Manufacturing Consent? The Israeli Media and the Al-Aqsa Intifada

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Book Reviews

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Daniel Dor, *The Suppression of Guilt: The Israeli Media and the Reoccupation of the West Bank* (London: Pluto Press, 2005). Pp.128. Paperback

In his book *Intifada Hits the Headlines*, Dr Daniel Dor, of Tel Aviv University, examines how the Israeli press reported on the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000. His key finding related to whom the media held responsible for the outbreak of the uprising. He noted that nine out of ten major news sources including senior Palestinian, and American officials as well as senior members of the Israeli army and general security services (Shin Bet) saw the unrest as a spontaneous eruption of Palestinian anger at the stalemate in negotiations and Ariel Sharon's visit to the Haram al-Sharif/ Temple Mount. However a single source, the outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Barak, insisted that Yasser Arafat had planned and initiated the Intifada after turning down the 'generous offer' made to him at Camp David in July 2000. Dor demonstrated that the editorial text of all major newspapers concentrated on Barak's viewpoint which was heavily featured in headlines and framed as a factual statement. The viewpoint of the other sources was reported but marginalised in back pages and supplements often without headlines. Dor suggests that Barak's version of events became crystallised as the 'cornerstone' of an Israeli public consensus that there was no partner for peace on the Palestinian side.

In *The Suppression of Guilt: The Israeli Media and the Reoccupation of the West Bank* Dor returns to Israeli media coverage of the Intifada, this time turning his attention to one of the most controversial periods of the uprising. On 29 March 2002, following a suicide bombing in Netanya which killed 28 Israelis, the IDF conducted its largest military operation since the June 1967 war. It reoccupied most West Bank cities for more than three weeks and caused extensive damage to the Jenin refugee camp. During March and April 2002 128 Israelis and 484 Palestinians were killed. Dor focuses on how three Israeli newspapers (*Ma'ariv*, *Yedi'ot Aharonot* and *Haaretz*) and two Israeli television stations (Channel 1 and Channel 2) covered 'Operation Defensive Shield'. Dor's analysis employs an innovative research methodology. Eschewing what he calls the 'naïve notion of truth' and 'objective reality' he uses what he describes as an 'intertextual' analysis. This involves comparing how different reports from the newspapers' correspondents were handled by the editorial staff. For instance which reports were featured prominently or highlighted in editorials, as well as which were relegated to the back pages or weekend supplements. This editorial work Dor suggests created an 'interpretive key' which helped readers understand the significance of different news reports and linked the news to readers' sense of identity as Israelis.

Dor's analysis of newspapers points to important differences in the way titles reported on the Intifada. *Ma'ariv*, he suggests, functioned as a 'partisan newspaper

in the simplest sense of the word' which projected a 'fundamentalist version of a dogmatic and belligerent Zionism'. Dor sees the newspaper as an 'active participant' in 'Operation Defensive Shield', providing almost complete and uncritical support for the IDF and ignoring the impact of the operation on the Palestinian population. In contrast *Yedi'ot Aharonot's* coverage was characterised by a sense of 'despair'. Although like *Ma'ariv* it saw the operation as justified and offered uncritical support and identification with the soldiers, it was troubled by a lack of overall strategy on the Israeli side for dealing with the Intifada. Also, despite 'being almost perfectly indifferent to the Palestinian plight during the operation' *Yedi'ot Aharonot* did feature an interview with a driver of bulldozer who gave a 'chilling testimony' of how he wanted to 'wipe out' the whole of the Jenin refugee camp. However, as Dor points out, the newspaper with the most complex attitude towards Operation Defensive Shield was the left-liberal *Haaretz*. Although at times critical of Sharon's strategy the newspaper also endorsed strongly Ehud Barak's opinion that there was no 'partner for peace' on the Palestinian side and thus accepted the view that Israel was pursuing the only path open to it, defending itself 'with brute force against terror'. *Haaretz* was also the newspaper which featured by far the most comprehensive accounts of the Palestinian perspective through the reports of its correspondents Amira Hass and Gideon Levy. However, Dor shows that these articles were usually relegated to the inside of the newspaper or to the supplements and magazines. They never appeared on the front pages which predominately featured the perspectives of the Israeli establishment. Thus suggests Dor, Palestinian claims 'generally do not quite count as serious news'. Dor's analysis of the broadcasts media's coverage of the operation also highlights significant differences between the reports produced by the state-owned Channel 1 and the commercial Channel 2. Channel 2 adopted a more populist stance and offered a relatively uncritical identification both with the soldiers and with the aims and strategy of the operation. In contrast Channel 1 took a more detached perspective, prepared to offer criticisms about certain aspects of the operation and willing to admit that Israel itself was also engaging in a propaganda war.

However, despite the important differences in coverage between the various media outlets, Dor suggests that they all fulfilled one very important objective, that is they served to deflect guilt, responsibility and blame away from Israel and Israelis for the violence and the continuation of the conflict. Nowhere, suggests Dor, is this more significant than in relation to the intentions behind the decision to launch Operation Defensive Shield. Dor points to a number of articles that were published away from the main news pages, often from respected military sources, which suggested that the primary purpose of the Operation was not to prevent attacks against Israeli civilians but instead to destroy the Palestinian Authority, prevent a return to the Oslo process and reduce the Palestinian territories to a series of isolated cantons controlled by Israel. However Dor shows that such views never reached the main news pages or the editorial texts, which consistently portrayed the operation as a strictly limited defensive move designed only to stop suicide attacks. In marked contrast, Dor notes that the Israeli media took a very different attitude towards Palestinians involved in the conflict. It was widely and prominently reported that incriminating evidence had been found linking Yasser Arafat to suicide bombings. However, Dor points to articles printed away from the main news pages which directly contradicted these claims. Dor also accuses editors of avoiding any discussion of the main factors behind suicide attacks in the main news sections of the papers. Articles which linked the attacks to the conditions created by the military occupation and the killings of Palestinian leaders were 'buried

deep in the back pages of supplements' or 'broadcast in a way which neutralised [their] meaning'.

In the final chapter of the book Dor attempts to ask why the Israeli media report in this manner. He suggests that it is not simply a question of the media being a malleable tool of political or military elites, rather he proposes that it is related to questions of how newspapers construct Israelis' sense of social identity. In particular it is related to Israelis' awareness of how they are perceived in the court of international public opinion. The media, he suggests, are reflecting a sense of insult felt by Israelis over the perception that they are being accused of crimes of which they are not guilty. This, he argues, leads to a suppression of information which would imply Israeli culpability for the continuation of the conflict. This attempt to avoid guilt, he maintains, is vitally important because it prevents the media from developing what he describes as an 'alternative discourse of responsibility' which 'regardless of the struggle over the origins of the conflict, understands that Israel, and Israelis, have to assume responsibility for the solution of the conflict, because at present, in reality, the Palestinians are under Israeli occupation and not the other way around'.

In a 2003 lecture at Georgetown University Israeli historian Avi Shlaim commented that after 1948 Israeli historians had put forward a narrative of the conflict which was 'selective, simplistic and self-serving'. This narrative, he suggested, served two important purposes in that it 'instilled a sense of nationhood in Jews from various countries of origin' and 'elicited support and sympathy for the fledgling state of Israel'. However he noted that 'the one cause it emphatically did not serve was that of mutual understanding and reconciliation between Jews and Arabs'. Daniel Dor's book, written in an accessible style and backed up strongly with empirical evidence, levels similar charges against Israel's media. It is an important contribution to the debate over media coverage of the conflict and deserves to be widely read.

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The Stand-Tall Generation

Dan Rabinowitz and Khawla Abu-Baker, *Coffins on Our Shoulders: The Experience of the Palestinian Citizens of Israel* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2005). Pp.221. Paperback.

Coffins on Our Shoulders plots the troubled contours of Jewish-Arab relations in the Holy Land over the past century through two interweaving narratives. The first, intimate one comprises the stories of its two authors' experiences of being Israeli – one a Jew, the other a Palestinian Arab – and the separate paths that led their ancestors, willingly and unwillingly, to their citizenship in the new state. A second, related narrative provides a series of contextualising analyses of ethnic politics in Israel. In sum, these parts create a slightly unwieldy but nonetheless instructive map revealing the inadequacy of the Zionist left's slogans about 'coexistence' and suggesting that Israel's much-vaunted status as a 'liberal democracy' has been camouflage for a cynical and oppressive form of ethnic rule inside its own borders.