

Peace Journalism in the Holy Land

Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick

'The citizen is completely helpless. He does not hear any other voice; and if everybody says the same, it must be true.' The lament is from Uri Avnery, veteran leader of Israel's peace movement, in our Peace Journalism video, News from the Holy Land, on coverage of the conflict with the Palestinians.

A Jerusalem bureau is a top posting for any ambitious reporter in international news, and it attracts some of the brightest and best in the profession. The Middle East is seldom out of the headlines; and yet there is now startling evidence of how ill-informed the viewing public has remained on some of the basic facts.

Everybody does say the same; or at least, the voices raised in print or on the airwaves are from a very narrow band of perspectives, and the questions they are asked don't much vary. It leaves huge gaps where chunks of the explanation should be, for what is going on.

As a result, more British people believe 'the settlers' are Palestinian, than know they are Israeli; substantial numbers think it's the Palestinians who are occupying the occupied territories, and many have only the vaguest idea of where 'the refugees' come from. 'Afghanistan' is not an infrequent guess.

These findings come from Greg Philo and Mike Berry, of the Glasgow University Media Group, based on polls and focus groups which saw them interview 800 people over a two-year period. They also analysed more than 200 news programmes, and their book, *Bad News from Israel*, spells out the exact match between patterns of omission and distortion in the coverage, and the wrong-headedness of the audience.

The most glaring of these omissions is any explanation of Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian territories - its illegality in the eyes of the world; why it's there; when it started; the form it takes and its effects on daily life for Palestinians.

In *News from the Holy Land*, we suggest this originates in the best of intentions. Journalists concerned to avoid allegations of bias 'tend to stick to safe stories like big bangs and the agenda set by political leaders'.

But television, in Britain as in many other countries, operates under public service obligations. One of them, enshrined in the BBC Producer Guidelines, stipulates that 'all views should be reflected to mirror the depth and spread of opinion'. *News from the Holy Land* shows how this could be done. It would entail hearing from Israeli peace activists, like Avnery himself, who are much more in line with global public opinion, than the present Israeli government.

The Guidelines also say that audiences should receive 'an intelligent account that enables them to form their own views'. The Glasgow findings show this is not happening, but we provide seven examples of news-length stories which could make good on this promise, starting with two different treatments of a violent incident, a suicide bombing in Jerusalem last year.

The first carries a familiar message - it's all the fault of fanatics; prospects for peace lie in ruins. The second is an example of Peace Journalism, showing how the conditions of everyday life for Palestinians - held up at checkpoints, shot and harassed with impunity - feed into a cycle of violence that is steadily corrupting and killing both societies.

It shows Palestinian casualties - who still outnumber those killed on the Israeli side, in the violence of recent years, by three to one - and it shows activists from Checkpoint Watch trying to reduce tension on the frontline. *News from the Holy Land* comes complete with comprehensive teaching notes, so groups of school students, undergraduates or postgraduates, as well as peace activists, can work through it and enhance their understanding.

Philo and Berry find a strong appetite for such material, among members of their focus groups. 'They never really tell you the in-depth reasons behind it?', one man complained. 'This guy went in to bomb a pizza restaurant - why? The Israelis are going to attack - why??' 'What pushes them to that extreme??' another wondered.

These questions lie at the heart of what has become a struggle for context in representations of political violence. Neoconservative guru Richard Perle has said 'we must decontextualise terror' because 'any attempt to discuss the roots of terrorism is an attempt to justify it. It simply needs to be fought and destroyed.' This is part of the shared understanding between the right wing of US and Israeli politics.

In Israel, it is impossible to understand it without allowing for the existential fear transmitted from centuries of persecution, culminating in the Holocaust. One respected analyst, Professor Gerald Steinberg, of Bar Ilan University, appears in News from the Holy Land to explain that, since attacks on Jewish civilians have been a fact of life for so long, the occupation cannot possibly be the explanation for terrorism - so ending the occupation would not remove the danger.

But we also interviewed the pollster, Dr Mina Zemach, who for many years has asked Israelis if they would be prepared to give up illegal settlements on occupied land, as part of a peace agreement. The proportion assenting to that proposition has steadily risen, she says, to 62% - an indication that most Israelis do see a just peace with the Palestinians as the key to their security.

In the US, the Perle analysis chimes with fundamentalist Christian interpretations of Scripture, in which the 'greater Israel' project is a prelude to the Second Coming. These believers in 'the Rapture' may account for as many as 15% of the US electorate, and their staunch support has just helped to ensure four more years for the Bush Administration.

Their political influence was manifest in thousands of angry emails to the White House when the President criticised Israel's military incursion into Jenin, in the occupied West Bank; but it also affects the media climate. According to Bill Moyers, the veteran PBS presenter, 'journalists who try to tell these stories, connect these dots, and examine these links are demeaned, disparaged and dismissed. This is the very kind of story that illustrates the challenge journalists face in a world driven by ideologies that are stoutly maintained despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality.'

The rest of the world generally does accept as reality the converse of the Likud/Republican view - that the intifada cannot be understood except as a response to the daily humiliations and privations of life under military occupation. But this struggle for context puts journalists where many least like to be - on the spot. On this, we either side with the Right of American and Israeli politics - which happens to be in the ascendancy, in each case, at the time of writing - or we side against them.

The film explores the connection with political process in Britain, too. Until the public grasps the nature of the occupation, the territories and the refugees, there will never be a groundswell in favour of any really effective third-party intervention. Tim Llewellyn, a former BBC Middle East correspondent, likens the conflict to the struggle against Apartheid - the difference being that 'everybody knew that Apartheid was wrong' an offence against moral and international law.'

A clear understanding of these issues would, for instance, build political collateral for initiatives presently being discussed by 'track two' groups of activists - and presented to ministers in private - based on establishing an international protectorate for Jerusalem and the West Bank.

As Roy Greenslade, reviewing the film in the Media Guardian said, 'There is more than one way to be a war reporter, and [Lynch and McGoldrick] have produced a video to prove that it can be done peacefully' They show how the concentration by the media on violence tends to prolong disputes rather than solve them?.'

That's why reports that omit context, instead presenting us with a blow-by-blow narrative of tit for tat, merit the title, War Journalism. They leave the conflict opaque ? we cannot see what needs to change, in order to remove or ameliorate the causes of violence, so they unavoidably strengthen the case for ?fighting and destroying? instead. There is now an urgent need, we argue, for more Peace Journalism.

Giving peace journalism a chance

What are the chances of that? Among those who spoke to Philo and Berry were a number of prominent television journalists, including George Alagiah, who presents the Six O'clock News on BBC1. Journalists now go about their job, he tells them, with a fear in the back of their minds that the viewer, remote control in hand, will simply switch channels, if there is not something to grab their attention in the first 20 seconds of any given report.

It's a ?hardy perennial? in debates about the BBC, its role and its future ? the need to boost ratings to justify the licence fee. But there are broader obligations to democracy, and big changes are needed, in the way this story is reported, if they're to be met.

The first step to bringing about change is to appreciate what's missing, in the prevailing patterns of omission and distortion ? and that's where News from the Holy Land is intended to help.

The next is to take up this cause as a matter of urgent public and political concern, and there's a message for peace activists and grant-giving bodies everywhere ? don't just campaign through the media, campaign on the media, too.

Orders for News from the Holy Land: Booksource +44 08702 402182 or www.hawthornpress.com. 49 minute Video; 48pp Teaching Notes ISBN 1 903458552 £25 for individuals; £75 for institutional use.

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