

Cancelling the Journalist: The ABC's Coverage of the Israel-Gaza War

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What a cowardly act it was. A national broadcaster, dedicated to what should be fearless reporting, cowed by the intemperate bellyaching of a lobby concerned about coverage of the Israel-Gaza war. The [investigation](#) by The Age newspaper was revealing in showing that the dismissal of broadcaster Antoinette Lattouf last December 20 was the nasty fruit of a campaign waged against the corporation's management. This included its chair, Ita Buttrose, and managing director David Anderson.

The official reason for that dismissal was disturbingly ordinary. Lattouf had not, for instance, decided to become a flag-swathed bomb thrower for the Palestinian cause. She had engaged in no hostage taking campaign, nor intimidated any Israeli figure. The sacking had purportedly been made over [sharing a post](#) by Human Rights Watch about Israel that mentioned "using starvation of civilians as a weapon of war in Gaza", calling it "a war crime". It also noted the express intention by Israeli officials to pursue this strategy. Actions are also documented: the deliberate blocking of the delivery of food, water and fuel "while wilfully obstructing the entry of aid." The sharing by Lattouf took place following a direction not to post on "matters of controversy".

Human Rights Watch might be accused of many things: the dolled up corporate face of human rights activism; the activist transformed into fundraising agent and boardroom gaming strategist. But to share material from the organisation on alleged abuses is hardly a daredevil act of dangerous hair-raising radicalism.

Prior to the revelations in *The Age*, much had been made of Lattouf's fill-in role as a radio presenter, a stint that was to last for five shows. *The Australian*, true to form, had its own issue with Lattouf's statements made on various online platforms. In December, the paper [found it strange](#) that she was appointed "despite her very public anti-Israel stance." She was

also accused of denying the lurid interpretations put upon footage from protests outside Sydney Opera House, some of which called for gassing Jews. And she dared accused the Israeli forces of committing rape.

It was also considered odd that she discuss such matters as food and water shortages in Gaza and “an advertising campaign showing corpses reminiscent of being wrapped in Muslim burial cloths”. That “left ‘a lot of people really upset’.” If war is hell, then Lattouf was evidently not allowed to go into quite so much detail about it – at least when concerning the fate of Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli war machine.

What also transpires is that the ABC managers were not merely targeting Lattouf on their own, sadistic initiative. Pressure of some measure had been exercised from outside the organisation. According to *The Age*, WhatsApp messages had been sent to the ABC as part of a coordinated campaign by a group called Lawyers for Israel.

The day Lattouf was sacked, Sydney property lawyer Nicky Stein buzzingly began proceedings by telling members of the group to contact the federal minister for communication asking “how Antoinette is hosting the morning ABC Sydney show.” Employing Lattouf apparently breached Clause 4 of the ABC code of practice on impartiality.

Stein cockily went on to insist that, “It’s important ABC hears from not just individuals in the community but specifically from lawyers so they feel there is an actual legal threat.” She goes on to read that a “proper” rather than “generic” response was expected “by COB [close of business] today or I would look to engage senior counsel.”

Did such windy threats have any basis? No, according to Stein. “I know there is probably no actionable offence against the ABC but I didn’t say I would be taking one – just investigating one. I have said that they should be terminating her employment immediately.” Utterly charming, and sufficiently so to attract attention from the ABC chairperson herself, who asked for further venting of concerns.

Indeed, another member of the haranguing clique, Robert Goot, also deputy president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, could boast of information he had received that Lattouf would be “gone from morning radio from Friday” because of her anti-Israeli stance.

There has been something of a journalistic exodus from the ABC of late. Nour Haydar, an Australian journalist also of Lebanese descent, resigned expressing her concerns about the coverage of the Israel-Gaza conflict at the broadcaster. There had been, for instance, the creation of a [“Gaza advisory panel”](#) at the behest of ABC News director Justin Stevens, ostensibly to improve the coverage of the conflict. “Accuracy and impartiality are core to the service we offer audiences,” Stevens explained to staff. “We must stay independent and not ‘take sides’.”

This pointless assertion can only ever be a threat because it acts as an injunction on staff and a judgment against sources that do not favour the accepted line, however credible they might be. What proves acceptable, a condition that seems to have paralysed the ABC, is to never say that Israel massacres, commits war crimes, and brings about conditions approximating to genocide. Little wonder that coverage on South Africa’s genocide case against Israel in the International Court of Justice does not get top billing on in the ABC news headlines.

Palestinians and Palestinian militias, on the other hand, can always be written about as brute savages, rapists and baby slayers. Throw in fanaticism and Islam, and you have the complete package ready for transmission. Coverage in the mainstays of most Western liberal democracies of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the late Robert Fisk pointed out with pungency, repeatedly asserts these divisions.

After her signation Hayder [told](#) the *Sydney Morning Herald* that, “Commitment to diversity in the media cannot be skin deep. Culturally diverse staff should be respected and supported even when they challenge the status quo.” But Haydar’s argument about cultural diversity should not obscure the broader problem facing the ABC: policing the way opinions and material on war and any other divisive topic is shared. The issue goes less to cultural diversity than permitted intellectual breadth, which is distinctly narrowing at the national broadcaster.

Lattouf, for her part, is pursuing remedies through the Fair Work Commission, and seeking funding through a GoFundMe page, steered by Lauren Dubois. “We stand with Antoinette and support the rights of workers to be able to share news that expresses an opinion or reinforces a fact, without fear of retribution.”

Kenneth Roth, former head of Human Rights Watch, [expressed his displeasure](#) at the treatment of Lattouf for sharing HRW material, suggesting the ABC had erred. ABC’s senior management, through a [statement](#) from managing director David Anderson, preferred the route of craven denial, rejecting “any claim that it has been influenced by any external pressure, whether it be an advocacy group or lobby group, a political party, or commercial entity.” They would, wouldn’t they?

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