Bad News from Israel

By GREG PHILO and MIKE BERRY (London, Pluto Press, 2004), 304 pp. £10.99

This book contains a fascinating, impressive and meticulous study by the Glasgow University Media Group of how the main TV news channels (BBC1 and ITV) misrepresent the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and misinform the great British public. It is therefore essential reading from two distinct viewpoints, on two important topics.

First, it is a must-read for anyone interested in the Middle East, arena of what is arguably the most dangerous and intractable conflict in our present-day world. Second, it can and should also be read as a case study, using the Middle-East issue as an illustration, of how public political ignorance and confusion, packaged as 'news' and 'information', is spread and fostered – an essential prerequisite for the preservation of the existing order.

The book begins with a 90-page historical introduction, outlining the evolution of the conflict from the inception of the Zionist colonizing project in the late 19th century up to the end of 2003. Quite properly, the narrative gets progressively more detailed as it approaches the present. Although the authors make no attempt to disguise their own opinions, they carefully report how each side to the conflict views those facts that are in dispute – that is, virtually *all* relevant facts. Fittingly, the heading of this chapter is 'Histor*ies* of the Conflict'.

Unfortunately, this account – which inevitably depends entirely on secondary sources – is marred by several inaccuracies. Politically, the only really serious error is the treatment of the programme for a 'Democratic State of Palestine' put forward by the PLO '[i]n the years after 1967'. Referring the reader to a book published by the journalist David Hirst in 1977, the authors tell us (p. 43):

> 'The brainchild of the PLO planner and negotiator Nabil Shaath, the Democratic State of Palestine would involve the dismantling of the Israeli state and its replacement with a non-sectarian bi-national Palestine in which Christian, Muslim and Jew would live together in equality.'

In fact, the PLO explicitly rejected the idea of a bi-national Palestine as a 'misconception'. In a programmatic article – unsigned, but to my certain knowledge written by Nabil Sha'ath himself – we are told that '[t]he call for a non-sectarian Palestine should not be confused with … a bi-national state' and that in the reality of Palestine 'the term bi-national and the Arab-Jewish dichotomy [are] meaningless, or at best quite dubious'. Moreover, the article stresses that '[t]he liberated Palestine will be part of the Arab Homeland, and will not be another alien state within it'; and looks forward to '[t]he eventual unity of Palestine with *other Arab* States'.[1]

The whole point of the programmatic formula '*Secular* Democratic Palestine' proposed at that time by Fateh, the dominant component of the PLO led by Yasir 'Arafat, was to present the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in *religious* terms and to propose a future Palestine in which Jews would have individual equality and freedom of religious worship

[1] 'Towards the Democratic Palestine', *Fateh* (English-language newspaper published by the Information Office of the Palestine Liberation Movement) Vol II, No. 2; 19 January, 1970. My emphasis.

in a country whose nationality would be Arab.[2] At that time, Palestinian nationalist ideology was coming to terms with the painful realization that the Israelis were there to stay, and had to be accommodated in a future free Palestine. But it denied the highly inconvenient fact that Zionist colonization had given birth to a new Hebrew (Hebrew-speaking Israeli Jewish) nation – a fact that is indeed an enormously complicating factor in the conflict. The adjective 'secular' in the formula 'Secular Democratic Palestine' encoded this denial.[3]

However, with this sole exception, the errors in the historical outline are quite minor, ranging from a couple of amusing solecisms[4] to wrong transliteration of names and slight factual inaccuracies that do not affect the basic validity of the account. Indeed, a corrected version of this historical outline could perhaps be republished separately and serve as a highly recommendable and much-needed brief introductory reading on the complex Palestinian–Israeli conflict. This should be accompanied by a glossary, whose absence in the present book must make some passages in it quite puzzling to a reader with little previous knowledge of the subject.[5] As the authors themselves point out (p. 99): 'what may seem obvious to the researcher or the journalist may not be so to all members of the audience.'

The remaining four chapters (with three appendixes) contain the authors' original findings. The material presented here is devastating.

Chapter 2 ('Content Studies') deals with the production of misinformation: it is an extensive account of the authors' analysis of BBC1 and ITV news reports on the conflict during four periods: 28 September – 16 October 2000 (outbreak of the second intifada), October–December 2001, March 2002, and April 2002 (Jenin). The authors rightly confine themselves to these media because for the great majority of the British population these are the main, if not only, source of information on foreign affairs.

Chapter 3 ('Audience Studies') is concerned with the consumption side: here the authors report research they conducted using 14 small focus groups of viewers (averaging seven members), selected on the basis of income, age and gender. Members of these groups were presented with questions probing their understanding of the news, following which there was a group discussion, led by a moderator who posed supplementary questions. Some of these discussions were attended by journalists and broadcasting professionals. In addition, two samples of students (one numbering 300, the other 280) aged between 17 and 23 were presented with an abbreviated version of the same questionnaire on two successive occasions, one year apart (October 2001 and October

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[2] Incidentally, elsewhere the authors of the book under review rightly note that 'to reduce the conflict to "religion" … can be misleading.' (p, 127)

[3] Ironically, this denial is also shared by Zionist ideology, which refuses to recognize the existence of the new nation created by Zionist colonization, because it insists on the fiction that there is one *worldwide* Jewish 'nation', with the Land of Israel as its God-given 'homeland'.

[4] On p. 2 we are told that from the 1830s onwards some rabbis 'stressed the need for Jews to return to the Holy Land as a necessary prelude to the Redemption and the second coming of the Messiah.' The authors do not seem to realize that the rabbis are one coming behind: as far as they are concerned the first (and only) coming is still awaited, Jesus was an impostor and his alleged first coming is a blasphemous fib.

On p. 5, the Central Powers in the First World War are referred to as the 'Axis Powers'.

[5] How is such a reader to know that the Yom Kippur War referred to at the bottom of p. 47 is the same as the October 1973 War mentioned earlier on that page?

2002). For the sake of comparison, the same questionnaire was also given to a group of German high-school students, and a group of US university students studying journalism or communication.

The headings of the final two chapters, Chapter 4 and 5, 'Why Does it Happen' and 'Conclusions', are self-explanatory.

The detailed evidence presented in Chapters 2 and 3 and the Appendixes leaves no room for doubt that BBC1 and ITV news are massively biased in favour of the official Israeli narrative.

In part, this is the effect of general structural causes, to do with the way *all* news is packaged and presented on TV. As one of the journalists, George Alagiah, confirmed, reporters are 'constantly being told [by news editors] that the attention span of our average viewer is about 20 seconds…' (p. 213). This leaves no room at all for explaining the background of the current events being reported. A BBC journalist told the authors that 'he had been instructed not to do "explainers" by his own editor' (p. 215). With the total absence of historical background, many viewers are not aware that since 1967 the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been under oppressive Israeli *military* occupation, which is regarded by most international observers as illegal. (The term 'occupied territories' is often used in news reports, but in the absence of any further explanation many viewers interpret this in the same sense as a house or a bathroom being 'occupied', and so conclude that it is the Palestinians who are the 'occupiers'!) Nor is it explained that a great many of the of the Palestinians in these territories were displaced in the 1948 war from their homes in what became Israel, or are descended from the original refugees. Viewers are left with the impression that the conflict is a symmetric quarrel between two nations over some bits of land along their mutual border. Moreover, in the absence of explanation how it came about, the status quo is automatically made to appear legitimate and 'natural'; and since it is the Palestinians who are resisting it, they are automatically seen as causing the trouble and starting each 'cycle of violence'. The Israeli occupation forces are seen as keeping order or restoring it, albeit by over-harsh means.

But there is also incontrovertible evidence of explicit and specific pro-Israeli bias in what is actually said and shown on TV news. There is a great imbalance in interviews: Israelis are allowed to speak to the camera much more than Palestinians (as measured by lines of transcript text).

In a period when Palestinian fatal casualties outnumbered Israeli ones more than threefold, the coverage of deaths was roughly reversed: the former was given in total about one third of the airtime devoted to the latter. It is hardly surprising that a majority of viewers are consequently unaware of the true facts.

Reporters and presenters of news tend to use Israeli explanations and terminology not only when quoting official Israeli sources, but also when speaking on their own behalf. Thus, Israeli assassinations and violent attacks are regularly reported as acts of 'retaliation' or 'response' but such motivation is very rarely offered to explain Palestinian attacks, which are therefore seen as starting the 'cycle of violence'. So, unlike a mathematical circle, this cycle appears to be far from perfectly round: the Palestinians start while the Israelis respond. A typical example of this is the reporting of events in October–December 2001, a period of intense violence, during which Palestinian casualties, as usual, far outnumbered Israeli ones (pp. 160–1). On 2 December 2001, a journalist commented on BBC1: 'This cycle of violence began six weeks ago when an

Israeli cabinet minister was shot.' That was a reference to the assassination of Rehav'am Ze'evi, Israel's Minister of Tourism and a notorious open advocate of ethnic cleansing, by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. BBC1 omitted to report that the PFLP had justified their action as revenge for the assassination, seven weeks earlier, of their West-Bank political leader, Abu-'Ali Mustafa, 64. (The PFLP assassins daringly infiltrated a Jerusalem hotel in pursuit of their victim. The Israeli uniformed assassins took no similar risk: they fired missiles from a helicopter into the PFLP's Ramallah office.)

Another typical example is the way in which ITV news reported the emblematic incident in which the 12-year-old Muhammad al-Durrah was shot dead by an Israeli marksman, while crouching behind his father who was desperately trying to shelter him. Newscasters and journalists parroted the Israeli official spin that the boy was 'caught in the crossfire', which according to eyewitnesses was a blatant lie: the boy was murdered in cold blood (p. 149).

TV news presenters and reporters also use emotionally charged terms that betray strong pro-Israeli prejudice. Descriptions such as 'horrific attack', 'brutal murder', 'savage cold blooded killing' and 'lynching' are used about Israeli deaths, but not when Palestinians are killed in ways that could also be so described. Terms such as 'mass murder', 'carnage' and 'slaughter' are regularly used to describe incidents in which, say, six or ten Israeli civilians are killed, but not when an even greater number of Palestinian civilians are killed by the Israeli occupation forces.

The authors report and analyse many more examples of grossly inadequate and biased reporting. They also show convincingly that members of the public are indeed affected by this: they are confused due to the lack of background information, and misinformed about the actual facts of the conflict, especially if TV news is their only source of information.[6]

What are the reasons for this marked bias? Again, some are generic and operate in other comparable circumstances, when a regular army of a modern capitalist state is involved on one side of a conflict. In the present case, Israel controls access to the Occupied Territories. Therefore journalists, who in any case naturally tend to live in the safer and technically more convenient Israeli side (especially in West Jerusalem), find it much easier to interview Israelis. The far greater slickness and professionalism of the Israeli spin machine, as compared to its Palestinian counterpart, also contributes to the imbalance.

There is also some racist stereotyping at work. Journalists – and probably even more so editors – find it easier to identify with Israel, a modern capitalist country, and with Israelis, especially members of the Ashkenazi elite, than with Palestinians. This outweighs sympathy for the Palestinians as underdogs. Widespread guilt feeling towards Jews, over-compensating for the endemic anti-Semitism of previous generations, is no doubt an added factor.

Then there is the heavy pressure, not to say emotional blackmail, applied by the efficiently orchestrated and well-organized pro-Israeli lobby and the many fanatic friends of Israel in the Jewish community, who habitually vilify as 'anti-Semitic' even relatively

[6] Reports base on focus groups display interesting difference in this respect along both class and gender lines. Middle-class males and professionals (mixed groups) tend to be best informed (p. 210). But middle-class women tend to be very ill-informed, worse than low-income mixed groups (p. 272).

mild criticism of Israel, self-appointed State of all Jews. Journalists and TV officials can be intimidated by such smear tactics.

Finally, there is American influence. The US gives Israel, its chief Middle-East junior partner and bully-boy, enormous support in finance, arms and political protection.[7] These facts are not explained on TV news. But when BBC1 and ITV interview a third-party 'expert' or politician on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, it is usually an American who, in the guise of expertise or objectivity, advocates the Israeli position. Amazingly, these British TV channels interview US politicians twice as often as British ones on the topic in question! This is no doubt part of the process of harnessing Britain slavishly to the American imperial chariot – a process that both requires and results in systematically misinforming the British people.

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[7] The US never votes against Israel in the UN, and habitually vetoes any resolution of the Security Council condemning Israel for violations of human rights and international law, no matter how serious.