

The BBC: Impartial Reporting or Pro-Israel Bias?

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The British Broadcasting Corporation has often been [accused](#) of anti-Semitism, usually by representatives of the Israeli government, the Israeli Ambassador to the UK or the Chief Rabbi.

Any passing mention of the plight of the Palestinians on the news used to result in either Ambassador Proser or Rabbi Jonathon Sachs elbowing their way into the Today programme studio the following morning to bleat about Israel's actions being misrepresented. The current Ambassador and Chief Rabbi are not quite so vocal but just as sensitive. Palestinians do not have that ease of access.

But is the BBC anti-Semitic as Israel claims or, as many others claim, does the BBC have a pro-Israel bias in its reporting?

Back in January 2009, when Operation Cast Lead was in full swing with Gaza being reduced to rubble, and its inhabitants had nowhere to flee, the Disasters Emergency Committee issued an appeal on behalf of the Gazan people. DEC is made up of 14 leading UK aid charities. When some major humanitarian crisis occurs they combine their fundraising efforts. The appeal is broadcast on all major TV and radio stations and large adverts appear in the press. The response from the British public is usually swift and generous. But, where the Israeli attack on Gaza was concerned, the BBC said 'No'. And because the great BBC was [refusing](#) to air the appeal, the other channels felt they had to follow suit.

The public outcry was massive. The BBC instantly received over 11,000 complaints. The Minister for the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Lord Malloch Brown, was similarly bombarded although protesters were forced to write to him as the FCO took down his email address. Proser and Sachs applauded the BBC's decision. And the Director General of the BBC, Mark Thompson, was forced into making the following [statement](#), justifying his decision:

"Inevitably, an appeal would use pictures which are the same or similar to those we would be using in our news programmes but would do so with the objective of encouraging public donations, ...The danger ... is that this could be interpreted as taking a political stance on an ongoing story. When we've turned down DEC appeals in the past on impartiality grounds, it has been because of this risk of giving ... the impression that the BBC was taking sides in an ongoing conflict."

Apart from the fact that the BBC were not showing any pictures from inside Gaza because Israel was preventing *any* reporters from entering, I was very puzzled by the statement that the BBC had turned down appeals in the past. I couldn't recall any occasion when they had done so. Using the Freedom of Information Act, I wrote to Mark Thompson, quoting his

statement and asking for the answers to the following questions:

- On how many occasions has the BBC turned down an appeal by the DEC?
- On what dates did the BBC turn down these appeals?
- On behalf of which countries/people were the DEC appealing?

It took a month, but I received a very nice reply from the Information & Compliance Manager (the BBC is after all run on public money so they can't afford to antagonise us too much) stating that the questions I asked were not covered by the FoI Act because...

"Your request falls outside the scope of the Act because the BBC and the other public service broadcasters are covered by the Act only in respect of information held for purposes "other than those of journalism, art or literature" (see Schedule I, Part VI of the Act). We are not therefore obliged to supply information held for the purposes of creating the BBC's output or information that supports and is closely associated with these creative activities."

Silly me. I thought that an appeal for aid came under "other than those of journalism, art or literature", but BBC logic dictates otherwise. They were certainly being 'creative' in their interpretation of the Act. However, the writer did volunteer this:

"Since April 2006, the date when the BBC Executive took over the role of deciding on Emergency appeals from the BBC Governors, the BBC declined requests for appeals for the Middle East in August 2006 and for Gaza in January 2009."

DEC has never issued an appeal for 'the Middle East' although, with the way things are developing there, they may yet have to. Even worse, when I checked with the DCE website, their [Appeals Archive](#) page listed no appeals for anywhere at all in 2006. Ooops!

It seems that under other circumstances, the BBC is not worried about appearing to be taking sides in an ongoing story, as they have just aired the DEC [appeal for Syria](#). So, whose side are they on? Are they anti-Semitic in the real meaning of the term, or is it more accurate to say that they have a pro-Israel bias?

Quite a lot of people think the answer to that is 'Yes'. They are demanding that the BBC Trust holds a Public Inquiry into whether there is pro-Israeli bias at the BBC. They reached their target of 10,000 signatures yesterday, but more would be welcome. It is time this issue was settled once and for all, time for the BBC to be what it claims it is - fair and impartial in the reporting of news.

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