

Softball Interviews with Israeli Ministers Breach Impartiality Code, BBC Admits

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Moshe Yaalon, Israel's defense minister, has told a series of lies on British radio. (Munich Security Conference/[Wikimedia Commons](#))

A BBC investigation has found that one of its senior presenters, Sarah Montague, breached the organization's editorial standards on impartiality in a radio interview she conducted with Israeli defense minister, Moshe Yaalon, in March.

The investigation was carried out following [allegations](#) of pro-Israel bias against Montague's interview by the [Palestine Solidarity Campaign](#) (PSC) and a number of concerned individuals who complained to the BBC.

The [ruling](#) against Montague is the second time in recent months that the BBC has upheld a complaint initiated by the PSC.

[In the first ruling](#), the BBC's [Editorial Complaints Unit](#) (ECU) agreed with complainants that an online [BBC article about Gaza's tunnels](#) had breached the organization's accuracy guidelines by presenting its pro-Israel author, Eado Hecht, as an "independent" defense analyst.

The two ECU rulings highlight just how often the [BBC provides an unchallenged platform](#) to Israel's spokespeople.

Montague's interview with Yaalon on the current affairs radio program *Today* was shocking in that a supposedly impartial journalist [remained completely silent](#) as the defense minister told lie after lie on air, including the outrageous claim that "the Palestinians enjoy already political independence...And we are happy with it."

In his first response to complainants, George Mann, assistant editor of *Today*, wrote via email: "I'm sorry you didn't enjoy Sarah Montague's interview with Moshe Yaalon...Having listened back [to the interview], I feel she challenged him well."

There were, however, no challenges from Montague to Yaalon's propaganda, so Mann's statement was deluded at best, an act of complicity in defending the bias at worst.

After being challenged again, Mann continued to defend his presenter and so complaints were made to the ECU, which, in the BBC's complaints system, is one stage away from the BBC Trust.

Last week, all complainants received an email message from Fraser Steel, the BBC's head of editorial complaints, on behalf of the ECU.

Steel, announcing that he would be upholding the complaint, wrote: "Mr. Yaalon was allowed to make several controversial statements...without any meaningful challenge, and the program-makers have accepted that the interviewer ought to have interrupted him and questioned him on his assertions."

Steel then tries to excuse Montague's appalling silence as Israel's defense minister took over the BBC airwaves by claiming that Montague was badly briefed by researchers and didn't have much time to make the recording.

He concludes: "The result was that the output fell below the BBC's standards of impartiality."

Damage is done

So, will Montague and other presenters on *Today* — billed by the BBC as its flagship news and current affairs program — be giving free rein to Israeli spokespeople again?

Steel writes: "The program-makers recognize that more recording time and greater attention to background detail would have ensured that the interview was managed appropriately and the editor has asked the production team to factor this in to future interviews."

But, of course, the damage caused by the Yaalon interview has already been done.

Once again, the BBC allowed an Israeli spokesperson to completely airbrush the occupation.

The ECU's ruling will eventually be published online, but only an apology on the *Today* program, where the interview was aired, could go some way towards mitigating its noxious effects.

In the other positive [ECU ruling published this year](#), Steel upheld complaints against the BBC website's description of Eado Hecht — a lecturer in the pay of the Israeli army — as an "independent defense analyst."

Hecht authored an article on BBC Online in July last year headlined "[Gaza: How Hamas tunnel network grew](#)."

The article itself is classic Israeli propaganda, devoted to describing tunnels "booby-trapped with explosives" and repeating the lie that Israel withdrew from Gaza.

It was written and uploaded by the BBC two weeks into Israel's 2014 attack on Gaza and is an attempt to justify the destruction inflicted on Gaza's people. The tunnels, Hecht writes, are "almost impossible to detect" and so the Israelis are compelled to "go in and search for them house by house."

And, because merely "blowing in the entrance or some of the airshafts leave most of the tunnel intact...the entire length of the tunnel and its branches must be located, mapped and then completely destroyed."

Seven hundred Palestinians had already been killed in Gaza in fifteen days when this article — which completely ignores the Palestinian perspective — was put onto the BBC’s website. By the end of the slaughter towards the end of August, more than 2,200 Palestinians lay dead and whole areas of Gaza were reduced to rubble.

It’s repellent enough that the BBC commissioned and printed an article attempting to justify this destruction, but even more so that its virulently pro-Israel author was presented as a neutral commentator.

Israeli privileges

Once again, the BBC initially rejected complaints that presenting Hecht as independent was inaccurate and therefore misleading to BBC audiences.

Complainants were forced to bring their arguments to the ECU, where Steel agreed that Hecht’s connections with the Israeli military — he lectured at the army’s Command and General Staff College — rendered him a partisan observer of the situation.

In a letter to complainants, Steel added that “articles published under Dr. Hecht’s name reveal a clear pro-Israel perspective and offer guidance and analysis as to how Israel might better prosecute its dispute [sic] with the Palestinians.”

BBC Online’s description of Hecht was judged by the ECU to have breached the following [editorial guideline](#) on accuracy. “We should normally identify on-air and online sources of information and significant contributors, and provide their credentials, so that our audiences can judge their status,” the guidelines state.

Publishing the ruling online in February, the BBC writes: “The editor of BBC News Online has reminded staff that it is important to give sufficiently detailed information to enable readers to calibrate a contributor’s affiliations.”

Which is all well and good, but why are BBC editors commissioning such [biased articles](#) in the first place? And, if they must, why don’t they clearly mark them as opinion pieces?

This is meant to be a news organisation without an agenda, but Hecht’s propaganda piece (minus the word “independent” in his biographical note) remains on the BBC website, alongside other [similar articles](#) written by [pro-Israel commentators](#) whenever Israel is conducting a full-blown assault on Gaza.

There are no comparable articles commissioned by the BBC from Palestinian or pro-Palestinian commentators, in which they are given *carte blanche* to set out their stall.

This is a privilege afforded by the BBC only to Israel’s spokespeople and, until now, those spokespeople have taken full advantage of this freedom across the BBC’s output, whether broadcast or online.

It is to be hoped that these two ECU rulings will go some way to pushing back those privileges and introducing something that more resembles professional journalism in the BBC’s coverage of Israel’s occupation.

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