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Mainstream Media: Not Antisemitic but Blind to Jewish Concerns



DOES THE MAINSTREAM American news media have an antisemitism problem? To many American Jews, the answer is self-evident: Of course it does.

In foreign coverage, there is the obsessive reporting on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, utterly out of proportion to its global importance. There is the unbending and often unsubtle tilt against the Jewish state, notable in the frequency with which Israeli retaliation against terror attacks becomes the focus of a story and is referred to as the original provocation. There is the treatment of anti-Zionism as a respectable political position, never mind that it is nearly the only living ideology in the world to call for the elimination of an entire state.

On the United States' domestic front, there is the treatment of Orthodox Jews as greedy landlords, pushy neighbors, and cunning political operators who bilk the state of money while refusing to give their own children a basic secular education. There is the bare minimum coverage of violent antisemitic attacks taking place with alarming regularity against visible Jews in Brooklyn, while hate crimes against other minorities receive extensive coverage. There is the persistent belief that the Iraq War was the fault of second- or third-tier Jewish officials in the Bush administration, and the frequent promotion of the notion that AIPAC is the largest and most powerful lobby in Washington.

In answer to such claims, most leading figures in the mainstream media reply: Outrageous nonsense.

For starters, they would say that a great many of the editors and reporters responsible for this coverage are themselves Jewish and not of the self-hating type. They would say that the attention they give the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is in line with the attention the U.S. government and international community give it—and considerably *less* than the attention it gets from those same American Jews who accuse them of exaggerating its importance to begin with. They would say that, for all the criticism they get from pro-Israel Jews for the allegedly pro-Palestinian tilt of their coverage, they get at least as much criticism from pro-Palestinian readers for what they view as pro-Israel coverage. They would say that if they occasionally publish an anti-Zionist voice, they provide a platform far more frequently to pro-Israel voices and that vigorous open discourse is best served by hearing a wide variety of views.

As for their domestic coverage, they would add that, in stories such as the *New York Times* investigation of ultra-Orthodox schools, they may have embarrassed community leaders but they were also shining a spotlight on bad educational standards that poorly serve ultra-Orthodox children. The suggestion that the news media have ignored

violent antisemitic outrages is false, they would also add, noting that the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh got wall-to-wall coverage, as did Kanye West’s antisemitic Twitter tirades, as well as the overall rise in antisemitic incidents.

The result is a proverbial dialogue of the deaf: News-media leaders tend to see their Jewish critics as hyperventilating partisans; those same critics tend to look at those media leaders as arrogant bigots. What passes for communication between them generally occurs in the form of angry letters to the editor, which are sometimes published but rarely catalyze any substantive change.

The truth is that the news media *do* have a problem in much of their reporting on Israel and Diaspora Jewry. It might help further their understanding if it weren’t called an “antisemitism problem”—a loaded term that does more to insult than educate—and were described instead as an ignorance problem.

This essay is intended to address that ignorance.



That’s not to say there is no antisemitism in the media. In 1977, *Time* magazine introduced Israel’s new prime minister, Menachem Begin, to its readers with a useful tip on how to pronounce his surname: “Rhymes with Fagin,” the famously cruel miser in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*. In 2018, the *New York Times International Edition* ran a cartoon of a blind, yarmulke-clad Donald Trump being led by a sly-looking Benjamin Netanyahu, drawn as a dog, wearing a leash and a Star of David on his collar. The paper quickly apologized after an outcry, but the fact that the cartoon made it into the paper in the first place was telling in itself. Another antisemitic cartoon involving greedy Jews with grotesque features was published in April 2023, this time in the *Guardian*, leading to another public furor and apology.

Still, examples of classic antisemitism are fairly rare. But reporting that ignores or downplays Jewish concerns to instead play into well-established antisemitic stereotypes is depressingly common, as are stories that rationalize antisemitic behavior and that judge the Jewish state by a standard that differs from that applied to other democratic nations faced with similar security challenges.

Consider a few examples:

1. After a white Christian male murdered eight people (six of them Asian) in Atlanta-area massage parlors, the media breathlessly covered the massacre as an act of anti-Asian hate—even though the motive of the killer (who claimed to be dealing with a sex addiction) has never been established. Yet when a British-Pakistani Muslim traveled thousands of miles to Colleyville, Texas, a few months later, took a rabbi and his congregants hostage, and was witnessed “ranting about Jews and Israel,” the media curiously bought into a clearly inane statement by an FBI agent—quickly refuted by the FBI director—that the attack “was not specifically related to the Jewish community.” Only a single major U.S. newspaper, the *Washington Post*, devoted a full story to the antisemitic nature of the attack.

2. From 12-year-old Mohammad al-Durrah in 2000 to journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in 2022, the mainstream news media have repeatedly gone to almost epic lengths in attempts to show that Israeli forces kill noncombatants, particularly children, in cold blood—even if, time and again, careful investigations show they don’t. In 2021, the *New York Times* front page featured photographs of dozens of Palestinian children (plus two Israelis) killed in that year’s Gaza war, under the headline “They Were Only Children.” Without addressing the factual mistakes—there were several featured victims who were found to have connections to terrorist groups or who were killed by Palestinian fire—the most basic question was never really answered: Why did the *Times* devote an entire front page to Palestinian chil-

dren killed by a foreign country despite never doing so for Iraqi or Afghan children killed by the United States in the many years of war fought by America in those countries?

3. Except when the perpetrators are clearly from the far Right, the media go out of their way to contextualize the motives of antisemitic attacks in a way they would never countenance when it comes to hate crimes against other minorities. In Brooklyn, where Orthodox Jews are routinely the subject of violent antisemitic attacks, often from young black men, “gentrification,” rather than hatred, is treated as the cause of the attacks. In 2021, after Palestinian sympathizers attacked Jewish diners at a Los Angeles sushi restaurant, a KABC-TV report of the event was headlined “Mideast tensions lead to LA fight” (as if the assault had been a “fight”). In the reporting on the Colleyville hostage taker, more attention was paid to his alleged mental illness than to his ranting hatred of Jews.

4. In April, CNN’s star news anchor Christiane Amanpour used the term “shootout” to describe the unprovoked killing of Lucy Dee and her daughters Maia and Rina in April in the West Bank. Yet the depiction of the attack as a shootout was the furthest thing from the truth. Lucy and her daughters were driving in a car in the Jordan Valley when they were shot at by Palestinians in a passing car. When Dee’s car went off the road and came to a stop, the terrorists pulled over and riddled it with bullets again to ensure that their victims were dead. Despite the obvious falsehood, it took Amanpour more than a month to apologize to the Dee family—and only after CNN and she personally were threatened with a massive lawsuit. Was Amanpour’s choice of wording an instance of antisemitism? Not directly, and it might have been a genuine mistake. But to think that it does not affect viewers’ state of mind and understanding of the victim–aggressor balance would be naïve.

The list goes on. And it raises the question: Why the constant

stream of offensive and one-sided reporting? There is no simple answer, since “media” is a plural noun: Different news organizations operate differently, as do individual reporters and editors. But after years of being both a participant in and observer of the media, I would argue that some generalizations are safe to make.



The most important one, as far as Israel and Jews are concerned, is that most major newsrooms tilt left ideologically, sometimes sharply. This has several effects.

One is a lack of awareness. Reporters and editors tend to believe that antisemitism is largely if not exclusively a phenomenon of the political Right: a shameful constellation of neo-Nazi rallies at Charlottesville, Marjorie Taylor Greene’s fantasies about Rothschild space lasers, and the like. As these cases arise, mainstream news organizations have no trouble reporting them. But they have a very large blind spot when it comes to the antisemitism of the Left: the antisemitism that comes forth in expressions of anti-capitalism or anti-colonialism or anti-Zionism.

Another is trouble understanding Jews as a vulnerable minority. Progressives tend to see the world through the lens of the powerful versus the powerless — the “powerful” typically being wealthy and white, the “powerless” being poor and “of color.” That narrative has changed some in recent years, as the return and rise of virulent antisemitism in Europe and the United States have become undeniable. But it does explain the underlying attitude.

Then there is the broad reluctance to call out antisemitism when the antisemites are minorities. Even now it remains shocking to see how Al Sharpton, one of the chief instigators of the 1991 Crown Heights riots, has been sanitized by the Left to the point of having

his own show on MSNBC. The media heavily covered the antisemitism of Kanye West, who is seen as an ally of Donald Trump. But, with rare exceptions, there has been little to no serious reporting in the mainstream press about why the Nation of Islam continues to be a force in the black community, attracting high-profile celebrities such as the rapper Snoop Dogg or the activist Tamika Mallory. (The latter was the subject of a flattering write-up and photoshoot in *Vogue* magazine long after her support for the Nation of Islam's Louis Farrakhan, a virulent antisemite, was a matter of public record.)

Finally, as with so much of the Left, the news media look at Israel, Zionism, and their champions with varying degrees of hostility, and at Palestinians and their advocates with corresponding degrees of sympathy.

This is an old story, and this is not the essay to rehash its many details. But in many newsrooms the general perception of Israel as a bad country that gratuitously oppresses Palestinians for no better reason than greediness and fanaticism can easily descend into thinking that replicates antisemitic tropes. "Israel is a superior country with superior people: its talents are above the ordinary," the *Economist* magazine wrote in an editorial at the beginning of the second intifada, in the fall of 2000. "But it has to abate its greed for other people's land." More than two decades later, in September 2021, a *Times* reporter sought to explain support for Israel among Democrats in Congress as a function of the influence of "influential lobbyists and rabbis." (The paper later deleted the line without acknowledging the change.)



There are, of course, additional reasons beyond the ideological leanings of most journalists to explain this kind of coverage. Like many

Americans, many journalists have an inadequate understanding of history: They tend to think that the Jewish state was created “because of the Holocaust,” or that an actual Palestinian state preceded Israel in the Holy Land, or that efforts to “liberate” Palestine began only after 1967.

Then, too, the fact that so many reporters and editors are themselves Jewish has, paradoxically, often made the coverage worse. During World War II, the *New York Times* infamously downplayed stories about the Holocaust because its Jewish owners feared that by highlighting those stories they would be accused of special pleading for their own people. In our time, many of the most aggressively anti-Israel voices are themselves Jewish, which, they often appear to think, gives them a license to write about Jews or Israel in a way they never would dream of if they were writing about other minority groups.

Whatever the causes, what ought to be clear is that there *is* a problem. If you, as a reader, happen to be an editor, reporter, or executive at a major media organization, ask yourself this question: If leading members of the black, Hispanic, LGBT, or Asian community had been telling you for years that they felt marginalized, misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned by your coverage, would you turn a deaf ear and send them away with some curt rejoinder?

Probably not.

How can this change? Perhaps the most obvious—and surprising—answer is a now-familiar word: “diversity.”

Today’s news organizations go out of their way to recruit and promote employees from “diverse” backgrounds, by which they mainly mean black and Hispanic journalists. The case they make for doing so is that a diverse newsroom enriches the media’s ability to fully and sympathetically report on the diverse communities they cover. This is true and important for a newsroom—so

why not expand the principle to other underrepresented minorities, including Orthodox Jews? There may be many secular Jews working the *Washington Post*, the *Times*, or CNN, but the sight of a yarmulke remains exceedingly rare. That *can* change.

Beyond diversity of backgrounds, there is the even more important consideration of viewpoint diversity. As explained above, the news media's coverage of Israel and Diaspora Jewry does *not* generally stem from self-consciously antisemitic beliefs. Instead, it comes from a progressive mindset that tends to be hostile to Israel and Zionism, ignores or downplays antisemitism except when it comes from the far Right, and sometimes repeats antisemitic tropes and perpetuates antisemitic stereotypes. Raising awareness of this hostility and tilt to the negative while teaching newsrooms to be more sensitive to Jewish concerns would likely have a positive effect.

But it would be even more effective if newsroom leaders cracked open the ideological monoculture that has dominated the media for too long. This change won't happen overnight and cannot override core journalistic considerations of independence, accuracy, fairness, and objectivity. In the long term, however, it can bring new perspectives that the media desperately need to challenge their easy assumptions. This will help restore trust with audiences — not only with the Jewish community but with so many others who've almost lost hope they'll ever get a fair shake from a press they once revered. *