



CHATHAM HOUSE



APTN / Chatham House Middle East Forum Debate

The Media and the Middle East

23 May, 19.00-20.30, Chatham House, London

Speakers: Professor Greg Philo, Strathclyde University
Mouafac Harb, Alhurra
Dr Percy Kemp, Tactical Studies

Chair: Dr Rosemary Hollis, Chatham House

The debate was held on the record.

Summary report

Dr Rosemary Hollis opened the debate by thanking APTN for their initiative in establishing this Middle East Forum and welcoming the wide range of participants to the debate. She invited Professor Philo to speak first.

Professor Greg Philo

Professor Greg Philo presented his research findings from a social science research project covering three years of work, summarized in his book 'Bad News from Israel'. It studied the content of television news reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The project also consisted of interviews of a large number of ordinary viewers in focus groups across the country. Students and journalists were also interviewed. The study aimed to bring together production, reception and content.

Professor Philo was interested in what people in this country understand of the 'Middle East' and wanted to analyse the role of television news in informing them, or not informing them, on issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Professor Philo argued that there is a tremendous amount of confusion in this country about the events taking place in Israel and the Palestinian territories. He elaborated on the terminology used to describe the 'occupation' of the Palestinian territories by giving an example: of the 300 students in his class, many thought that it was the Palestinians that were 'occupying' the land and not the Israelis. He stated that the word 'occupied' can be interpreted in different ways, and many do not regard the occupation as specifically a military one. He also added that only 6% of those interviewed in his research project could explain where the Palestinian refugees originated.

Overall, people see the conflict as a border dispute between two countries. People also think that television news never explains the historic issues and events in their reports of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. 80% of those surveyed stated that television news is their main source of knowledge on the Palestinian- Israeli conflict.

Professor Philo argued that the gaps in public knowledge on these issues very closely parallel the gaps in television news on the same issues. One of his studies included monitoring three weeks of television news content in 2000, at the start of the second intifada. The news content amounted to 4500 lines of text; only 17 lines of those monitored referred to the historical background and origins of the conflict.

People tend to fill their gaps of knowledge on the subject with their own ideas. In a focus-group not specifically related to the study, some thought that the main problem in the conflict was caused by bad parenting, based on the images they had seen of Palestinian youths throwing stones. Professor Philo argued that they were unaware of the historical background of the subject and therefore they blamed the problem on the fact that some youths always cause trouble, as they do in their own cities. He claimed that interest in a subject is always strengthened when historical background is given.

Professor Philo stated: *'Although it is a fairly complex issue, it is not that hard to give a presentation of the underlying rationales of both sides; if you ask an Israeli their perspective, they will say that they are a small country, a democracy surrounded by enemies, there is a great deal of anti-Semitism and they have suffered tremendously in their history, and they will not allow it to happen again. Other Israelis would add that the land was their divine right. On the other hand the Palestinians would say that it was a pretty stupid idea to drop a country into an area where people already lived and it is even more terrible to keep them under military rule for a long period as they have suffered appallingly under this occupation and they want their own state. It might not be the best description of the conflict, but it is an awful lot clearer than 'it's a border dispute' or 'the parents should keep their children in'.*

Professor Philo insisted that there is a great need to clarify these issues, especially on television news. He claims there is a tremendous amount of (over)caution amongst journalists on the subject. This also creates a certain boredom amongst the audience as the events seem inexplicable but when you talk about causes the audience becomes more interested in the subject. He concluded by calling for the gaps in the public understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wider Middle East, to be fully addressed.

Mouafac Harb

Mr Harb opened his presentation on the Arab media by explaining that Alhurra and Radio Sawa are publicly funded by the United States Government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The board consists of nine members: four Democrats, four Republicans and the Secretary of State as an *ex-officio* member. They are named by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

Mr Harb argued that the BBG serves as a firewall against governmental influence; it serves to protect the editorial and journalistic mission, namely to promote freedom and democracy throughout the world, and in this case in the Middle East. Mr Harb went on to state that his journalists promote freedom and democracy through the dissemination of accurate and objective information about the world and the United States to audiences of all languages.

Many people in the Arab world risk their life by installing satellite dishes on their roof, to escape the state-run television stations. Even today, it is still illegal to own a satellite dish in most Arab countries. The parameters of freedom of speech in the new Arab media (especially pan-Arab satellite channels) are limited to two subjects: anti-Israeli sentiment and anti-Americanism. Mr Harb claimed that these are also the issues about which many Arabs can speak freely without having to worry about the state's intelligence services.

Mr Harb wants Alhurra to expand this journalistic landscape by reporting on other issues, although at the same time not ignoring the key stories: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq. But he insisted that results from focus groups he has attended showed that Arab people are interested in other stories such as corruption, democracy, parliamentary debates and local stories, which their state television stations are not providing them with.

Mr Harb claimed that technology has played a key part in raising the profile of the new Arab media. Western media outlets covering the Middle East now rely on Arab media organizations for their pictures and footage. He cited the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq as such examples in which many images that were shown by the Western media were acquired from Arab media organizations.

There is a huge discrepancy between the performance of the new 'individual' Arab journalists and the performance of the Arab networks, as the journalists are becoming closer to the level of performance and professionalism employed by the Western media and the Arab media institutions themselves seem to be lagging behind. Mr Harb stated that '*Arab media is using the most advanced technology to deliver the most primitive content.*' In Mr Harb's opinion the content is more often than not the 'Arab humiliation story'.

The lack of a healthy Arab media industry can be blamed on the 'dysfunctional states' which have always subsidized the media. Now the Arab media market is the second most competitive in the world. There are many channels on offer, including many music channels, which compared to the news channels, receive by far the most attention among the young people in Arab countries.

Who is really in charge in deciding what the 'story' is: according to Mr Harb it is often Bin Laden or Zawahiri who decide when their videos will dominate the news headlines. At the same time Mr Harb raised the moral issue of whether a station can show tapes which have been delivered by potential terrorist organizations, but having to balance out the decision with the people's right to know.

Mr Harb concluded by stating that there is no such thing as a 'local story' anymore, as recent events in Afghanistan showed when several people were killed while protesting against the alleged desecration of a Quran at Guantanamo Bay. This report that appeared in the American magazine Newsweek was later retracted. There must be a greater awareness amongst editors about how their stories can affect other people.

Dr Percy Kemp

Dr Kemp opened his remarks by setting out his main arguments. Truth is no more than a commodity and as a commodity it is subject to market laws that determine both the conditions in which it is produced as well as the conditions in which it is sold. Since the end of the Cold War and especially since 9/11, political conditions have not been conducive either to producing the commodity of truth or selling it. Finally, truth itself is not much in demand today.

Quoting Einstein, Dr Kemp stated that agreement amongst all observers making the same observation is the only possible definition of reality. Experience of reality is achieved by a combination of sensory perception (what our senses tell us) and of cognitive perception (what our memory and knowledge tell us). When our senses fail us, the cognitive perception takes over. With regards to international affairs, people are often unable to experience reality at first-hand; in such matters they rely on the media, which conveys reality through language. By using language to convey reality, the media enables the cognitive perception to dominate over the sensory perception.

Dr Kemp stated that people experience reality through the media from the 'top-down' and not from the 'bottom-up'. The media also solicit the rational senses such as vision and hearing, while stirring emotions, thus hindering the audience's ability to perceive reality soundly. Citing the example of the reaction in Afghanistan over the story that the Quran was desecrated in Guantanamo Bay, Dr Kemp argued that it illustrates the way in which emotions, memories and pre-conceived ideas enter into our perception of reality and shape it.

Einstein's definition of reality therefore becomes impossible to attain. The cognitive perception can be particularly deceiving. This places an even heavier burden of responsibility on the media to deliver honest and objective reporting. Dr Kemp contended that today the media's task in producing the truth is hindered by unfavourable conditions and by a lack of investigative tools.

In fulfilling their role of honest brokers between reality and the public, Dr Kemp argued that the media have traditionally relied on the gap that existed between the conflicting interests of two or more antagonistic parties. In the Cold War, the gap that made the media's quest for truth possible resided mainly in the antagonism between the Soviet bloc and the Western democracies. Dr Kemp added that each side tries to use the truth to suit its own interests.

Dr Kemp argued that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the media's quest for truth resided in the dialectical gap that exists in the West between government and civil society. Yet the events of 9/11 have substantially narrowed this gap, causing government and civil society to coalesce, and damaging the quest for truth. The political discrepancies on which the truth used to feed tend to disappear and with them the media's leeway.

Dr Kemp concluded that conditions today are not conducive to producing the truth, and they are even less conducive to marketing it. Since 9/11 neither governments nor public opinion have been interested in the truth, only in whatever information comforts them in their existing beliefs. The commodity of truth is now even more difficult to sell than to produce: there are simply no buyers. Dr Kemp asserted that the 'new star of the market' is fear which is selling like hot cakes.

Question and Answer Session

Questions

Adel Darwish

Mr Darwish commented on Professor Philo's idea of briefly describing the historical background and origins of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in television news. This is difficult because there is usually only one minute to spend on the issue. Mr Darwish also asked Mr Harb whether it is a journalist's job to educate and inform people.

Maitre Saad Djebbar

Maitre Djebbar asked Mr Harb whether he thought that Al-Hurra is trying to divert the attention of the Arab world away from such issues as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq through its apparently appealing Western content. Maitre Djebbar also asked Mr Harb how he classifies Al-Hurra in its competition with Al-Jazeera and other Arab channels.

Jonathan Steele

Mr Steele asked Mr Harb why Al-Hurra has so much difficulty penetrating the Arab media market and what are his focus groups advising him on how to do better.

The panel was also asked why is it that the United States is pushing hard for the privatization of all markets in the Middle East except the media market.

Answers

Professor Philo argued that in the period of Mrs Thatcher's government there was an almost complete absence of discussion and argument on the television news regarding the historical reasons for the conflict in Northern Ireland and the differences between the communities. The IRA was simply portrayed as a group of criminals and Sinn Fein was banned from the (broadcasting) air. But after Thatcher left office and the Good Friday agreement was signed, there was a noticeable change in the coverage as journalists slowly started reporting more on the backgrounds. In the case of the Middle East, it does not take too long to give a brief account of what is happening. Professor Philo carries out exercises with his students in giving a brief summary of the events in the Middle East in 15 seconds.

Mr Harb responded that if the political system in the Arab countries that own the media outlets would be the same as that under which Alhurra operates, namely the American political system, Mr Harb would have no problem with criticism of his channel's relation with government. With reference to Al-Jazeera, Mr Harb admitted that it is a great competitor but it now operates in a 3-channel market. Al-Jazeera is not a conventional television channel as it has become a political movement. Mr Harb (quoting a senior Palestinian official) claimed that Al-Jazeera had climbed over the Palestinian Authority to take over the lead of the second intifada. He added that Alhurra has been on air just over a year, and he believes that their mission is on a good track. But it is not their job to replace the indigenous media; their job is to promote freedom and democracy.

Dr Kemp commented that truth is linked to power: an emerging force uses truth to attain power, but once it has attained power it is no longer interested in truth. This is normal because the establishment is naturally conservative. Dr Kemp argued that we find truth in revolutionary times and periods of upheaval. Yet in this period, upheavals are provoked by un-truths, which in Dr Kemp's opinion is more dangerous.

Questions

Jerry Lewis

Mr Lewis commented that it is not the reporter's job to editorialize or pre-judge a situation. He also commented that many of the main television news channels in Britain soften their terminology preferring terms like 'guerrilla' to 'terrorist' in coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this runs counter to a main point of Professor Philo's book 'Bad News from Israel' which, according to Mr Lewis states that the media in Britain are pro-Israel. Finally, Mr Lewis noted the strong focus of the media in general on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, compared to issues that might deserve similar attention such as human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Christopher Walker

Mr Walker asserted that Professor Philo relies too much on focus groups and that the main reason why people are in conflict with each other is exactly because of their different interpretation of historical facts. He argued that Prof Philo cannot just summarize a subject and present a 'real truth'.

Answers

Answering the question on different perspectives on historical events, Professor Philo argued that there are several perspectives on this issue and he was emphasizing that there certainly should be a representation of all these perspectives. He added that journalists avoid laying out these issues in a clear manner because it is so controversial. Senior editors of television news have expressed to him their reluctance to adjust their reporting because of their fear of complaints from the Israelis.

Mr Harb argued that even if those participating in a debate are not qualified to speak on the issues at hand, they should still be given a platform. Mr Harb believes that just by providing the forum for such a debate that includes different perspectives, you are already offering a valuable service and at the same time you become the moral winner.

He thinks that we have to improve the quality of debate in the Middle East, but is also realistic about the demands of the audience to be *entertained* as well as informed.

Dr Kemp commented on the fact that today, governments feed on the fears of population. Fear as a commodity is kept as a safeguard in case policies fail so the government may ultimately retain power at elections. Dr Kemp gave examples of governments which lost power the moment the populace lost their fear and insecurity. Now, he believes, we are in a system in which fear is permanent.

END

Speaker's Biographies

Mouafac Harb is Executive Vice President and Network News Director of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, Inc. (MBN.) MBN oversees Alhurra, (Arabic for 'The Free One') a new 24-hour Arabic-language news and information satellite television channel and Radio Sawa, the popular Arabic-language station. Before joining Alhurra and Radio Sawa, Harb served as the Washington bureau chief of *Al-Hayat*, the respected Arabic-language daily newspaper. A longtime journalist, he has also worked for ABC News and broadcast outlets in Lebanon. He is a graduate of George Washington University.

Professor Greg Philo is Research Director of the Glasgow University Media Unit. He has lectured at Glasgow University since 1987. His research interests are in the area of the media and cultural reception. Research in the past has centred on media presentations of industrial disputes and trade unionism, the Falklands War and Northern Ireland. Current research includes ESRC and other externally-funded research projects on political advertising, images of health and illness (including mental illness), migration and 'race' as well as risk and food scares. Professor Philo's publications include (with Mike Berry), *Bad News from Israel*, 2004.

Dr Percy Kemp was born in 1952 in Beirut. He was schooled at the Notre-Dame Jesuit School and holds a BA from Lyons University, an MA from the School of Oriental & African Studies, a Doctorate from the Sorbonne and a D. Phil from Oxford (Pembroke). He founded *Middle East Tactical Studies* in 1986. Alongside his work as a consultant, he contributes to a number of academic journals and general periodicals and has had four novels published in France and one in the UK, *The Boone System*, 2003.