



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Session 4: The role of the media in conveying and countering prejudice: information and awareness raising

Considering the different issues to be addressed in Session 4, and to complement his speech, the RFOM would like to make the following comments and suggestions on the role of the media with respect to anti-Semitism.

The media and contemporary anti-Semitism

The Middle East conflict is fuelling a new wave, and seemingly a new version, of hostility against Jews around the world. Almost all surveys carried out in recent years agree that "classic-style" violent acts against Jewish targets have fluctuated in tandem with media coverage of events in the Middle East.

That fact alone deserves scrutiny to see if the media has done its best in terms of the quality of coverage of the Middle East conflict, and to see if it acted on its double responsibility to fight both Islamophobia and Judophobia.

But many observe that, in addition to the old hate-speech discourse, a new and sometimes ideologically-motivated resentment has emerged. Some observers even identify it as a "*new anti-Semitism*". Uncomfortably for Europe's post-WW2 democratic pride, some mainline press outlets, and sometimes even Europe's hallmark public-service broadcasters, have been accused of generalizing or of biased reporting and commenting on Israel.

This note does not aim to define and conceptualise contemporary anti-Semitism. Here, the goal is just to set out a framework for further comments on the role of the media in countering such re-occurrences of an old prejudice.

Covering "classic" anti-Semitism

Since the Holocaust, the European press has done a great job in exposing the traditional themes of anti-Semitism which had provided the ideologies for discrimination and genocide. These fallacies are well-identified and generally despised in Europe. Just a brief list shows this: the Jews are responsible for both capitalism and Communism; Jews rule the world by proxy and get others to fight and die for them; the Holocaust is a Jewish lie, while forgeries like The Protocols of the Elders of Zion or the blood-libel accusation of ritual child murder are all true.

Today, any re-emergence of open anti-Semitism is mostly due either to right-wing fringe groups or to extremists in the Muslim community. There is a job here, too, for improved

press coverage: as if the old threat were well under control, re-occurrences of these "classic" ideologies are not always reported in the mainstream media. Many people point to a certain under-reporting of the presence of outspoken anti-Jewish doctrines, for example in the educational background of Muslim extremism. These underlying prejudices usually get uncovered only if they are accompanied by physical attacks on Jewish individuals, or vandalising actions against Jewish targets.

However, we cannot exclude the possibility that these traces of the classic anti-Semitic themes and forgeries could still serve as fertile soil for new intolerance. It reportedly emerges in some of the media by way of opinionated, often emotion-filled reporting and comment on the mere existence, the battles, and the failures of the State of Israel; on the fate of the Palestinian people and the causes that led to the delay in the foundation of their own State; or on the perceived complacency of American and European Jewish standpoints towards the perceived sins of the State of Israel.

Covering "new" anti-Semitism

Is there a "new" anti-Semitism, in fact? I am not sure, even if the new wave of biased reporting or ideological generalization about Israel can be proven to exist.

Part of it might simply be the nature of the encounter between modern media and the sort of modern wars that democracies are waging. Since the dawn of the television age, journalists covering all such engagements have become strict demanders of peacetime human rights standards, notwithstanding the fact that the enemy's own behaviour might be lower than that expected under the rule of law. This phenomenon could be described as the "Stockholm syndrome" of war reporting, if we wish.

Another part of it is probably real, but nobody can prove it beyond doubt because the essence of a supposed "new" anti-Semitism lies in its not manifesting itself via direct hate speech. And so if it were proven, it would turn out to be the old version anyway.

Nevertheless, the very accusation of seeing a "new wave" of prejudice convinces me that the press must do a better job in covering a situation with so many variables. Instead of perpetually defending the press from suggestions that it has given in to prejudices, let me offer here a short "checklist" on possible shortcomings, a list to be amended or rejected by Europe's seasoned, erudite editors and journalists.

A tentative checklist against bias

"New anti-Semitism", if it exists, would supposedly consist of generalizations about "Zionism" and "the Jews", or biased Israel-bashing. All this would be disguised as legitimate, politically correct criticism. So when devising media strategies to counter contemporary anti-Semitism, or its semblance, the first task is to differentiate it from the legitimate criticism of the policies of the Government of Israel. Here is a first possible "checklist":

- Does our coverage obscure the fact that the Israeli Government, like any other democratically elected government, is not only deserving of criticism but is actually living with it in every political aspect? Is it made clear to the readers of our comment that most of our legitimate critical points against the Government of Israel are originally produced within Israel's passionately pluralistic political and media scene, notwithstanding the state of war there? Furthermore, is it recognized that Jewish people all over the world are taking different sides in the debate over Israel's policy questions?
- In the light of the above, the allegation that "Israel" or the "Jews" "reject every criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism" could safely be identified as one of the "new" forms of anti-Semitic prejudice.

- One could safely detect some latent anti-Semitism in the hypothesis that anti-Semitism is "caused" by "the Jews", by "Israel", or for that matter by anything else on Earth. Faulting the Jews for anti-Semitism is perhaps the oldest anti-Semitic prejudice, and is today, just as it was in the past, the only common feature of all forms of anti-Semitism.
- The same goes for finding excuses for anti-Semitism. Poverty, the Middle East conflict, Israel's illegal settlers, its illegal executions of terrorists, and the still ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories are each as bad an excuse as some older excuses used to be in Europe: Germany's humiliation in the peace treaties after WW1, the sufferings of the working classes under capitalism, or the over-representation of Jews in trade and journalism.
- Also, the word "but" should figure on our checklist. Check if otherwise commendable condemnations of anti-Semitism are not followed by a "but ...".

When checking for involuntary bias, the press could ensure that it does not make false equations; not even out of a sense of striving for objectivity.

- To start with, objectivity is not reciprocity. None of Israel's numerous faults could lead to a labelling of Israeli democracy as totalitarianism, nor to relating its present-day violence to genocide, or, as too often happens, to "a" or to "some" Holocaust.

Avoiding such harsh equations could simply be a matter of style and taste. In order to preclude charges of prejudice, editors could apply the tools which the modern liberal press has developed to use when handling minorities.

- When the Star of David is equated with the swastika, or any use is made of that ancient religious symbol in caricatures, especially for the purposes of marking Israeli brutality, it can hardly be explained away to the Jewish readers of European mainstream journals, not even by pointing to Israel's state symbols. Editors must know that the pride felt in the existence of Israeli democracy has become an integral part of today's European Jewish identity, and such visuals are unavoidably perceived as a deliberate trampling on those peoples' own feelings.
- Similarly, when the imagery of "the Zionists" is presented in the manner of the traditionally caricatured Jew, it is hard to avoid a frightening resemblance to past propaganda. I am not only referring here to right-wing propaganda. In my own childhood, when Soviet-bloc countries did not recognise the state of Israel the Communist dailies used the same images, and that was not benign either.
- When African, Arab, Muslim, or other non-Jewish minority principals in Europe or America are correctly described as "community leaders", while Jewish ones are often termed "lobbyists", that approach deserves scrutiny that goes beyond linguistics.

As data collected by the Stephen Roth Institute at Tel Aviv University, and other researchers, make clear, the rise in anti-Semitism in Europe coincided with the beginning of the Second *Intifada* and Israel's military and political response. Therefore the quality of the conflict's coverage is crucial, if we seek a press approach that is conscious of the possible fall-out.

- Editors could check if it is clear to their audiences that the *Intifada* war they are watching (the terrorist attacks on civilians, and Israel's heavy-handed responses) was actually started **not** to force a peace or to end the illegal occupation, but rather to stop the promising negotiations over the ending of the occupation, the Palestinian State, and Jerusalem. Of course, that fact does not alter the need for an Israeli peace strategy, but it does present a more accurate picture of the difficulties.