

Israel and the Media: An Exchange

John Eldridge, Greg Philo, and Mike Berry vs. Mike Brennan

John Eldridge: Brennan cannot be serious

Editors: Mike Brennan's review of *Bad News from Israel* (Democratiya 3) was a triumph of maliciousness over accuracy. It is a sorry day for sociology when a Research Fellow in the subject actually complains that ' swathes of the book groan under the weight of empirical data.' In a similar way, he refers to the 'dreary list of appendices,' where further data and information about research methods are to be found. This is what we call evidence. It is what sociologists do: they gather evidence, analyse it and present it for public scrutiny. From my knowledge of Warwick University sociology department that is precisely what his colleagues routinely do. But this man, in the immortal words of John McEnroe, cannot be serious.

John Eldridge, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of Glasgow

Mike Brennan replies to John Eldridge

John Eldridge either misses or wilfully misrepresents the point I make in my review of *Bad News from Israel* when he suggests that I am dismissive of empirical research in sociology – I am not. Rather, as can be seen from the full passage from which Eldridge himself maliciously and selectively quotes, I argue for a closer and mutually reciprocal relationship between theory and empirical research in which theory is used to elaborate data and vice versa. This view, common throughout sociology, argues that theory be used to 'elaborate' and 'unpack' any data generated. My complaint that the 'book groans under the weight of empirical data' refers specifically to the absence of balance between data, commentary and theoretical interpretation. My point was that data should be used selectively and not simply presented as page upon page of appendices. This is abundantly clear if one reads the full passage from my review:

Chapter 5 provides an even more cursory conclusion and a dreary list of appendices (chiefly, pages of detailed questionnaire results, with little annotation). Swathes of the book groan under the weight of empirical data. And where data are presented (especially in chapter 2), lengthy transcripts of TV reports are used to make the same point, ad infinitum, without any

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attempt to unpack, ground or elaborate the claims being made through reference to theory. Rather, claims made about the data appear to owe more to the taken-for-granted assumptions of the researchers – that the media is a tool of the dominant classes, creating rather than merely reflecting attitudes, beliefs and ideas – than to any theoretical knowledge.

It is indeed a sorry day for sociology when an Emeritus Professor chooses malice over accuracy to counter legitimate academic criticism.

Mike Brennan, Research Fellow in Sociology, University of Warwick

Philo and Berry: Brennan offers a collection of falsehoods

Editors: You have published a review of our book *Bad News from Israel (Democratiza 3)*, written by Michael Brennan. This is such a collection of falsehoods about our research that we must refute them.

1. He states that our thesis is that ‘in news production, the dominant ideology (the Israeli viewpoint) is reproduced and continually affirmed.’ This is false and the words do not appear in our book. We show there is not a single frame of ‘Israeli dominance.’ Journalists, for example, responded very strongly to the deaths of Palestinian children and were critical of Israeli actions in this respect. We also highlighted sharp differences in reporting between areas of news output as between Channel Four and BBC1 and also between press accounts and television. There was a dominance of some perspectives much of the time on the news in our samples and this had a measurable influence on the development of public understanding. But this is a research result which can be replicated. It doesn’t follow from a pre-ordained ‘thesis.’ If Brennan has other evidence which questions this result, for example that Palestinians are reported more often than Israelis, then let him present it.

2. He states that our book assumes that ‘TV audiences passively absorb information from news reports.’ This is false. Our work on audiences over the last ten years has shown the processes by which some audience members use logic or alternative information to critique news accounts. In this study we reported how some participants used logic to deduce that Palestinians would have the highest number of dead, even though TV news coverage focused disproportionately on Israeli casualties.

3. He claims that 'Arab nationalism is valorised as a righteous and heroic struggle against Western/Zionist imperialism.' This is false and no such words appear in our work. We actually include many criticisms made of Arab governments, of anti-Semitism in the Arab press, and of the rule of Yasser Arafat and of corruption in the Palestinian Authority. It is not our job as academics to promote 'heroic struggles.'

4. He claims that we dismissed the views of research group participants because they 'had connections with Israel.' This is false and we made no such comment on personal beliefs. We reported that the choice and use of photographs in a research exercise was influenced by value commitments. So if people were concerned about how Israel was presented on the news, they might focus more on photographs of the conflict which put Israel in a negative light than photographs which did the same for the Palestinians. This is a research finding and we reported it as such. Brennan is not happy with this and refers to us as 'occupying an Olympian viewpoint.' But if he does not accept the processes by which university researchers gather data and report it from this 'Olympian height' then why is he working in a university.

5. He accuses us of quoting 'without reservation' from sources who use terms such as 'the power of the Jewish lobby' and 'the influence of organised Jewry.' The implication is that we are encouraging the use of anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jewish influence. His words are a massive misrepresentation of what these sources were actually arguing. The first author was saying that the stereotype of the 'Jewish lobby' is wrong and that a key issue is the rise of the Christian Right and their support for Israel. The second was saying that journalists are reluctant to talk about anything that sounds like 'organised Jewry' because they don't want to feed Arab stereotypes about Jews. But what is Brennan actually asking for, by raising this issue? Is he saying that we should not mention the existence of an organisation such as AIPAC in the USA, in case to do so offends Jewish people. And should we similarly not mention the presence of anti-Semitism in the Arab press or in the content of sermons in mosques in case it offends Muslims? Is this how he proceeds in his own research – Do his own reports leave out evidence that someone might not want to hear?

6. He falsely accuses us of giving our audience groups a one sided history of the origin of Palestinian refugees, which privileges the Palestinian view and is upset because we reference the work of the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim (who has made criticisms of Israeli policy). A more balanced view he claims would come from quoting other historians. The information that he objects to is that Palestinian were forced or fled

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from their homes in 1948. The focus of the current historical argument over this is actually whether this forced movement of Palestinians was because of military exigencies (Shlaim or Benny Morris) or was part of a deliberate Zionist plan to create an Israel without Arabs (Finkelstein or Khalidi). The view that Palestinians left voluntarily is now largely discredited. This however does not deter Brennan and to illustrate his point, he quotes from a participant in our audience research who has been newly informed about the conflict. The man states: ‘You filled in the blanks I didn’t have a clue about.’ Brennan suggests that we have filled this person in with one sided, partial blanks about the history of the conflict. But Brennan leaves out what the man said next and what he is actually referring to. This is: ‘1948? Was there a war in 1948? Now I know there was.’ Of course to have included that would have made Brennan’s point look ridiculous. Unless of course he knows some historians who think it happened in 1949. He also falsely claims that we did not discuss the Holocaust with participants. We did and there are clear references to this and quotes from them in our text which Brennan has chosen to ignore.

7. At the beginning of the book we give an account of the different histories of the conflict as told by different commentators and historians. Brennan is unhappy with this because we quote from Benyamin Netanyahu who offers a defence of Israel. Brennan writes that Netanyahu is a ‘political and intellectual lightweight’ and that it is not somehow fair to compare his views with those of theorists such as Chomsky and Finkelstein. Again, Brennan misses out that we also quote from other pro-Israeli historians such as Martin Gilbert, Howard Sachar, and Yehuda Bauer. But if we lead his normal distortions aside for a moment we can ask: Is he seriously suggesting that we should have excluded the views of an ex-prime minister of Israel who is a frequent contributor to public debate, with five books on the subject and then given as a reason that we think that he is a lightweight? What would then be said of us? How can we possibly win when we are confronted by Brennan with an argument as foolish as this?

His review then goes on to tread some very strange ground. He writes that: ‘crucially (our italics), the avowedly anti-Zionist pedigree of the likes of Chomsky and Finkelstein are not disclosed to the reader.’ There is a certain malevolence in this phrase with its odd packaging of different theorists as being simply ‘the likes of,’ about whose ‘pedigree’ we have to be told. Is Brennan now saying that as academics it is crucial that we should evaluate contributions not on the basis on the quality of what is written but on the pedigree of the individual. Where does this process stop? Do we give health warnings to students about each speaker: ‘this one is a leftie, this

one Jewish, this one Muslim.’ It is not an approach to professional academic life which we favour.

8. He suggests that in our history of the conflict, we reduce the human cost of Israeli casualties by using language which ‘objectifies’ them – i.e. by saying that ‘a bombing killed eight’ rather than ‘eight people.’ The truth is actually the opposite of his suggestion. In writing this section of our book we went back to our own archive, quite deliberately, to find one of the first BBC reports of a suicide bombing in Israel in the 1990s. We did this exactly because we wanted to convey the human costs of such actions and the sense of shock which they engendered in Israeli society. The BBC quote is very graphic and is in our text just nine lines below the sentence about which he is making his rather obscure point, so he didn’t have very far to look.

There are many other mistakes and distortions in what he writes. But the above eight areas will give a sense of the quality of his work. One question remains, which is why would Brennan produce such a false and misinformed review? He accuses us of having an ‘agenda’ but does not discuss his own. He writes that he is concerned our book will reinforce perspectives of Israel as ‘monolithic.’ He apparently wants someone to give a better defence of Israel, which is why he is worried that Netanyahu is a ‘lightweight’ and is upset by our citing Avi Shlaim. But it is not our role as academics to give a partisan defence of anyone or any state. Our job is to stand by the rules of social science, to gather evidence, to debate and to present work in an accurate and truthful fashion. By these criteria Brennan has failed miserably.

Greg Philo and Mike Berry

The Perils of Remedial Empiricism: a rejoinder to Philo and Berry

Philo and Berry’s personalised assault on my review of their book is a gross misrepresentation and I strongly reject it. My essay provides a thorough-going chapter by chapter critique of their work, replete with citations and page references that give the reader a genuine flavour of the book’s overall content. Judged by the received standards of scholarly criticism, my comments faithfully reflect the contents of *Bad News from Israel*, contributing to on-going academic debate, and are situated within the bounds of legitimate academic criticism.

As should be clear to anyone who has read my review, I criticise *Bad News from Israel* on two key grounds: as methodologically flawed and premised upon an

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overtly 'objectivist' orientation towards the data (and the wider Israel/Palestine conflict) that obscures the role of research design in eventual research outcomes. As if to confirm the 'Olympian viewpoint' of the researchers, claims made by Philo and Berry based on empirical research are treated by them as placing their work beyond reproach. It would seem, therefore, that merely to challenge Philo and Berry's thesis is sufficient for them to allege a 'false' review. I do not, as Philo and Berry patronisingly put it, reject 'the processes by which university researchers gather their data.' Rather, I critique the methods and interpretations of the data by which they arrived at their conclusions.

Whilst Philo and Berry accuse my review of inaccuracy, they themselves begin rather sloppily by misquoting me. Throughout their response Philo and Berry endeavour to suggest that I attribute words to them that are incorrect. This is simply not the case. Thus, they repeatedly counter my claims by recourse to a specious form of remedial empiricism. For example, in response to my assertion that *Bad News from Israel* invests in a discourse that valorises Arab nationalism, Philo and Berry claim: 'this is false and no such words appear in our book.' Here Philo and Berry are so caught up in a focus on particular words characteristic of a content-analysis approach that they miss the point entirely. Let me be crystal clear: I am not attempting to attribute words to Philo and Berry that are not their own but rather to provide a descriptive and critical evaluation of their work and the arguments it implies.

Philo and Berry's response attempts to redeem *Bad News from Israel* by arguing that the omissions which I accuse them of are 'false.' As I will demonstrate in my response, this too is clearly not the case. For example, Philo and Berry claim that *Bad News from Israel* includes 'many criticisms' of anti-Semitism in the Arab press. Close inspection, however, reveals only a cursory reference to anti-Semitism (p. 249). Their point about anti-Semitism is, however, subtly undermined, and thereby effectively disqualified, by the fact that it is reduced to an allegation made by 'pro-Israel groups' or the Israeli government. Their more substantive discussion of anti-Semitism (a paragraph and footnote: see *ibid*) amounts only to its mobilisation by the Israelis and pro-Israel groups to ward-off unwanted criticism of Israel.

Similarly, Philo and Berry claim that I chose to ignore the 'clear references' and 'quotes' to discussions of the Holocaust with research participants. In actual fact, only one reference to discussion of the Holocaust with a research participant occurs in *Bad News from Israel* (p. 236). When it does we learn that it occurred in

'a one-to-one discussion outside the groups' (ibid, my emphasis) in a situation that appears to have been initiated by the respondent herself. This, however, is besides the overall point I am making here and again I leave it to the reader to check the veracity of Philo and Berry's counter-claims.

Again: Philo and Berry claim in their response that they made no comment on the relationship between people's perceptions of television news and their personal beliefs. Yet in their book Philo and Berry assert that the perceptions of people who 'had connections with Israel' might be due to the fact 'that they were sympathetic to Israel and that coverage of Palestinian casualties in some way upset or contradicted their preferred view' (p. 235-6). Again, I will let the reader decide for themselves.

The impression given by *Bad News from Israel* – and this I maintain – is that research participants were not provided with a 'rounded' or 'multi-perspectival' approach to the events leading up to and surrounding the establishment of Israel. This is absolutely crucial in a context where not only participants knew very little about the origins of the conflict but where historians are themselves still sharply divided on the issue. Contrary to Philo and Berry's claims, I welcome the use of historical material from a new generation of so-called 'post-Zionist' historians but alongside and not instead of various other accounts. What is clearly misleading therefore is to present a history of the conflict to participants as if it were the history. But again Philo and Berry miss the point. For to help others with little prior knowledge make sense of the context of the present conflict we need to carefully distil the key elements of the past in all its complexity. This is a huge challenge, one which television news – as Philo and Berry repeatedly remind us – fails to meet.

Here I maintain my claim that popular television news cannot realistically be expected to do the difficult job of explaining an intractable, contested and deeply complex conflict to audiences. Philo and Berry themselves implicitly concede this point: not only by the amount of space they devote to a history of the conflict (some 90 pages of text) but by a recognition that those who were best informed displayed an already 'high level of interest' about the conflict that was 'being fed by other sources such as books, the quality press or further study in higher education (p. 210).

Concomitantly, Philo and Berry's suggestion that other in-depth news sources do a much better job of explaining the conflict, providing descriptive, investigative and interrogative journalism, is rather unfair, assuming that each operates under

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the same conditions. Not only are the alternative news sources that Philo and Berry site (BBC2 Newsnight and Channel 4 evening news) twice as long as their ‘popular’ BBC1/ITV1 counterparts, but they are specifically designed with an analytical remit.

I maintain too that the inclusion of Benjamin Netanyahu – a clearly identifiable political figure – as a reliable source of historical interpretation about the conflict is a strange choice, especially when pitted against established intellectuals and historians. Netanyahu’s pedigree as former Prime Minister does not in and of itself make him qualified to accurately report the historical events of 1948 but rather his inclusion merely helps to effectively discredit the Israeli position.

Philo and Berry accuse me of concealing my own views yet I make no secret in my own academic work of a commitment to reflexive methodologies and alternative epistemologies that place researchers on the same critical plane as the conventional ‘objects’ of their inquiries. A constant theme running throughout my academic work has been to highlight the risks engendered in narrowly empirical and positivistic research: namely, the potential for projective and transference relations that exist between researchers and the data they produce.

Despite Philo and Berry’s best efforts to make my review of their work appear unreasonable, many of the points I make have been echoed elsewhere in mainstream publications including the *New Statesman* and the *Economist*. [1] Philo and Berry’s ungracious response to my critical review of their book – the bread and butter of academic life – can perhaps be seen to signify a genuine sense of unease, especially as my review comes from within sociology itself. One thing should, however, be abundantly clear: that claims based on empirical research are not – however much Philo and Berry protest – immune from academic criticism.

Notes

[1] For example, Anton La Guardia writes in the *New Statesman*:

‘[T]here is much about *Bad News from Israel* that is flawed. Like the TV news that they criticise, Philo and Berry are guilty of errors of fact and selectivity, and of adopting one narrative – that of the Palestinians – over the other. On page after page, they compare television coverage to reports in the *Guardian* and the work of the historian Avi Shlaim: respectable sources, certainly, but hardly unchallenged arbiters of truth.’

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Even more damning is the Economist review which describes *Bad News from Israel* as a 'dismal production,' claiming 'massive quantification counts for nothing if the research method is flawed.' Incidentally, Philo and Berry responded in similar vein to this review as they did my own, claiming it not only to be 'false' but mistaking direct quotation for description by insisting 'these comments do not appear in our book.' For full reviews see Anton La Guardia, 'Chicken and egg,' *New Statesman*, 30 August 2004 and 'The long fall from grace,' *the Economist*, July 19 2004.

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