

## MASS MEDIA: VIEW FROM THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

We have learned that there is less a "general public" out there, than there are a number of "special publics." There is a labor public, a farmer public, a sports public, a black public and so forth. Obviously, one can belong to a number of different "publics," depending on the issues -- and there is presumably a common denominator American public. But, just as obviously, many public affairs attract the special interest of special publics. The Jewish public is one such special public, with a special interest in certain public affairs, and in the way the mass media report them.

The public issues in which the Jewish public has a special interest include: Israel and the Middle East; beleaguered Jewish communities abroad, such as in the Soviet Union and Syria; anti-semitism, neo-Nazism and the like in America; church-state issues -- and in varying degrees, other issues relating to civil rights and civil liberties. Jews belong to other special publics, and have other burning interests, but as a Jewish public, their interests tend to turn especially around these issues.

Among these issues, two may be seen as touchstones with respect to mass media:

- 1) Defamation of Jews;
- 2) Fair treatment for Israel.

The Jews are a special public on defamation for obvious reasons. A long history of oppression in many countries under many different circumstances has always been built on a reservoir of popular prejudice, actively stimulated by whatever communications media were available. Czarist agents used books, pamphlets and newspapers in order to whip up anti-semitism. Nazi Germany did the same, adding the new weapon of radio, and also bringing anti-semitic cartooning to a new stage of development. And so forth. The Jews are not naive enough to believe that there is a direct and automatic relationship between the media and anti-semitism. A person is not converted to anti-semitism by seeing an anti-semitic cartoon or reading an anti-semitic diatribe. But the media, over a period of time, do establish the climate of what is culturally acceptable

and legitimate, and what is not. The media are not a sufficient weapon for those who want to revive and use anti-semitism for political purposes -- but they are a necessary weapon. There is little wonder that the Jews form a special public on this matter.

2) There are some basic differences between the issue of defamation and that of "fair treatment" of Israel. Although presumably all Americans should be interested in fair treatment for Israel, the Jews do form a special public on this issue for several reasons: Israel represents the only refuge which European and Middle Eastern Jews had; it represents the spiritual center of Judaism; and it represents the possible locus for another holocaust.

However, the defamation of Jews tends to be more easily demonstrable, less debatable, less controversial than the question of fair treatment for Israel. Anti-semitism is culturally illegitimate and unacceptable within the framework of the American ethic. Most strategic positions on American foreign policy vis-a-vis Israel are debatable; and while we prevalently believe that some of those positions are badly mistaken differences of opinion, they are not by themselves culturally illegitimate.

But there is an aspect of media behavior which could be subsumed under the strongly worded category of illegitimacy, with respect to morality and the American ethic -- and which could conceivably be applied to some media treatment of Israel and the Middle East. We expect certain professional standards of relatively unbiased news reporting from our mainstream media, and any radical departure from that might well be viewed as illegitimate by the Jewish public.

Obviously, there is a greater twilight zone between illegitimacy and difference of opinion in matters relating to Israel than in matters relating to defamation. But it would seem important for the distinction to be made both by the Jewish community and the media.

However, it should be strongly emphasized that the word illegitimacy, in the context of common morality and the American ethic, is not to be equated with illegality.

Uniquely complicating any media evaluation is another axis, which has to do with freedom of the press and of expression. The Jewish public is, as a whole, strongly committed to freedom of expression -- simply because Jews have had their greatest freedom in societies which guarantee freedom of expression; and have been most suppressed in those societies which have also suppressed general freedom of expression. That is not an accidental coincidence. Jewish support of a free press is a matter of the deepest self-interest.

Therefore, while the Jewish public may take exception to some media treatment of pertinent issues, it does not, at its most enlightened, want the intervention of law or government. However, it does want the media to behave responsibly. It makes a distinction between freedom of the press and editorial responsibility. It does not believe that freedom of the press should relieve the media from the exercise of editorial responsibility.

In summary, then, there are two broad categories of media treatment which relate to that editorial responsibility: 1) The illegitimate: that which runs counter to the basic American ethic, such as anti-semitism; or which runs counter to the basic journalistic ethic, such as a blatantly slanderous or slanted treatment of Israel. 2) The debatable: that which differs from the prevalent beliefs of the Jewish public -- such as the belief that Israel should recognize the P.L.O.

By the same token, there might be journalistic behavior relating to anti-semitism which the Jewish public might consider, not illegitimate, but debatable, open to a difference of opinion. A common example is whether news about a given anti-semitic group in a given set of circumstances should be heavily dramatized in the media.

Editorial responsibility, in the view of the Jewish community, means avoiding the illegitimate, and being open to differences of opinion. Obviously, there are vast twilight zones between the two which require further exploration.

For example: If a newspaper or a TV station would take a clear editorial position supporting anti-semitism, then the Jewish community would shout "foul." This would be an illegitimate thing for the mainstream media to do, given the morality and fundamental American ethic which we expect of even our unofficial institutions. But that is not normally the problem. The problem usually occurs in relation either to "features" or "reporting about" anti-semitism. These are illustrated in two of the case studies which are being presented to the workshops:

. A newspaper ran a syndicated column, whose author suggested that there was much truth in the folk belief that Jews were greedy.

. A TV news reporter interviewed an anti-semite who said, in connection with no news story, that Jews practiced a blood ritual during Passover, which accounted for the disappearance of some Christian children. This interview was filmed, and run on the air as filmed.

Questions: That newspaper columnist had a legal right to say what he said. The newspaper had a legal right to run it. But does not the newspaper have editorial responsibility for what its purchased features say? Does not a newspaper have a responsibility to refuse to run such a column; or to inform the columnist that it will run no more such columns? And, most of all, -- in an editorial, or an editorial note of some kind -- does not the newspaper have a responsibility to say to its general public that it finds the columnist's comments invalid and unworthy?

And on the blood libel story: does the TV station not have the editorial responsibility to edit out that particular interview? The First Amendment is not involved here because we are talking about voluntary editorial responsibility -- and the fact that most of the material filmed by TV news people is cut as a matter of editorial judgement.

These are admittedly judgment calls. When General Brown several years ago accused the Jewish community of controlling all the media and the banks in this country, no one objected that the media ran that story. It was legitimate news. It was important for everyone to know that there was that kind of thinking in high places. This raises another criterion: the distinction between reporting news and attempting to make news. When the TV station ran the "blood libel" interview, in the view of the Jewish public it was attempting to make news, it was engaging in cheap sensationalism. The Jewish community felt that that was an illegitimate endeavor.

This slides into more difficult questions which should perhaps be considered "Differences of Opinion" rather than "Illegitimacy." For example, the group which calls itself Nazi in the Bay Area has lifted its ugly head periodically over the past 20 years with a series of hopefully dramatic events. About ten uniformed Nazis appear at a Board of Education meeting, or hold a street meeting, and, of course, are attacked. The media say that this is legitimate news; and some of them say that this provides a good opportunity to expose them for what they are. There are many headlines, pictures and interviews, to the Nazis' delight.

The question here: What is the point at which the media may exceed the legitimate news value of the Nazi appearance, and over-play them, in another version of "making" rather than "reporting" news, for purposes of titillation?

One illustration: at a time when the San Francisco public was engaged in a debate about one school busing plan as against another, one newspaper ran a big picture of eight Nazis expressing their opposition to one plan. A TV station interviewed one Nazi towards the same end. But there were a substantial number of citizens who were opposing that plan. The picture and the interview suggested that the Nazis were leading the movement. The media were allowing themselves to be used by the Nazis.

On the other hand, the Jewish community is interested in anti-Nazi education on the media. Such an education would require an occasional demonstration of what the local Nazis are saying or doing. It is the total context which counts.

So, with respect to "reporting about Nazis" or anti-semites, there can often be differences of opinion about strategy, with the Jewish community feeling that the standards for exposure should be: very hard news, the reporting of news rather than the making of it, and the general projection of an anti-Nazi climate.

With respect to Israel, the categories must be defined somewhat differently. The obviously illegitimate with respect to Israel has to do with outright slander of Israel. If a newspaper editorial were to flatly say that Israel has invaded Arab lands repeatedly, then the Jewish community could call "foul," because the facts are so demonstrably otherwise.

Many abuses, however, fall in the twilight zone between fair and foul, and become matters in which the context is critical. Among the case studies to be used later in the workshops are these:

. When the Israeli cabinet recently decided that Egypt was demanding concessions beyond those considerable concessions already made by Israel at Camp David, without offering any new ones of their own -- and that Israel could not accept such further, unilateral concessions -- the headline in a local newspaper read: "Israel Rejects Concessions."

Headlines are a common problem, for a number of technical reasons. But since a large number of Americans, by survey, don't read foreign news much beyond the headlines, headlines do create a problem. This one projected the idea that Israel was being the hard-nosed party, and had not made any concessions -- when that was factually not the case.

. One newspaper ran almost a full page of articles on the charge that Israel was engaging in torture. The charge was based on a small number of interviews with Palestinian Arabs, by a person who was personally involved with those Palestinian Arabs. Nowhere did the story seriously allege that any torture was the result of a systematic policy by the Israeli government. And buried in the story was the State Department evaluation that Israel generally rated very high in the matter of human rights, for Jews or Arabs.

Was the newspaper remiss in its editorial responsibility when it played this unvarnished charge so prominently? Notoriously systematic torture by China, Nicaragua or Iran scarcely received such treatment. Of course, some have pointed out that Israel is not expected to engage in torture, and therefore it is news when they are so charged. However, this does not remove the fact that a mis-impression was communicated by the media.

The editorial responsibility of the media in this case was largely a context responsibility: it was not a matter of them refusing to run the story of the charge against Israel -- that was legitimate news -- but of providing the necessary perspective for that story. In a real sense, the press was here engaged in making rather than just reporting the news.

There is no need to document cases of "difference of opinion" in the matter of reporting on Israel and the Middle East. Whether Israel should place settlements in the West Bank, whether a Palestinian state should be set up forthwith, whether Egypt or Israel is being more hard-nosed -- there are legitimate differences of opinion. It should be emphasized strongly that this does not make it less a matter of concern. The Jewish public, by and large, has a stake in trying to change the editorial opinion of the media in these matters of differing opinion. But the different categories require different attitudes and approaches.

However, there is another note on these "differences of opinion" as they are reflected by news stories or columns and other features. The pattern of features and news stories can produce a distorted context for these admittedly controversial issues. This is the most subtle editorial responsibility of all, which touches on journalistic legitimacy.

It is very important to state that few people believe that the mainstream media commit their "illegitimate" errors out of a designed malice. This would be a kind of reverse conspiracy theory to that of General Brown. However, there has developed the feeling that there may be an increasing insensitivity in the media to the concerns of the Jewish community -- a matter which is dealt with in more depth by an article which you have all received entitled "The Insensitives," using some of the examples we are using today.

Finally, there is the question of when and how it is proper for the Jewish community to express its views on these matters. What is the relationship between the media and the special publics? It is, at the moment, somewhat different for the print media than it is for TV and radio. In the case of TV and radio, there is a somewhat obscure governmental relationship, because of the use of limited public air. The FCC has certain broad parameters of fairness to which the special publics can appeal. For the newspapers, there is no official intervention at all.

But the Jewish public, like other special publics, takes the view that all of these media are unofficial but quasi-public social institutions -- which have the avowed perception of themselves as such, and as being imbued with editorial responsibility -- and for both reasons of substance and self-image, they can be fairly charged with the obligations of editorial responsibility.

There is, of course, an obverse responsibility for the Jewish public, or at least for the organized Jewish community: to make the necessary distinctions between that which tends to be illegitimate and intolerable; and that which is an unhappy matter of difference of opinion. In order to be effective as well as constructive, the Jewish community must attempt to make these distinctions, and adapt different approaches for them. However, it would also seem to be the responsibility of the media to develop a sensitivity to that which should be mutually deemed illegitimate -- and to be open to discussion on matters which are deemed differences of opinion.

S.F. JCRC  
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