

Pens and Swords - How the American Mainstream Media Report the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

review of Marda Dunsky's book

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In an era when American foreign policy has reached the pinnacle of unilateralism by invading other countries pre-emptively, threatening others with nuclear annihilation, and abrogating in doing so many decades if not more than a century of international law development, Marda Dunsky's book *Pens and Swords* presents a very strong, well-referenced argument illuminating the bias within American media reports on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That bias develops under two main themes - a lack of historical context, and a lack of recognition of the effects of U.S. foreign policy. Along with those two major themes, are the related ideas of weaknesses in analysing and criticizing sources, and in not providing references for what discussion there is as the arguments already fit the generally accepted 'Washington' consensus. Other ideas that accompany the discussion are the use of language that biases an argument, and the desire for the "amorphous if not impossible standard of objectivity."

Overview

The book is well organized and well developed. It begins with an introduction that presents a brief summary of some current communication theory. This is followed by a discussion of the "policy mirror" between the Washington consensus and the media. Next is a limited presentation of historical context - the nakba, international law and the right of return - in order that the reader does have some background knowledge, leading into Dunsky's first discussion on reporting on the Palestinian refugee story. From there the main presentation works through discussions of media reporting on Israeli settlements, the violence of the second intifada, the 'war at home' or how the local media is perceived by various sectors. The two final sections "In the Field" and "Toward a New way of Reporting..." carry significant and well-reasoned perspectives on what is happening and what could or should be happening.

There are several points along the way that deserve emphasis for their clarity and validity.

Communication theory

First is the communication theory, which defines mainstream media as "outlets that are in harmony with the prevailing direction of influence in culture at large." In essence, "to a significant extent American mainstream journalism on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict toes the line of U.S. Mideast policy." She discusses three theoretical constructs - hegemony, indexing, and cascading - that emphasize these points respectively: "the American mainstream media...operate in the same social and economic framework as government;"

“The range of discourse is exceedingly narrow...because [it] emanates from an equally narrow range of sources;” and “the mainstream media determines the level of understanding that is possible for the public and the policy makers alike.” If that does not give the mainstream media thoughts for concern, then ironically, these definitions become all that more powerful.

Refugees

The refugee problem is defined as “a root cause of the Israeli-Palestine conflict” and to omit it from context “is to omit an important part of the story.” Dunsky briefly outlines the nakba as recently viewed by ‘revisionist’ historians who deny the official Israeli narrative while using information in a large part garnered from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) archives themselves. While these ideas “depart markedly from the familiar narrative” there are other gaps in the narrative, one of the more important being “the body of international law and consensus on refugee rights in general, and Palestinian refugee rights in particular.”[1] Accompanying this is the right of return which the Israelis claim for the Jewish people of the world, but that is denied to the Palestinians in contravention of international law.

Context as a theme is obviously a major issue for any discussion of the refugee problem. American media “routinely denies its audience the contextual tools with which to assess important historical and political aspects of the issue,” and it “largely mirrors U.S. Mideast policy,” remaining “explicitly tilted in favor of Israel in the pursuit of what is officially defined as the U.S. national interest in the region.” News reports “relate what can be *seen and heard*, to the exclusion or relevant contextual background.” [italics in original] The message that does come across is that of the “refugees’ own transigence and the machinations of their leaders, the Arab states, and the United Nations.” While it seems almost too obvious to state, Dunsky sums up her arguments on the refugee reporting saying “if Americans had a fuller contextual understanding of the key issues...via the mainstream media, they would be better equipped to challenge U.S. Mideast policy.”

Obvious yes, but it also signifies that American culture, American society perhaps does not want to disturb its own beliefs in its exceptionalism and perfectionism that is their gift (even if by the barrel of a gun) to the world. To admit these failings of context, to examine the context in light of foreign policy would be greatly disturbing to a society educated (or inculcated) about its own greatness, exceptionalism, perfectionism, and love of democracy and freedom. And so it should be.

Israeli settlements

Similar arguments are brought forth concerning the Israeli settlements. A brief background set of information ties in the U.S. \$3 billion in aid each year that supports the ability to continue the settlements. Dunsky argues, and supports, the idea that “reporting on the settlement issue bears a striking similarity to reporting on the ...refugee question,” with “more weight usually given to Israeli claims and little or no reference to international law and consensus.” Also, “dramatic description is substituted for thoroughgoing analytical reporting.” And more in the same category of context: “Contextually and substantively...the stories made little or no reference to international law and consensus or to U.S. aid to Israel.”

The media references to the Israeli side generally emphasize the perspective “that Palestinian violence must be halted before negotiations can resume,” without the context of

history and the idea that the very act of settlement and “its attendant military defense have been a root cause of that violence.” Frequent comments run through the text, emphasizing and referencing the lack of context and of international law and consensus in the media reports that are studied.

The intifada

The height of the intifada violence coincided with American rhetoric and anguish after 9/11 and provided a neat tie in for the Israeli government and the IDF to try and capture the argument as one of terrorism, leaving aside completely the historical context and using the American perspective of “us against them,” of democracy versus demagoguery, of “they hate us for what we are.” For the media “political discourse focused entirely on themes that were emotional, moral, and patriotic,” providing a “period of congruence for the United States and Israel.” The IDF incursions into the West Bank relied on the concept that “the campaign was to root out the terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank.”

Palestine was no match for the well-organized Israeli “propaganda battlefield” and as events continued, “Arafat and the PA were linked to terror” as “repeatedly impressed on U.S. government officials and the American public through the media.” Another feature of these reports is what “amounted to transparent Israeli advocacy for a U.S. war in Iraq” as well as connections through to Iran. In sum, Dunsky says

“American journalists were operating within the sphere of cultural congruence – a comfort zone where journalistic scepticism and balance were often overshadowed or displaced by the political discourse of the Bush administration, in which a “war on terror” could be prosecuted by the United States, and, by extension, its closest ally.”

Ego and Access

The chapter “In the Field” provides an intriguing perspective on the reporters/journalists (I put those two descriptors together, not really sure where the lines between a reporter and a journalist meet or overlap or coincide) themselves. The section could be subtitled “Ego and Access” as those are the two main themes in the first set of self-reports.

Dunsky allows the reporters to speak for themselves and some of what they say is self-incriminating as to why there is a bias and lack of context. It would seem that the correspondents are well aware of media competition in the sense that they need a daily story. They worry about how the editors will deal with their report and they need a story with a different view to gain publication and so that their peers will take notice: “to attempt unfiltered reporting...not only is often discouraged by newsroom culture but can also result in swift and unstinting audience censure.” That is the ego part. The access part is the consistent iteration that access to Israeli sources was very easy and well organized and that communication with the Palestinians required more effort. That could be – although denied by the correspondents – because “most...choose to live among Israelis in West Jerusalem because of its higher standard of living rather than among Palestinians.” It is a hard denial to make, that their place of living has “had little or no effect on their actual work product.” If they have no sense of context, perhaps also their sense of place is...hmm...misplaced.

Before getting into these self-examinations, examinations that reveal all too much about

ego and access, Dunsky reiterates her own two “key underlying contexts: the impact of U.S. policy on the trajectory of the conflict; and the importance of international law and consensus regarding the key issues of Israeli settlement and annexation policies and the right of return of Palestinian refugees.” As a result the journalistic product “frames media discourse on the conflict in a way that reinforces and supports rather than scrutinizes and challenges U.S. policy that in many ways undergirds it.”

Context and media failure.

The final two writers provide a much clearer analysis of the world they lived in. Gillian Findlay, ABC correspondent from September 1997 to June 2002 says “when we did try to provide context, it became such a controversial thing, not only among viewers but also within the news organization.” She was surprised by “how little our audience understood about the roots of the conflict,” and says it is a “cop out in reporting” to say there is nothing the U.S. administration can do. Speaking more globally she hits upon another truth about American media, that “the lack of context applies to so much reporting these days. It’s not just this issue.”

Chris Hedges worked for the New York Times and the Dallas Morning News off and on from January 1988 to 2003. He says “Arab culture is incomprehensible to us because we’ve never taken the time to understand it. It’s a great failing of the press that when something is incomprehensible to us, we certify it as incomprehensible to everyone.” He continues this idea when discussing the suicide bombers, “we don’t understand the slow drip of oppression” that created them and further “We’ve never taken the time to understand them....[a] fundamental failure of the coverage of Palestinians.” As for the press as an institution he says, “bureaucracies...are driven by ambition and have very little moral sense. That’s true of every institution....It’s not conducive of their own advancement.”

All of which leaves me wondering, as a critical reader, what exactly are the credentials of the writers/reporters/journalists who are in the field. Certainly being there provides them with first hand observation of current events, but do they have the academic background to understand the socio-political history of the region? Are they able and willing to look at what for me is the prime contradiction in the vast majority of American and Israeli foreign affairs and those who report on it - that what you do speaks so loud I can’t hear what you are saying? That democracy does not arrive at the barrel of gun, peace does not come from pre-emptive invasions and occupations, the victim cannot be blamed for the ongoing violence against the intruders, and international law deems it all illegal? More simply put, people, nations, do not like being occupied and suppressed, and no rhetoric of any kind will make it acceptable except to an elite few cronies of the occupiers. Are the reporters able and willing to step outside of the Washington consensus, willing to take the time to provide more background information for themselves as well as their readers, or will the corporate agenda over-rule any attempts at providing context, a context that more often than not goes against the grain of the Washington consensus?

The final argument is on objectivity, seen in the introduction as an “amorphous if not impossible standard,” another argument that comes back to all media tasks being “superfluous as long as one remains within the presuppositional framework of the doctrinal consensus,” with writers well aware of “rewards that accrue to conformity and the costs of honest dissidence.”

I would hope that all journalists/writers would take the time to read Pens and Swords. The books arguments are well presented and well referenced, and the work as a whole should be placed on every journalists'/reporters' shelf alongside similar works by other well referenced and questioning media critics [2] For any journalist who is actually wishing to pursue truth rather than ego and access, consideration and action on the ideas presented in Dunsky's work would be a great place to start. Pens and Swords is also a great read for all mass media audiences to better inform themselves and to be able to criticize and analyze the writers/producers and their products more intelligently as well as to analyze their own place and views within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

[1] for an easily read comprehensive understanding of international law, see Michael Byers' War Law, Understanding International Law and Armed Conflict, Douglas & McIntyre, Toronto, 2005.

[2]]Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent (2002), and Falk and Friel Israel-Palestine on Record (2007).

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