air strike”. In paragraph 14 of the story is the additional detail that “at least nine other people” were killed in the strike. The final total was 16 dead, eleven of them children. It is hard to believe that a similar number of Israeli deaths would have been placed so far down the story.
- On the following day “Israel braced for Hamas response” heads a story that “in response to Hamas’ call for protests, Israeli police have been stationed throughout East Jerusalem. Movement for Palestinians in the West Bank has been severely restricted.” Perhaps a more accurate headline would have been “Israel curtails right to demonstrate”?

Sometimes, of course, what is significant is what gets reported and what doesn’t. A study of Associated Press (AP) coverage for the year 2004 found that:

- There were 141 reports of Israeli deaths in headlines or first paragraphs of stories. During the period there had actually been 108 Israelis killed. The discrepancy was caused by the fact that some Israeli deaths were reported more than once. In the same period 821 Palestinians had been killed but only 543 of these deaths had been reported by AP. In other words 131% of Israeli deaths and 66% of Palestinian deaths were reported in AP headlines or first paragraphs.
- Looking at the deaths of children the study found, on the same basis, that the deaths of Israeli children were reported at a rate 7.5 times higher than Palestinian children’s deaths. <sup>4</sup>

## The Israeli view

The Jewish Chronicle recently carried an article – “Israel claims success in the PR war” - detailing the lengths Israel had gone to strengthen positive media coverage, and how successful the Israelis believed it to have been. The article points out that “while the military aspects of the operation were meticulously planned, a new forum of press advisers was also established which has been working for the past six months on a PR strategy specifically geared to dealing with the media during warfare in Gaza.”

The preparation included setting up a new National Information Directorate (NIC) that worked to ensure that:

- Fewer soldiers were interviewed. “One of our lessons from the Lebanon War was that there were too many uniforms in the coverage,” says Yarden Vatikay, director of the National Information Directorate, “and that doesn’t come over very positively.”
- The international media were sent to a press centre in Sderot to maximise stories about missiles hitting Israel, and kept out of Gaza to limit coverage of the carnage there.
- “when the IDF was represented on the international TV networks, it was by Major Avital Leibovich to project a feminine and softer image.”

The Israelis believe that their preparation paid off, at least as regards the British broadcast media.

“Israeli diplomats and spokespeople working with the British media have said that so far ‘most of the hostility has been in the print media, especially in the Guardian and the

Independent. The electronic media, including also the BBC, have made more of an effort to seem even-handed.

‘The coverage is definitely less hostile to Israel than what we saw during the Second Lebanon War two-and-a-half years ago.’ <sup>5</sup>

## And finally

In this country, our government gives unstinting support to Israel. As bombs fall on Gaza and the Israeli state bans Arab parties from standing in elections, our Foreign Secretary describes Israel as ‘a beacon of democracy’ in the region.

We also live in a world with a well-organised Zionist lobby which responds immediately to any perceived slight to the State of Israel, and systematically attempts to distort coverage of what is really happening in the Middle East.

One part of our response should be to use public opposition as a counter-pressure on the media. The BBC received tens of thousands of complaints about its decision not to broadcast the humanitarian appeal for Gaza, and as a result has spent the whole week attempting to justify its decision. Next time the BBC may think more carefully.

So, next time you hear or see something which makes you angry why, not take a few minutes to complain?

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1. Figures from ‘Bad news from Israel’, Greg Philo and Mike Berry
  2. [www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/jan/12/bbc-reporting-gaza-conflict](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/jan/12/bbc-reporting-gaza-conflict)
  3. Evening Standard 27/1/09
  4. Figures from If America Knew, [www.ifamericansknew.org/media/ap-report.html](http://www.ifamericansknew.org/media/ap-report.html)
  5. All quotes from Jewish Chronicle, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2008: [www.thejc.com/articles/israel-claims-success-pr-war](http://www.thejc.com/articles/israel-claims-success-pr-war)