

Balance Kills: Media, Good Will, and Israeli Oppression in Palestine

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Media balance and its civil varieties kill people by inhibiting clear thought that could otherwise inform and motivate effective civil responses to human rights violations and war crimes.

Media professionals are indoctrinated to dilute and neutralize any criticism or fact that challenges the dominant view by contrasting it against the dominant view and by calling this 'balance'. A more honest term would be 'embedding'. A still more honest term would be 'serving power'.

The indoctrination is virtually flawless. The knee jerk reaction of any corporate or government media worker or any communications drone presented with an element at odds with the corporate and finance dominated mediascape is to insist that any reporting of this element (when it cannot simply be ignored) be 'balanced' and that 'both sides' be presented. It is understood that there are only two sides: The side represented by the recently discovered offensive element and the dominant view. None of the other related critiques or positions need be considered until the immediate crisis is solved.

The widespread insistence on 'balance' has the added advantage that it masks the media profession's behaviours: being unbalanced in promoting the dominant side by always referring to it as though it were the only acceptable reference point, not reporting the great majority of facts that threaten power, misrepresenting and transforming critical items, and blatant inventions. This process of disinformation, which tacitly endorses war crimes, is well documented in every case that has been independently studied. For example, in the case of the 2004 US-Canada-France led military coup that deposed the elected Aristide government of Haiti (Isabel MacDonald, MA thesis, 2006, York University, Canada). Another striking example is the Canadian media coverage of Israeli-sponsored state terrorism and war (*Israel, Racism, and the Canadian Media*, Dan Freeman-Maloy, 2006 [1]).

For media professional schools and media employers to achieve the 'balance' result by indoctrination, it is important that they also ensure that media professionals be ignorant. Media professionals should not be knowledgeable of history, except the history of dominant interpretations as portrayed in media reports. They should not have knowledge of other cultures and should limit their social analyses to glib mappings of any human context onto their own culturally sterile and textbook defined 'human interest factor'. They must not have been exposed to alternatives and they must not admit complexity.

It is no accident that the most complete analysis of the mass media, Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), is not part of media school curricula. Indeed, the Herman

and Chomsky media model correctly predicts that *Manufacturing Consent* will not be on the curriculum (*Citizens of the Empire*, Robert Jensen, 2004). Try to find a reporter or news anchor who has read *Manufacturing Consent* (or even seen the documentary). Also try to find an unembedded investigative reporter who is occasionally published in the mainstream: If you make a complete list, you can count them on the fingers of one hand (see [2]).

Since media professionals are constrained by their bosses to 'keep it simple', struggling with or considering complexity (or even being exposed to it) is of no use. Here, 'keeping it simple' means not presenting information that readers, listeners and viewers could not easily reconcile with the dominant view.

Only red herrings are allowed: Bogus critiques that do not threaten power and even serve it, such as the chorus against the tax burden on the working individual. The problems of income fairness and of true democratic control over how tax money is spent and collected are strictly taboo. In the face of glaring lies such as the myth that we live in a democracy (say plutocracy), the media is occasionally forced to admit meek defusing criticisms, such as allowing the term 'democratic deficit' to occasionally surface. The reality that our business-financed elected officials don't control the economy, except in-principle via such superficial and inconsequential tools as taxation and gutted environmental and health regulations, is also strictly taboo. Any independent adventures in this dangerous direction are met with the full furry of ridicule. The notion that capital should be constrained by democratic forces is considered insane.

But it gets worst. There is a form of 'balance' that is more insidious than simply crushing every spark of dissent with a healthy dose of the dominant paradigm. The most traitorous form of 'balance' is the expression of spiritual or humanitarian balance as a method of whitewashing worldly problems. This form of balance is an appeal to universal principles to blanket away the power asymmetries that are always central in conflicts of oppression.

"The Palestinians and Israeli are fighting: If only they could get along. If only a majority of them could recognize that we are all the same: We all only want good lives for our children and security. We only need to dissipate hate: If these individuals just talked to each other..."

All of these wonderful sentiments and the occasional feel-good reports of components of Israeli and Palestinian civil societies that are engaged in dialogue and cooperation (despite strong government resistance to such efforts) mask the truth and point observers towards hope and confidence rather than towards the main and essential characteristics of the conflict: The situation is primarily one based on a massive power asymmetry where one side has virtually all the power and is the oppressor and jail keeper. The other side is reduced to economic dependency and suicide attacks.

The Israeli side is disproportionately more powerful and is the oppressor. The other side is the victim. The fact that Palestinians can and often do have emotional responses of anger and hatred is no more relevant than the fact that Jews can also have disproportionate emotional responses of fear and of anger and of hatred (*The Holocaust Industry*, Norman Finkelstein, 2003 [3]).

Profit-driven geo-political forces and national power structures victimize citizens on both

sides of the conflict. Too many powerful interests would have too much to lose from peace to expect good will to save the day on its own. Civil society must be realistic rather than hopeful (*Beyond Hope*, Derrick Jensen, 2006 [4]) and its analysis must start with and be based in reality, both economic and military. Dreamy warm fuzzy feelings are perfect among close friends and family and are part of the supportive community that we all need but must not cloud our political thinking or impede our actions of civil responsibility.

There are as many more examples as there are asymmetric conflicts. Anti-globalization and environmental activists are told that “CEOs are people too”, that CEOs are wonderful family men that support community initiatives and that must live in the same environment as everyone else, etc. Direct action front line activists are told that the police are people too and that activists should take courses in respecting ‘peace officers’. We are all told that industry and corporations are stakeholders just as the public is a stakeholder (whereas ‘special interest groups’ are not?) and that all stakeholders must be involved in government decisions. We must consult the fox (that here funds the farmer) on how to protect the henhouse.

These are all examples of the principle of ‘balance’, where powerful oppressors and exploiters are put on an equal footing of legitimacy with their victims, where power’s propaganda is given the same weight as dissenting views (except that the latter must be proven whereas the former is taken as truth), and where glaring asymmetries in treatment and conditions are masked by advancing a universal sense of oneness.

We must oppose ‘balance’ and fight off the warm and fuzzy reflex, in taking our civil responsibilities. This, in turn, saves lives and restores sanity. It also creates stronger ties that are worth celebrating.

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Notes:

[1] http://www.zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=10617§ionID=1

[2] <http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/interviews/9501-journalism.html>

[3] <http://www.normanfinkelstein.com/content.php?pg=3>

[4] <http://www.oriononline.org/pages/om/06-3om/jensen.html>

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