

# ***Bad News From Israel***

by Greg Philo and Mike Berry, Pluto Press, 2004, 317. pp.

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This book focuses on British television reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Readers familiar with the Glasgow Media Group's earlier work [1] will recognise a continuity of method: chiefly, a political economy approach to the analysis of news media which views reportage as favouring dominant groups within society. Somewhat predictably therefore, television news reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is seen to favour the Israeli perspective.

The choice of topic is reflective of wider shifts among sections of the British (and European) left, when, after a long relative silence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the state of Israel has been thrust centre-stage as the source of all our discontents [2]. In the 1970s, the Glasgow Media Group focused on British television reporting of industrial relations, and showed it to be 'clearly skewed against the interests of the working-class and organised labour ... in favour of the managers of industry' [3]. Today, the thesis is that the Israeli position is given 'preferential treatment' in news reporting (p. 199). Then, as now, the Glasgow Media Group highlight visual and narrative techniques used in news production by which the dominant ideology of the status quo is re-produced, continually affirmed and thereby secured.

The problems are two-fold. First, Philo and Berry's book invests in an ultra-leftist discourse in which Arab nationalism is valorised as a righteous and heroic struggle against Western/Zionist imperialism, whilst Zionism – itself a (former) vehicle of national liberation – is demonised. [4] Second, and more serious from a scholarly, rather than purely political, perspective, the research methodology is faulty.

### **Synopsis**

The main thesis of the book is set out in Chapters 2 and 3, where the different ends of the process of news production – representation and reception, and the relationship between them – are explored. Chapter 2 reports the results of a quantitatively-focused content analysis of popular television news footage. Chapter 3 reports the results of focus-group research with audiences, designed to ascertain what they understood of the conflict following such news reports. The book assumes – it hardly amounts to a theory – that a clear and unilinear relationship exists between

## Democratiya 3 | Winter 2005

television news reports and the audiences receiving them. Television audiences are treated as a *tabula rasa*: their perceptions of events the result of information passively absorbed from popular news reports.

Chapter 4 provides a cursory analysis of why British television news favours the dominant Israeli perspective. The authors point, rather predictably, to the slick Israeli Public Relations machinery, the wholesale adoption of the Israeli perspective by television news editors, and the pressure on television news editors and individual reporters by the hugely influential ‘pro-Israel lobby.’ Whilst Philo and Berry are careful to avoid using such terms themselves, they quote heavily, and without reservation, from sources that refer frequently to ‘the power of the Jewish lobby’ (p. 252) or to ‘the influence of organised Jewry.’ (p. 253)

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 points, *ad infinitum*, without any 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.

### Bad Histories

Philo and Berry claim there is a near-total absence of historical background in news reports of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They remind us that journalists typically have a 2-3 minute slot within a half-hour news programme in which to report a day’s events. We learn that the BBC journalist, George Alagiah, claims that news editors are constantly reminding journalists that they have about 20 seconds in which to grab the audience’s attention (p. 211). Channel 4’s Lindsey Hilsum highlights the difficulties of doing justice to the complex, long-standing and deeply contested history of the conflict. To focus on each side’s (Palestinian or Israeli) interpretation of a single day’s events actually prevents journalists from providing any kind of overview of the news because, ‘I think, well, bloody hell, I’ve only three minutes to do this piece in and I’m going to spend a minute going through the arguments’ (p. 245). For these reasons Philo and Berry devote a full third of the book (some 90 pages) to an ostensibly unbiased history of the conflict.

## BRENNAN | Bad News From Israel

Now, observers with only a passing interest or knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will recognise it has a complex and deeply contested history (or rather histories). Representations of this intractable conflict are premised upon competing truth-claims and historical narratives which will never be fully established. [5] This provides a formidable obstacle to anyone wishing to write on this subject. At first sight, therefore, Philo and Berry appear to make a decent attempt at providing a balanced historical account of the conflict by letting each side speak for itself.

And yet the authors continually undermine the Israeli position. I struggled to put my finger on how, exactly; the carefully constructed case against Israel was being achieved. So I reached for an earlier work by Greg Philo, *Seeing and Believing: the Influence of Television*. [6] I discovered it provided a critique of television news reporting that could equally be applied to his (and Berry's) own historical sketch of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In 1992 Philo explained that television news does not deny but routinely acknowledges the existence of two mutually opposed and competing view points, only then to effectively neutralise and disavow one while naturalising and thereby validating the other. Television news creates an illusion of balance, Philo argued, because both views are presented, but no real balance is created, in fact, because they are weighted differently. [7]

In 2005, in the interests of 'balance,' Philo draws on the voices of both Israeli and Palestinian (or rather, western intellectuals supportive of 'the' Palestinian position) sides in equal measure. And if we follow the logic of Philo and Berry's *quantitatively*-focused content analysis of news reporting (chapter 2), in which, in 'order to obtain some measure of the relative dominance of different accounts and perspectives, we count their frequency' (p. 97), there does indeed appear to be little to choose between the pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian accounts. However, if we employ the kind of qualitative analysis Philo urged in 1992, and study the standing of the voices called upon to represent each side's respective claims, a different picture emerges. The contest now appears, at best, to be something of a mismatch. In the pro-Palestinian (and anti-Israeli) corner, intellectual heavyweights from MIT Professor of Linguistics Noam Chomsky and Oxford historian Avi Shlaim, to Norman Finkelstein and the *Guardian's* former Middle East correspondent David Hirst, are frequently called upon to provide damning evidence of Israeli atrocities committed against the Palestinians. By comparison, the historical case in defence of Israel falls routinely on the shoulders of former right-wing Likud Prime Minister and vociferous opponent of Israel's recent withdrawal from Gaza, Benjamin Netanyahu – a man widely acknowledged by all serious commentators on the Middle East to

be a political, let alone intellectual, lightweight: a man 'drunk on his own rhetoric and personal illusions' [8].

Moreover, and crucially, the avowedly anti-Zionist pedigree of the likes of Chomsky and Finkelstein are not disclosed to the reader. This is significant because *Bad News from Israel* targets a potential readership, including students of sociology and media studies, with little prior knowledge of the conflict, least of all an awareness of Chomsky's and Finkelstein's long-standing investments in a profoundly anti-Israeli politics. There are other glaring omissions in the treatment of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Curiously, in discussions of the 1978 Camp David accords there is little mention of the 'external' pressures (of bordering Arab states and dissident Islamist groups) opposed to any formal recognition of Israel, let alone the signing of a peace deal between Israel and Egypt. And no mention that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was to pay with his life for the peace he signed with Israel when, in 1981, he was assassinated by Islamists opposed to peace.

Philo and Berry claim that television news reporting of the conflict tends to favour the visually dramatic and eye-catching story-line, eschewing social and historical background. Explanations of the conflict tended to be 'enigmatic and brief' (p. 99), leaving audiences mystified and likely to 'switch off.' We should note in passing that, true or not, this insight does not bring us any closer to solving the practical question of how to present news whilst providing 'balanced' historical context, given both the severe time constraints and the deeply contested nature of the conflict. More: the claim assumes very little responsibility on the part of audiences. Clearly, a democratic civil society rests upon a reasonably well-informed public. Yet the responsibility rests also with citizens themselves. [9] As Philo and Berry's analysis of audiences illustrates (chapter 3), not only are the people with the clearest understanding of the conflict the ones who read most widely on the topic (be it books or 'quality' newspapers), but those least informed are also least likely to want to inform themselves about the conflict, even if that means watching a television documentary. This is encapsulated by a participant in focus group research who says, 'it's much preferable to see a short slot on the news, because, obviously, a documentary lasts half an hour, and you don't want to watch all that.' (p. 243)

Philo and Berry claim the lack of historical context inevitably favours the Israeli perspective by 'removing the Palestinian rationale for action.' (p. 157) The implication appears to be that if only audiences were 'told the truth' about what really happened in 1948, they would inevitably see things from the Palestinian

## BRENNAN | Bad News From Israel

perspective. Again, this elides the complexity of available historical narratives on the conflict, preferring instead a comfortably monist and idealised Palestinian perspective. Philo and Berry go further. The absence of historical context in television news reports, is, they appear to suggest, a deliberate strategy by which audiences are kept in the dark.

### Media Bias in News Content

Philo and Berry have studied news reports of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shown on prime-time BBC1 and ITV1 news bulletins between September 2000 and April 2002. To interpret this data they deploy the method of content analysis. Lines of text devoted to each side in the conflict are measured and used to make the claim that media bias takes four forms: 1) the disproportionate amount of coverage – as measured quantitatively – given to the Israeli perspective, 2) the sequencing of reported events, 3) the language used to describe each side in the conflict and 4) the actual physical context in which each sides views were reported. So, volumes, sequences, frames and contexts.

### Volumes

By counting phrases, words or sentences used in news reports (p. 98), Philo and Berry claim that Israelis were disproportionately represented. Israelis, according to their research, were given ‘twice as much coverage’ as Palestinians (p. 157). And whilst the majority of deaths since the outbreak of the second intifada have been Palestinian – ‘apparently by a numerical ratio of around 13:1’ (p. 144) – most coverage was given to Israeli casualties (p. 144). Philo and Berry go to great lengths to illustrate the disproportionate emphasis upon Israeli casualties. For example, measured as lines of text, they claim one sample of news footage devoted 128 lines of text to Israeli casualties compared to 117.25 lines to Palestinian casualties (n25, p. 297). At times, the analysis reads like a statistical attempt to empirically ‘prove’ who are the biggest victims of the conflict. The costs of this kind of approach have been huge. It is through just such calculations, and the empirical assertion of righteous claims to victimhood, that the humanity of the Other is effectively effaced. Indeed, each side’s own victimhood, whether of the Holocaust or Nakbah, has been used to silence and over-write the suffering of the Israeli/Palestinian Other. [10]

And yet, when analysing the Israeli siege of Jenin, in April 2002, in which Palestinian casualties were eventually much less than initially claimed in media reports, Philo and Berry change tack. Oddly enough given their remorseless numerical focus

on reported casualties, and in the wake of a UN report confirming there was no massacre, Philo and Berry claim it is 'distasteful to argue over whether "enough" civilians were killed...to justify the use of such a word as "massacre"' (p. 198).

### Sequences

Philo and Berry claim that the sequencing and orientation of news reports almost invariably began from the premise that violence started with the Palestinians and the Israelis were merely responding. At this point, like at so many others throughout *Bad News from Israel*, Philo and Berry do exactly what they accuse mainstream television news of doing, adopting one narrative – in their case the Palestinian – over the other, assuming that Palestinian violence is invariably a response to Israeli aggression. Implicit in this is the assumption that Israeli occupation is the act of violence to which any Palestinian violence, including suicide bombing, is simply a 'response.'

### Frames

The genuinely low-point of *Bad News from Israel*, however, comes when the authors turn their attention to the frames of reference used by the media to describe each side in the conflict. Here Philo and Berry rehearse age-old arguments about the perceived lack of 'balance' that accrue from terms that pitch 'soldier' [Israeli] against 'terrorist' [Palestinian], claiming that the Palestinians are disadvantaged in news reports by the use of such labels. It is problematic, apparently, for the BBC to describe a Palestinian suicide bomber who killed six Israelis as a 'mass murderer' (p. 197). In truth the BBC now routinely avoid the appellation 'terrorist' in favour of 'gunmen,' 'insurgents' or 'militia.' Yet even these terms, according to Philo and Berry, are 'negative words' which are 'typically applied to Palestinian actors rather than to Israelis' (p. 171). It is, however, almost inconceivable to find words other than these – if news reports are to remain at all meaningful – to describe organisations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

According to Philo and Berry, Palestinians are disadvantaged by a process of 'objectification' that takes place through the very language of news reporting. Israeli 'tanks and warplanes hit Palestinian targets' rather than 'people,' for example. Whilst clearly this is a legitimate point, it can be applied to Philo and Berry's own descriptions of Israelis. On two different occasions they refer to a 'car bombing in Afula which killed eight' (p. 71), omitting the word people or Israelis. Discussing the first Gulf War of 1991 the authors write that 'Saddam Hussein struck at the

## BRENNAN | Bad News From Israel

Israeli state with scud missiles' (p. 67). Clearly, the elision of the Israeli state with Israeli citizens serves the function of objectifying Israelis, not least the Israeli civilian killed by an Iraqi scud missile in Ramat Gan, near Tel-Aviv, in 1991.

### Contexts

Philo and Berry claim that Israeli speech was given added legitimacy by being presented in the context of the trappings of institutional power. Israelis were afforded the opportunity to speak from 'calm and relaxed' surroundings. Palestinians, in contrast, tended to be interviewed in the street against the noisy backdrop of demonstrations and violence. Again, this is derivative of the Glasgow Media Group's work in the 1970s – where camera work pitted bosses in comfy offices against workers on inhospitable picket lines. Such coverage is assumed to subtly, if subliminally, legitimise the status quo. But this assumes that television news media prefer official Israeli voices over their Palestinian counterparts, choosing instead Palestinian vox populi. Yet, such claims, I would argue, are routinely contradicted by the media's willingness to talk to 'un-official' voices within Palestinian society, and in anything but demeaning contexts. It is increasingly common, for example, to see Sky's Emma Hurd, or the BBC's Orla Guerin, conduct studio-style interviews with senior political figures from Hamas, as if they were elected representatives of the Palestinian people (which they were not until gains in the December 2004 Palestinian elections).

### Flawed Methodology

A further cause for concern with Bad News from Israel is the flawed methodology of the research. Two problems require study. The first relates to the version of Israeli-Palestinian history that the Glasgow researchers presented to the participants of the focus groups, and to the problematic role played by the moderator of those groups. The second problem concerns the dismissal of some research group participant's views as stemming from their 'connections with Israel' and the dubious implication that the authors, by contrast, occupy an Olympian viewpoint.

As we have seen, Philo and Berry insist that the lack of historical context favours the dominant Israeli perspective. They then argue that, as a consequence (note the circular argument); many focus group participants perceived Israelis benignly, as defending themselves against unwarranted Palestinian violence. This (mis)reading of the conflict, in Philo and Berry's view, was reflected in the comments of focus group participants. 'You always think of the Palestinians as being really aggressive...

I always put the blame on them in my own head' or 'I always think the Israelis are fighting back against the bombings that have been done to them' (p. 222). In order to illustrate how audiences might perceive the news differently if given (the 'right') information about the conflict, the participants in research were given a 'very brief account' (p. 213) of the roots of the present conflict, namely the events surrounding the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. However, not only was this account 'extremely brief' (p. 213), it was based on the work of Avi Shlaim. Whilst Shlaim is clearly a distinguished historian, a leading figure within a 'new' generation of 'post-Zionist' intellectuals critical of the official mythology surrounding Israel's founding, his work is also a partial account of the country's troubled history. At no point, it seems, was it made clear to the participants in the research that there are equally distinguished historians who challenge his perspective.

Given the participants general lack of understanding of the conflict, the moderator of the focus groups came to occupy an influential position in 'explaining' the conflict. It becomes clear from reading the reported comments of participants, that the historical account presented to them was a simplified, partial and predominantly Palestinian one, in which the moderator played a significant role in shaping perceptions about the conflict. Take this exchange between moderator and participant. The moderator asks, 'would it help you when you are watching the news, if you knew the history?' The participant replies: 'on what I was given by the media, a great deal [of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict] was blank, and you just filled in the blanks that I didn't have a clue about' (p. 213). This of course is only a problem if the history provided is so simplified and reductionist as to privilege one side over the other. However, the reported comments of research participants do not suggest that they were presented with a balanced range of historical perspectives on the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. One participant says, 'I didn't realise that they [Palestinians] had been driven out' (p. 216). And that, I 'didn't realise they had been driven out of places in wars previously' (p. 228). And at no point, it seems, were participants provided with an alternative account for the birth of modern Israel: namely, of European anti-Semitism culminating in the Holocaust, which gave impetus to the desperate need for a Jewish homeland. The result is, precisely, an illusion of balance. Without a grasp of the history of the Jewish people, of suspicion and fear fuelled by persecution, displacement and annihilation, the actions of the Israelis are rendered motiveless and meaningless.

Where audiences' expressed opinions sympathetic to the Israeli position, this was seen as the result of media manipulation, with one important caveat. People 'who



## BRENNAN | Bad News From Israel

had connections with Israel' (p. 235) came to view the news as biased in favour of the Palestinians. Such an anomalous view is explained as the result of these audience members watching 'different bulletins from those in our samples' (p. 235-6), or else because they were 'sympathetic to Israel', and were thus unwilling or incapable of seeing what was in front of them. Philo and Berry remind us that psychological research has proved that a 'strong commitment' to a particular viewpoint can lead to an 'inability to see information that contests' a preferred view or expectation (p. 251). But does the same point – following feminist critiques in which a final 'objectivity' is perceived as unachievable – not also apply to those who conduct research? Is it not intellectually disingenuous to speak from a position that assumes 'value-neutrality' whilst refusing to acknowledge a deep-seated investment in a politics that, quite routinely, psychically 'splits' the external world into 'good' and 'bad?'

### Conclusion

As I have attempted to illustrate here, there is much that is flawed about *Bad News from Israel*. Ultimately this is a rather tendentious and agenda-driven book in which the researchers set out to prove their own politically-inflected views. Its claims are based upon data generated by the selective use of historical material and flawed research methods. The net effect of the book will be to reinforce perceptions of Israel as monolithic, and will give succour to those who claim that the western media are controlled by 'Zionists.'

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## Democratiya 3 | Winter 2005

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### Notes

- [1] Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1980, 1982.
- [2] I borrow this phrase from Edmund Leach, 1967.
- [3] Glasgow University Media Group 1976, pp. 267-8.
- [4] For a discussion of the way in which anti-Zionism became, for the post 1960s New Left, a 'necessary correlative of anti-Imperialism, anti-Americanism and support for national liberation movements', see Cesarani 2004:p. 64.
- [5] See Howe 2005.
- [6] Philo 1990.
- [7] Philo 1990, pp. 169-70.
- [8] Halliday 1996.
- [9] In classical Athenian models of democracy, the rights associated with citizenship are guided by the principal of civic virtue and are accompanied by corresponding obligations. These obligations include the demand that one be interested and well-informed not only about ones own private affairs, but in public affairs pertaining to the common good. See, for example, Pericles's funeral oration, in Thucydides, 1972.
- [10] See Grossman 2005; Gur-Ze'ev and Pappé 2003.