



ISRAEL IN THE MEDIA

A Guide to Producing
Effective Media Critiques

DAVID BERNSTEIN

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.

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Cover photo: Photographers taking a picture of a Palestinian woman standing next to the Israeli security barrier; AP Photo, Enric Marti

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Publication date: June 2004

FOREWORD

Monitoring media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a focus of pro-Israel activists, particularly during the past three years of Palestinian-instigated violence and terror. How effective have activists been in critiquing the media's presentation of Middle East news? Some would say not very—attributing the difficulty to the media's inherent “biases” and insensitivity or, alternatively, to counterproductive overzealousness on the part of Israel supporters.

A guide to “best practices” in the field is clearly needed, and David Bernstein, the director of AJC's Washington office for seven years, has provided that in this study.

Bernstein gained valuable insight through a project conducted by AJC's Washington Chapter over a period of eighteen months, in which lay and professional leaders together carefully monitored the Middle East reporting of the *Washington Post*. They presented their analysis of the coverage to the staff of the *Post*, arranging numerous meetings with the publisher, high-level editors, and the paper's ombudsman. As a result, the Washington AJC office became the resource to which the *Post* now turns to discuss its often controversial coverage of the Middle East.

Bernstein provides the tools for others to learn from the Washington Chapter's experience how to conduct a thoughtful, effective press critique. He underscores the inherent difficulties: a frenzied news cycle; layout artists and headline writers who know little about the subject; a tendency to focus on the nega-

tive; reporters with a lack of in-depth knowledge; and the media's dependence, for Palestinian views, on local Arabic journalists and translators, who often provide heavily "filtered" information, while reporters obtain Israeli views from thoroughly "unfiltered" English-speaking Israelis.

Bernstein explains the importance, in media analysis, of understanding and identifying the "narrative frames" reporters use to present the news. Inevitably, in trying to provide background or context to an event, a reporter will select preceding events to which he can relate the occurrence. Likewise, a reporter will select a "story line" into which he can conveniently place the events described. These choices, like the crop lines on a photograph, determine the reader's interpretation of the story. Word choices—for example, "terrorist" versus "militant"—also color the story.

The *Guide* will also prove helpful in identifying which battles are worth waging and in learning to speak in ways that make media outlets more likely to listen. Like other forms of diplomacy, critiquing the media involves choosing issues to focus on that are "winnable" and stating differences in ways that demonstrate respect and minimize defensive reactions. It can be more productive to suggest additional sources of information and alternative story angles than to accuse journalists of bias.

David Bernstein has provided a savvy and practical guide to critiquing the media. His thoughtful suggestions can be put to effective use in our efforts to win fair media coverage for Israel, a crucial engagement in the battle for public opinion.

David A. Harris

Executive Director

The American Jewish Committee

June 2004

Israel in the Media: A Guide to Producing Effective Media Critiques

Why Critique the Media?

It does not take a journalism expert to appreciate the power of the media. Simply put, what the public knows about all manner of things depends, to a large extent, on what the media convey. But as important as newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet are, it is very difficult to critique them. Journalism as a field lacks a coherent, widely accepted set of rules governing precisely how the news should be covered.¹ Who is to say what “objective” reporting should look like? Or how “comprehensive and balanced” the news should be? Unlike law or medicine, there are no government-imposed regulations that control proper journalistic practice. This lack of universally accepted standards can make judging the news extremely difficult, but—as this guide aims to show—far from impossible.

Given the difficulties involved, is it worthwhile to offer a critique of the media’s coverage of Israel and the Middle East? Will those who produce the news listen? The answer to these questions is a resounding “maybe.” On the one hand, the media are not nearly as predisposed to accept the views of their listeners and readers as are elected officials to be attentive to their constituents. Unlike politicians, journalists don’t depend on votes and, hence, are not always receptive to outside voices. Some journalists, acutely aware of the inherent shortcomings and subjectivity of their trade, can be thin-skinned or altogether inaccessible. In some cases, media critiques fall on deaf ears, or only work for a short period of time. But experience shows that, by and large, most editors and reporters will at least give a

hearing to friends of Israel who speak out as responsible critics. As *Jerusalem Post* editor Brett Stephens observed in 2002 at the height of the media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

U.S. media watchdog groups ... have been unrelenting, and increasingly successful, in raising awareness of media bias against Israel. Eason Jordan, chief news executive at CNN in Atlanta, reports being flooded with as many as 6,000 complaining e-mails per day.²

In the face of continuous allegations of bias in its Middle East coverage, the BBC appointed a “Middle East policeman,” an ombudsman, to oversee its coverage of the region. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, “[I]t is the first time the corporation has made such an appointment. Insiders say it is a signal that senior executives feel that the Middle East is an area over which the BBC needs to take particular care.”³ While the BBC continues to be highly critical of Israel, it has recently begun to show some modicum of balance. For instance, a recent posting on the BBC web site reads: “The Israeli Army is attempting to destroy a series of tunnels in southern Gaza that are used for smuggling arms into the strip from Egypt. A photographer accompanied Israeli soldiers on a recent mission into southern Gaza. This is his record for BBC News Online of what he saw.” It is doubtful whether two years ago the BBC would have looked at this story from the vantage point of the Israeli army.

In some cases our critique may make a difference, and in other instances it may not. With media’s power to define reality, we have little choice but to “watch the watchdog.”

We should be heartened that Israel’s image is now not solely defined by the mainstream news outlets because no longer do just three networks, one cable channel, and a few radio stations have a corner on the market. A proliferation of news sources, from Fox News to the *Drudge Report* to talk radio, many of which are open about their ideological predilections (some of which favor Israel), have made the elite news channels far less

influential than they once were.⁴ The process of diversification began both because of technological advancement—e.g., the onset of the Internet—and because many news consumers became disenchanted with what they believed were the hidden ideological biases of the mainstream outlets. They wanted other sources, and the market responded. Thus, as we seek to improve news coverage of Israel, we are also generating pressure that is in keeping with a much larger critique of mainstream news. With the recent massive shifts in market share, those who produce the news know that they ignore this critique at their peril.

Purpose of this Guide

The purpose of this guide is to help the pro-Israel community develop tools to deliver intellectually honest and analytically sound media critiques so that its intended audience—the international media—will rethink their approach to stories about Israel. It is a guide designed to help the pro-Israel community go beyond what *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman derisively referred to as “idiot press criticism,” and to assess the news based on standards that the field of journalism has set for itself.

What’s the best we can hope for? As one former marketing executive remarked, “What we are after is top-of-the-mind awareness”—so that reporters, editors, and producers think of our concerns as they produce the news. In short, we can hope that journalists, aware they are being monitored, will strive for the highest standards of journalistic balance and fairness.

What's Wrong with the Media?

A Frenzied News Cycle

Producing the news is a little like making sausages—it's a very messy process. Newsrooms are notoriously boisterous, frenetic places where critical decisions on how events get covered are made in a hurried, sometimes haphazard fashion. With the inexorable pressures of a twenty-four-hour news cycle, reporters often operate on seemingly impossible deadlines, which result in their not having enough time to get to and from the action, ascertain the facts, call their sources, and write or broadcast their story adequately. Editors are similarly hurried and, even though they are responsible for upholding high standards, they often face time-restricted decisions that shortchange these standards.

These inherent shortcomings can produce particularly bad results in coverage of the Middle East. From late March 2002 until June 2002, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was covered four times more than the next most covered story during the same period.⁵ According to one survey, 44 percent of the American public said they followed the conflict "very closely," 7 percent more than said they followed the weapons inspection process in Iraq the previous December.⁶ In short, the interest of both the media and the public (and the interplay between the two) created a virtual "media circus." The Israeli public relations establishment, both the Foreign Ministry and the Israel Defense Forces, could not handle the sheer volume of requests for information and interviews, often leaving journalists without benefit of their viewpoints.

One media expert described this media barrage as "garbage in, garbage out." Because the reporters were missing critical perspectives and pieces of information, the stories they produced were naturally incomplete and unbalanced. As Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, who created the Israel Project to help counter such distortions, noted:

With tremendous interest in the conflict worldwide, more than 1,400 reporters, producers, and cameramen currently cover the Middle East crisis. Each day, as they compete for interviews, sound bites, and graphic images, Israel's communications teams have been hampered by a severe lack of resources. In such a media feeding frenzy, where the media beast insists on being fed, Israel's image is bound to suffer.⁷

Tight time frames and difficult conditions, however, are not excuses for unbalanced coverage. Notwithstanding the difficulty, news outlets that pride themselves on their fair and comprehensive coverage should be held accountable. If journalists cannot call on government sources in a timely manner, then they should seek other knowledgeable sources inside the country to shed light and provide perspective. If reporters are bogged down in a West Bank hot spot, their outlets can send other reporters to garner alternative perspectives in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. To provide anything less—to give only half the story—is to violate a key tenet of journalism: presenting a fair and balanced story.

*What Critics of the Media
Need to Take into Account*

For our part, we, the “critics,” must appreciate the difficulty of the news production process and allow some room for error. Generally speaking, no one story should be viewed as the final word on the fairness of a media outlet. Good news coverage develops over time. As two prominent media experts put it:

The individual reporter may not be able to move much beyond a surface level of accuracy in a first story. But the first story builds to a second, in which the sources of news have responded to mistakes and missing elements in the first, and the second to a third, and so on.⁸

As publisher Philip Graham stated, “The news is the first rough draft of history”—and we, the critics, must treat it

accordingly. This is not to say that individual articles should be exempt from criticism. On the contrary, factual errors, ideological biases, lack of balance, and other substantive problems can appear in a single piece and should be challenged. But when addressing highly complex stories that develop over time, we must be tolerant of an unfolding journalistic process. And if, in the course of time, the media fail to tell the whole story, or tell it in an unfair and imbalanced manner, we must be prepared to hold them accountable.

Media Critique Tips

- Allow reasonable room for error in a story's coverage.
- Assess stories as they develop over time, and then offer a critique.
- Ask media outlets to include all sides of the story, no matter how difficult it is or how rushed they may be.

Negative Coverage

Beyond the difficulty of producing the news, another mitigating factor should be taken into account in our analysis: A great deal of media coverage, by its nature, is negative. Good news is no news at all, or, in another fitting aphorism, "If it bleeds, it leads." In his comprehensive account of the impact of negative coverage on people's perceptions, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, Gregg Easterbrook, a senior editor of the *New Republic*, shows that the media's coverage of all that is negative, to the exclusion of the positive, gives people the mistaken impression that life is getting worse when, in reality, for the vast majority in the Western world, it is getting better.

This tendency applies to Israel in spades. Because people are more interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict than in

other world hot spots, such as the Congo, Sudan or Colombia, the press devotes far more coverage to it. More coverage of the conflict, unfortunately, translates into more bad news about Israel and more negative sentiment toward the country. According to a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), a media watchdog group based in Washington, D.C., during the height of the violence in spring 2002, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict received nearly unprecedented news coverage for an international story.⁹

The CMPA study found that 78 percent of sources quoted in the coverage were critical of Israel. Comments on Israel's overall treatment of the Palestinians were overwhelmingly negative—96 percent—with the three networks carrying roughly equal amounts of criticism. Coverage of the Palestinians was also extremely negative (which does not prove that the media is fair-minded, just that it's negative).

Television images of violence are almost inherently negative. In a thirty-second spot, TV, unlike print media, cannot give proper context to images of Israeli tanks confronting stone-throwing Palestinian youth. As media consultant Michael Shannon quipped, "We could always give the Palestinians the tanks and we take rocks, but we've tried that already and it didn't seem to work very well." The pro-Israel community will simply have to cope with this asymmetry in TV imagery, while insisting that the media outlets provide at least some context.

*What Critics of the Media
Need to Take into Account*

We should not accept negativity in the news at face value; indeed, we should challenge it. But we also must adjust our expectations to the reality that the media provide so much coverage of the conflict precisely because of its negativity. The day there is peace in the Middle East is the day the media will stop covering Israel.

Media Critique Tips

- Factor into your critique that a large portion of hard-news media coverage tends to be negative.
- Point out positive story opportunities to editors and reporters.

Lack of Information

During the height of the violence in the spring of 2002, one network correspondent who was doing a piece on dimming prospects for peace tried to leave viewers with a ray of hope by showing a Palestinian child holding up two fingers in what the reporter thought was the peace sign. In Palestinian culture, however, this gesture stands not for peace, as it did in America during 1960s anti-war rallies, but “V” for victory. The reporter, no doubt drawing on his own experience, totally misunderstood the message of the Palestinian child, and his viewers were consequently misinformed.

One of the greatest problems in Middle East coverage is that many reporters are ignorant of the conflicts, peoples, and cultures they cover. Most don't know the languages of the region. This problem creates an asymmetry that favors the Palestinian perspective. When covering Israel, reporters are rarely in need of translators because the vast majority of Israelis are fluent in English. But when covering Palestinians, who have a much lower English fluency rate, reporters are forced to find local translators, who have been known to spin the translation. For example, in an interview aired on National Public Radio in the wake of a confrontation with the Israeli army, a Palestinian woman told an interviewer in Arabic that the “Jews had come.” But the translator mistranslated the word “*Jews*” for “Israeli army,” thus depriving listeners of a clue to the woman's mind-set, i.e., her failure to draw any distinction between Jews and

Israeli soldiers. This asymmetry in language means that reporters get their news straight—warts and all—from Israelis, while they get a censored, sanitized version from Palestinians.

Further compromising their objectivity, foreign reporters often rely on Palestinian journalists to get around. According to Khaled Abu Toameh, a Palestinian correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post*:

In effect, foreign journalists are dependent on Palestinian journalists. Yet the latter are often more vulnerable than the former. For instance, an article published by a foreign journalist after a visit to the territories can cause serious problems for those Palestinians who accompanied him or her, often unbeknownst to the journalist in question. Such problems may lead to a sort of Palestinian self-censorship.

Palestinian journalists are routinely subjected to harassment. Ahmad Sub Laban, a Palestinian journalist writing in the *Palestine Report*, a weekly publication based in Jerusalem, described several incidents in which his colleagues were subjected to “hoodlums who are allowed to run amok by an impotent or indifferent Palestinian Authority.”¹⁰ Foreign news crews have been subject to similar harassment and limitations in Gaza, Judea, and Samaria.¹¹ By contrast, in Israel, journalists can, with few exceptions, interview anyone and go anywhere they want without fear of government harassment or intervention. Providing coverage of an open society in conflict with a closed society will almost inevitably produce news that favors the latter, unless the journalist goes to great lengths to compensate for the selective access in the Palestinian-controlled areas.

Beyond these structural barriers, many reporters seem downright ignorant of basic facts and historical points in the conflict. *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer believes that ignorance is the primary reason for bad coverage:

To the extent that [American coverage] is anti-Israel, I have always maintained that much of that bias comes from an abysmal ignorance. They don't know how the '67 war start-

ed. They don't know how Israel came into the territories. They don't know what 1948 was about. They couldn't tell you what the UN Partition Resolution was about ... when you get to a higher level of sophistication, people who know something, you tend to get better coverage.¹²

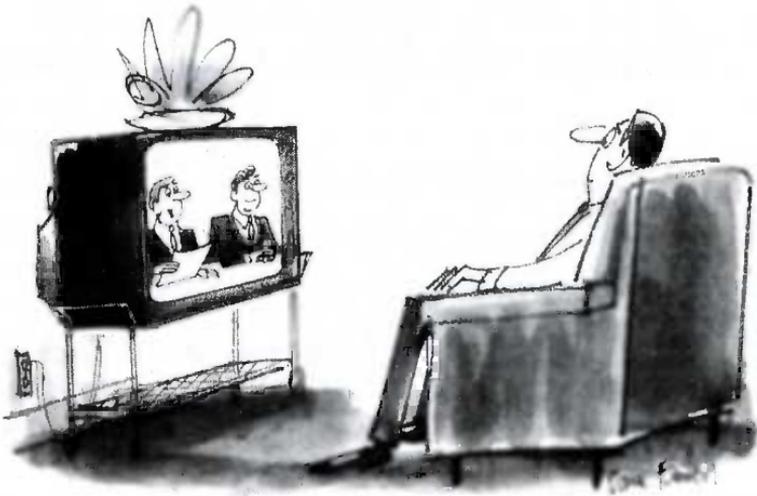
Reporters often seem like they've been "parachuted" into the region with little sense of what happened in even the recent past. Linda Scherzer, a former correspondent for CNN based in Jerusalem, described this phenomenon:

Reporters are trusted to call it as they see it, to use their eyes and ears to tell a very complex story, one that takes years to understand. But most news outlets don't have "years" to invest. So they rely on "parachute journalism," where they drop reporters into global hot spots.¹³

Veteran journalist Jim Lederman recalls a BBC reporter "so raw that he could not recognize Jerusalem's Teddy Kollek— unquestionably one of the most famous mayors in the world and one of the leading figures in Israel's political hierarchy."¹⁴ Another contributing factor to the same problem was described by journalist and writer Don Oberdorfer at a May 2003 Inside Media program at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., as follows: "As most television networks succumb to economic pressures by closing their foreign bureaus, the number of inexperienced journalists covering international crises and wars has increased." What is the result of inexperienced journalists parachuting to the scene? Simplistic and unbalanced coverage, in favor of whatever party looks to be the victim to the journalist's untrained eye and preconceived notions.

During the spring of 2002, when the coverage of Palestinian suicide bombings and the Israeli incursions that followed reached a fevered pitch, more journalists than ever were sent into the conflict-ridden region to report the story. Much of the coverage during that period was, in the words of the *Washington Post's* media critic, Howard Kurtz, "like showing U.S. warplanes

hitting Afghan towns without mentioning that there was this episode called Sept. 11.” To a reporter covering the conflict with little prior understanding, the party sending in the tanks and soldiers must have looked like the aggressive party. The ignorance showed in the coverage.



“Owing to cutbacks in our news department, here is Rod Ingram to guess at what happened today in a number of places around the globe.”

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What Critics of the Media Need to Take into Account

We should not expect reporters, many of whom cover a wide range of stories and places during their careers, to have doctorates in Middle Eastern history. But we can expect journalists to be reasonably well informed and, at the very least, to take the time to do background research on the conflict before going on assignment.

Absent information and true understanding, journalists will often fall back on simplistic concepts, such as “cycle of violence,” to describe a dynamic they fail to grasp. Columnist Charles Krauthammer contends that “reporters turn to these concepts, I don’t think out of malice, but out of laziness and ignorance.” In other words, the less reporters understand about the situation, the more likely they are to apply simplistic preconceived notions or stereotypes that fit a larger worldview. In short, ignorance and laziness breed a kind of underlying bias.

Media Critique Tips

- Look for and respond to factual errors in media coverage.
- Be alert to translation errors in radio and television segments. Speak to editors about the use of local translators and ask about the possibility of running periodic checks of translations.

Detecting Underlying Bias

The notion of “media bias” is one of the least understood concepts among critics of the news coverage of Israel. The word “bias” carries conspiratorial overtones, as if reporters and editors actually confer around a table about how best to sully Israel’s good name. It generally doesn’t work that way in mainstream media outlets (though, as discussed below, ABC News and many European outlets have, at times, intentionally twisted the facts).

Contrary to what many news editors say and critics of the media demand, journalism is not and cannot be a purely objective enterprise. In the words of *Jerusalem Post* editor Brett Stephens:

Objectivity in news coverage is both a metaphysical and physical impossibility; to pretend otherwise is either men-

dacious or delusional. Should a story about corruption in the Palestinian Authority get larger prominence than one about the business deals of Omri Sharon? Does a flood in Bangladesh merit more attention than a tax bill in the U.S.? The pretense of objectivity is lost the moment an editor decides what goes on Page One.¹⁵

Understanding the Role of Narrative Frames

By necessity, the news utilizes what the Project for Excellence in Journalism describes as “narrative frames” and others have referred to as “story lines,” the underlying paradigms that define what is and is not an important story and the manner in which a story is covered. According to the Project, “[f]rames are a necessary way of organizing information to make it more coherent and interesting and to put it into perspective.”¹⁶ Many in the media take exception to the notion that story lines dictate news. They argue that good journalists know, as if through a sixth sense, a story when they see one. But how can they explain the underreporting of the genocide in the Congo and the ethnic cleansing in Sudan compared to the pages and pages devoted to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in some of the nation’s finest newspapers? Was this simply a failure of the reputed sixth sense? Or was the importance attached to each story determined by preexisting paradigms in our news culture?

The fact that journalists cannot be perfectly objective, that narrative frames are a necessary prerequisite to covering the world, does not mean that anything goes and that reporters and editors deserve a pass, especially when media outlets themselves claim neutrality or impartiality. These narrative frames can become extremely well-entrenched and lead to massive failures on the part of reporters in covering news trends that run counter to the prevailing paradigm.

What are the narrative frames that dictate the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is covered by the U.S. media? The three main paradigms are “cycle of violence” (or, its close

cousin, “occupation-causes-violence”), “victim versus victimizer” and “conflict versus peace.” Another narrative frame that we see in controversies surrounding negotiations is that all negotiations are good and all conflict bad.

Narrative Frame #1:

The Cycle of Violence

The “cycle of violence” frame holds that violence only begets violence, in a vicious circle of bloodshed. According to this paradigm, in the words of the *Jerusalem Post*’s Stephens, “ordinary distinctions between aggressors and victims, and between random terrorist acts and targeted military reprisal, are submerged in the catch-all word ‘violence,’ as if violence belongs to the same category as the weather.”¹⁷

Many news outlets do not deny the use of this operative paradigm. The *Washington Post*’s foreign editor, David Hoffman, offered this observation: “There is a cyclical nature to this violence, and I do not believe it would serve readers to omit the Israeli actions which cause Palestinian responses. Likewise, I do not think we should omit the Palestinian actions which cause Israeli responses.” In defending his paper’s coverage, *Washington Post* ombudsman Michael Getler stated that pro-Israel media critics are attempting to “shift the focus ... away from the occupation and despair, and the violence that it causes.” In other words, in Getler’s view, the coverage *should* focus on the occupation as a cause of violence.

Does this paradigm accurately describe the situation? According to Samuel Freedman, associate dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism:

That familiar template [cycle of violence] should no longer apply. The intifada raging now is not just the same old stalemate between two peoples struggling over one land. It is the expression—in the form of suicide bombers and drive-by shootings and broken truces—of a considered refusal of imperfect statehood in favor of terrorism and a kind of auto-genocide.¹⁸

*Narrative Frame #2:
Victim vs. Victimizer*

Another, more overtly biased narrative frame is “victim versus victimizer,” which holds that the former victim—Israel or the Jewish people—has now become the victimizer. It should not surprise us that this is the default position of an industry that has described its mission as “to afflict the powerful and comfort the afflicted.” In the words of Columbia’s Freedman:

What is plausible to press for is this: an understanding in all coverage of the conflict, in every article and broadcast, that the paradigm has changed. Israel from 1948 to 1967 was an object of sympathy, a plucky nation born from the ashes of the Holocaust, defending itself against hostile Arab multitudes. Israel from 1967 to 1993 was an object of skepticism and criticism, the putative Goliath to the Palestinians’ David.¹⁹

Indeed, both this and the cycle-of-violence paradigm are profoundly ignorant of history. According to former Middle East envoy Dennis Ross, as well as numerous other participants in the Camp David peace effort, Arafat turned down a golden opportunity to end the occupation during the Camp David talks.²⁰ If Ross is right, then Arafat, not Israel, is primarily responsible for the continued occupation and, hence, the resulting violence. According to this understanding, the Palestinians, not the Israelis, are the primary victimizer. Factoring in the Palestinian intransigence at Camp David, the paradigm that journalists use could just as easily be “Palestinian rejectionism causes violence.”

*Narrative Frame #3:
All Negotiations Are Good, All Conflict Is Bad*

Another narrative frame that journalists use is that negotiations are good and that conflict, or the threat of conflict, is bad. According to Tom Rosenstiel of the Project for Excellence in

Journalism, the mainstream media tend to be biased in favor of peace negotiations and against the party perceived as scuttling peace talks. In a report two years ago about Pakistan-India tensions, NPR's Michael Sullivan commented approvingly of a "more reasonable attitude from both sides" toward entering into negotiations. His comment represented a subtle rebuke of the Indian foreign ministry spokesperson interviewed in the story, who demanded an end to cross-border terrorism as a precondition for negotiations. Although all agree that nuclear war would be a disaster, can Sullivan say for certain that India's determined stance against terrorism and resistance to unconditional negotiations hurt, rather than improved, the long-term prospects for peace? One need only recall the British media's tragic support for Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy (BBC's "God bless you, Mr. Chamberlain") to realize that such assumptions can be fatally off the mark.

The belief that all conflict is bad also causes reporters to miss stories, such as Israel's successful counterterrorism measures that have drastically reduced suicide attacks and have fueled the growing sentiment among Palestinian moderates that violence has only brought them ruin.

Other Narrative Frames

There are other narrative frames as well, such as "America's misbehaving ally, Israel," which implies that Israel needs to be reigned in by its patron. This critique is meant to suggest criticism not only against Israel, but also against a pro-Israel American government unwilling, in the eyes of the journalist, to place the necessary pressure on Israel. As one media scholar put it, "Once enamored by Israel, the press now treats Israel as a problem." All of these frames suggest strongly held preconceived notions that appear over and over in the coverage.

Striving for Ideological Diversity

The problem is not only that individual journalists have a point of view that colors the news coverage; it is that *most journalists tend to share the same point of view*. According to a 1996 landmark study by the Freedom Forum and the Roper Center, Washington journalists represent one of the most liberal segments of American society, with 89 percent of the journalists voting for Bill Clinton in 1992 compared to 43 percent of the population at large. Only 4 percent of those surveyed said they were Republicans. A recent Pew Study confirmed these findings: “Journalists at national and local news organizations are notably different from the general public in their ideology and attitudes toward political and social issues. Most national and local journalists, as well as a plurality of Americans (41 percent), describe themselves as political moderates. But news people, especially national journalists, are more liberal, and far less conservative, than the general public.”²¹ What’s clearly missing from the journalism industry is ideological diversity.²² Some in the media establishment have come to terms with the problem and have called for greater ideological diversity. In the wake of the 1996 study, media critic Howard Kurtz wrote that “anybody looking at those numbers ... would conclude that there is a [political] diversity problem in the news business.... [A]nybody who doesn’t see that is just in denial.”²³

This is not to suggest that all liberal journalists cover Israel in a harsh, unfair manner and that all conservatives do so in an even-handed, fair way. Instead, it suggests that shared ideological proclivities are likely to breed a kind of “groupthink” and inflexible narrative frames, which color all the coverage.

Unfortunately, many in the media have yet to recognize the problem. According to the Pew Study, “Roughly seven-in-ten local news executives (73 percent) say coverage too often reflects a journalist’s ideology; roughly six-in-ten national news executives (62 percent) agree that this is not a valid criticism of

the press.”²⁴ *Washington Post* ombudsman Getler asked rhetorically: “Is it possible that so many major newspapers could be biased in their Mideast coverage?” Contrary to Getler’s contention, the answer is a resounding “yes.” Whole societies have been overtaken by disastrous misapprehensions and collective illusions. Corporations around the country have simultaneously embraced abortive management fads. Is it really a great stretch to suggest that news writers, many of whom attended the same journalism schools, possess the same political proclivities, and interact with each other in myriad ways, might be predisposed to operate under a common set of assumptions?

Media Critique Tips

- Do not accuse news outlets of bias. Instead, try to identify specific problems in the coverage and shed light on why they are problems.
- Attempt to detect the “story line” behind the coverage and point it out to the news outlets. Cite clear examples when this hidden paradigm fails to explain events.
- Suggest to editors other ways of looking at the conflict or a specific story.
- Ask media outlets if they would consider broadening the scope of coverage to include other voices, both among the reporters and the sources, to provide a fuller perspective.

Finding the Untold Part of the Story

Just as important as what the news says is what it doesn’t say. One of the most obvious outgrowths of a fixed story line is that many important stories simply get ignored. Because editors and reporters are often so set on how they perceive the causes of the conflict as well as what is and is not news, they miss major events or pay them short shrift in the coverage. Such oversights

can be obvious in a single article where key aspects of the story or important voices are missing. Many stories about difficult conditions imposed on the Palestinian population, for instance, ignore that such conditions were necessitated by the threat of terrorism. This type of flaw is often less obvious in a single story, yet more damaging than the negative content of the report.

Just as often, news outlets fail to cover important stories. Few in the media delved into Arafat's complicity with terrorist organizations; the use of ambulances to aid suicide terrorist operations; or the teaching of hatred in Palestinian schools. They also have largely failed to cover Israel's successes, such as a major reduction in terrorism and the concomitant decrease in Palestinian casualties. As critics, we need to be mindful of this flaw in the coverage. It is often easier to react to what's written than to figure out what's missing, but in doing so we may give short shrift to the single most glaring flaw in the coverage.

What Critics of the Media Need to Take into Account

One way to detect the missing story or part of the story is to monitor Israeli media, such as the *Jerusalem Post* and *Ha'aretz*, as well as a wide range of U.S. publications, and compare their coverage with the media outlet in question. Did the *Jerusalem Post* give some key information about the context of a story that was absent from another publication's coverage? The media are more likely to fess up to stories they missed than to admit to inadequate or biased coverage—stories not covered that can be explained by a shortage of news personnel. Sensitizing media outlets to possible story angles may make a greater impact than any other type of criticism.

Media Critique Tips

- Compare Israeli and other publications to the problem coverage and look for missing pieces of information.
- Give editors and reporters ideas and story angles that have been missing from their coverage.

Identifying Editorial Commentary

Aside from the underlying bias we often see in coverage, some news outlets allow journalists to deliver editorials or editorial comments under the guise of straight news. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with editorializing; indeed, some news sources, like the *New Republic* or the *Weekly Standard*, unabashedly provide nothing but articles with an editorial bent. The problem is that many mainstream media outlets that profess to provide neutral, balanced coverage allow what can only be considered editorial analysis without so labeling it. Priding themselves on their purportedly objective coverage, these outlets often go so far as to separate their editorial departments from their news rooms to protect their news reporters from editorial taint. But, upon close review, they frequently seem to give great interpretive latitude to their reporters and, at times, even allow blatant editorializing.

According to a joint study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Princeton Survey Research Associates, only 25 percent of the early coverage of the U.S. war on terrorism was editorial in nature. As time progressed, however, nearly four out of ten stories engaged in what the study termed “analysis, opinion, and speculation.”²⁵ Former CBS and NBC correspondent Marvin Kalb, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University, says edgy copy logically rolls over into slant. A writer may know that he or she isn’t supposed to inject his opinion, but using sharp words can convey a bias. He says, “Attitude and edge tend to

stack the deck editorially.”²⁶ Such attitude runs rampant in the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to the Pew Study, “most journalists ... accept as valid the criticism that the distinction between reporting and commentary has seriously eroded.”²⁷



“You mean when I use a phrase like ‘Pharaoh dreamed seven cows came up out of the Nile,’ or ‘God remembered Noah,’ or David’s wife Michal ‘despised him in her heart’—that’s speculative journalism?”

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Many editors flatly deny the charge, arguing that it is a reporter’s job to provide “context.” To be sure, it is indeed the media’s job to place its coverage in context—that is, to provide information that helps the reader or viewer understand the situation being covered. But if such context is extremely controversial, what distinguishes it from opinion? As cited earlier, *Washington Post* foreign editor David Hoffman argues that “there is a cyclical nature to this violence,” and he does “not believe it would serve readers to omit the Israeli actions which cause Palestinian responses.” Implementing this theory, Hoffman has no problem justifying a reporter drawing causal con-

nections between something Israel does and an act of terrorism committed against Israeli citizens. Apparently, to Hoffman's mind, "occupation causes violence" is axiomatic to the Israel-Arab conflict, without adding into the equation the other factors, such as incitement and education, that contribute to the result. This analysis also does not bring into focus that Israel is an unwilling occupier, having come into possession of the West Bank and Gaza in a defensive war. Thus providing "context," like picture cropping, is a subjective art, and what is included or cut from the picture can be critical. (*See discussion of narrative frames, pg. 13 ff.*)

Journalists sometimes editorialize by carefully selecting sources that support their views. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, "journalists who select sources that express their own point of view—and then use the neutral voice to make it seem objective—are engaging in a form of deception."²⁸ In a controversial front-page story appearing in the *Washington Post* on February 10, 2004, headlined "Israel Hems in a Sacred City," the reporter interviewed numerous Israeli leftists and Palestinians who accused Israel of attempting to isolate Palestinians geographically. Aside from quotations from a few government sources in the extensive piece, the reporter failed to include perspectives from mainstream Israelis, who would have certainly provided an alternative perspective. This lack of balance left readers with a clear point of view—the reporter's.

In our critique of this practice, we need to show how such reports represent only one perspective, to the exclusion of others, and we must encourage media outlets to broaden their range of sources to include mainstream Israeli voices.

Media Critique Tips

- Try to identify hidden editorials.
- Encourage news outlets to broaden their use of sources with diverse opinions and provide names of alternative sources.

Pointing Out Inconsistent and Incorrect Definitions and Word Choice

Seemingly trying to be “value-neutral” or nonpartisan, the media often shy away from describing Palestinian terrorism as “terrorism.” That would be “taking sides,” editors say. This word choice is difficult to fathom, particularly when media use the word liberally to describe acts of terrorism aimed at the U.S. and others, but resist, often as a matter of policy, from referring to Palestinian suicide terrorism aimed at Israelis as the same. The *Washington Post* describes its policy as follows:

Critical readers also attempt to equate the U.S. battle against al Qaeda with the Israeli battle against Hamas. There are, however, differences. Hamas conducts terrorism but also has territorial ambitions, is a nationalist movement and conducts some social work. As far as we know, al Qaeda exists only as a terrorist network ... the contexts of the struggle against al Qaeda and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are different. News organizations should not back away from the word terrorism when it is the proper term. But as a rule, strong, descriptive, factual reporting is better than labels.²⁹

In truth, mainstream news outlets rarely apply the word “terrorism” in describing terrorism, even when covering the most ghastly attacks against Israeli civilians. Political analyst Joseph Farah points to a November 2003 report by the Associated Press listing recent terrorist attacks around the world. The report cited terrorist attacks from Jakarta to Yemen, but incom-

prehensibly failed to cite a single terrorist strike against Israelis at a time when there had been many.³⁰

David A. Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, points out that “[t]errorists, be they from Al Qaeda, Hamas, or Hizballah, target innocent people with the aim of inflicting death and destruction.... They’re not just militants or insurgents. They’re terrorists, as in cold-blooded, fanatical murderers. There’s just no other way to describe them.” According to the U.S. State Department, “The term ‘terrorism’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.” Are news editors seriously suggesting that Hamas attacks against innocent Israeli children are anything but unadulterated terrorism?

It is important that the pro-Israel community establish the principle that “terrorism is terrorism” in its communications with media outlets and continually point out the double standard. However, given that the approach to this subject has begun to harden in much of the journalistic establishment, might it be better to focus on other shortcomings in the coverage? In the end, will U.S. news consumers feel a lesser sense of horror at an act of Palestinian suicide terrorism if the act is referred to as a “suicide bombing” rather than a “homicide bombing”? Will Americans feel more sympathetic toward Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups if these groups are referred to as “militants” rather than “terrorists”? It’s not clear.

There are numerous other examples of incorrect or inconsistent definitions, from defining the West Bank and Gaza Strip as “Palestinian occupied land” to referring to all Israeli settlements as “illegal.” Depending on the media outlet and the offense, it may be worth putting up a fuss; in other cases, you may choose to reserve your ire for more consequential and controllable journalistic violations.

Media Critique Tips

- Point out inconsistent uses of the word “terrorism” and other definitions.
- Do not make widely accepted definitions the main focus of your media critique.

Spotting Unfair Layout

Some of the most frequent complaints about media coverage of Israel pertain to layout. Accusations of “layout bias” include the prominent placement of articles portraying Israel in a negative light; the appearance of photos that unfavorably depict Israel’s actions; the use of photos and headlines that are much harsher to Israel than the article suggests; and the placement of Israel’s side of the story toward the end of an article. Studies have shown that headlines and photos have a much greater impact on readers than the text, which often goes partially or completely unread. This finding amplifies concerns about layout bias. But keep in mind that, while these concerns are well founded, it is difficult to make headway with this kind of critique.

What Critics of the Media Need to Take into Account

It is often photo editors—not news editors—who, at the last minute and depending on what is available on the wire, decide which photographs to use. Similarly, headlines are often written by junior copy editors, who know even less about the story than the greenest reporter. And the prominent placement of stories sometimes has more to do with what else is on the news agenda than any desire to show Israel in a negative light.

Many a media critic has complained that articles portraying Israel in a detrimental fashion are given better placement than articles detailing Israeli suffering from terrorism or negative

news about the Palestinians. If you are going to level allegations of this nature, be prepared to prove them. It is not enough to compare two stories to make the point. You must be willing to look at the news over a long period, perhaps up to six months, to establish this type of pattern. As for photos, editors will often agree with your critique or shrug their shoulders and blame the underpaid photo techies for the problem. The most compelling critique in the area of page layout is to draw attention to the all too common practice of placing Israel's perspective at the end of a story, which makes it difficult for readers to compare and contrast various views, as many never read the jump of the story.

Media Critique Tips

- Point out problems of layout sparingly.
- Compare coverage over a long period of time to establish “layout bias.”
- Identify a pattern of either underplaying Israel's views or presenting them at the end of the story.

Highlighting Overt Bias

Aside from the blatantly anti-Israel publications on the political margins, such as the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, which wear their dislike for Israel on their sleeves, intentional bias against Israel in the U.S. press is rare but, regrettably, not unheard of. Joshua Muravchik in “Covering the Intifada” pointed to numerous examples of misreporting, but none more egregious than that of ABC anchorman Peter Jennings. ABC's coverage of the Middle East conflict distinguishes itself not only by its wanton editorializing, but by the crucial facts it frequently leaves out, according to Muravchik. His review leaves little

doubt that such bias, however uncommon in other mainstream U.S. media, represents an intentional effort on the part of ABC News to skew the news in order to make Israel look bad.³¹

Blatant bias, however, is far more common in the European press. Journalist Evelyn Gordon points out as an example an article appearing in the *International Herald Tribune*. Dubbed a reprint of a *New York Times* article, the *IHT* article “improved” the original version to make it decidedly more unflattering to Israel. The article’s main thrust was that Israeli leaders believe that Israel’s tactics against Palestinian radical groups were beginning to work. But the *IHT* reprint then diverges on a critical point, referring to an “unofficial ceasefire” in which no Palestinian suicide attacks were “carried out” against Israelis. The *Times* article never made mention of an “unofficial ceasefire,” which, it seems, was a figment of the *Tribune* editor’s imagination, but did cite the numerous “terror attempts” against Israelis during the time. The headline of the *IHT* article was “Israeli tactics assure future bombings, Palestinians assert,” whereas the *New York Times*’s article was “Bombing after lull: Israel still believes the worst is over.” Unfortunately, such blatant attempts to slant the news, not to mention the headlines, are all too common in the European press.

It is difficult to know what to say or do when faced with such bald-faced bias, other than to challenge it both privately and publicly.

Media Critique Tips

- Point out problems in the coverage by comparing it to how other outlets covered the story.
- Do not inveigh against the motives of a guilty journalist or editor but, rather, criticize the substance and tone of the coverage.

How to Conduct an Analysis

There are many ways to conduct a content analysis of the news, ranging from a simple critique of a single story to a comparative analysis of multiple ones. There are even more sophisticated techniques, highly analytical in nature, which are beyond the scope of most pro-Israel advocates and beyond the purview of this guide. Short of the more complex studies conducted by media think tanks, professional researchers, and schools of journalism, we can upgrade the kind of analyses we have delivered in the past and, in so doing, make a bigger impact.

Looking at Individual Stories

The advantage of analyzing individual stories is that it is relatively easy to do and takes little time and preparation. The disadvantage is that analyzing one story does not allow us to draw larger conclusions about coverage. Moreover, the outlets themselves will view this type of assessment as less credible because journalists do not regard any single story as a definitive account and can always point to the broader range of coverage. That said, when certain violations of journalistic practice are evident in a single story, we should not be reluctant to make our case.

Time-Based Analysis

As discussed, a more credible analysis looks at the coverage over a period of time or at a series of different incidents that took place over a span of time. This type of analysis prompts the following types of questions:

What patterns emerged in three months of coverage of a specific topic or event?

How did an outlet cover three different incidents, such as Israeli elections, an Israeli prime minister's visit to the White House, and an outburst of violence in the territories?

Assessing coverage over time allows us to substantiate specific, repeated problems in media coverage.

Comparative Analysis with Another Conflict or Story

Another difficult, quite compelling form of analysis is to compare a news outlet's coverage of another international conflict to that of the Middle East conflict. This type of analysis prompts the following sorts of questions:

How did the overall tone of the coverage compare and contrast?

How much editorializing was evident in the coverage of each?

Were the same underlying biases that we detect in the Middle East coverage also present in the coverage of the other conflict?

How were the stories placed in the paper? Did one receive disproportionate coverage on the front page or other prominent pages?

Answering such questions can identify specific problems unique to the coverage of Israel.

Comparative Analysis of Different Outlets

One powerful way to look at the coverage is to compare how two or more media outlets covered the same story or, better yet, several stories on Israel. If you are concerned with the coverage of one media outlet, showing how other outlets covered the same story may bolster your analysis. The more comparative and comprehensive we are in our analysis, the stronger our conclusions.

Stylistic Dos and Don'ts

It should go without saying that we need to be highly diplomatic when approaching the media. Unfortunately, some journalists have reported being berated by members of the pro-Israel community. It is clearly unproductive to be accusatory or contemptuous in either our verbal or written communications. Here are a few simple guidelines to follow:

Media Critique Tips

- Be courteous.
- Be complimentary when possible.
- Do not accuse journalists of bias, but do challenge the substance of the reporting.
- Allow room for errors.
- Thank the editor or reporter for listening.

A real example of an unnecessarily discourteous critique, written to an editor of a major news outlet:

Dear _____,

Can you explain to me why you and your colleagues do not regard as news worthy of exposure to your readers Yasir Arafat's speech broadcast on Palestinian television, in which he calls for Palestinians to, quoting from the Koran, "Find what strength you have to terrorize your enemy and the enemy of God"?

While I have not written you in the last several months, you should not regard my nonresponse as in any sense indicating that I find your coverage fair and unbiased. Your omissions are telling. Not only have you today failed to cover the Arafat speech, but you never...

The editor's reply (after responding to the substantive issues):

Finally, I reject the insulting tone of your letter. Your claims about "omissions" and "ignoring real news" are uncalled for. I have raised this issue with you before, apparently to no avail.

What the news critic could have said:

Dear _____,

I recently read about Yasir Arafat's speech broadcast on Palestinian television in which he called for Palestinians to, quoting from the Koran, "Find what strength you have to terrorize your enemy and the enemy of God." I was disappointed that, unlike several other major newspapers, the paper failed to cover the speech. The speech was a stark reminder that the Palestinian leader, by encouraging terrorism and hatred, has failed to lead his people to peace. Your readers deserve to know what he said.

Many thanks for your consideration.

Issuing a Complaint

Contacting the Ombudsman

The first recourse for a media critic is to contact the ombudsman, if there is one. The ombudsman is an independent but inside observer of the news outlet and a liaison between the public and the journalists. *Washington Post* ombudsman Michael Getler, once a highly respected reporter and editor for the newspaper, now works under contract in this capacity and not, in the typical sense, as an employee. His job is to provide a critical evaluation of the paper for both internal and external audiences. His weekly column often addresses shortcomings in

the coverage, and his much more extensive weekly internal memo has ruffled the feathers of even the most prominent journalists at the paper. In his columns addressing coverage of Israel, Getler has both upheld and discounted critiques of the coverage. He is much more likely to point to minor infractions—such as inaccurate information or poor use of sources—than to systemic, across-the-board problems in the coverage. He rejects the “media is biased against Israel” charge out of hand. Nonetheless, Getler and others like him are a good first stop for criticism and may, if they find merit in the critique, help effect a shift in how the Israeli side of the story is reported.

High-Level Meetings

High-level meetings are not for everyone. The editors of major publications are generally highly knowledgeable professionals with extensive understanding of the issues at hand. If you decide to engage in a high-level meeting, you must be very well prepared, possess extensive documentation and evidence to support your arguments, and have a firm grasp of both the situation in the Middle East and journalistic standards. If you are at all uneasy about your mastery of any of these areas, then holding such a meeting might undermine the full strength of the argument and make it less likely that other, better constructed critiques will be heard. That stated, a well-prepared, knowledgeable delegation with prominent members of the community could make a real difference.

Public Campaigns and Boycotts

There is reason to be skeptical about the effectiveness of boycotts. Some argue that boycotts can anger the journalistic establishment to the point that they actually discredit all criticism of the media. Others argue that the business and editorial sides are so separate that no respectable editorial department would ever take its cues from the business side. Besides, media outlets gen-

erally depend more on advertising revenue than on subscriptions; boycotts have, at best, a negligible economic effect.

It would seem that most boycotts have little direct effect because, in reality, it is difficult to mobilize enough people to cancel their subscriptions and even more difficult to get advertisers, the bread and butter of newspaper revenue, to stop placing ads. I am inclined to believe that while boycotts by themselves do not change the coverage, they do create a dynamic that increases the likelihood that a serious critique will be heard. This type of public campaign may force media outlets to seek out someone they feel they can talk to, which may, in turn, lead to changes in coverage.

Public e-mail campaigns are a different story and have proven more effective than boycotts. Activists who identify and disseminate problems in the coverage through mass e-mail have, at times, achieved results. It is important to construct an airtight critique and to be selective about using this potentially potent tool. Media critiques that come too often, especially those that are poorly thought out, might have the effect of numbing editors to criticism altogether and drowning out the more effective analyses. Indeed, in recent years, the drumbeat of media criticism emanating from e-mail has grown so incessant that it may now be subject to the law of diminishing returns. The “delete” button is the editor’s most effective countermeasure, so be careful about how you use the “send” button.

Issuing a Report

Before issuing a report, you need to determine whether there is a consistent pattern of bad coverage and, if so, what kind of report would best highlight the problem (*refer to page 28 on How to Conduct an Analysis*). A well-executed report might make a big difference. A poorly constructed one will hurt the cause. You also need to decide whether to go public with the report, which may undermine your relationship with the media

outlet. It's generally a good policy to begin a media critique effort through private contacts and, if all else fails, only then issue a report for public consumption.

Conclusion

This guide points to many flaws in the coverage of Israel and the Middle East. Some of these flaws are inherent to modern journalism, such as the twenty-four-hour news cycle, the press's negative tone, unprepared reporters, and the greater latitude given to editorializing. Others are specific to the coverage of the Middle East, such as preconceived notions that journalists bring to their coverage. These underlying narrative frames can be particularly insidious and difficult to remedy because media outlets often seem unaware of or unwilling to admit to them. The underlying frames give rise to some of the other problems highlighted, such as telling only part of the story, bad layout and photo choice, and incorrect definitions. If we point out these weaknesses in a carefully thought out, civil manner, we can—at least some of the time—make an impact. The result we would hope for is greater balance and perspective in the news media in its coverage of the Middle East.

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