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Why Does it Happen?¹

FACTORS IN PRODUCTION?

We look here at key factors which affect the production and structuring of news accounts in this area. As we have seen, there is in general a dearth of in-depth, analytic and explanatory material included in news reports. Journalists in our focus groups pointed to the problems in producing a constant flow of news items and to pressures of time. Newsroom discussions do not focus very often on issues of audience comprehension or the overall effect of news programming on public understanding. As Adrian Monck pointed out to us, the main concern of news producers is often the logistics of how to get the job done in the time available. As he noted, there are a limited number of ways in which news stories are currently told. These include the standard news package with video inserts, or a studio discussion or a live piece to camera by an expert journalist. As he put it, which format is used and what goes into the story is often dominated by the pressure to deliver a sequence of programmes lasting exactly 24 minutes and 36 seconds (timed to the second). He believed that it was now very important for journalists and broadcasters to reorient their concerns and think about how news output could be restructured to improve its capacity to inform. Others also pointed to factors in the current organisation of news programming which limit the ability of journalists to explain and analyse. One participant in the focus groups was a professional photographer and he commented that

Part of the problem is just the way the news medium works nowadays – where you are geared up to having constant 24 hour news and you get the feeling that some of the journalists on the spot are spending more time in front of a camera because they have to do 15 different TV news

programmes and four different radio programmes, than they are actually finding out what's happening in the story, and that means we do not get as much analysis, as much colour, as much depth in what's going on. You get moment-by-moment repetition. (Middle-class male group, London)

Lindsey Hilsum also noted the pressures of time but linked this to the specific difficulties of covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with its long complex history in which explanations are intensely contested:

There are two problems ... how far back do you go is one and the other is with a conflict like this, nearly every single fact is disputed ... I think, 'Oh God, the Palestinians say this and the Israelis say that' and I have to, as a journalist, make a judgement and I say this is what happened and it's quite clear and there are other things where I wasn't there and I didn't see it with my own eyes. I know it's a question of interpretation so I have to say what both sides think and I think sometimes that stops us from giving the background we should be giving, because I think 'Well, bloody hell, I've only three minutes to do this piece in and I'm going to spend a minute going through the arguments.' (Middle-class female group, London)

But, as she notes, the journalists should be giving the context, and our study suggests that the removal of it has important consequences. As we have indicated, the absence of key elements of Palestinian history makes it difficult to understand their perspective. Their actions could appear without context and in consequence they may be seen as 'initiating' the trouble. In contrast, when the Israelis acted, the news often gave an explanation which could legitimise what they were doing. Israeli views on terrorism and the rationale for their actions were clearly included on the news, and Israelis were more frequently quoted and featured than Palestinians. One reason for this disparity was the more efficient public relations machine which the Israelis operated to supply information to journalists. At the same time it was sometimes difficult for journalists to obtain information from the Palestinian side about current events. We interviewed a US journalist who had headed a Jerusalem-based news agency in the period before the intifada. As he noted, most journalists actually lived in Israel and were regularly supplied with information:

Nearly all [the journalists] lived in Israel or West Jerusalem, rather than in Palestinian areas. The Israelis were very nice to them. They speak their languages, they dress like us, for the most part they act like us. They press the right buttons. The other thing is the Israeli efficiency, 'You want these documents, I'll get them for you', miles of statistics!² (Interview, June 2002)

He believed the Palestinian operation was far less effective:

Palestinian spokesmen are their own worst enemy. They often come across as boorish, the message is often incoherent. Official Palestine does have a method problem. They miss the

essential points. Arafat is a one man show, he is almost always incoherent. (Interview, June 2002)

He also noted the difference in that the Israeli approach was essentially proactive while the Palestinians were essentially reactive:

Palestinians don't have a clear public relations approach. They [Palestinians] start from a reactive approach. I get 75–100 emails a day from official Israeli sources and organisations which support [Israel] (about 15 per cent from government, the rest lobbyists and supporters). I get perhaps five a week from Palestinian sources. (Interview, June 2002)

In contrast, some British Zionists with whom we spoke took the view that there were weaknesses in Israeli press and public relations, particularly in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Joy Wolfe from the Women's International Zionist Organisation commented on the 'inexperience' of the IDF team who have 'very poor communication equipment and not even a proper Englishspeaking translator who can put out a decent and accurate press release' (23 October 2003). Overall, however, it does seem from our research that the Israelis achieved much more space for their views than the Palestinians (as shown, for example, in the relative amounts of reported statements/interviews).

British journalist Robert Fisk has also described how the regular supply of information and well organised public relations can set agendas in news:

The journalists' narrative of events is built around the last thing someone has said and the last thing, given the constraints of time and the rolling news machine that they have heard on the agency wire. So what you would find on television in the last few weeks is that every time an Israeli statement was made, it was pushed across at the Palestinians. So the Israelis would say: 'Can Arafat control the violence?' and instead of the television reporters saying: 'Well that's interesting, but can the Israelis control their own people?' the question was simply taken up as an Israeli question and became part of the news agenda. There seemed to be no real understanding that the job of the reporter is to analyse what's really happening, not simply to pick up on the rolling news machine, the last statement by one of the sides. And given the fact that the Israelis have a very smooth machine operating for the media, invariably what happened is, it was Israel's voice that came across through the mouths of the reporters, rather than [having] people who were really making enquiries into both sides and what both people were doing. (*The Message*, BBC Radio 4, 20 October 2000)

It has often been noted that it is easier for journalists to accept the routine supply of information than to undertake the difficult, expensive and sometimes dangerous path of generating independent material. Journalists who were working in the occupied territories complained of extensive intimidation and it has been suggested that this has worsened as the intifada gathered momentum. The veteran BBC correspondent Keith Graves has written in the *Guardian* that

When I was first based in the Middle East as a BBC correspondent thirty 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. (*Guardian*, 12 July 2003)

Organisations such as the Foreign Press Association (FPA) in Jerusalem and Reporters Sans Frontiers have accused the Israelis of deliberately targeting gunfire at journalists, noting that eight had been wounded (*The Observer*, 17 June 2001).³ A recent programme on Channel 4 television gave a detailed account by journalists 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.⁴

The Palestinian Authority has also made attempts to limit unfavourable coverage by, for example, trying to control what is filmed. But it seems clear that, overall, Israel's public relations and system of information supply is more sophisticated and well resourced. There are also powerful lobbies which support them in the US and to some extent in Britain. The *Independent*, for example, has reported that 'the Israeli embassy in London has mounted a huge drive to influence the British media'. The paper quoted the embassy's press secretary as saying that

London is a world centre of media and the embassy here works night and day to try to influence that media. And, in many subtle 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 situation and its challenges. And we have had influence on the BBC as well. (*Independent*, 21 September 2001)

The *Observer* has also written of the intensity of this campaign, noting that:

A new front is opening in the intifada. Faced with increasing international criticism of its handling of the Palestinian uprising, the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon and its allies in the powerful and influential pro-Israeli lobby, have stepped up their efforts against international media reporting of the current crisis. News organisations that fall foul of Israel are accused of being pro-Palestinian at best, and at worst anti-Semitic. (*Observer*, 17 June 2001)

Journalists spoke to us of the personal criticism and 'flak' which they had received. Lindsey Hilsum from Channel 4 News commented on 'the number of emails that I receive saying that I'm anti-Semitic because I've written something they don't like about Israel' (in focus group: middle-class females, London).

The *Observer* also noted the organised nature of letter writing campaigns:

For many years, pro-Israel organisations have organised letterwriting campaigns to protest against articles and programmes they dislike. With the development of email, this activity has grown enormously. Websites ... target individual journalists and provide ready-written letters of complaint for subscribers to send out. (*Observer*, 17 June 2001)

Pro-Israel groups often argue that both 'bias' in the media and physical attacks upon Israel are at root caused by anti-Semitism. There is certainly evidence of anti-Semitism in the speeches of some Muslim clerics and in the Arab media.⁵ The Israelis have occasionally pointed to this as part of making their own case. We spoke in some detail about this with Nachman Shai, who was a key Israeli spokesman in the early period of the intifada. He was also Director General of the Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport and had been chief spokesperson for the IDF at the time of the Gulf War. His view was that Israel tended to avoid using anti-Semitism as an argument. He also noted that it was more significant as an issue to Jews living outside Israel: 'Anti-Semitism doesn't have the same significance to Israelis as to non-Israelis, since we are not exposed to it in our everyday life' (interview, 15 August 2003).

There was another very important issue which affected the contemporary development of Israeli public relations. After the events of 9/11 and the attack on the US, Israel had stressed its role as part of the 'war against terror'. This had much more 'general' connotations in terms of presenting Israel as one part of the Western Alliance. As Nachman Shai commented:

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've run out of arguments, you're stuck with anti-Semitism. The first one is based on common interests. (Interview, 15 August 2003)

We might note that for Israel to present itself as part of a general 'war on terror' against those who dislike Western values also has the advantage of drawing attention away from specific actions by Israel which have contributed to the origins and development of the Middle East conflict. However, a final comment from Nachman Shai was on the quality of international media coverage, including that of Britain. He regarded it 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. (Interview, 15 August 2003)

The essence of what Nachman Shai is saying is that the Israelis have stressed their role in the general ‘war on terror’ rather than the issue of anti-Semitism, and also that the coverage of suicidebombing has improved the ‘balance’ of coverage, from the Israeli perspective. This is strikingly different from the arguments of pro-Israeli commentators in Britain who have stressed anti-Semitism and attacked media coverage.

CLAIMS THAT THE MEDIA ARE BIASED AGAINST ISRAEL

The *Observer* also pointed to the influence of lobby groups such as the Conservative Friends of Israel which invites senior journalists to lunches at the House of Commons. It commented that ‘for those working for organisations perceived as being biased against Israel these can be uncomfortable affairs’. Such lobby groups often assert that the media is biased against Israel. The Conservative MP Gillian Shephard is quoted as saying:

Let’s not forget that Israel feels under siege. And it literally is. That is what drives the feeling of ultra-sensitivity. They feel that there is bias and there is a conspiracy against them. There is a perception that Israelis are portrayed as instigating the problems and that the historical context of the threat against Israel is forgotten. There is a feeling too that Israel – which is a tiny island of democracy amid much less democratic neighbours – never gets enough credit for what it has achieved. (*Observer*, 17 June 2001)

As we have seen, our study does not support the view that Israel is portrayed unfairly. Yet Gillian Shephard points to the deep sense of persecution which some in the wider Jewish community still apparently feel at the hands of the media. In February 2003, for example, Melanie Phillips wrote in the *Jewish Chronicle* of a conference on anti-Semitism and the discussions and evidence which were presented at it. The recurring theme, she notes, was ‘a nexus of anti-Jewish hatred between fanatical Islamists on the one hand and the British and European media on the other’. She argues that

Europe has waited for fifty years for a way to blame the Jews for their own destruction. So instead of addressing genocidal Muslim anti-Semitism, the Europeans have seized upon a narrative which paints the Jews as Nazis and the Palestinians as the new Jews. (Phillips, 2003)

She notes how the conference ‘was told about the way the British media describes Israel’s “death squads”, “killing-fields” and “executioners” while sanitising Palestinian human bombs as “gentle”, “religious” and “kind”’ (Phillips, 2003). While it is clearly true that vicious anti-Semitism exists in some Islamic groups and elsewhere, this description of the British media does not accord with what we have found. We were also puzzled by what some people in our focus groups believed about TV news. There is an interesting phenomenon well documented in psychological studies whereby a strong commitment can lead to an inability to see information that contests the preferred view or violates a preferred expectation. We did find in our study at least one case where a person found it difficult literally to see what was in front of him. The great majority of those in our audience groups did not process information in this way, but in this case the participant stated that the news was biased against Israel and that the photographs he had used in the news writing exercise were also ‘pro-Palestinian’. We pointed out that they had been carefully chosen. They did in fact include a picture of the aftermath of a suicide-bombing, which showed an Israeli ambulance with the Star of David on the side. They also included the image of a dead Israeli soldier being thrown from the window of a Palestinian police station. But the participant focused his attention very largely on an image of an Israeli tank in a Palestinian area and expressed his concern about what people would think of this.

Overall, the results of our study suggest that it was Israeli perspectives which predominated in TV news and this is in part the result of a very well developed system of lobbying and public relations. Another key factor affecting media coverage is the very close political and communication links which exist between the US and Britain.

THE US CONNECTION

Our content analysis showed that speakers from the US were frequently featured on TV news and that they commonly endorsed or supported Israeli

positions. There was no comparable referencing of the governments of other nations who were more critical of Israel.⁶ Given the significance of the US as the world's sole remaining superpower and its relationship with Britain, it is not surprising that the views of its politicians would be featured but none the less it had a significant effect on the balance of TV news coverage. There is some evidence to suggest that the perspectives on the Middle East adopted by US politicians are strongly influenced by pro-Israel lobbies. A recent Radio 4 programme looked in detail at this and noted how the pro-Israel groups now included the Christian Right:

Journalist: It's time to revive one of the oldest stereotypes in American politics, the power of the Jewish lobby. Today, it's not the Jewish lobby which counts, it's the pro-Israel and the difference is crucial. Two of the most formidable organisational networks in America, the Jewish Establishment and the Christian Right have joined forces. Together, they can penetrate deep into the body politic. (*A Lobby to Reckon With*, BBC Radio 4, 7 May 2002)

The programme visited the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, 'a stadium-sized arena' with 10,000 worshippers, whose services are broadcast to millions of homes. The pastor's sermon is heard:

God entered into an eternal covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that the nation of Israel would belong to the Jewish people for ever, and forever means 2002, 3002, 4002, forever is forever. Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Jewish state. (*A Lobby to Reckon With*, BBC Radio 4, 7 May 2002)

The programme also pointed out the strength of Jewish American activism and the role of AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee). It was also stated that there are smaller Jewish groups in the US who are opposed to Israel's current policies, but the influence of AIPAC is very noteworthy:

Journalist: AIPAC's power has become the stuff of Washington legend. *Fortune* magazine consistently puts it in the top five special interest groups. No other foreign policy based lobby group gets into the top 25. (*A Lobby to Reckon With*, BBC Radio 4, 7 May 2002)

The programme also interviewed J.J. Goldberg, an American author who has written on AIPAC and other pro-Israel groups. He comments on how the influence of 'political action committees' has developed through the financing of the opponents of those who speak against Israel:

AIPAC has a lot of influence on foreign policy, they work hard to make sure that America endorses pretty much Israel's view of the world and of the Middle East. They do it partly by convincing, partly by implied threats. AIPAC does not raise money for candidates but there are Jewish PACs (Political Action Committees) that raise campaign funds for candidates. Four or

five times over the last twenty years, these PACs have gone after members of Congress who voted in ways that AIPAC didn't like. They have flooded their opponents with money and enabled them to beat the incumbents. Sent a message that if you really go against AIPAC, you'd better know where you're next dollar is coming from. So that, as I've been told by a number of congressional aides over the last few years, if the congressman doesn't vote against Arafat they'll pay a price. If they do vote against Arafat, there's no price to be paid. There's no percentage for the member of Congress to stand up for peace, for compromise. Nobody is going to reward them, they'll be punished. (*A Lobby to Reckon With*, BBC Radio 4, 7 May 2002)

As the BBC programme notes, the strength of the lobby was shown at the annual conference of AIPAC which featured the attendance of half the US Senate and half the members of the lower house. It has also been argued that media coverage in the US is strongly influenced by the pro-Israel lobby. Michael Massing, writing in *The Nation*, noted that the activities of AIPAC are rarely analysed in the American media:

Journalists are often loathe to write about the influence of organised Jewry. Throughout the Arab world, the 'Jewish lobby' is seen as the root of all evil in the Middle East, and many reporters and editors – especially Jewish ones – worry about feeding such stereotypes. (*The Nation*, 10 June 2002)

But he also comments that the main obstacle to covering such groups is fear:

Jewish organisations are quick to detect bias in the coverage of the Middle East and quick to complain about it ... As the *Forward* observed in late April, 'rooting out perceived anti-Israel in the media has become for many American Jews the most direct and emotional outlet for connecting with the conflict six thousand miles away.' Recently an estimated one thousand subscribers to the *Los Angeles Times* suspended home delivery for a day to protest what they considered the paper's pro-Palestinian coverage. The *Chicago Tribune*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Enquirer* and the *Miami Herald* have all been hit by similar protests. (*The Nation*, 10 June 2002)

Massing asks whether such protests have an effect and considers the experience of the *New York Times*. On 6 May 2002 the paper had run two photographs of a pro-Israel parade in Manhattan:

Both showed the parade in the background and anti-Israel protesters prominently in the foreground. The paper, which for weeks has been threatened with a boycott by Jewish readers, was deluged with protests. On May the seventh the *Times* ran an abject apology. That caused much consternation in the newsroom, with some reporters and editors feeling that the paper had buckled before an influential constituency. 'It's very intimidating', said a correspondent at another large daily who is familiar with the incident. Newspapers, he added, are 'afraid' of organisations like AIPAC and the President's Conference. 'The pressure from these groups is relentless. Editors would just as soon not touch them.' (*The Nation*, 10 June 2002)

Ted Turner, the founder of CNN also famously ignited an international controversy by saying that both the Israelis and the Palestinians were engaged in ‘terrorism’. As the *Guardian* reported:

After the Turner interview appeared ... there were calls for the cable and satellite operators [in Israel] to pull CNN from their output. One of the main satellite operators in Israel, Yes, added CNN’s arch-rival Fox News – perceived to be sympathetic to Israel – to its package of channels. CNN clearly had some talking to do, and its most senior editorial executive got himself on the first flight out of Atlanta when he read Turner’s comments. Eason Jordan, chief news executive at CNN spent the next week or so on a whirlwind damage-limitation exercise [in the Middle East]. (*Guardian*, 1 July 2002)

The *Guardian* also noted that Fox News had ‘endeared itself’ to the conservative right in its approach to the Middle East conflict: ‘It now refers, for example, to Palestinian suicide bombers as “homicide-bombers”. In Israel, it is held up as a model of “objective” reporting’ (*Guardian*, 1 July 2002).

Fox is part of Rupert Murdoch’s organisation which has extensive media interests in Britain, owning, for example, the *Sun*, *The Times*, the *Sunday Times* and the *News of the World*. Sam Kiley, a correspondent for *The Times*, resigned in September 2001, blaming its allegedly pro-Israeli censorship of his reporting. He spoke of Rupert Murdoch’s close friendship with Ariel Sharon and heavy investment in Israel. Writing in the *London Evening Standard*, he commented that

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 ‘extrajudicial killings or executions’. (Quoted in the *Guardian*, 5 September 2001)

The *Guardian* also reported Kiley as saying that

Murdoch executives were so scared of irritating the media mogul that when [Kiley] interviewed the Israeli army unit responsible for killing a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy, he was asked to file the piece without mentioning the dead child. (*Guardian*, 5 September 2001)

The *Daily Telegraph* has also been the subject of disputes over its Middle East coverage. The proprietor of the Telegraph group, Conrad Black, is strongly supportive of Israel and journalists complained that this was affecting editorial policy. In March 2001, The *Guardian* reported that:

Three prominent writers – all of them past contributors to Mr Black’s Telegraph group have signed a letter to the *Spectator* 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 reporter would dare write frankly about the Palestinian perspective. (*Guardian*, 16 March 2001)

On the same day in the *Guardian*, William Dalrymple, one of the authors of the letter, wrote:

A press baron is an immensely powerful 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. (*Guardian*, 16 March 2001)

The pressures of organised public relations, lobbying and systematic criticism together with the privileging of Israeli perspectives by political and public figures, can affect the climate within which journalists operate. There is no total control and there are areas of the media where the debate is relatively open. But these factors go some way to explaining why journalists sometimes have difficulty in giving a clear account of the Palestinian perspective, while they can apparently more easily facilitate that of the Israelis.