

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:260 3 Elul 5752 / 1 September 1992

A SPECIAL REPORT

ANTI-ISRAEL MEDIA AND HOW TO FIGHT BACK

David Bar-Illan

Reporting Arab Inventions as Truth / The Pursuit of Balance / The Use of Anti-Zionist Jews / Selective Use of Anonymous Opinion Leaders / Inappropriate Headlines / If Not Anti-Semitism, Then Why? / What is Fair Reporting? / Compare Israel with America / How to Fight Back

Reporting Arab Inventions as Truth

The BBC recently featured a story about Israeli use of pesticides for agriculture in the Gaza Strip, how it was entering the food cycle and thereby slowly poisoning the people of Gaza. This is just a variation of the old blood libel or that of the Jews poisoning the wells, of which we are so familiar from other centuries. The reporter who interviewed the UNRWA official who told him the story did not invent or even provoke the story. He just happened to be talking to an UNRWA man a few days after a teacher was murdered in front of his class at an UNRWA school, and the UNRWA people were afraid that their own officials would be next on the list for these death squads. This story may have been meant to counter the news stories about the murder in the school, a story obviously not very favorable to the intifada and one that shows the intifada as indiscriminately brutal, vicious and murderous. Therefore, a counter story was put out, one of how the Israelis are poisoning the residents of the Gaza District.

Did the reporter think about the story at all? Obviously he could not have since it is common knowledge that Gaza produce reaches the markets in Israel, which means that the Israelis are also poisoning themselves in order to be able to poison the people of Gaza.

To be sure, the reporter did add a one-sentence denial from the Agriculture Ministry at the end of his 12-minute film report about how the Israelis are poisoning the people of Gaza. One can imagine the value of such a denial at the tail end of a story which has already raised every viewer's blood pressure by 100 degrees. The denial is absolutely valueless because the viewer has already absorbed a barrage of negative propaganda against Israel from the pictures and the tone of the report.

The story in this case was typically based on an interview with a local man. In most Western democracies a reporter assumes that when talking to someone who was involved in the event, chances are that the eyewitness is not deliberately lying. One assumes that the innocent person off the street

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.
13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112. © Copyright. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 0334-4096.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

is telling the truth. There is a certain genuineness about what he or she says, a certain innocence. What is difficult for Westerners to imagine is that many times the stories from these "witnesses" are fabrications, absolute lies from beginning to end, which have absolutely no basis in truth whatsoever.

Long before the intifada, the *New York Times* published a story by its correspondent in Israel, James Farrell, about a truckload of religious settlers who came into a village and shot at children playing in the street. They hit only little girls, not boys, and they were all taken to the hospital in critical condition. What was particularly strange about the story was the fact that there was no follow-up on the part of the reporter. He did not go to the hospital to check if anybody was injured and if indeed they were injured critically, but the story was published as is. When the story was read out in the Knesset by a member of the Communist Party and the case was investigated, it was found that there was no truck, no Jews, no shooting, no village, no nothing. The whole story was totally fabricated by an Arab who spoke to the reporter and planted the story in his mind. Of course there was no apology in the *New York Times* and no retraction. This was a case where an anti-Israel story was printed for no reason whatsoever because it is so difficult for Western reporters to believe that people would lie to them like that.

When Western reporters witnessed Arafat waving an enlargement of an Israeli coin and saying that the imprint inside that coin is really the expansion map of Israel and it covers half of Saudi Arabia, half of Iraq, all of Syria, all of Jordan, and some of Egypt, they know that this is an idiotic lie and they chuckle about it. But the fact is that they allow him to transmit to the whole world his line about an expansionist Israel. We all know that imprinted on the Israeli coin is an ancient coin from Bar Kochba's days whose sides are a little jagged, but the Western media allowed Arafat to announce to the world that this ancient coin was really a map of the expansion plan of Israel and people believe it.

Assad of Syria frequently claims there is a similar map in the Knesset which covers the whole area from the Nile to the Euphrates, a map which, of course, no actual visitor to the Knesset has ever seen. Arafat also claims that the two stripes on the Israeli flag represents the two rivers, the Nile and the Euphrates, representing the territorial ambitions of the State of Israel. It is very difficult to imagine that such lies can be told and believed, but they are.

This reporting of outright lies does not only happen

in the Middle East. A recent BBC program about Angola featured a very handsome 16-year-old, talking with the greatest sincerity to the camera about Sovimbi, the head of the group that was fighting against the Communists in Angola. He told about a stadium in which people were burned alive. One woman tried to escape the fire and the boy described how Sovimbi pulled out his gun "with the ivory handles" and shot the woman dead. The boy was so sincere that only the meanest person could have doubted his veracity, but a few months later the same boy admitted he had invented the whole story.

For the editor, the point is that it made a good story so why not show it, especially if it is also a story that happens to serve the correspondent's agenda. The fact is that the correspondents do have an agenda, an image of what they feel is right and wrong, and they will obviously tend to favor the stories that confirm their agenda.

Again, this does not happen only in the Middle East. Walter Durante of the *New York Times* reported from the Ukraine during the Great Famine that the Soviet government was really the most benevolent, wonderful, and generous government in the world and that all the stories about the famine were lies — and he got the Pulitzer Prize for it.

The Pursuit of Balance

John Martin, a correspondent for ABC TV, interviewed an Arab who lives near Neve Tzuf, not far from Bir Zeit. The man showed Martin all the hills around his village and said, "All these hills belong to my family. These lands have been in my family for at least a thousand years." Of course there is proof, he says. There are papers, but the Turks took the papers away with them to Istanbul in 1917 when they left the country. Before 1967, Arabs would tell visitors that Tel Aviv was on land that had been in their family for ten centuries. Now it is more fashionable for correspondents to repeat that story about the mountains of Samaria and Judea.

It is amazing that there has never been an Arab interviewed on American television who has not lived in Palestine for ten centuries, especially in light of the descriptions of Mark Twain and hundreds of other pilgrims in the nineteenth century who reported seeing a very sparsely settled land.

But John Martin did not check the Arab's claim. He did not even qualify his report by saying "the man says it is his land." He proceeded to film a program in which he referred 14 times to the land as the Arab's

land. After saying it 14 times, he interviews a Jewish woman in Neve Tzuf and tells her she is sitting on this Arab's land. The woman replies that it is state land and was never owned by anybody. In fact, all land ownership cases are checked thoroughly and cases are often brought to the Supreme Court. But the woman's reply does not make any difference because by this time the viewer is convinced that she and her neighbors are colonialists who stole Arab land.

If one confronts correspondents with charges of bias, they insist they are being fair by hearing both sides and deciding that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. This is like being objective and balanced between the arsonist and the fire brigade, or wanting to report the Gestapo's side as well as the Jewish side about what happened in Auschwitz. In fact, one cannot take the middle ground and be fair because the middle ground is often nowhere at all. Reporters do this with casualty figures. The Israeli army says that there are 800 dead as a result of the intifada and a human rights organization says there are a thousand dead so the correspondents conclude that the truth is probably somewhere in the middle and report the figure as 900.

The Use of Anti-Zionist Jews

The BBC had a recent series about the Middle East which included one half-hour program called "The Lovers of Zion," obviously a translation of Hovevei Zion. It was supposed to be the Israeli side of the story. The narrator in such programs is supposed to be the objective, neutral reciter of facts. He is not expected to offer an opinion but is there to tell the history of the country and the conflict as a prelude to presenting the differing opinions from the Israeli and the Arab perspectives. For their neutral narrator in a report of the Israel side of the conflict the BBC chose Walik Halidi, the PLO propagandist from Chicago. This would be equivalent to doing a program about the history of the PLO and asking Rabbi Levinger to be the narrator. To be fair, both Jews and Arabs were interviewed — anti-Zionist Jews and anti-Zionist Arabs.

This is also a standard practice of the "McNeil-Lehrer Report." They often invite Jews who will speak against Israel and Arabs who will speak against Israel. They will very seldom invite pro-Israel people to speak on their program unless they are official representatives of Israel, but that reduces their credibility right away because obviously one cannot expect the Ambassador of Israel to be objective. On the other hand, if the correspondent interviews a certain Jewish university professor, the audience does not know that this Jewish

academic is a famous anti-Zionist who is, if anything, more vicious in his attacks on Israel than any Arab interlocutor.

The BBC had a program called "Opposing Opinions" which included three people: one, Avi Shein, was a very well-known anti-Zionist lecturer in London; another was an Arab propagandist; and the third was the moderator, a Britisher, a member of the BBC staff, and a known anti-Israel personality. The three competed with one another in anti-Israel venom in the name of "opposing opinions."

Selective Use of Anonymous Opinion Leaders

Another journalistic practice often seen regarding Israel is that of quoting people who are supposed to represent an opinion. *Time* magazine would often quote "most Jews," as in "Most Jews think. Most Jews feel." How could they even know what most Jews feel or think? They were always quoting a nameless housewife in Los Angeles who was always supporting the line of the magazine.

A researcher for *Newsweek* once told of asking at least 12 rabbis for their opinion of an issue and none of them fit what the magazine wanted. They quoted only the thirteenth and ignored all the other opinions.

Thomas Friedman does this all the time, talking to Henry Siegman and then quoting "American Jewish leaders." He does not talk to the others because the leadership community is not that large and we know that no others have been interviewed. Or even more criminal, a poll is taken among "American Jewish leaders," who happen to be the three people that the pollster happens to know and like. That kind of manipulation is so common that it is almost taken for granted by now.

Inappropriate Headlines

The recurring problem of inappropriate headlines is not always the reporter's fault but the fault of the editor. Last year there was a horrible murder of three people in an aluminum workshop near Tel Aviv. At that time I did a study of the headlines in a very thorough sample of the leading newspapers in the United States, Britain, Ireland, and even Hong Kong and Singapore, and every newspaper in the world except one used the headline: "Jews Attack Arabs in Tel Aviv Street." In fact, there were gatherings of hotheads who attacked Arabs on the street as a result of the uproar that occurred after the discovery of the murders. From this came the headline, "Jews Attack Arabs," referring to incidents in which nobody was

really hurt instead of to the brutal murder of three people. The only paper out of the 25 that I checked that actually had the appropriate headline, "Jews Killed by Arabs in Tel Aviv," was the *Irish Echo*.

Peter Jennings, the anchorman for ABC TV, introduced a news story on his program saying: "A Jewish mob almost lynches an Arab in a Jerusalem street; more about it after the commercial." After the commercial he comes back and the viewer learns the story. Two 90-year-old men were stabbed to death outside the post office on Jaffa Road and people chased the murderer, caught him and beat him up. The teaser headline for the story was "Jews almost lynch an Arab in a Jerusalem street," and for most listeners that is the whole story. They do not even hear the rest. How the anchorman read the news clearly set the direction of that story.

After the official report came out on the Temple Mount riot, the story was headlined "Police Provocation Caused Temple Mount Riot." There is nothing in the report anywhere that says that the police provoked it, but the headline writer picked on something about a smoke grenade that exploded during the riot and it might have frightened the women who were standing next to the Mosque of Omar, and that was a police provocation. Yet the headline made the story. From then on the reader expects a story of police provocation and no matter what it says in the story, one's impression of it is that it supports the headline.

When the *London Times* prints on the same page a picture of Shamir looking like he is about to kill someone and a picture of Arafat right next to him smiling and kissing a baby, it is clear that this is done tendentiously, that they did not just choose these pictures by chance. They chose them very carefully in order to show Shamir in as bad a light as possible and Arafat in as good a light as possible. These things are done all the time.

If Not Anti-Semitism, Then Why?

Why do correspondents act like this? Theodore Stanger of *Newsweek*, who believes that every problem in Israel such as wife-beating or the war in Iraq is because of the settlements, has "I hate Jews" written on his brow. But 90 percent of the reporters are not anti-Semites. The fact that some of them are Jewish means nothing because the worst reporters in Israel have been the Jewish ones.

There used to be an understanding at the *New York Times*, before Tom Friedman, that Jewish reporters would not be sent to Israel because they might write

too favorably. Friedman proved that they had absolutely nothing to worry about. In every Arab country there are Arab reporters working for Western news organizations, especially for the wire services. Doud Katab, a PLO propagandist, writes for Reuters. Yet they will not use anybody in Israel who is known for having a favorable opinion of Israel. As a matter of fact, a writer for the *Jerusalem Post* was told that as long as he continued to write for that paper he had absolutely no chance of becoming a correspondent for the BBC in Israel because of his affiliation with what is now known as a Zionist newspaper. The editor who sends out correspondents knows their political proclivities. If a correspondent is a Zionist, he is not going to go to Israel. The editor may not want the correspondent to be a PLO agent, but he does not want anyone who might really have a soft spot for what Israel is about and what it is doing.

If they are not anti-Semites, what are they? Partly, many of them are products of the 1960s and 1970s, those who were in college in those years, people of the New Left who have absorbed this notion of Israel being an imperialist, militarist, colonialist country, and therefore it is in the wrong. Once they believe that the country is in the wrong, it can do no right. Then anybody who fights it is a good guy and the country that represents this colonialism and imperialism is the bad guy. That generation pictures the whole intifada (which, after all, is just a new name for something that is a little more intense in the last four years but which has been occurring since the 1920s) as one between an oppressed people and an oppressor. The Arabs in the territories are, in their minds, a cross between the black civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, and an African nation fighting for its independence against a colonialist power — a cross between Alabama and Algeria. Anybody who fights against this heroic battle for independence is the bad guy. So Israel can do no good and the Arabs can do no bad.

Much of the diaspora Jewish press is influenced by the same kind of 1960s mentality. Many of these Jewish writers and reporters are not dissimilar to the Jewish reporters that the *New York Times* would use. The American Jewish press does not have to be that fair. It is, after all, a parochial press and as such one would expect it to be much more pro-Israel than it is and many are not at all. Many of them take the position not of the Israeli Labor party but of the left-wing fringe parties, closer to the Communists than anything else, and that is a little strange for a Jewish newspaper

in America. The position that land should be exchanged for peace is a perfectly legitimate one that many honest people hold. It is the attitude that the PLO can do no wrong and that the Israel government, police and army can do no right that we must object to.

Add to this the tremendous success of Arab propaganda in converting the conflict between Israel and the Arabs from one between little Israel and all 200-plus million Arabs in states spanning an area almost twice the size of the United States, in which Israel was always pictured as David against Goliath, into one of women and children fighting an army of occupation in the streets of their villages. Combining that with their image of the Arab cause as a cross between Algeria and Alabama is a deadly kind of potion for the correspondents of that era and of that mentality — Thomas Friedman, Jackson Diehl, and their colleagues in Israel.

In the period before 1967 Israel was pictured very favorably in most of the world press because at that time it was really very difficult for anybody to picture us as the strong ones. We had won the War of Independence but it was a very costly victory, it did not get us as much as we had hoped, and it was not a smashing victory as the 1967 victory was.

After the 1967 victory Ephriam Kishon, the country's great satirist, wrote a wonderful piece which was distributed in the United Nations called "Forgive Us for Winning," because obviously it was much easier for the world to accept Jews as martyrs and victims than to accept Jews as victors and strong occupiers.

Another factor at work is in a way complementary and flattering to us. The fact of a Jew killing an Arab is news but an Arab killing a Jew is not news, from a purely journalistic point of view. It is like the truism that a dog biting a man is not news; a man biting a dog is news. For Jews to kill is still considered unusual; for Arabs to kill is considered quite normal. In fact, Arabs killing each other makes no news at all. They have killed 650 of their own in the most brutal, unspeakable ways, yet the reporting is made to fit the picture that the intifada is all good and pure, ignoring this fact.

There is an embedded, entrenched racism in that attitude. Whether Jews are held to a higher standard is not the point. It is a racist attitude to feel that there is a group of human beings who are inferior because they can kill with impunity while another group cannot. It is like saying that African tribes kill each other because they are black (and therefore it is not considered news).

One additional factor is that the official Israeli

information effort is not very good. Having lived here under the British regime, I remember that the Arabs always were much better than the Jews at flattering the stranger, at cosying up to him and currying favor with him. It was always possible to see the favoritism towards the Arabs by the British. This was partly dictated from London, partly because they really did not like Jews very much, and also because it was easier for them to be flattered and to feel comfortable with the Arabs. The Arabs supply stories with extreme expertise to the correspondents here about how oppressed they are and the correspondents eat it up. Aside from bad manners, we Jews also have the kind of pride that makes it very difficult for us to do this kind of work with foreign correspondents.

What is Fair Reporting?

Fair reporting is giving both sides of the issue but banking on past performance as well; both have to be considered. It is not a question of finding a middle road. One may report what the Palestinians are saying, but it is not ethical to give the Palestinians cameras and accept the footage as if it were taken by a Western organization without announcing this fact. This is a totally unprofessional and unethical practice. Yet the foreign networks often give video cameras to Palestinians in the areas, but do not say that the pictures were taken by Palestinians. They were not taken by a fair reporter who went into the village, but by a Palestinian who wanted to show only certain things. This is not fair reporting.

Fair reporting is saying: "this is what the Palestinians say," "this is what the Israeli army says"; however, in the past it has been proven that what the Palestinians say is very often exaggerated. For example; they say that 200 women have miscarried as a result of tear gas. It is the reporter's responsibility to talk to some doctors and ask if it is at all possible to miscarry as a result of tear gas. He has to go to the hospital records and find out if anybody really miscarried as a result of tear gas. He cannot just report these things as if they happened. He may report them as a version of events and then say, "but doctors deny that it is possible" or "hospitals do not have any records of anybody miscarrying as a result of tear gas." He must say: "this is what the Palestinians are saying," but that does not mean it actually happened.

Fair reporting means not parroting the numbers given out by the Arabs about Arab refugees without telling the whole story. In 1948 the United Nations said that the Palestinians in the camps numbered

700,000. There is no way there could have been more than 400,000 that left the area that became Israel at that time, but the U.N. did have 700,000 people listed. There were many thousands of Arabs who had absolutely nothing to do with the war who came to register for food rations in these camps because it was too good an offer to pass up, since no such rations were available in other Arab countries.

It is impossible to expect that Israel will always be presented in a positive light. The United States is not always presented in a positive light by the media in democratic societies. The French newspapers do not report everything favorably about France. However, if one compares how they report about France and how they report about Israel, one sees a big difference.

Compare Israel with America

For example, the American media often report about the open-fire regulations of the Israeli army, but they also have to report what happens in America. In American cities all of the questionable practices mentioned in the reports about Israel simply do not exist. Nobody ever shoots in the air, nobody ever shoots warning shots. In America, if a policeman pulls out a gun, he shoots to kill. That is the policy of all police forces in all the United States — without an intifada, without a war, without terrorism — using live fire against plain citizens, as they have done in treating riots since 1965. In Israel, a report about open-fire regulations does not occur in a vacuum; it is in a war. In a world in which riots occur, what Israelis do should by comparison appear in a very good light. Israeli open-fire regulations are almost crazy in how careful they are not to allow anybody to be shot if it is not a question of life and death or of apprehending an armed terrorist. In Los Angeles earlier this year their open-fire instructions were shoot to kill, even for looting. That is not exactly what the Israeli army is instructed to do. When somebody covers his face in a democratic society and is obviously on his way to committing a crime, he is usually required to stop when the police tell him to stop, and if he does not stop he is shot, because he cannot be assumed to be an innocent bystander. The police in every major city of the United States forbid shooting in the air because it is dangerous, and no one is instructed to shoot at a suspect's legs as we are instructed to do.

I interviewed some in the Israeli army who said there was an open-fire regulation that said that if you see armed people preparing to ambush a bus and you are on the opposite hill, and you cannot apprehend them

because they are too far away, you are not allowed to shoot at them. This is suicidal and utterly ridiculous. I have spoken to people who were besieged by 40 stonethrowers surrounding their car, hitting them with iron rods and throwing stones into the car. There were three Jews in the car and one of them had a pistol. He got out of the car and fired the pistol in the air twice. The stonethrowers ignored him completely because they knew he was not going to shoot at them. They pounced on him. They pulled his arm down and he shot himself in the leg. I asked him, "why didn't you shoot them?" He replied that he was afraid of going to jail. This is what went through his mind. He was not sure whether they threatened his life. Throwing a stone at a car is considered a lethal weapon in America. It is the same as throwing a bomb or anything else through the windshield. There is a man sitting in a Maryland jail for 40 years who threw a stone at a car and did not kill anyone.

These open-fire regulations are, first of all, not even standard army regulations because armies are supposed to shoot at their enemies. These are police regulations, nothing else, and the police regulations in Judea, Samaria and Gaza are really far more liberal in terms of favoring the criminal or potential criminal than in any other country in the world. That is something that any study will show and any correspondent should know it, especially an American correspondent, because he has seen what happens in American cities.

How to Fight Back

In my "Eye on the Media" column I try to raise the Western media's consciousness. First, I try not to call them anti-Semites or anti-Israeli, but to touch on the professional side. How can they print a story without checking it? Can you imagine a reporter in Manhattan hearing that a truck full of black people came into a Puerto Rican neighborhood and shot a girl playing in the street, and not going to the hospital to see if it actually happened? The reporter would be fired the same day if he failed to check the story. By touching on the professional side of things rather than accusing them of being anti-Israel, one may have a chance to shake them up a bit. They may become a bit defensive if they come to feel that many people resent what they write. The readers are, after all, their consumers and they are concerned about what the consumers think, even if it takes a long time for them to get the message.

People ask about the usefulness of writing a letter to the editor, that they will not print it and will just ignore it. First, one should write sensible, calm, cool

letters, not frothing at the mouth, trying to get down to the facts as one knows them. If they get not one or two but 150 letters protesting a story, they will look into it. They will not apologize, they will not retract, but they will think about it. For me, the fact that both John O'Connor and Abe Rosenthal can say that there is Israel-bashing in the press is an achievement because it used to be that anybody who said "Israel-bashing" in the press was considered paranoid. In fact, Michael Sheridan of the *London Observer* called my column "the paranoid column, 'Eye on the Media,' in the *Jerusalem Post*." That is very flattering because it means they are paying attention, they are reading it.

An organization in California called Coma actually found that in the four leading newspapers in America, more print was spent on the Sabra-Shatilla massacre than on all the massacres that have occurred in the world since World War II. In those 45 years millions of people have been killed in massacres. Just in Cambodia two million were killed in one series of massacres, but more print was spent on Sabra-Shatilla than all the rest. That is the kind of thing that no newspaper can ignore completely and pointing out these things to editors must have some sort of cumulative effect.

We Jews may appear more divided than the Arabs, but that is the price of democracy. Our fault is in not making the most of it. We do not stress often enough that internal democracy is why we seem so splintered and why we have so many differences of opinions. The fact is that we can point to it as a sign that we are a democracy fighting totalitarianism because, in contrast, no Arab who wants to wake up alive in the morning would dare say anything against the line because, no matter what he says in private, he cannot say it in public because he will get shot. He cannot say anything different from the general line because of the totalitarian control that exists in all Arab countries, and one can

make capital by saying this.

The people who run the *New York Times* do not wake every morning and say to themselves, "What can I do against Israel today?" They think they are actually helping us. They think they are pro-Israeli. They often have this very condescending attitude that "We are going to save Israel from itself." The *New York Times* for 50 years did not allow a picture of a Jew with a beard to appear in the newspaper because the publishers did not want to be associated with such Jews. They certainly do not consider themselves anti-Israel, and if we keep pointing out these things, we must believe that sooner or later they will see some kind of light. I cannot imagine that they are essentially evil people and I hope that we can affect them in one way or another.

David Shipler of the *New York Times* wrote a story about an Arab who was forced by Israelis to call them "my Lord, my Lord." In fact, there is no "my Lord" in Hebrew; there is *adoni*, which is a cross between "hey you" and "mister." To report that anyone was forced to say "my Lord" is completely out of the question. When I pointed this out, Shipler actually answered by saying that the fact that he said it twice made it mean "my Lord." He called him *adoni* — "mister" — twice. This just shows the level of the argument that can be given instead of admitting a mistake, because this was obviously an atrocious, insulting and offensive mistake based upon a distortion of common Hebrew. But because it served his purposes, he took a story that was third-hand and printed it as is. Here one can point out to the editor that printing a third-hand story in his paper is beneath his dignity.

* * *

David Bar-Illan is the Executive Editor of the *Jerusalem Post* and author of its "Eye on the Media" column.