

Israeli-Palestinian issues: A call for fair coverage

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NEW YORK CITY – Emphatic exchanges of contesting points of view about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict characterized an April 17-18 conference here, titled “Megaphones and Muffled Voices: What Constitutes Full and Fair Media Coverage of Israeli-Palestinian Issues?”

Some 80 secular and religious journalists and activists took part in all or part of the two-day effort, co-sponsored by the World Association for Christian Communication, WACC’s North American Regional Association (NARA-WACC) and the (U.S.) National Council of Churches’ Communication Commission.



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Fourteen formal presentations by journalists and academics with such

diverse affiliations as the Jerusalem Post and the Muslim Public Affairs Council provided both fodder and a “reality check” to a conference whose stated purpose was to help move news media “a little closer to fair coverage,” as NARA-WACC president and conference planning committee co-chair Linda Anderson put it.

While there was some reference to coverage by European and Middle Eastern media, most critique was of U.S. media.

At times, the debate seemed only to illustrate Tel Aviv University Professor of Communication Akiba A. Cohen’s point that – in effect – “objectivity” and “balance” are in the eye of the beholder.

Cohen described a sobering bottom line – journalists and their audiences alike vary greatly in what they pay attention to and how they perceive and remember it. The more complex, intense and insolvable a conflict is, the harder it is to cover, he said.

Accordingly, speakers disagreed openly about whether journalists should be denied or allowed access to, say, Jenin or Bethlehem during active fighting.

Whether to refer to particular piece of land as “occupied” or “disputed” or to a particular action as a “policy” or a “practice.” Whether it’s easier to cover the Palestinian side of the story or the Israeli side and whose suffering is under or overreported. Whether Camp David was about a “generous offer that Arafat refused” or not-yet-conclusive negotiations over land to which the Palestinians are entitled.

Nevertheless, conferees met their immediate goal – agreement on a close-to-final “Fair Practices Code,” which applies basic tenets of good journalism to the extraordinarily complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hartford Courant Editorial Page Editor John J. Zakarian drafted the code; he and the conference planning committee were charged with final editing and distribution of the code post-conference.

As speakers gave examples of what they considered to be “good” and “bad” coverage of Israeli-Palestinian issues, they reinforced such points in the code as:

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The best of journalists do not only report what they see, hear or are told by official sources. They dig beneath the surface. They strive to get the other side or sides of the story. Commented Ethan Bronner of The New York Times, “You don’t have to accept the other perspective but you have to try to get and understand it.”

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Balance of coverage is not achieved only in providing equal space or time to each side. There is no balance when an articulate, moderate and charismatic person is asked to represent one side and an uncompromising, militant, fiery and inarticulate ideologist is offered as a representative of the other side.

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Headlines should reflect the content of the story. Photographs should give a fair and accurate image of an event and not exaggerate an incident simply because the photograph is exceptionally dramatic.

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As much as possible, journalists should understand the language, the history and the culture of the people they cover.

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Covering such a sensitive, nuance-ridden subject as the Arab-Israeli conflict, journalists should be careful in using such loaded words and clichés as “terrorists,” “gunmen,” “Islamic bombers” and “fatalistic” Muslims.

Several speakers urged journalists to hold all parties to a single standard, especially in respect to human rights violations, to recognize international law, resolutions and conventions (e.g. United Nations Resolution 242). And they urged a harder and more dispassionate look at U.S. Middle East policy – especially the ability of the United States to mediate effectively given its financial and political support for Israel.

“The media have done a good job covering the Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli destruction of Palestinian infrastructure,” Zacharian commented. “What’s lacking is context, background, nuances of language, an understanding of the forces of culture brought to bear. Our goal is not to take sides, but to help provide a view not only of what happened yesterday but also why.”

Besides conference co-moderators the Rev. Dr. Rena Yocom and the Rev. Dr. Martin Bailey, conference presenters included reporters and editors for Kol Israel Radio, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Jerusalem Post, Jordan Times, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Palestine Media Watch and for several major North American dailies – The New York Times, Newark Star Ledger, Toronto Star, Hartford Courant. Other presenters were from the United Methodist Church, Bethlehem, Columbia School of Journalism, Tel Aviv University and the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

See the full code of fair practice [here](#)