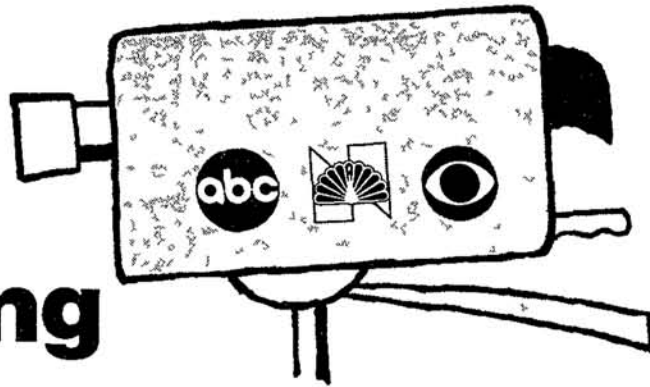


ADL BULLETIN



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Lebanon: Where TV Went Wrong



Television network coverage of the war in Lebanon was flawed by inaccurate and unbalanced reporting, according to an Anti-Defamation League study based on data gathered by media specialists, Garth-Furst International, Inc.

The study acknowledged the networks' "desire for truth and accuracy" in news coverage and the "inherent difficulties" in war reporting. It nevertheless cited numerous examples of errors and distortions found in examining tapes of the evening news broadcasts of the three major networks—CBS, NBC and ABC—from June 4 to September 1.

The following factors contributed to the perceived lack of balance in the news media's handling of Israel's actions in Lebanon:

- inflated casualty figures reported and not corrected, as well as other factual errors;
- melodramatic portrayal of Israeli censorship;
- lingering and graphic daily coverage of the wounded and suffering that overwhelmed or overlooked the political, historical and military context of the situation,
- simple, nondimensional reporting of P.L.O. posturing and a lack of critical analysis of the nature and background of the P.L.O. role.

Prior to public release of the findings, ADL officials met with executives from CBS, NBC and ABC to discuss some of the difficulties and consequences of reporting fast-breaking events, especially when they occur in faraway places.

The study pointed out that the American media are no longer mere spectators—they have become a factor in shaping public opinion, and, in some cases, U.S. foreign policy.

The television coverage of the Lebanese war left viewers with a feeling that Israel was totally responsible for the violence. With the media competing for "scoops" and graphic depiction of violent events, even if the text of a report correctly attributed the violence to the Palestine Liberation Organization or leftist Moslem militias, the brutally graphic visuals of explosions, suffering of refugees, women, children and the wounded tended to obscure and overwhelm the text.

The study employed three criteria in examining network news coverage: accuracy of reporting, censorship and balance and fairness

The greatest inaccuracies were found to have occurred in reporting casualty figures in June, particularly during the first 10 days of the month when Israel did not

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TV Coverage *Continued from page 1*

release casualty figures. In July and August, there was an improvement in reporting of casualties, the study noted.

Often, it went on, the networks provided casualty totals without a source or based on a biased source, the Palestine Red Crescent, an arm of the P.L.O., but neglected to report updated figures provided by impartial observers, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The networks initially reported 600,000 Lebanese war refugees. However, the study pointed out, on June 18 the International Committee of the Red Cross said this total was "highly exag-



NBC's Roger Mudd, l., erroneously referred to the Red Crescent as "Lebanon's Red Cross." Numbers, such as given by ABC, r., were called "highly exaggerated" by the Red Cross.

gerated" and put the refugee figure at 300,000. Yet, no network reported that an update had been made, ADL said. Also lost on the viewing audience was the fact that the entire pre-war population of the region was 510,000.

Frequently during the June coverage of the war, the study went on, field reporters and anchormen used the "Palestine Red Crescent" interchangeably with the Red Cross. The Palestine Red Crescent is headed by Fathi Arafat, the brother of P.L.O. chairman Yasir Arafat.

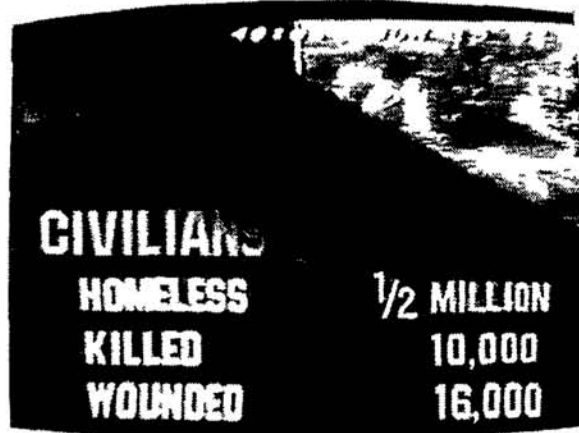
On the subject of censorship, the study concluded that although Israeli censorship was a factor in network reporting, treatment of it was overplayed and went beyond normal journalistic practice.

By contrast, TV coverage of the Falklands war, which was going on simulta-

neously, employed very different standards in treating British and Argentine censorship of the fighting.

On many occasions in the Lebanon situation, in addition to the networks superimposing the words, "Report cleared by Israeli censors" on field reports, anchormen also called attention to the censorship, followed by field reporters again reminding the viewer that the report had been censored.

While the P.L.O. did not examine stories being filed, it did employ a type of censorship which was largely ignored, according to the study. During P.L.O. control of West Beirut, correspondents were limited in their movements and by what the P.L.O. wanted them to



report or film. "They were not free to roam the streets of Beirut and shoot film at will, and that fact was not as often or dramatically reported as Israeli censorship," the study said.

On the question of balance and fairness, it was found that all of the networks, perhaps unwittingly or unconsciously, had contributed to some distortions and lack of objective perspective in their coverage of the war.

ADL acknowledged that evaluating the fairness of reporting political and military events raises the issue of whether any such evaluation can ever be free of subjective consideration.

The League, while recognizing the difficulties news media experience in seeking to fulfill their responsibilities, said that because most attention was focused on scenes of violence, casualties and devastation, there was scant

attention to wider reality. This resulted in the networks:

- only rarely mentioning the fact that the P.L.O. intentionally placed its artillery within civilian centers;
- ignoring the “extraordinary” measures taken by the Israeli force to avoid civilian casualties, such as warning civilians before an attack to flee;
- inadequately reporting Israeli relief efforts in Lebanon, an extraordinary departure from the usual behavior of combatants and certainly newsworthy;
- exaggerating internal Israeli debate over the war. Although it was unprecedented for Israelis to protest a war while it was still going on, and the networks certainly had an obligation to report this, not enough attention was paid to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the nation supported the Begin Government’s war effort,
- pursuing the “hot” or graphic war story in Beirut at the expense of coverage of the strategically more important Syrian-Israeli battle in the Bekaa Valley;
- showing P.L.O. leader Arafat repeatedly kissing babies and smiling broadly with little or no analysis of the propaganda impact;
- virtually ignoring the context of the larger political and historical realities of the region, including the seven-year Lebanese civil war in which 100,000 Christians and Palestinians were killed; Jordan’s expulsion of the Palestinians in 1970 during which 10,000 Palestinians were reported slain, and the reaction of the Lebanese population, both Chris-



“Lingering and graphic” footage of suffering “overwhelmed or overlooked the political, historical and military context of the situation”

tians and Moslems, to the P.L.O. and to Israel.

In addition to the issue of media responsibility to the public, the study raised the following questions:

- should the networks have reported the war in any particular context? Is straight, objective reporting possible in a “hot” war?



Reporting Israeli shelling of ‘residential sections’ on July 27, CBS’s Dan Rather did not refer to arms placed there by PLO

- is the quality of news reporting improving as television devotes more and more time to it? How much more of a factor is news reporting in determining public opinion and governmental policy, as indicated by remarks during the Lebanese conflict by Secretary of State Shultz and Vice President Bush that the Administration “has seen the pictures and been affected by them”?
- with the media using one set of standards for democratic Israel and a different set for the non-democratic Arab states, how could the viewer accurately judge the right and wrong of the situation involving Israel and the P.L.O. during the Lebanese war?
- to what extent, if any, were the media manipulated and/or intimidated by the P.L.O. during the Lebanese civil war and the recent war in Lebanon?
- were internal Israeli decisions regarding military censorship, public relations, and the conduct of the war responsible for the way the war was reported?

The League study concluded with the hope that these questions—and others raised in the report—will be used in discussions by all those interested in balanced and fair reporting. □