An exposé of dishonest media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict

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Bad News from Israel: Greg Philo and Mike Berry, Pluto Press, London, 2004

The Glasgow University Media Group's new book, *Bad News from Israel*, exposes the dishonest role the main TV news coverage in Britain plays in distorting the Israel-Palestine conflict and misinforming the public.

Far from explaining the origins of the conflict, most news bulletins function as little more than the overseas arm of the Israeli government's propaganda. Israel is able to mobilise the support of billionaire media owners, Zionist pressure groups and write-in campaigns to intimidate journalists who try to take a more objective stance.

The result is an alarming level of ignorance and confusion among viewers, a lack of interest in the conflict, and feelings of helplessness and the impossibility of change. Above all, poor and biased coverage plays a crucial role in preventing an informed public debate about how the conflict might be resolved.

These criticisms are far from new. But *Bad News from Israel* provides reams of evidence to back up such views.

The book's authors, sociologists Greg Philo and Mike Berry, monitored and analysed four separate periods of news coverage by the BBC and ITN, Britain's two main TV news channels, between the start of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000 and the spring of 2002. They examined around 200 news programmes and compared them against the national press and other programmes such as Channel 4 (C4) News and BBC2's current affairs programme, Newsnight. They interviewed over 800 people and brought well known broadcasters and programme makers to take part in discussion groups with ordinary viewers and find out what they thought about the conflict and its coverage.

Philo and Berry found that news items were reported with little explanation about the origins of the conflict, the United Nations resolution establishing the state of Israel on part of Palestine, and the subsequent war between Israel and her Arab neighbours. Neither did the news spell out how the establishment of the state of Israel and the subsequent war had led to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fleeing their homes, both because of the horrors of war and the forced expulsions organised by the official Israeli military forces and Zionist terrorist groups sanctioned by the then Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion. There was little or no explanation of how many had become refugees again after the 1967 war and had lived in squalid refugee camps ever since.

While news coverage focused on the day to day details of the Palestinian armed uprising, few reporters described how Israel had seized the West Bank and Gaza 37 years ago and illegally occupied it ever since in defiance of numerous UN Security Council resolutions. There was next to no explanation of the meaning of that occupation: that the Palestinians lived under military rule in all but name, had no civil rights and suffered enormous economic and social deprivation.

The figures are quite stark. In the period between September 28 to October 15, 2000, BBC1 and ITN devoted 3,500 lines of text to the uprising, but only 17 to the history of the conflict.

The lack of public knowledge closely mirrored the absence of such information on the TV news.

Without any contextual information, most viewers did not appreciate that the Israelis had seized the Palestinians' land to build the Zionist settlements, closed hundreds of roads, diverted their water supplies, uprooted their olive groves, assassinated their political leaders, detained people for years without trial, routinely used torture, and imposed collective punishment in the form of house demolitions and curfews.

If the journalists did make passing reference to such abuses, they failed to point out that all of this was illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Not surprisingly, therefore, viewers had little understanding of what had given rise to the uprising. Only 10 percent of the groups of British students interviewed in 2001 and 2002 knew that it was Israel that had occupied Palestine. Some even thought that the Palestinians were the occupiers. Many saw the conflict as some sort of border dispute between two countries fighting over land. A massive 80 percent did not know where the Palestinian refugees had come from or how they had come to be dispossessed.

The study found that the language used by reporters routinely favoured the occupying Israeli military forces over the occupied Palestinians. Words such as 'atrocity', 'mass murder', 'lynching' and 'slaughter' were used to describe Israeli deaths, but not Palestinian. Journalists used the word 'terrorist' to describe Palestinians, but 'extremists' or 'vigilantes' to describe an Israeli group trying to bomb a Palestinian school.

There were constant references to Israel's security and Israel's right to exist, but little mention of Palestinians' security or their right to exist.

The study found that the impoverished and humiliating conditions faced by Palestinians for decades under the military occupation were virtually ignored. There were no visual pictures of the economic and social consequences of the military occupation, the brutal treatment at the hands of the military, the squalid housing, the shortage of water, or the contrast with the settlers' homes that had swimming pools and lawns.

The bias was quite blatant. In the sample of news items in 2001, the news coverage was six times more likely to show the Israelis as 'retaliating' to Palestinian 'terrorism', which led viewers to blame the Palestinians. There was no indication that the military occupation had spawned the resistance to Israel, or that the Israeli armed forces had provoked Palestinian violence.

There was more coverage of Israeli deaths than Palestinian, even though three times the number of Palestinians had lost their lives, and the journalists have the evidence that proves it.

That is not to say that the journalists were uniformly pro-Israel and unsympathetic towards the Palestinians. They do show the consequences of Israeli military actions, but it is the Israeli explanation that is most frequently cited.

Again, the gaps in knowledge closely followed the reporting. In 2002, only 35 percent of students questioned knew that the Palestinians had suffered more casualties than the Israelis. In so far as some of the focus groups were better informed, it was because they had access to other sources of information: the press, books or further study in higher education. In other words, despite its potential TV was not the most useful source of information. The Israeli settlements in the occupied territories were presented as vulnerable communities, rather than as having a key strategic role in expanding Israel's borders and imposing the occupation. Built as fortresses on hilltops to give a commanding position, their occupants are often heavily armed.

Focus groups told Lindsey Hilsum, a Channel 4 News presenter, that they would welcome a "quick potted history", with somebody saying "This is all because in 1948, this happened and that happened", or, as Hilsum put it, "A sort of new readers start here".

The journalists report the tactics and responses of the various parties involved in the conflict. On one occasion they cited the then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak as saying that he would use all means to restore order and concluded that the Palestinians were likely to react violently to such a move. There was no critical consideration of the nature of the 'order' that the Israelis would restore and that it would mean military control, large scale arrests, imprisonment without trial, torture and extra-judicial killings. Neither did the journalists discuss what the Palestinians could or should do to end this.

Similarly, while the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, was routinely blamed by the Israelis for breaking off the peace talks at Camp David in July 2000, the journalists made little attempt to investigate what the terms 'peace' or 'normalcy' meant to the Palestinians.

Producing the news

The book's authors provide some interesting insights into the operational reasons why the news is presented in this way.

The demand by the commercial news channels for 24 hour news 'as it breaks' means that journalists spend more time in front of the camera than collecting and analysing the news. It makes them more reliant on easy-to-source and cheap information, meaning official sources of information. While the BBC, which has the largest international news teams in the world, remains publicly funded, 25 percent of its income comes from commercial sources, including the syndicating of its news coverage.

Veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk explained that the journalists' narrative of events was built around the last thing some official has said. "There seemed to be no real understanding that the job of the reporter is to analyse what is really happening, not simply to pick up on the rolling news machine", he said.

Senior journalists told the research team that they were instructed not to give explanations. Paul Adams, the BBC's defence correspondent, said, "It's covered as if it's a very large blood feud and, unless there is a large amount of blood, it's not covered."

George Alagiah, presenter of the BBC's six

o'clock news, pointed out that the BBC constantly stressed that the viewers' attention span was just 20 seconds and that if the news didn't grab people, then people may switch over in that first minute.

Another BBC journalist told the research team that he had been instructed not to do 'explainers' by his own editor. As he put it: "It's all bang bang stuff".

Israel's control of the news content

The study shows that the Israeli perspective predominated in TV news because of Israel's well-developed system of lobbying and public relations.

One very experienced Middle East correspondent for the BBC gave several practical—but essentially political—reasons for the biased news reporting.

Israeli authorities can provide documents in the appropriate language and put forward a fluent English speaker, well versed in addressing the western media, to put the Israeli perspective on the latest events in a studio in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv or anywhere else in the world. Its media organisation sends out 75-100 emails to reporters every single day.

The Palestinians, by contrast, were described as their own worst enemy. They spoke poor English, were perceived as boorish, were typically incoherent, and were deemed to have 'missed the point'.

Secondly, the Palestinians find it impossible to surmount the hurdle of dozens of road blocks to get to the studios in Jerusalem, leaving them to give a brief response down the, at best, crackling telephone line. Essentially reactive, they sent out just five emails a week.

Thirdly, the same system of restrictions meant that it was nearly as difficult for the journalists to reach the Palestinian areas to report on what was going on there and obtain a Palestinian viewpoint. None of the Western news channels put any resources into maintaining a news team in the occupied territories.

While all of these factors clearly affect how the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives are presented and perceived by viewers, the journalists made little attempt to compensate for the disadvantages that the Palestinians are working under. At the very least, they need to explain to viewers why they were unable to get to Ramallah to interview the Palestinian Authority leaders or were using a poor telephone line because of the restrictions imposed by the Israeli military authorities. As Philo and Berry put it, "To avoid doing this is to legitimise a structural imbalance".

The book cites Keith Graves, who spent many years reporting for the BBC in the Middle East, as one of a number of journalists working in the occupied territories who complained of extensive intimidation by the Israeli authorities. He suggested that this had worsened as the uprising had continued.

"When I was first based in the Middle East as the BBC correspondent 30 years ago, Israel was rightly proud of its position as the only country in the region where journalists could report freely. Not anymore. Under the Sharon government intimidation of reporters deemed 'unfriendly' to Israel is routine and sanctioned by the government", he wrote in the *Guardian*.

This is something of an understatement. The Foreign Press Association in Jerusalem and Reporteurs San Frontiers accused the Israelis of deliberately targeting gunfire at journalists, noting that eight had been wounded as of June 2001. *The Killing Zone*, a Channel 4 programme, gave details of what they regarded as the deliberate killing of a colleague by Israeli security forces, when he had been filming the bulldozing of Palestinian homes.

Israel organises powerful lobby groups to represent it in the United States and in Britain and make sure that the media run with their line. The Independent quoted the Israeli embassy in London as saying, "London is a centre of media and the embassy here works night and day to influence that media. And in many ways I think we don't do a half bad job, if I may say so... We have newspapers that write consistently in a manner that supports and understands Israel's position and its challenges. And we have had an influence on the BBC as well."

If the media do not "support and understand Israel's position", then their reporters face a barrage of critical emails. *The Observer* has written, "News organisations that fall foul of Israel are accused of being pro-Palestinian at best, and worst anti-Semitic".

Lindsey Hilsum commented on "the number of emails that I receive saying that I'm anti-Semitic because I have written something they don't like about Israel". *The Observer* also noted the organised letter writing campaigns and the growth of websites that target individual journalists and provide ready-written letters of complaints for subscribers to send out.

The Israelis have also utilised rhetoric about the 'war against terror' in their public relations armory, and successfully exploited revulsion produced by suicide bomb attacks by Palestinian militants.

Nachman Shai, a key Israeli spokesman in the early years of the intifada, told the research team, "We selected the first [war on terror] instead of the second [anti-Semitism] because we are part of the Western world. We very much played the first argument. It worked better with governments, they gave us more support. It's like if you run out of arguments, you are stuck with anti-Semitism. The first one is based on common interests."

The strategy had worked. He regarded the quality of the international media coverage, including Britain's, on the conflict as having improved, and cited the effect of suicide bombings on how the conflict was seen:

"It has gradually become more balanced than in the beginning...the media are now seeing more of the complicated issues than at the beginning, because of the indiscriminate violence of the suicide bombers against the Israeli population," he said.

Political pressure on the media

The research also showed the political and corporate links that are important in ensuring that Israel's perspective predominated.

Speakers from the US, who usually endorsed or supported Israeli positions, were regularly featured on TV news. No other countries or governments who were critical of Israel were given as much air time, if any at all, as the US.

Some of the US politicians were strongly influenced by the Christian Right, which had joined forces with the powerful Zionist lobby, particularly AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee), which Fortune magazine consistently places in the top five special interest groups. No other foreign policy-based lobby group makes it into the top 25. AIPAC's annual conferences regularly feature the attendance of half the US Senate and half the members of the House of Representatives.

Although AIPAC plays a hugely influential role in the media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict in the US, its activities are rarely analysed. In part, this is because it is believed to have organised mass write-in campaigns or suspension of home deliveries of newspapers protesting at alleged pro-Palestinian bias.

In Britain, Sam Kiley, a correspondent of the Times newspaper, part of Rupert Murdoch's communications group, which also owns Fox News in the US, resigned in September 2001, blaming its pro-Israeli censorship of his reporting. He spoke of Murdoch's close friendship with Ariel Sharon and heavy investment in Israel.

Writing in the *London Evening Standard*, Kiley pointed out, "The Times foreign editor and other middle managers flew into hysterical terror every time a pro-Israel lobbying group wrote in with a quibble or complaint and then usually took their side against their own correspondent... I was told I should not refer to 'assassinations' of Israel's opponents, nor to 'extra-judicial' killings or executions".

Kiley was also cited as saying the paper's executives were so frightened of crossing Murdoch that when he interviewed the Israeli army unit responsible for killing a 12-year-old Palestinian boy, he was asked to file the piece without mentioning the dead child.

The Daily Telegraph, part of the US Hollinger group that also owns the Jerusalem Post, previously owned by the disgraced Conrad Black, has also been subject to complaints by its journalists that Black's strong support for Israel has affected its editorial policy.

The Guardian newspaper wrote, "Three prominent writers—all of them past contributors to Mr Black's *Telegraph* group—have signed a letter to the *Spectator* [magazine] accusing him of abusing his responsibilities as a proprietor. Such is the vehemence with which Mr Black has expounded his pro-Israeli held view, they say, no editor or correspondent would dare write frankly about the Palestinian perspective".

The travel writer William Dalrymple, one of the three authors of the letter, wrote in the *Guardian*, "A press baron is an immensely important figure. With that power, comes responsibilities, and those responsibilities are abused when he makes it clear that certain areas are off-limits to legitimate enquiry, and that careers will suffer if those limits are crossed."

The general response of the BBC and ITN is to bow to the pressure. As Professor Philo explained to the World Socialist Web Site, the conflict is so controversial that it is easier not to go over the history. This serves to remove the rationale for the Palestinian uprising and conflict with Israel, leaving journalists reliant on Israel's public relations material rather than the Palestinians' story of their lost homes or struggle for national liberation.

He cited the case of John Pilger, whose programme Palestine for ITV resulted in more than 4,000 emails, largely pro-Zionist and critical, being sent to the TV regulator. It took six weeks to write a 20,000-word response justifying his film. Rodrigo Vasquez, the producer of *The Killing Zone* for Channel 4, had a similar experience. While the regulator eventually cleared Pilger, it is not something that other journalists want to go through.

In other areas, he said, reporters can be more critical of the official line. For example, reporters can castigate African governments for their corruption. But if the subject was oil, then it became more difficult. The oil companies have lawyers. Journalists know what they can say and adjust their scripts accordingly. Everyone gets to know the parameters of their own organisation.

The book provides a devastating picture of the extent to which the truth is the victim of a pliant media that is, notwithstanding the honesty of a few journalists, only too ready to sacrifice its professional standing in the interests of powerful pressure groups and their corporate backers. But it fails to draw out the wider political, economic and strategic interests that lie behind the TV companies' reluctance to report the Israel-Palestine conflict from within and across the Arab world and the occupied territories, as they once did, as well as from Israel.

The media has no interest in presenting an historical explanation of the tragedy that has befallen the Palestinians, created the monstrous garrison state that is Israel today and threatens to embroil the two peoples in barbarism. Such an analysis would cut across the British government's support for the US and Israel as the custodian of its interests in the region.

Initially published on the World Socialist Website: www.wsws.org