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Unfavorable News Coverage

"A review of the coverage of Lebanon by the major U. S. daily newspapers reveals a consistent pro-Israel bias."

That is the conclusion of an irate research report from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, about the coverage of events in Lebanon since June 6. After examining papers from around the country, this Committee spelled out its complaints:

"The most important but also the most subtle manner in which the press demonstrates its pro-Israel anti-Arab favor is through the daily editorial decision-making process...from the choice of words for headlines, the selection and placement of war-related photographs, the phrasing of editorials...opinion essays...letters...political cartoons."

The report attempts to document its complaints with evidence from the newspapers, in sections headed: "Accepting the Israeli line," "Dehumanizing the Palestinians," "Downplaying Israeli Destruction." The report summarizes its findings by saying that "the Pro-Israeli attitudes of the top echelon encourages and legitimizes an anti-Arab bias at all levels of the press, whose biased coverage of the events such as the current war must be considered a public disservice."

It is immediately obvious that these exact charges have been made against the press by the Jewish community, with only the "pro-Israel" changed to "anti-Israel,"

and so forth. And it would be a mistake to think that either the Jewish community or the Arab community were play-acting in making their charges. Both communities feel genuinely and angrily that they have been unfairly dealt with in the press coverage of events in Lebanon.

In the course of its media monitoring project, the JCRC did an analysis of about 200 news stories, letters, columns, photographs and editorials in San Francisco's least friendly newspaper between June and August. The evaluations were necessarily subjective, although guidelines were used. These evaluations were made by people who are admittedly pro-Israel in their attitudes.

These evaluators found that 15 percent of these items were favorable towards Israel, 31 percent were unfavorable, and 54 percent were neutral. The news stories were found to have the most unfavorable proportion. Only about one percent of the news stories were found to be favorable, 31 percent unfavorable, and 68 percent neutral.

Among the items which were not news stories - the columns, letters, photographs and editorials - there was obviously less "neutral" material. Of those (non-news) items, 49 percent were found to be favorable, 33 percent unfavorable and 18 percent neutral.

Make of it what you will. There is always the Partisan Reader's Syndrome at work. If you believe that Israel deserves to be shown in the best possible light, then anything less than, say, a 95 percent favorable ratio of treatment will make you think that the overall treatment is outrageously biased. But that percentage is to be found only in the Jewish Bulletin and the Wall Street Journal.