



THE BLOG 01/12/2009 05:12 am ET Updated May 25, 2011

The CNN-NPR-NYT Middle East Conspiracy



By Marty Kaplan

Have you noticed that when people complain about bias in the media, it's always bias *against* their own point of view, and never bias *in favor* of their side?

When press accounts confirm your interpretation of events, they're fair, accurate and objective. When the upshot of a news story is that your team are the bad guys and the other team are the good guys, it's obvious that the reporter or paper or network or corporation is in the tank for the other side. And when articles and broadcasts balance ammo for your side with ammo for the other side, they're guilty of the fallacy of false equivalence, which turns righteous battles between right and wrong into vapid he-said/she-said standoffs.

Nowhere is this more true than in coverage of the Middle East.

Supporters of Israel are furious that when pictures of Palestinian casualties are shown, the causes and context of the war are left out — Hamas's rocket attacks on southern Israel, which precipitated the attack on Gaza; its cynical use of civilians as human shields, which is a war crime; its stated intention to destroy Israel and Jewry, which amounts to genocide.

Supporters of Hamas are just as enraged about the inhumane living conditions in Gaza, which Israel has blockaded; and the Israeli refusal to allow the international press into the battle zone; and what they believe is the original sin of Zionism, the displacement of Arabs; and that when Israel is portrayed as a victim, the suffering of the Palestinian people is conveniently omitted.

And what if you're not a partisan of either side, but think of yourself instead as an independent advocate for human rights and peace? Then not only will you bring down on yourself the opprobrium of both sides for failing to take a stand at a moment that demands a choice; you will also find in the prevailing media narrative no hook to hang your conciliatory analysis on, no peg for your empyrean perspective, no patience for your it's-all-so-complicated heartsickness.

Any news story can be successfully picked apart from any vantage point. Why does the *Los Angeles Times* disparage the Israeli point of view as “set talking points”? Why does the *New York Times* undermine Red Cross accounts of the Israeli military’s “shocking” failure to meet its humanitarian obligations with anonymous mitigating hearsay about a Hamas sniper? Why aren’t the networks airing the bone-chilling YouTube footage of armed Palestinian terrorists kidnapping children to use as human shields against the IDF? Why does an NPR host leave unchallenged an Israeli scholar’s assertion that Palestinian casualties aren’t excessive because “so far well over three quarters have been armed gunmen, and that is a percentage which is very rarely attained in urban warfare”?

In fact, two reasons make it really hard to conclude (but not to claim) that a mainstream media outlet is biased — on the Middle East, or on anything else. And a third reason makes the whole enterprise of watchdogging the press somewhat quixotic.

One is the sheer quantity of content. The stories and pictures you saw may be plenty to convince you, say, that the AP is unfair to Israel, but the plural of “anecdote” is not “data.” The only way to determine anything defensible about bias in reporting is to analyze a scientific sample — to examine a slice of stories that’s large enough to be representative of all stories, and to choose that slice randomly, without knowing what’s going to be in it. Some people may feel that they watch CNN so much or read the *New York Times* so regularly that they have plenty of data to base conclusions on. Not so. That’s why pollsters are paid big bucks: the methods they use to construct the universe of people they survey are even more important than the questions they ask them.

Second is the difficulty of coming up with an objective measure of bias. One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. If you can show me a journalistic scoring system that Alan Dershowitz and Noam Chomsky can agree on, then I’d like to show you how to earn 12 percent a year in a very special investment fund.

But even if you had a scientific sample, even if you devised a neutral litmus test for bias, the strange truth is that media spin probably matters a lot less than we assume.

Yes, public opinion is an important element of public policy. Nations care what people think about them. But the audience for cable news is astonishingly small, maybe two million people on a good day; the daily readership of a prestige newspaper is hardly more than that; and the only way that public radio can claim north of 20 million listeners is to count all the people who listened to any of its programs during a week.

Sure, the Internet has surged as a source of news, but its audience is fragmented into niches. If you want to get really depressed, chew on this: for decades, Americans have said that their number one source for news is local television news. Not only is that audience scattered among a thousand stations in a couple of hundred media markets; the amount of attention those stations give to international news is a tiny fraction of the airtime they give to celebrities, freak accidents, and crime.

There’s no question that some elite media set the agenda much of the rest of the press. And some non-news programming, like talk radio hotheads, get demonstrably big listenerships. But it’s next to impossible

to prove a cause-and-effect relation between these bloviators and public opinion, and the same is true of the impact of the mainstream press on public attitudes and beliefs. In the end, why Americans think what they do about Israel and Hamas is as much a mystery as how they decide who to vote for or what toothpaste to buy.

I get just as steamed as anyone else when I see a Middle East news story that I think is wildly unfair. I'm just unwilling to ascribe it to a conspiracy, or to think it matters as much as the frustration and fury I feel.

(This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.)

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director