

How and why the BBC is not impartial

By Alan Hart, formerly an ITN and BBC Panorama correspondent and the author of *Zionism: The Real Enemy of the Jews*.

In the light of the BBC's refusal to give air-time to the Disaster Emergency Committee's Gaza appeal, and even if it changes its mind before this article is published, it really is time for an open and honest debate about what, really, determines the corporation's editorial decision-making on matters to do with Israel.

On 23rd January, the first on-air words of Newsnight presenter Gavin Esler to Caroline Thomson, the BBC's Chief Operating Officer, were "This looks as if you are just scared of the Israelis" (for which read the lobby of supporters of Israel right or wrong, and which should properly be called the Zionist lobby not the Israel lobby because it doesn't speak for all Israelis let alone all Jews). There is truth in what Gavin Esler said even if he was only being properly provocative, but it needs to be unpacked.

Carline Thomson's initial justification for the refusal to give air-time to DEC's appeal was the need to "avoid compromising public confidence in the impartiality of the corporation". A day later this was qualified a bit. Interviewed on the BBC's World TV News, she said it was important not to endanger the trust of "**certain parts** of the audience". (My emphasis added).

That implies, surely, that the BBC has identified or is aware of a particular and quantifiable part of its audience which would accuse the BBC of having compromised its impartiality if it gave air-time to DEC's appeal. So which part?

Caroline Thomson could not have meant Britain's Muslim community, in number about two million, because it is rightly outraged by the BBC's decision.

I think it's more than reasonable to presume that she was meaning - without wanting to say so - Britain's Jewish community, in number about 300,000 or less, and by no means of one view. (The views of Britain's Jewish citizens range all the way from total and unquestioned support for Israel right or wrong to condemnation of Israel as a terrorist state).

As I listened to Caroline Thomson, I was reminded of a most revealing statement made to me three years ago by Professor Greg Philo, the research director of Glasgow University's universally respected Media Unit, and the team leader of its two-year study of BBC and ITN news coverage of what has come to be called the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The unit's report was an indictment of the BBC's lack of impartiality which included a "strong emphasis on Israeli perspectives" and an "absence" of Palestinian perspectives. After the unit's findings were published in book form - *Bad News From Israel* - I was sitting alone with Greg in his university office. At a point he told me what had been said to him by an editor of BBC 1's flagship 10.0pm main news programme. Greg prefaced his revelation by quoting the BBC employee as saying to him, "If you quote me by name, I'll deny it." Here's what the editor told Greg (my emphasis added):

“We live in fear of the incoming call from the Israelis. When it comes, we ask ourselves only two questions. From what level did it come - from the Israeli embassy press office, from the ambassador himself or the government in Israel? To what level in the corporation did the call go - to our immediate superiors, to the director general or the chairman?”

At the time Greg was speaking to me in confidence but later that evening he shared a public platform with me and on it he repeated what the BBC news editor had said to him. And that freed me to quote him.

So why does the BBC live in fear of incoming calls from Israelis (for which read callers who are part of, or are activated by, the Zionist lobby)?

If the BBC was a commercial organization in the sense of being dependent for most if not all of its income on revenue generated by the selling of air-time for advertising, it would fear punishment in the form of a withdrawal of advertising if the Zionist lobby was offended too much by the corporation’s reporting. (This is, in fact, the fear that almost all newspapers and commercial broadcasting organizations in the Western world have to live with). But the BBC is not a commercial organization in the sense above.

The real problem at the BBC is what is known as HF, the hassle factor, and its consequences. As all BBC staff who have anything to do with the corporation’s Middle East coverage know, a report that offends supporters of Israel right or wrong generates a highly organised campaign of protest and abuse including false charges of anti-Semitism. Such campaigns can result in many thousands of e-mails, letters and telephone calls, usually directed from two or three places. This intimidation, and the wish to minimize controversy if it can’t avoid it, has resulted in BBC news and management executives opting for an interpretation of what might be called the balance and fairness doctrine which, in effect, makes its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict partial and pro-Israel.

In principle the idea of balance - equal time for both sides - is fine, but it becomes a nonsense when one side is allowed to go on telling obvious propaganda lies without being challenged by the known facts. I’ll give just one of very many examples to make the point.

Israel’s line, asserted time after time by its official military and political spin doctors, was that Hamas broke the cease-fire and was therefore responsible for the war. Hamas did not break the cease-fire. Israel did, on 4 November. Two of Israel’s newspapers - *Ha’aretz* and *Yediot Ahronot* - are among the prime sources of that truth. (Despite the fact of Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip, collective punishment in all but name and a crime against humanity, Hamas not only kept the cease-fire until provoked by Israel, it was also, again contrary to Israel’s assertions, ready and willing to re-new the cease-fire on condition that Israel ended the blockade).

Israel's spin doctors were not challenged by the facts of this particular matter (and many others) because BBC correspondents have red lines drawn for them by management - red lines that, if crossed, would bring the wrath of the Zionist lobby upon the BBC. (Governments, including the one in Washington D.C., are frightened of offending the Zionist lobby too much, so it's not surprising that the BBC is frightened, too).

The BBC's decision-makers need to understand that there is much more to balance and fairness than "one side says this and the other side says that". The truth, when it can be established, does matter, and BBC reporters ought to be allowed to tell it, even when doing so offends supporters of Israel right or wrong.

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