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### Media Bias in Covering the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: With a Case Study of BBC Coverage and Its Foundation of Impartiality

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## **Introduction:**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, having lasted for many decades, has created long involved actors outside the region. With such warfare and discord comes an interest from the outside world as to what exactly is transpiring between the two nations. With all of this in mind, it is, therefore, a reality that the events in Israel and Palestine have traveled beyond borders and into the minds and hearts of many around the world. This is where the media plays a major and decisive role. Whether it is interest produced out of humanitarian regard for the lives of those effected, political attention from a fellow nation's government, economic intrigue from businesses and markets impacted by the fighting, or even religious fervor generated by the major root of the conflict, this issue has the world's communities watching. Who exactly is it then that gathers the news of what is occurring and redistributes it to the global public at large who need and want to know what is happening? The British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, is one of the major news sources in the world, and is, therefore, an organization which is globally relied upon to be informative, expeditious and first and foremost impartial. By that same token, one can then ask whether or not the BBC *breaks* news on the conflict while executing impartiality and whether or not this is even their central goal.

The problems that arise in media coverage of the conflict are innumerable and stem from various factors that effect reporting at a fundamental level; the same factors that effect media coverage on many other types of news as well. What country is the Media source based in? In this case we are presented with a

news source based in the United Kingdom with correspondents and satellite broadcasting centers around the world. How strong and accurate are journalists' and correspondents' information sources and where are they getting their 'facts' from? The BBC draws its news from its own correspondents as well as cross referencing with applicable regional and global news sources such as the Associated Press and even entities like Al Jazeera. What are the political, social and economic relationships between the country reporting and the countries reported about? The BBC has many decades of history with Israel, both very high and low periods, as well as many vested interests with Muslim nations interconnected with Palestine. Both Muslim and Jewish communities prominently exist in its base country of Great Britain and these faiths also have a social affect on the country and how it relates to the Middle-Eastern region.

These questions have further complicated answers and, therefore, create the overarching issue that faces us: Bias exists in media, but to what degree does that apply to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the BBC, and how is that bias generated? The following sections of this paper will further examine the reality of bias in the Media and what that means for those of us consuming news on the conflict. Furthermore, a more in depth look is taken at a major international news source which has already been mentioned, the BBC, and how it reports on the conflict. Through research on the BBC's history of reporting on the conflict and interviews with major BBC figures as well as some of its critics, a clearer understanding of how this news organization reports on Israel and Palestine emerges.

During a long period of gathering research from reading stories, watching the news, and speaking with employees of the BBC, I have begun to get a better idea of how the BBC has come to report the way it does. It has been vital to read from different sources to gain an understanding of BBC history and practice and in addition to this reading I have been fortunate enough to meet and talk with many members of the BBC community who hold numerous places on staff. In my conversations with Roger Hardy of the BBC World Service I was first introduced to theme which was later repeated amongst fellow BBC employees that it is a news source which prides itself on aiming for impartiality. In my next interview with Malcolm Balen, writer of the *Balen Report* from 2004-05, I gained an understanding of his role in examining the accusations of bias made against the BBC and his ongoing process of ensuring balanced coverage on the conflict.

After this, a conversation with James Stephenson, former correspondent from Jerusalem and the current Editor of the Six and Ten O'clock News, exposed me to the logistical and practical aspect of news gathering and broadcasting and the reality of the difficulties that exist when producing news segments. Lastly, Sharif Nashashibi who works for Arab Media Watch gave me the outsider and critical view on the shortcomings of BBC reporting and the things that go wrong with the reporting which James Stephenson had tried to fortify in our interview.<sup>1</sup> Comprehensively, my interviews, which I conducted with BBC employees,

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the meeting with Arab Media Watch, I had hoped to have a meeting with a representative from BICOM, the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, unfortunately no one was ever available for an interview.

resulted in a common theme at the corporation which is presented throughout this paper.

Lastly, I must point out that to give myself more stable background knowledge and awareness of the tone of BBC reporting, a lot of time has been spent personally examining the news it produces. Over a period of time I have looked at reports put out by the BBC on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, providing me with sources to personally examine the tone, wording, content, and other important aspects of its reporting. Together with the interviews I conducted, this research provides a more comprehensive view on how the BBC reports and how it appears to viewers at home.

With all of this in mind I have started piecing together a perspective on the BBC and the reporting of the Middle Eastern conflict. In the many years that the BBC has reported on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, it has come under substantial fire from both organized and personal critics alike. From both sides, the BBC has been continuously slammed with criticism after criticism that its reporting is biased towards either of the sides in the conflict. The criticism was fueled especially by the Blair administration when officials and the party in power felt the BBC was not being balanced in its reporting. It was the realization that the media was in fact having a sizable effect on public perspective of the conflict and in turn the government's foreign policy on the issue that the government took such a large interest on the subject in the first place.

Separately from the concerns of the governments, the major mood in the British public arena in particular is that the BBC tends to be "Pro-Palestinian"

with its reporting. In both the stories it broadcasts as well as how it chooses to broadcast those stories, there are many accusations that the BBC does not report in a balanced, impartial manner. It was my time with those actually working at the BBC that painted somewhat of a different picture of its reporting and decision making within its own walls. Despite numerous objections to the BBC's reporting, I have come to believe that in its internal practices and policies on reporting the news, the BBC does, overall, try to report on the Middle Eastern conflict in an unprejudiced and unbiased manner to the best of its ability.

We will now examine the findings of my interviews and research taking a stance against a particular statement made by John Tusa of BBC World Service:

The very idea that telling the truth in government and public affairs is the best policy must sound hopelessly unrealistic and idealistic. Public communications have become something to capture, to influence and to manipulate. Either they are captured by the great Moguls of the media - the Murdochs in America and Britain, the Bertelsmanns in Germany, the Berlusconi in Italy, whose interest in the control of the means of distribution are directly financial, and who have, more often than not, a political line to put over, or they are captured and seized by politicians who of course always have a clear political line to put over (Tusa 56).

### **The Media and Balancing Coverage:**

The issue of problems in Media coverage on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been around for many years and is one that has been examined by the public, interests groups of the conflict, as well as some governments. For example, in 2003 the United Nations' Public Forum in Support of Middle East Peace included a round table of speakers on the conflict and a resounding message that emerged was the belief that media coverage on the subject was often indeed biased. For the United Nations and those concerned, this was something that needed to be addressed as they knew, and still do, that media coverage greatly effects public opinion. At the same forum, another issued was raised on the logistical side of reporting beyond what the Media reports and into how they report. The speakers pointed the importance of language used in reporting and the wording that news sources choose to use and how stories are framed.

A particular and major example of how different countries and media organizations can alter and bend what the public hears and watches about events in the world comes from a project initiated in 1998. A co-production initiative was taken on by the BBC in the United Kingdom, PBS in the United States, and MBC Abu-Dhabi for numerous Arab-States to create a six part documentary series entitled *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs* (Ashuri 1). Despite the gathering of information and documenting portion being a group effort, each of the entities were given final editing rights to the documentary which would air in their particular region/zone. What they found was that regardless of these groups

starting with the same information, three very different products were released to each of their viewing publics.

We repeatedly read that national news sources, especially publicly funded news sources, in each of their respective countries or regions will tend to report and, understandably, style what they broadcast on their stations to appeal to those who will be watching. For instance, phrases like “This program was funded by viewers like you” which is used by the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) are used to reiterate that the public itself has a vested interest as they are the ones funding PBS’s existence (Ashuri 47); just as the license in the United Kingdom funds the BBC. Later in this paper, we see James Stephenson elaborate more on the idea that general public desire must be appealed to in order to appease the greater portion of a channel’s viewing public when producing broadcasts.

This concept of appealing to an audience which gives a media source its funding could in fact be one of the arguments raised by skeptical viewers as to why certain imbalances may occur in reporting on certain issues. However, we will later see that despite this influence by the public, institutions such as the BBC which are relied upon by more than just British citizens, make the conscious decision of striking a balance between reporting interesting stories as well as informative and educational stories to the public. Even so, James Stephenson of the BBC reassures those who question the BBC’s intentions that indeed they are creating a product dependent on visual and audible assistance, but the BBC still operates under its three fundamental rules to inform, to educate, and then to



entertain and, therefore, provide the viewing public with what they consider relevant and timely information.

Another issue raised, specifically in Tamar Liebes' *Reporting the Arab Israeli Conflict: How Hegemony Works*, is that of "our" versus "their" war. Stepping away momentarily from a British perspective, Liebes, of Israel, points out that American coverage is one that may not be completely balanced with regard to the Israeli perspective despite its close ties. She points out that like any country conflict is reported on as "their" war. "In spite of the generally friendly relationship between the United States and Israel, and the partisan American Jewish constituency hungry for news of the conflict, the intifada on American television took its place alongside a number of seething conflicts in other parts of the world" (Liebes 68).

This concept of "our" issue and "their" issue is one which lies with each media organization around the world regardless of nation or continent. When a major event "hits closer to home" so to speak, the viewing/listening/reading public reacts and pays attention differently and with this reality comes the reaction of those gathering and broadcasting news to get the prominent news the public is interested in to them. Therefore, if in a news broadcast only seven to eight major stories can be told, by fundamental production practices, stories of most interest to the general viewing public (and it is important to specify it as general or at most a 'majority' and not the viewing public as a whole) have pride of place. This leaves others who may have wanted to hear about a specific subject or about what was going on in a different area than what the majority wanted to

hear about feeling as though a gap or void has been left in that news broadcaster's airtime. As a reaction, that group can justifiably make claims that the Media is not reporting on everything that is happening; however, at the same time, how is a news source expected to do so when those variables of time constraints, general public interest, etc. call for otherwise?

Even Liebes points out that when it comes down to it, television coverage, no matter the country, may tend to reflect already established attitudes of the societies in those countries. She also carefully spends much of her sixth chapter entitled "Us and Them" validating her point further and painting a picture for us by showing an unequal balance of airtime that tends to exist between those pieces of news deemed as "us" events have over those specified more so as "them" events.

On the other hand, from a Palestinian perspective of media, we read in Amal Jamal's *Media Politics and Democracy in Palestine* of the more complicated relationship that exists between that half of the conflict's government and the Media. Indeed, this paper examines the way outside news sources' report on the conflict; however, it is by looking at the way in which the Palestinian and Israeli governments go about working with their own medias that gives us a better perspective on how it is our Western media coverage is in essence affected by those internal relationships.

Jamal points out to the reader something that later comes up in my interview with Roger Hardy regarding the Palestinian perspective: that the existence of a public Palestinian voice to the rest of the world has not always been

a strong one. Internally, media has played a large part in Palestinian politics and organizing, but internationally speaking it has not really been a global player. This is a reason some claim its voice had gone unheard for many years.

In the period of Israeli settlement and expansion discussed in a later section, especially after 1967, Palestinians began the process of developing its media into a much stronger institution under the Palestinian Liberation Organization. With the help of fellow Arab nations, they launched their very own radio broadcasting network, and then began a run of different newspapers which were distributed in Israeli occupied territories. Finally, in the period of the Oslo accords, in the early 1990s, a the shift from the Palestinian Liberation Organization to the Palestinian Authority meant further growth in media technology and power and in a matter of a few years, opinion polls showed that almost half of the Palestinian population polled trusted in Palestinian radio broadcasts (Jamal 78)<sup>2</sup>.

This new media driven power gave Palestine at least a somewhat greater ability to get its voice heard by those who had previously not noticed it and, therefore, what some might view as a closer balance in media coverage. Of course, the issues of rising violence and turmoil in the Gaza Strip and surrounding areas have resurfaced numerous times causing international news sources to repeatedly question placement of correspondents and journalists, but great strides have admittedly been made for Palestine's voice in the past sixty years.

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<sup>2</sup> In even more recent years, additional changes are occurring as new social media further proliferates a pro-Palestinian perspective.

However, in addition to the developments that had been made in Palestinian media and getting its voice heard globally, numerous events have again thrown them repeatedly back into the dark multiple times. Whether it was the Arab *defeat* in the war with Israel in 1967 or the following 1970s era of state controlled broadcasting these resurgences of poor media coverage have kept external, international news sources clambering to place a firm footing in reporting from and about Palestine, and for that matter political and academic international institutions well informed about what is happening (Rugh 91). Because of these setbacks however, the public continues to get mixed messages from *cooperative* Israel and *unstable* Palestine.

We are, therefore, presented with a few of the numerous obstacles which media institutions must constantly overcome in order to work toward being as impartial and balanced as they can be. These include: The fundamental nature of news broadcasters being creators of television shows which must appeal topically and aesthetically to viewers while still maintaining a foundation of information and education, the natural division that exists between the culture in which they are broadcasting to and the culture they are broadcasting about and overcoming that divergence, and lastly the ongoing instability of the Middle-Eastern region which continuously changes the dynamics of the governments, news sources and societies of all involved.

### **A BBC Timeline:**

It is important for the reader to now have a basic knowledge of the BBC's history so one understands that it was founded and has been run based on a foundation of impartiality and information for the benefit of the listener, viewer or reader. Both the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Conflict between Modern Day Israel and Palestine each have long histories, the BBC's goes back decades while the Middle Eastern Conflict goes back centuries upon centuries. In 1926-7, the British Broadcasting Corporation was formed out of the former British Broadcasting Company with John Reith as its first General Manager. Reith was the son of a Protestant Minister giving him a strong moral code, he was also educated in Scotland, and he was a survivor of World War II. It is important to note Reith's religious background because as Professor Christopher Cook explains, "He is the architect not only of BBC and its values, but of what we know as public service broadcasting itself".

Reith would later become the Chairman of the BBC and reshape the company itself. He preferred a strongly structured and thoroughly organized model of running the BBC and put in place 'controllers' in positions of power and organization. As part of the BBC's modern mission statement, we find the three words which Reith used to explain its purpose: inform, educate, and entertain. His main objectives during his years of power were to fully establish and further develop the BBC as a broadcasting organization. Within the first year of Reith's

appointment, “The first plays, concerts, charity appeals, debates, variety shows, weather forecasts, SOS messages, women’s talks, dance band broadcasts, symphony concerts and religious talks had all been heard by those people who had access to receivers” (Cain 13).

Reith remained part of the BBC until 1938, just shortly after the 1936 birth year of the television broadcasting at the BBC, when he then moved on to other positions such as Chairman of Imperial Airways, Minister of Information in Neville Chamberlain’s government, and Chairman of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Board. Sadly, although Reith had thought he was moving onto bigger things leaving the BBC, he would later reveal that he felt he was never ‘stretched’ to his full potential. He claimed that many of the government appointments that he held later, many made by Churchill who was known to not be one of Reith’s main supporters, did not satisfy his needs or utilize his various strengths. This situation from over seventy years ago is representational of the tense relationship that has existed at times between the BBC and government officials and into the present day disputes that exist between the two.

Television service was short-lived as wartime postponed broadcasting for a number of years. “With the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939 the service came to an abrupt end” (Crisell 79). During this time, radio broadcasting continued, although at times haphazardly, and radio programming continued to spread. When the television service came back up and running in 1946, it reached about 15,000 households. This number grew as a new license fee was created which combined radio and television into one price of £2.

Despite the protests of many traditionalists and others in the live-performance fields, such as the theatre, BBC broadcasting continued to grow and spread throughout Britain and eventually led to other broadcasters such as ITV to enter the field. It was this appearance of competitors, along with new government policies that came into existence, which broke the longstanding monopoly the BBC had held on broadcasting. However, a major surge in television viewing occurred, attributed to the June 1953 broadcast of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation; it was between 1951 and 1954 that the number of people with combined radio-television licenses doubled.

A large cornerstone for the BBC then occurred in 1955 when the number of television viewers first exceeded the number of radio listeners. By 1958, 9 million licenses were held; up from the 2.5 million radio licenses held in 1926. Although this number makes it seem as though the BBC was in a state of strength, the number of licenses did not translate into the number of people watching the BBC as ITV existed at the time as well. "By August 1958, 80% of the population could receive ITV and the BBC's share of the audience had dropped. The lowest point was reached at the end of 1957 when, according to BBC estimates, the Corporation's share of the audience capable of receiving both television channels was only 28%" (Cain 77).

In the 1960s, the BBC then experienced two major events which it benefited from as an organization. The first was in 1960 when the BBC opened the famous Television Centre in Shepherd's Bush which opened a new era in the shows that BBC created. It is in the Television Centre that much of the BBC's

national and international broadcasting originates. The opening of the Centre meant a definite growth and development in the output of BBC broadcasting. The second event came in 1964 when BBC Two, BBC's second television station, was launched. After a period of petitioning the government to allow them to create a channel for color television, they were finally granted the right. It was with the BBC having two channels that they finally saw a hold of 49% of television viewers.

This increase prompted the newer ITV to once again work to add a station to balance what people were watching. After numerous talks and changes in plans, the idea for Channel 4 as a publishing channel was finally decided on. Channel 4 actually did not create any of its own shows, but rather allowed others to create shows and have them broadcast on the station. These developments in competition for the BBC are vital to point out to the reader when considering the reasons the BBC does some of the things it does. Competition with commercial stations reorganized the way BBC had to attract and keep viewers as well as changing what type of programs they put on television. In addition, to these two developments in broadcasting, the 1960s were faced with numerous pirate radio stations that broadcasted outside of legal parameters. In answer to this, in 1967, the BBC launched Radio 1 and further reorganized its other stations into Radios 2, 3 and 4. This strong restructuring for the BBC was just one other way in which it reaffirmed its place in British broadcasting.

It was in the 70s and 80s which BBC received some of its first major criticism on its reporting, originally from the government itself. During the



Falklands War, for example, it was Margaret Thatcher's government which complained that the BBC was presenting too strongly the Argentinian point of view and not being balanced in its news. Later in the 1980s, during the miner's strike, the BBC once again came under fire by the political left for being biased in its reporting of the events which were unfolding. It was during this period into the 1980s which more and more public criticism began to occur and organizations and interest groups began to get involved in the process. Growing public interest and criticism from the British public at large meant the BBC had to begin answering to a much larger number of people instead of only the government who was originally the power, which strongly voiced its opinion and influence.

Despite many of its troubles in the 1970s and 80s with public and private criticism, the BBC saw a strong degree of growth at the end of the 80s and into the 90s with certain expansions to their broadcasting. A clear explanation of this change reads:

The years from 1987 to 1992 witnessed the most radical changes ever seen in broadcasting in the United Kingdom. To a very large extent, these reflected worldwide events, as well as Government policies. Almost everywhere in the developed world, commercial broadcasting through cable, satellite and terrestrial channels flourished while public sector broadcasting went on the defensive. The BBC, generally recognized to be the biggest and most successful example of the latter, could not alone expect to escape major changes. Under its new management it resolved to welcome

the new climate and to strengthen its position in every possible way, competing with what were to be an increasing number of operators at home and abroad (Cain 133).

In 1988, the External Services that had formerly encompassed the international services of the BBC, was reorganized and renamed under BBC World Service. In addition to this, in the 1990s, a BBC world television service was added as a companion to its radio counterpart. The BBC further launched a new radio station, Radio 5, which covered the news and sports of the times. In the mid-90s, the BBC also launched into the realm of online news with the launching of BBC online.

By the turn of the century, BBC was broadcasting to larger numbers of viewers, had new programs in both News and general television, and was adapting to new technology and advancements in broadcasting. This sort of power and stronghold in information distribution that BBC had developed was also one of the major reasons many are skeptical of what it broadcasts and how it goes about doing it. Although competition has meant a certain amount of balance in the British broadcasting world, the BBC still holds a major portion of broadcasting power both nationally and internationally. Therefore, with issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the public and indeed the government of its base country must admittedly hold the large media power to the highest of standards if it is in fact going to be the organization which brings those throughout the world much of their news on the subject.

As a result, when those on both sides of the conflict and those consuming news began to question the BBC's reporting, it was only right for a move to be made to look into the serious accusations made against it. Therefore, with the agreement of the government, in 2004 Malcolm Balen was commissioned by former BBC Director of News Richard Sambrook to look into the allegations. At the end of his research into the matter, Balen, as mentioned before, wrote his findings in what became known as the *Balen Report*. Further turmoil then sprang up when the BBC refused to release the document and continues to this day.

For the past seven years the issue has been taken through the High Courts of the United Kingdom; activists groups demanding it is the public's right to see the document, and the BBC answering back with statements of the document being an internal document. After multiple appeals by the said activist groups to an Information Tribunal and answering appeals made by the BBC to the High Courts to overturn the Tribunal's decisions, the document remains the private property of the BBC and has yet to be released to any public organization.

### **Introductory thoughts with Roger Hardy: BBC World<sup>3</sup>**

My interviews at the BBC itself started with Roger Hardy in the offices of Bush House, and these talks gave me a basic understanding of how reporting tends to go on within the walls of the BBC. Hardy, who has been a journalist since the 1970s, came to work for the BBC in 1985 and has acted as a Middle Eastern and Islamic affairs analyst since that time, becoming a major figure and reference to others at the BBC. As a person who has spent years in media and worked for other news sources as well as the BBC, Hardy has developed an in depth knowledge of how the corporation operates and made some very interesting statements when we first met that I will express in this section, and that I actually came to hear later on in other interviews from others at the BBC. We first started talking about his personal career and how he saw the growth of the BBC in his time working for the company.

With regards to the means in which the BBC reports, we discussed that with the dawn of new technology and media growth in past years, the BBC has come into faster and more efficient ways of getting News to the world at large. This, however, did not mean that everything about reporting had become better overall. With the speed of the News world as it is, one notices that facts and figures are not always 100 percent correct when it comes time to report. Although a reporter, correspondent and/or editor does everything in his or her

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<sup>3</sup> "Interview with Roger." Personal interview. Bush House, London. 14 Oct. 2009.

power to ensure validity, a spectrum of human error is to be expected. It is drawn down to the fact that no person is perfect and sometimes things can be overlooked, forgotten, or accidentally altered by a reporter.

These observations are also later made by other interviewees such as James Stephenson of the Six and Ten O'clock News and even Sharif Nashashibi of Arab Media Watch. It is in the BBC's sole purpose, however, to do everything in its power to get things right, and if mistakes are made, they do what they can to rectify it. As a consumer of news, one must worry however when they come realize that those broadcasting the news are aware of faults that occur and the answer to concerns about this are equivalent to "We will try our best to fix things when information is wrong".

In Hardy's time at the BBC he has noticed that one internal policy has stayed constant though in day-to-day processes, he says, "The basics of fairness and impartiality have remained the same. These are unwritten rules that have gone unchanged at the BBC". It is this statement that seems to underlie many BBC employees' opinions of the work that the BBC does. Despite the efforts of how the BBC reports, Hardy also pointed out that with time, the context within which stories are reported has changed in two ways.

The first, as briefly mentioned earlier, is the technical part of the media and the development of New Media. For all intents and purposes, Hardy feels that the New Media should not affect the basics of reporting that were explained before. However, in reality, it does. As more and more people are able to get the news service, as the internet has grown more popular and more developed, and as

the public have wanted a larger say in media coverage, people are now able, more than ever, to scrutinize the BBC and express their opinions at large. This change undoubtedly means that the degree and intensity of scrutiny on reporters and editors has changed drastically overtime, altering the very atmosphere of the media world.

Secondly, Hardy has described a change in public opinion on politics and society in the past fifty years in Britain. He says that in his opinion, the American people think that the BBC is or has always been pro-Palestinian, but they are wrong in this assumption. This, however is a personal observation that I believe Hardy made, as there is no concrete evidence that the majority of Americans feel this way. He explains that around the time of the birth of Israel, between 1948 and 1967, the European perception tended to be pro-Israel. He bases this in the idea that Europe was able to relate to the Israeli people as they were sympathetic from the Holocaust having happened not so far in the past. On the other hand, at that time, the Palestinian point of view was fairly absent, went unnoticed and therefore influenced very few.

It was the Siege of Beirut in 1982, followed by the aftermath into the late 1980s, which brought about the sense that the Palestinians were the underdogs living under occupation. This, Hardy says, was the true swing in opinion. The swing, however, was not from pro-Palestine to anti-Israel, but rather to be more critical of Israeli policy than they had been in the past and to be more open to the perspective of Palestinians. Hardy says that it is usually overlooked that, "The idea of having two separate states was supported in Europe long before the

Clinton or Bush Administrations.” It was as time went on in the conflict that opinions grew much more polarized than they had ever been before.

This issue with the relationship between the media and the public, which Hardy brought up is the question of which is the cart and which is the horse? Is it the public that tends to guide the media in what they put on the air and how they go about doing it, or is it the Media which bends public opinion and shows them how to think about a certain topic or event? Hardy expresses that is a widely held belief that *The Guardian*, as one example, is pro-Israel in today’s world and not only today, but actually for much of its existence in the print world. He says that they have taken the stance that they report in this way because they feel that the British public can more easily relate to the people of Israel. This is something he says the BBC could never claim as an impartial broadcaster. The BBC, standing on principles of unbiased and nonpartisan reporting, would not ever make a claim like *The Guardian*’s.

In the political/economic sphere, Britain also had a lot at stake in doing business with Arab countries like Saudi Arabia. This is clearly a strong juxtaposition with the relationship that Western nations have with Israel, politically. For example, although during Margaret Thatcher’s government she may have been pro-Jewish in her opinions, foreign policy had already been set at the time and was fairly strongly followed. It was during the period of the BBC-Blair relationship that one can find the serious crisis. Hardy explained that, “It was revealed that while every government, Labour or Conservative, wants to

promote BBC's independence in reporting, they do still want to control the reporting in some sense."

What it comes down to with such a large organization like the BBC is to ensure that from those who make the decisions at the top, to the correspondents in the field, to the employee sitting in Television Centre, BBC aims for impartiality. Without being recognized for impartiality, their credibility is completely lost.

I asked Hardy how this related to the literal act of choosing and writing about an event. He said, when it came down to it, a genuine reporter must do their job, "without fear or favor." Simply, one should never drop or alter a story out of fear of angering or upsetting someone else as well as never picking up or altering a story to win favor with another person. He explained that when an event happens, there is going to be some expense related to reporting on it; there is no way to please everyone in the world of journalism. Someone will always be upset by a story written, from a person sitting at home reading the newspaper to the governments of foreign nations.

Hardy ended our talk with one last thought on the task that is presented to every person working in the field of journalism, not only the BBC. In my opinion I felt as though he was being quite idealistic, but in reality he is the one with over 25 years of experience in the field while I am the outsider looking in. He said that after getting past the worries of upsetting someone and past the initial desire to please people, the journalist, at the end of the day, must continually examine their own actions and decisions; just like anyone else. In a field where people are being informed and educated on the events of the world, a journalist must always be fair



and impartial in their reporting. “Fairness and impartiality should not work like a tap that one can simply turn on and off when they so choose.”

**Malcolm Balen: The Middle East Policeman:<sup>4</sup>**

To speak with the “Policeman of the Middle East” Malcolm Balen was a rare opportunity and a vital one when examining the ways in which BBC manages its reporting. As mentioned in the BBC timeline, Malcolm Balen was commissioned to fully examine and advise on BBC’s reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the time and to write a report on his findings which would assist the BBC in fixing any flaws that existed in their broadcasting. Balen continues as an overseer today and this made him a very compelling person to speak with. After a kind introduction from Roger Hardy who had accompanied me to Balen’s office, we sat down to have a very enlightening conversation about Balen’s position and his opinions on what had transpired regarding the accusations against the BBC. Balen was a very laid back person with a lot of intriguing thoughts on the issue of criticizing the BBC for being biased in its reporting on Israel and Palestine and shared a few with me.

Balen first described to me why it was that he was the one to fill the job of overseer. He told me that when the BBC was looking for someone to take on the task, they needed someone who had a knowledge of media, but was, for all intents and purposes, separated from the day to day workings of the news world. This gave the person the knowledge of what should be happening without being hindered by other influences. Balen said that he fully understood how there could be, at times, accidents made in reporting. With news segments, for example,

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<sup>4</sup> "Interview with Malcolm Balen." Personal interview. White City, London. 14 Oct. 2009.

Balen said, “Editors are bogged down by running their own show. It can be hard at times to see if there is something particular missing. I, on the other hand, have the time to do that.” However, it is in fact the job of that editor sees what is missing and what there is too much of in a broadcast; so it seemed as though Balen was relieving particular employees of their duties or at least preemptively pardoning them for their mistakes. In addition, as shown later in this paper, this issue of missing facts is a major complaint made by the public and is a fundamental problem people like Sharif Nashashibi have with the BBC.

We further spoke about the turning point in the history of the news world when the age of criticism and close analysis by the public came about. He described the explosion that has occurred in past decades which has altered the way news is addressed. “Before this explosion in different Media, there may have been four corrections pointed out in a news segment. Now, its quite possible that there may be one hundred corrections that could be made to something.” After the 1970s, Balen said that the BBC was stuck in the old structure of how things worked, and they had not adjusted to the new realm of broadcasting; this caused a lot of problems for it. “It just wasn’t meeting the output that it needed as such a large institution. It needed to make some necessary adjustments.” The period after this coincides with the time of BBC development described in the earlier timeline. The BBC reshaped much of its infrastructure at this time and developed more direction on how it reported. It continued to do this for a number of years after that and still works to adapt to the world around it today.

On the topic of complaints, Balen explained that there were four major reasons that public criticism had vastly increased, along with being in the age technology. Firstly, the simple fact that people are now able to find contact information on those working in the News. Unlike the past, when it was more difficult for people to track down direct contact information of employees, people now can fairly easily figure out the email address of a person or manage to find the number of the person's desk phone.

Secondly, people's respect for institutions as a whole has been in decline for a number of years. No longer will people simply sit at home and ponder what people and decision makers are doing in the offices of different institutions as they may have done in the past. The "trust in the powers that be" principle does not apply to society at large anymore, least of all when it comes to information institutions like broadcasters.

Thirdly, Balen presented the idea that as the number of events as a whole in the world have gone up, so has the reporting on them as well as the number of sources to gather information through. Therefore, an increase in reporting means there is more for the public to critique overall. As events around the world continue to unravel and develop further, the effects they have continue to multiply and cause numerous other events to occur. This is what I think Balen meant by events as a whole in the world have gone up. This observation is one that would be harder to argue against. Quite literally, as news broadcasters have increased the span of what stories and events they report on, the number of criticisms and messages to the institutions has grown as well.

Lastly, and most importantly, is the fact that the cost of the license fee to British citizens means that the BBC is public property. This is something that more and more Britons have come to realize and hold onto as each year passes. Although always aware that their money was going to keep the BBC's running, the realization that there is power behind that fact is something that has continued to spread over time in the public. It is the combination of these four factors, in Balen's opinion, that criticism by the public has increased more and more into the technological age.

Then to this issue of who it is running the news world, Balen gave his thoughts on the matter. "In today's world, television reporting is being run by the younger generation. With the new technology that is out there, that's just the way it is." In the same thought, however, he expressed a major issue that occurs with this reality. "With issues like the Middle East, which have gone on for decades, the younger generation has a different frame of reference. For many of them, they can only remember as far back as the 80s and 90s period of the conflict and that just is not enough for this type of subject matter." He then conveyed the dilemma that exists in the media today for issues like this. He said that with the Middle East, along with many other long-lasting events, it is easy to forget the full history. Some people begin referencing a few years in the past when they can really be looking at events that occurred decades beforehand. It is in this fact that many problems and new issues can occur when reporting on the event.

I then of course wanted to know what his relationship was like with those who wrote the stories and were actually in the field. Balen explained to me that it

was rare for him to actually directly intervene in the jobs of the correspondents and writers. He wanted to make it clear that when it came down to gathering information and sending it to the BBC, reporters know the more detailed on-goings of day to day journalism and it is not his place to impede that. His job is to react to what he sees, hears, and reads on the different means of news and not to get involved before hand. He is an adjuster, or at most a corrector, not a preventer.

An example he gave of stepping in and giving his opinion on an issue is one of the latest periods of unrest in Gaza. As reports were coming out to the public, Balen was realizing that they were doing very well giving the Israeli perspective on what was occurring, but were a bit too locked into giving that outlook. He felt that they were failing to provide the particular reasons for Hamas' actions in this particular period of disquiet and that this was a necessary part of the story for the public to know. Upon seeing this, he pointed it out to James Stephenson at the Jerusalem Bureau who was the current correspondent at the time. Balen told me that he was pleased to see that within a short time of his observation, they had corrected the issue and had released an informative story that explained Hamas' side of the event.

Overall, he told me that BBC works under the assumption that its correspondents and employees are competent, informed, and prepared; similar to the way Roger Hardy and later James Stephenson describe. Therefore, when it comes to examining the news that comes from the different world posts, "a correspondent should have enough knowledge and experience to make a proper

judgment call on how and what they report.” In the case of correspondents, they are in high regard with a lot of faith and trust placed in them. With a number of complaints coming in regarding particular stories from the public and numerous activist groups, I wondered how then the News presenters themselves were regarded when it came to complaints made; if having anything to do with it at all. Balen’s response? “News presenters are paid to know a little about everything and a lot about nothing.” He explained that in the end, it was not the people behind the desk that had much to do with the content that was chosen for the audience. They are simply vehicles for the information and that is the major component of their job. If people complain about them, it is more likely that it will be about how they were dressed or the tone with which they were discussing something.

Lastly, and quite importantly, we discussed the *Balen Report*, which there has been so much speculation over. When I first brought it up, Balen almost seemed to treat the subject as an overly discussed topic. He truly gave the impression that he did not understand why so many people had caused such an uproar regarding its contents. “I was hired for a job which dealt with internal matters. I looked into it, I made my report, and now it is in the hands of the people it should be.”

I then asked why the BBC could not simply release the information to the public when they demanded it and after repeating the fact that it was an internal issue he continued to explain, “The BBC doesn’t release the report because of the gray area in the *Freedom of Information Act*. It is not at all that the BBC does not

want that specific information released. Simply, losing that particular case would set a precedent and open a flood gate of the public wanting to read all internal BBC documents.” I asked what he thought about the unrest of the public in the answers that the BBC was giving regarding the report. “Really, it doesn’t matter if people like or don’t like what the BBC says, but rather that the BBC has looked at the issue raised and has a logic to why and how they say things in the news.”

Balen then elaborated on who it was that should have the report in-hand by saying that his reports go to the Content Board, or the Journalism Board, which is run by the Deputy Director at the BBC, and it is there that his reports are reviewed and examined. To another degree, he said that the Trust will also look into the journalism and the reports written about it. In the end, after looking at the information he presented and continues to present, “The BBC must follow its charter that was set so many years ago. Impartiality is truly what lies at the heart of what the BBC does, but it does not mean that in the end, people don’t make mistakes.”



### **James Stephenson: Editor of the 6 and 10:<sup>5</sup>**

James Stephenson was a fantastic person to meet, having previously been the BBC correspondent in Jerusalem and currently working as the Editor of the Six and Ten O'clock News. Stephenson is, therefore, a person who has seen the world of media from many angles: as a home viewer, a person in the middle of the action, and now a person who decides what the public sees. As a result, he was an ideal person to speak with on the matter of bias and how the BBC operates.

It is from my conversation with Stephenson that I found the most straightforward and eye opening answers. Stephenson was not afraid to explain how things really worked at the BBC and was instead actually fairly eager to clear the air. When we first sat down, and I thanked him for his time, he quickly thanked me as well. He said that with all of the questions and concerns that float around regarding the BBC, it is always a great opportunity to sit down with someone and clarify the situation as well as get their opinion on the matter. Speaking directly with people about the world of reporting is something they cannot easily do at times, and he enjoyed the fact that he had the opportunity.

Having recently met with Malcolm Balen, he was fresh on my mind, and it was with his name that we fully started our conversation. After learning what it was that Balen was supposed to be doing, I asked Stephenson about their relationship while he was reporting from Jerusalem. He told me that, in reality,

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<sup>5</sup> "Interview with James Stephenson." Personal interview. White City. London. 11 Nov. 2009.

he and Balen were not in constant communication like some may think. Instead, at the end of every three-month period, he would write a report for a review board and Balen to read through. After each of these reports, Stephenson was given suggestions and information on what else needed to be done in the future as well as what perhaps could have been done instead of what occurred. The degree of communication between them and the sum of recommendations made changed depending on the time of reporting. At times of the year, when many events had occurred in succession and the number of reports was high, they would of course be in more communication. Stephenson did then explain that at other times, in the down periods of the conflict, reports and recommendations were much thinner than usual.

Stephenson was definitely of the opinion that Balen was an important colleague to have in overseeing their work and talking with them further about it. He told me, “Malcolm Balen is beneficial to us because he has a certain detachment from what we do. He’s not drawn into *how* it is the stories run. I have respect for his role and what he does for the BBC.” He explained that if it had been a different type of person that was placed in the position, the strides that they had made thus far would not have been as strong. Balen’s experience, background, and current relationship with the BBC at the time of his appointment, made him the ideal candidate for the job.

When we turned to the subject of the public’s criticism, Stephenson became even more engaged in the conversation. My first question to him was whether or not he felt the people’s accusations were well grounded at times. He

responded, “To be honest, people’s personal perspectives on the issue at large have created some of those accusations they have made against the BBC. Not to say that BBC reporting is perfect; no reporting is perfect. The thing is, finding particular ‘mistakes’ in the reporting, is all in the eye of the beholder.” When the stakes are higher in the middle of a conflict, the voices and opinions of people on both sides greatly increases as well.

Part of the problem that lies at the heart of reporting, Stephenson believes, is that watching any story on television creates a sort of unreality for the viewer. As informed or even moved that a person is upon hearing or viewing a news story, they are still essentially disconnected from the event itself. There is no way they can truly understand what is happening without seeing it with their own eyes, and this can create confusion when they watch the news. Stephenson explained that as a correspondent he saw many things that he thought he had previously seen and understood. Once in the midst of everything occurring, he realized the difference between sitting at home and viewing events around the world and actually being there as they happen. This disconnect between event and viewer adds to the reasons some people complain about BBC coverage. They do not realize that what they think or expect is happening may be different than what they will have to watch on the News at the end of the day.

A specific instance that I was able to discuss with Stephenson was the period of time in which Israel refused access to the media into conflict areas. At the time, major destruction was occurring and the conflict was in one of its most heightened points. Not long after this began, Israel started to deny reporters

access. Stephenson informed me that Israel told them they were denying them access because they felt they would “get in the way” and “only complicate things further.” I wondered what kind of effect this decision had on the public at large and specifically Israel’s relationship with the Media. Stephenson’s answer was a direct one which he felt very strongly about. “Israel not allowing the Media into key areas and denying us information truly hurt its reputation in the conflict. People undoubtedly began to question Israel’s claim of being a ‘free state’.”

In relation to this, one can read in Tamar Liebes’ work that the difficult concept of media censorship that exists in the Israeli state is much different than our own Western concept. For example, the idea of aiming to stay true to the Zionist endeavor is strongly expressed and held important by the Israeli government and supposedly journalists alike and, therefore, an acceptance of a need for a certain degree of censorship when it comes to the conflict seems to have worked (31). Though, for external spectators, this only reinforces the skepticism that we do not receive all of the news of what is occurring. At the same time, this observation may also lighten the blame from the BBC in having flaws in its coverage by pointing out that the media remains reliant upon the amount of slack in which a particular government or nature gives it. If one region is too hostile to report from and the other allows access under the pretense that the news source should not shed negative light on it or cause unrest based on what it reports, how is that news source able to get the right information out to viewers?

The issue of Israel having a rather jarring relationship with the media and allowing it access to report on current events still continues today. As recently as

June of 2010, Israel ran into criticism when videos were released of a confrontation between Israeli commandos and an activist group's vessel named the Freedom Flotilla. Both vessels carried passengers equipped with cameras and broadcasting equipment, and this is the circumstance that created such confusion for the public. The Israeli vessel had cameras on board which captured the skirmish and was able to broadcast their footage following the event, but the Flotilla was fortunate to be carrying equipment linked to satellites and, therefore, broadcasts images and videos as the struggle unfolded.

The confusion that came about was due to the fact that the Israeli broadcasts of the conflict did not fit into the context of what people had seen earlier and made it very difficult for viewers to figure out at what stage of the attack the Israeli videos were set at. Clips of Israeli soldiers arming themselves and warning the other vessel to make port peacefully are followed by clips of what Israel claimed were its soldiers attacking the other vessel in self-defense. The activists on the other ship, however, reported that the Israelis fired stun grenades and tear gas onto their vessel without provocation that badly injured its passengers.

In addition to this, the report by Brian Stelter of *The New York Times* reported that, "at least 15 journalists who were aboard the flotilla had been detained by Israel and had not made contact with their respective news outlets. Among them were journalists from the Kuwait News Agency, The Sydney Morning Herald and Al Jazeera" (Stelter). In addition to this, the Israeli military had attempted to jam signals and stop cell phone transmissions from the vessel,

but could not stop the satellite transmissions which the Flotilla was able to send out. With events like this showing Israel's efforts of obstructing media coverage, the international community, as stated, will further question Israel's policies.

The next thing that Stephenson told me was what I think impressed me most about the process of reporting at the BBC. Given that Stephenson had been both in the field and in the decision making seat, I wanted to know one main thing: "Do stories and the information provided by correspondents in different countries, remain intact from what they send from their post to what the viewer at home sees at Six and Ten O'clock?" His response? "In my experience, yes. At the BBC there is a certain amount of faith placed in people in the field and with that comes a level of autonomy. I would have my stories that I would send from my post, and that would be the story that would make it to the viewers at home. No adjustments or alterations are made between when correspondents send things and when they are broadcast."

He pointed out that this was quite different than the practices of broadcasters in America, for instance. "In the United States, you have the policy of script approval. Before a story is aired, there is a back and forth between reporter and editor on what is right or wrong with a piece." At the BBC they trust that the correspondent has done what they needed to do and is providing them with the accurate story. It is in this belief that they choose to not alter or adjust stories before they go to the viewer.

Following this, I enquired about what stories ended up being chosen to show and how they were chosen to begin with. Stephenson's answer to this was

also something I greatly respected and I did not feel as though I was being given the answer from a politician sort. Although it was somewhat difficult to wrap my mind around, it was the fact that I was given an honest answer that I found the answer to be the appropriate one:

Take the Ten O'clock news, for example. In that segment there are seven to eight stories which will air. Keeping in mind that there may have been many more interesting stories that we received. The truth of the matter is that some are just left out. In the end its about putting a show, a *television* show, together which people will watch at home. Like any other show, there is very limited time and space to report during these segments.

Personally, it was a bit shocking to hear that particular stories must be entirely left out of a news broadcast, but upon further reflection I realized that what Stephenson explained is a basic, but valid point. For a person to take in a larger number of news stories, they will have to rely on the 24-hour news cycles and not simply the two main broadcasts of the evening. When it comes down to it, there is only so much time allotted for a broadcast, and they must prioritize what to air.

Stephenson told me that with BBC 1, "being a flagship channel, there is a requirement and weight on me to appeal to a very general audience. The BBC *wants* license fee payers to watch." The issue of imagery is obviously a major part of the media world. Andrew Crisell elaborates on this factor in *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* saying:

Though their full meaning is seldom apparent without the help of words, it seems fair to say that on the whole pictures have a more powerful, immediate and emotional effect than words alone. They seem to be a direct expression of reality, whereas words - a human invention - interpose themselves between reality and us, perhaps filtering or even distorting the former. Pictures show; words merely represent, and have to be 'decoded' by their audience - a process which itself dissipates the emotional force of what they convey (Crisell 155).

To this end I asked Stephenson what sort of influence stories with images played on being chosen for broadcast. "There is no doubt a story with visuals, or even audio, will run. You go with the pictures. Sometimes people making the show don't like that, but you just can't get around it." He said in the recent events of the tsunami and earthquakes in Samoa, they had to make tough decisions between choosing stories that came in with visuals that were perhaps less interesting and stories that were more interesting, but had nothing to accompany them.

This part of our interview relates back to the issue raised by the creation of the documentary *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs* examined earlier. When speaking with the Producer of the UK version, Norma Percy, she expresses that same interest in creating an experience for the viewer so they can relate to it and make "dry concepts come alive for the viewers" (Ashuri 15). In her



description of the process of creating a body of work which the public can relate to, be interested in, and learn from, we get a similar message that it will be through personal videos, interviews and other images that the viewer will take interest while learning something. On the other hand, James Stephenson did express that at the end of the day, absolutely vital information, which the public should not go without, whether or not it has images, will of course run. Despite being in the business of creating a show, they are indeed there to inform the public of the news that is most vital for them to know.

As a reaction to some of the things that the BBC has broadcast, Stephenson said that along with providing the license fee payers a show to watch, in return, the license fee payer has a sense of entitlement to complain when they choose to. I asked Stephenson whether or not complaints were listened to and addressed. He explained to me that the BBC *would* indeed listen to every complaint they received. Sometimes changes will be made and sometimes they will not.

With regards to where the complaints come from and whom they are directed to, Stephenson said it is rare for him to be the one to receive a direct complaint. If the BBC has received a specific and substantial complaint about one of his shows than he is of course notified, but on a day to day basis he does not see the complaints himself. In addition to the numerous, general complaints from the public, most of the considerable complaints come from highly funded and organized organizations. Stephenson told me this as I brought up the name of Arab Media Watch. He told me that general viewers at home

would complain perhaps about the news anchors or a story in general, but it was the organizations that came with researched and developed ideas on what was wrong with a broadcast. In addition to this, it was Balen who was in contact with these groups and took care of their complaints to the BBC; Stephenson was detached from this part of the process.

### **Sharif Nashashibi: The View of Arab Media Watch:**

It must first be pointed out, before going into great detail about my interview with Mr. Nashashibi, that the atmosphere of this talk was unlike any other. As I walked past Harrods towards 1 Ennismore Street, I was unsure of where exactly I was headed. Walking down this street of private homes and gardens I came upon 1 Ennismore and realized that instead of being directed to an office building, Sharif Nashashibi, Chairman of Arab Media Watch, had invited me to his father's home to go through my questions. I entered the home and walked in to find spectacular surroundings. The lounge which I was directed into was filled with large mirrors and family portraits framed in golden frames, couches were covered in fine silk, and beautiful wooden dressers were inlaid with white pearl. It was quite unlike the offices which I had conducted my other interviews in at BBC buildings and I describe the surroundings simply to give the reader a better idea of the interesting environment I sat in as Nashashibi explained to me the different things flawed with BBC broadcasting and practices.

The moment we sat down, Nashashibi actually posed the first question to me instead. "Shall we talk about Malcolm Balen now or later?" he said to me in a

quizzical manner. I found this interesting and went with the prompt by Nashashibi to talk about Balen, someone I had planned to ask about much later on. He then posed another question to me before I could ask him anything, “What did you think of him?”

In my brief talks with Balen, explained earlier in the paper, I had indeed left his office with a feeling of not getting the answers to a few of my questions; specifically regarding the BBC’s argument against releasing his document. Expressing this to Nashashibi he quickly interjected, “See, I knew you were going to have that impression. Balen has a way of using a lot of words without actually saying anything at all”. This followed by a small chuckle by Nashashibi at his own observation. Upon hearing this, I inquired whether or not he thought Balen had served any purpose at all in being hired as the ‘Policeman of the Middle East’.

His answer, rather cryptic, was that overall he did not know. At first this seemed confusing, as Nashashibi had just made a joke about Balen, but he further explained that without being able to see the *Balen Report*, he really could not make a judgment call on whether or not Balen had done his job. His frustration in the fact that the *Balen Report* was not released to the public was quite evident throughout the interview. At particular points during our conversation it always reverted back to, “Well, if we could only see the report.”

Nashashibi stood firm in his belief that the report should be released to the public under the *Freedom for Information Act*. “Something like the *Balen Report*, which would answer a lot of critics’ questions is not something to withhold. The

BBC is only causing itself more distress by not releasing Balen's findings." In a sense I could agree with him that holding this information created even more questions and complaints from the public, but on the other hand it seems to me that when it comes down to it, the report which the BBC asked for is their property, free to do with it what they will. When I asked Nashashibi what he thought of the idea that the report was something that examined internal matters at the BBC and, therefore, did not have to be released, his answer was short and simple. "The BBC is paid for and sustained by the public to whom they report. The BBC should therefore be answerable to that very public and that means giving them the answers to their questions when asked."

Something Nashashibi did admit to, however, was that in the past decade he had seen some fundamental changes in the *way* BBC reports. Although still critical of what stories the BBC chooses to run, he does admit that some of the tone and wording has been corrected in past years. "The BBC has started to really look at word choice. Things like elaborate adjectives or wordy phrasing have been replaced with more informational and purely factual words and phrases." This is a change that he *does* associate with Balen, as some of the suggestions Balen has made seem to be better known by the public than others.

Towards the end of our conversation, we hit the main reason of why Nashashibi was disappointed with BBC broadcasting. "The major issue is location. Not having correspondents in Gaza and the West Bank is one of the BBC's biggest mistakes." Nashashibi explained that in past years, when BBC had correspondents who reported from more of the high action areas, it was more

closely balanced and much more credible. By having people write stories on these areas without actually being there when the events happen, the BBC loses credibility in certain people's eyes.

Nashashibi had one final thought on the issue of correspondent placement; he ended this part of the discussion with a single statement. "Not having correspondents in key areas, in the heart of the trouble, means not getting the whole story. It is an injustice to those killed from war as well as to the viewers at home."

What I found most interesting about my time with Nashashibi was the fact that as we talked I had one thing on my mind I could not shake. Nashashibi continued to elaborate on his issues with the BBC, and I continued to think, "If the BBC is said to be so Pro-Palestinian, how is it that an organization like Arab Media Watch has so many problems with it?" After speaking with him for a large amount of time, I finally asked him this. As confused as I had been about this issue, Nashashibi explained that they were asked about this quite often.

His answer to me was that despite popular opinion that the BBC was "on the side of Palestine." it was organizations like Arab Media Watch that took the time to actually look at what the BBC was broadcasting on an analytical level and hold it accountable for what they found. He said that many in the public sphere hear that the BBC is biased and then turn on the television expecting this. As they watch, they find the parts of the broadcasts which simply reaffirm what they thought going into viewing the program. He said that many viewers just do not take the time to look at the facts that would counter-argue their opinion. In this

respect, more people are under the impression that BBC reports in an unbalanced manner too one side when really, the BBC is flawed in its reporting on both sides

### **Closing Thoughts:**

No other international broadcaster puts in as much effort as the BBC to reassure the public that it is a broadcaster of truth, with slogans such as: Free and untainted information is a basic human right. Not everyone has it but everyone wants it. It cannot by itself create a just world, but a just world cannot exist without it (Wood 39).

This brief statement, I feel, recapitulates what each of the people I spoke with at the BBC tried to explain. For the past couple decades, the BBC has battled endlessly with those in the public that continue to claim it reports in a biased manner. My talks with Roger Hardy set up my first impression of the BBC and how it operated in the News world. I was given the impression that in the years that Hardy had worked there, BBC had stood firm in the policies and principles that it had set out under Reith so many years before.

My discussion with Malcolm Balen reiterated some of those principles that Hardy had pointed out, while also elaborating on the new practices that the BBC had undertaken in recent years. Although at times I may have questioned how forthcoming Balen was being with his answers, he provided me with a mental map of what the BBC had laid out for him as the Policeman of the Middle East. Based on the opinions of his colleagues, and even in some respects his

skeptics, I left with the impression that Balen was leaving a positive imprint on the future outcome of BBC reporting.

It was my conversation after this, with James Stephenson, which left me most satisfied with the answers given to me regarding the day to day operations of the BBC. Stephenson made no excuses for the practices that the BBC had for broadcasting the news and was upfront with all of the information he could give to me. The media world is not a perfect one and Stephenson openly expressed this during our conversation. For him, it was Stephenson and his colleagues' job to present both the best and most informative News broadcast they could to the public in the time they were given. His experience in and out of the field of reporting, his straightforward answers, and his eagerness to clear the air of confusion made Stephenson both a knowledgeable and credible source in my eyes.

Lastly, to gain the outside perspective, I sat down with Sharif Nashashibi. Although an interesting conversation, the open-ended answers and ambiguity of Nashashibi's responses to my questions were simply not enough to persuade me otherwise. Although passionate about his cause, and at times articulate with some of his specific opinions, I did not leave his home with any examples of which one could point to and say "The BBC is biased right there." He did, however, impress me with his thoughts on the importance of impartiality and the promotion of having correspondents in the necessary areas to tell the right story. I was thus able to find some common ground with Sharif Nashashibi in our talks.

As examined in the section on just a handful of the numerous issues that have arisen in reporting on the conflict, I also developed a better understanding of the political and historical hurdles that not only the BBC, but other news sources must get over to get information to the world's news consumers. Between the structure of broadcast journalism changing nation by nation to appeal to audiences, the fundamental difference that exists between nations on what is important to them to stay informed about, and lastly the overall turmoil and volatility of the Middle Eastern region which keeps the media on its toes in how it will access information to report to the world, the BBC and other media institutions must each resolve how to become and remain impartial news sources.

I set the challenge for anyone willing to take it up to find a media broadcaster in the world which pleases everyone watching, reading, or listening to its news segments. Like any other industry that exists, there will always be someone to find fault. This is of course not to say people should not look for ways to improve issues once they have found them. Since the period of the *Balen Report*, the BBC has made a more prominent position of answering to accusations made against its reporting not only on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but its other reporting as well. With the spotlight shining on its reporting, a new degree of transparency at the BBC exists which results in answers being given when questions are raised. They are no longer in the era of "Thank you for your concerns, we will look into it." but rather in a time when in depth answers are given for issues raised.



What I leave this experience with is the knowledge that the BBC, despite what many on the outside-looking-in try and suggest, does strive for the impartial stance that the public demands. There is, however, a certain degree of healthiness to the presence of watchdog groups like Arab Media Watch to continuously press the BBC for clarification and answers when they come to them with valid concerns. It is an imperfect system run by imperfect human beings, mistakes will be made and sometimes they will get it wrong. The BBC is fortunate enough then to employ people like James Stephenson, Roger Hardy, and Malcolm Balen who acknowledge this and try to better the system on a daily basis in what they do for the public at large.

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## CAPSTONE SUMMARY

I am an International Relations major and my work is on media bias in BBC coverage on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the summer of 2009, I began a program entitled “Politics and Media in the United Kingdom.” Initially this was because of my focus on international politics, but the program led to my interests expanding to how governments relate to news sources and other public actors. Fortunately, with the initial help of Christopher Cook, a professor at SU London and radio personality in Great Britain, I was able to explore exactly that.

Many are now aware of bias that exists in numerous fields and the Media is no different. My initial interest in the conflict itself came on a personal level due to my family's heritage, and I have therefore always held some interest in what has transpired between these two conflicting nations. In addition, because I was in a course which focused a great deal on the Media, I spent more time than I ever had on certain issues including this conflict. It was after a casual conversation with Professor Cook about my feeling that reporting on the conflict in the UK was different than that of the US's coverage, that he explained to me the controversy of BBC reporting on the conflict.

In order to get a better idea of the BBC today, I first looked at its history to get an idea of how it had evolved. From its birth in the 1920s as a major radio broadcaster, it then grew into a television broadcaster in the late 30s and later into a major internet news source by the mid-90s and despite many viewing the BBC as a strong institution now, there have been numerous obstacles in its history. Along with other problems, the BBC faced more issues with new news sources, and it answered back by overhauling its very infrastructure. Reexamining the things it broadcasted on television, reorganizing its radio stations and finally, as

mentioned, launching BBC online in the 1990s. In this massive overhaul, the BBC became more famous than it ever had been and not only nationally or in imperial nations, but to the rest of this world. Of course, with greater awareness and attention by the public at large comes that many more people with opinions on what it is you are reporting.

The main section of my thesis is based on the interviews I was fortunate to do while in the United Kingdom. Roger Hardy of the World Service acted as my direct channel into the BBC, and in our talks we discussed that news is a flawed system in and of itself. Media faces numerous layers which can complicate an overall story: what happens, who witnesses it, who reports on it, who decides on what stories are broadcasted and who the people are at home listening or watching. In addition, the birth of new media has completely changed the way people interact with news. People are now able to watch and read the news and immediately react to it. Whether it is writing in by way of a website or tweeting about what they have seen, the public has affected media entities and how they report by having a newer louder voice. Furthermore, political views of the public have changed quite a bit in the last 50 years, and this also changes the relationship between media and the public. During the period of Israel's birth, spanning 1948 to 1967, it is the opinion of many that European sentiment tended to be fairly Pro-Israel. Post World War II, many involved in the war were justifiably sympathetic to the plight of the Jewish people and, therefore, Israel in turn. In addition to this, the Palestinian narrative and much of what was happening to the Palestinian people went fairly unnoticed to those outside of the region. It was not until the 1980s, after the Siege of Beirut, when a number of the onlooking global community began to see Palestinians as true underdogs. The change in political public opinion is seen to have changed in this period. However, it was not so much that the British and others in Europe became more Pro-Palestine and less Pro-Israel, but rather that they became more aware of Israel's actions and that the

conflict was not as simple and straightforward as they might have previously thought.

Specifically in the political realm, we must take into account Britain having had a lot at stake because of its business with Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia as well as its closer proximity to the Middle East. Many issues and problems came about for instance in Margaret Thatcher's time as Prime Minister when the media's new focus on larger coverage of Palestine came into conflict with the well known Western political affinity with Israel. It was again later in the Blair administration when the greater uproar of BBC reporting came about. It came to a point where government began expressing its distaste for the route the BBC was taking. As Hardy pointed out to me though, the BBC at almost every level must strive for that impartiality and get past pleasing people. One must report, in his words, without fear or favor; events are events and must be reported on. He said something to me which made me view the entire issue a bit differently in my later interviews. He said, "Fairness and impartiality should not work like a tap that one can simply turn on and off when they so choose."

Another important person to speak with was Malcolm Balen, also known as the Policeman of the Middle East. The BBC and British government jointly hired Balen to look into the accusations made against the BBC as being biased, and then he wrote a report on his findings. He was hired because of his knowledge expertise on how media "should" fundamentally operate and work. Something Balen pointed out was that, in his opinion, those who should be running media in today's world is the younger generation; they are, after all, more in tune with new technology and new media. This however creates a fundamental issue; younger people do not have the same knowledge or memories of what has politically occurred in the Middle East as older generations. He points out that many references are made to 'years' ago when in essence political references can and should be made to 'decades' ago as many of the events that occur today in the

conflict stem from the political turmoil that first occurred during Israel's formation and sometimes that can be overlooked.

Balen then explained that his job is not to intervene with correspondents and journalists, rather he was there to observe and then adjust or correct, not to prevent. He says that in essence, regardless of the BBC's leaders' political views and standing in society, they act under the assumption that those witnessing and reporting the news are competent, informed, and prepared.

Concerning all of the complaints regarding the BBC that have come about in the past, he said it came down to four major things. First, simply that people both in the general public and political groups, can find the contact information of those working at News organizations. Second, people's respect for institutions has overall declined. People no longer sit and listen as much as they use to without having a verbal or physical reaction to what they witness. People do not trust the powers that be. Third, as the number of events in the world has grown increasingly complex and multi-dimensional, so has the reporting on them. The Media has expanded what they report on in the past 50 some odd years and with that has come a larger reaction. Whether this stems from religion, economics or politics. Lastly, the BBC is funded based on a license fee which each TV owning British subject must pay. This makes the BBC public property and as the political public has become more and more aware of the power this gives them, the more and more critical and reactive they have become.

Balen wrote a famous report on BBC reporting which he submitted to a Content Board which has supposedly considered his recommendations regarding the BBC's reporting. The word supposedly is used because we do not actually know what Malcolm Balen concluded from his look into the BBC's reporting as the BBC refuses to release the document creating a major uproar from the public claiming they deserved to know what it was he had found. However, as Britain's Freedom of Information Act is fairly new and quite broad, the BBC claims that

they have no obligation to release the information. Furthermore, politically speaking, releasing the document would set a precedent which would lead to a flood gate opening of demands on seeing other internal BBC documents which they claim the public has no right to. In the end however, Balen did share his overarching opinion that he has made quite public. He said, “Impartiality is truly what lies at the heart of what the BBC does, but it does not mean that in the end, people don’t make mistakes.” Leaving me and many others with a few more questions in mind I suppose.

After I spoke with Balen I spoke with the Editor of the evening news, James Stephenson, who was also the former correspondent from Jerusalem to get a feel for what people in the field thought. Stephenson told me that regarding Malcolm Balen, he respected the position he was put in and the relationship he was asked to have with him. Every three months writing a report and sending it to Balen and a review board to go over and send back with thoughts and opinions.

When it came to the political accusations of bias, Stephenson told me that in his opinion he felt that people’s personal perspectives were sometimes what generated some of the bias itself. He admitted that like everything else, reporting is not perfect and that when it comes to accusations that the Media is being biased or imbalanced, it sometimes comes down to the fact that finding mistakes in their reporting was in the eye of the beholder, and there is no pleasing everyone. He also wanted to reiterate that as a global institution of information, without a fundamental focus on impartiality, the BBC itself would fail all together.

In addition, he observed that watching the news at its core was based in a disconnect between the event and the viewer. As a viewer and reporter himself, he realized the fundamental difference in how something affected someone on a couch at home and the person present at the event itself. Sometimes viewers go into Media consumption with expectations of what they think they will see or what they think is going on when in reality, especially with such a volatile



conflict as in the Middle East, things change and horrible things happen that sometimes people at home cannot witness or experience. So when a person reads or watches something about the conflict, it is their pre-existing views which may shape how they indeed view it.

To point out one of the reasons people are sometimes more skeptical of Israel for instance, Stephenson referenced a period in which the violence between Israelis and Palestinians reached even more extreme heights than usual and Israel completely refused access to the BBC claiming they would be in the way and further complicate what was already occurring. Stephenson related to me that this decision was something that hurt Israel in the end because people began to question Israel's claim of being a free state when they denied media coverage access.

In reference to the credibility of the news that is reported, Stephenson reiterated what Balen and Hardy had both said. A lot of faith is put in correspondents and the stories they send from their posts are the stories that will air, no alterations. He pointed out that this was different from the American media in which practices of script approvals and edits are made. With the BBC, they trust the correspondent is well informed and factual and because of this, they air what they receive in London.

An unsettling part of my research was when it came inquiring about the producing of the news. Stephenson was very up front with me in saying that at the end of the day, you only have an allotted time in a news report. Many things happen in a day and there is only so much time to report things to the public. Furthermore, what is chosen to air is based on the principle that they are in essence making a television show on channels paid for by the public; they must appeal to a general audience and stories with audio, video or pictures get run before stories that do not. He did, however, reiterate that fundamentally, as a news source, vital information, which the public should not go without, will always run.

Overall, Stephenson, like the others at the BBC, restated its mantra that things may not always go perfectly, but at its core, BBC demands the greatest degree of impartiality one can expect from a journalist.

Lastly, I spoke with an outsider of the BBC, Sharif Nashishibi of Arab Media Watch, a media watchdog based in London and it was one of the more critical and cynical voices on the issue. Nashashibi expressed his dislike of the BBC's demand of privacy, and Malcolm Balen's failure to answer to the very public which initiated the enquiry to begin with. For Nashashibi it was a matter of the logistics like word choice and where the stories are reported. Using excessively elaborate adjectives, he said, was one of the BBC's downfalls as well as its lack of regional correspondents. Not having reporters in Gaza and the West Bank is a big mistake. Jerusalem is not the main stumbling block. He pointed out that when the BBC had people reporting from Palestine, their stories were much more on point, but with the more recent claims that it was too dangerous to have reporters in the area, they now rely on Jerusalem. My last clarification with him was the question that, if the BBC was accused by the public of being so pro-Palestinian, why did an organization like Arab media watch claim otherwise? He told me that in their opinion, people did not take the time to take in all of the facts and really take in what they were seeing. They simply use the parts of the News that reaffirm their opinion and run with that. In essence, Nashashibi said that it wasn't that the BBC was flawed in its reporting to one side or the other, but that it was in fact flawed in reporting on both sides.

In the end, taking into account all of my interviews and research, it is my belief that the British Broadcasting Corporation in fact, at its core, works to the best of its ability to be impartial in reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.