

Alternative truths

Keith Brennan and Cian O'Neill look at how newspapers online and the electronic press forum treat the Middle East

Editorial treatment has historically been mandated on the basis of impartiality. This is commensurate to the mantra of empiricism or verifiability which has echoed through science since Apollonian high tide. It echoes through high journalism as peroration. No matter, impartiality is not as fixed as the constellations.

The question is most pertinent to crisis. Loose lips may, after all, sink ships. A prescient example is that of the Middle East. When the pictures look the same, editorial line is all. There is now a new dimension—the growth of Newspapers Online, and independent forums. They represent a new discourse. They represent the views of paper copy readerships, and those readerships without proper political representation. And they can be interesting, or alarming.

The *Jerusalem Post* is of course, outside its constituency, not known as anything but partisan. Nor its online incarnation www.jpost.com. With hawks such as Berel Wein, whose 'Wein Online' articles expose perfectly the editorial treatment of the paper, this is apparent. On January 31, 2002 he wrote, *au sujet de* the hearings in Belgium's courts of war crime allegations against Sharon, of Belgium's 'morbid and bigoted fascination with Israel. Curiously, the Israelis brought Arafat to the same court in November 2001. According to the *Post* (24/7/01) the Sharon counter-action was initiated by Likud MK Avraham Herschson due to the BBC Panorama documentary which accused Sharon of war crimes for his actions in the Lebanon.'

Yet the site does not merely elucidate the views of part time hacks zionistas. The web forum is a global phenomenon. The *Guardian* reported (16/3/2002) that web journalism is fast becoming more important to journos and readers than paper script—see the Independent News reportage from within Jenin. Independent media has become a movement to be noted. The move however to open participation not only challenges the ownership media hegemony. It challenges the notional value of impartiality.

A prime example is the international 'indymedia' cooperative www.indymedia.com. Their Irish wing has just gone online in full form. Given the history of libel writs in the Republic the site was especially careful about ensuring its survival. 'Open-door' sites hope to provide access but not to writs by disclaiming control over the content contained on forum pages. So the writer posts it, and any control comes belatedly. Liability eschewed. In theory. This is not unusual. The *Jerusalem Post* refuses forum posts which 'we deem illegal, unlawful, abusive, inciting, racist, obscene, threatening, offensive, defamatory or otherwise unacceptable or in violation of copyright or trademark laws.'

Yet what is the reality? This brings us back to that

BBC Panorama show mentioned hitherto. Daniel Doron (5/7/01) in 'The BBC incites against Israel, again', stated that the BBC was 'determined on nailing Sharon as a war criminal.' Mladen Andrijasevic (3/4/01) called BBC reportage in Israel 'immoral.' Doron later reported (3/4/02) that the UK's Chief Rabbi had warned that, 'Hatred of Israel expressed by the Left and some sections of the media has produced levels of Anti-Semitism not experienced in Britain since the Holocaust.' Attacking BBC, jpost.com seeks not to palliate such fears.

In a January 2002 poll, 90% of jpost.com web poll respondents—numbering in excess of 27,000—said that treatment of Palestinian terror was too weak. On February 21 2001 it was written by Uri Dan: 'Ariel Sharon has succeeded so far in promoting Israel's security horizon.' One looks hard to find any article at all contrary to this line. Arab newspapers are reported, but selectively. See the translated 13/3/02 *Arabic Daily Star* excerpt which included a caption, 'PA (Palestinian Authority) has forfeited our trust.'

Indeed, of all the links or advertisements which 'JPost.com' could carry, two are prominent—Personals (i.e. 'JCupid, the leading Jewish picture personals') and the IDF. The Israel Defence Force. Is this unusual? The IDF site has much to commend it to the errant web surfer. There is a *petit histoire*, including the 'Deployment' in Lebanon and its 'integral role in the Peace Process'. There is a 'security doctrine', including a 'desire to avoid war by political means and a credible deterrent posture.' Why this link to a military government agency is included on the main page of an online newspaper, one may wonder.

JPost.com 'Personals' are an even more central component of the site content. Under a search in the 'Classifieds' section, no finds were given for guns, ammo, Korans, hard drugs, yashmaks, or Arafat. Other searches are more likely to 'hit', such as searches for eligible bachelors seeking wives. We found one 38 year old widowed Afghan male looking for 33–43 prospective. The name? Bin Laden.

One must ask oneself is there any more sanity abroad than one finds with JPost.com? Or is there any more sanity aboard a different online press forum? The mission statement of Indymedia, launched officially in Dublin, April 02, runs as follows: "Indymedia is a collective of independent media organizations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage. Indymedia is a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth."

A fine and noble ambition. A tour around the global stable of Indymedia sites reveals the real possibilities, and potential pitfalls, with the format. Are concepts of democratic media and passionate truth compatible? It is perhaps admirable to give

voice to the marginalised, even with the knowledge that some of the marginalised have been made so for fine reasons. Yet there seems to be a gap within the mission statement, a conceptual Maginot line around which swarms of festering leftists would gather, in the frightening way in which pallid vegans hover over bean curd at buffets. The happier prospect is that indymedia could be an arena within which both passion and truth would unify somehow, and so provide an alternative to syndicated news. A possibility for those who were there to tell us how it really was, and not have to worry about who the editor is backing in the elections. The truth may lie somewhere in between.

The ideological background to Indymedia lies in the same ground as the politics that informed the left wing liberal founding fathers of the net, the goal is the creation of open access communication for readers and contributors. Free web software / freeware makes the creation of such catered sites easy. Editorial control is elected, not required. Almost anyone with anything to say can publish it, as soon as they have it typed. Expression is various, and free, may fall either side of impartiality.

The root of the indymedia editorial ethos is distrust of established media to represent both their and their readers' interests. Perhaps it is from this desire whence good journalism comes. One of the bylines of Indymedia is "be your own journalist". Hence reports are quite often of a first hand nature, with photos/stills and streamed video from the front-lines of anti globalisation protests, from within war zones from which no other report can be generated etc. Passion is tangible. Reported events are often in the home range of the reporter. Perhaps due to this, righteousness and outrage make themselves present in measures that can be refreshing, and disturbing. The manifest subjectivity of the report posted makes the free press forum the logical extension of the New Journalism of Wolfe and Hunter S Thompson.

It seems as if, by its very nature, the tenets of democratic journalism involve the abandonment of impartiality as a journalistic ethic. This may not be quite as bad as it seems. Abdication of editorial control immediately precedes an abdication of impartiality, as a consequence, and probably not as motive. In comparison to the partial renderings of the *Jerusalem Post*, CNN, Al Wafa (the Palestinian news agency), it is an abandonment inspired by a refreshing *naivete* which would have to be tortured from the pages of a newspaper at war. Indymedia is a medium which attempts to give voice to the truth by the inclusion of all voices. However, one cannot mistake passion for truth.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this weakness has been manifested in a landslide of Middle East related content. From Monday 11th to Friday 15th April, 14 of the 17 stories posted on Irish Indymedia represented the Palestinian experience of the fresh occupations alone / much more favourably. The remaining three were either pro-Israel, or balanced commentary. Lax editorial control may hold little comity with truth, just like rigid and partisan editorial control. It seems the Jpost.com here has its mirror image, in a web site featuring



Welcome to Israel

equally passionate versions of events seen through different eyes. Placed side by side, one can but hope that their errors and omissions would serve to cancel one another out.

Put plainly, the weakness of Indymedia may well be that it is fettered by its ideals of ensuring participation, accurate reporting etc. Their more corporate competitors may well be exempt from this type of social value taxonomy. Imperfections in the construct acknowledged, the forum is still a curiously interesting digital agora for a passionate minority. Can truth be told only with one voice? It is a much closer heir to the ideals of its medium in that sense, and fitted out with very modest foibles attendant to an overreaching concern to relate human experience. It is not a source of verifiable (Socratic) truth. The proponent of indymedia might instead look to the aforementioned Dr. Gonzo to validate their sense of reality 'when the hammer comes down, I'll side with the human beings.'

It would be trite to say that such forums are replacing the perceived partiality of the established outlets with an equal but distinct partiality of their own. Subjectivity, though rarely truthful, can be honestly expressed. Perhaps the new reality of growing online journalism; be it in a democratic forum, in the migration of newspapers to the internet, and in the immediate availability of all perspectives almost as the events described are unfolding; is the evolution of a bazaar of competing reportage of stories, of narratives, of experiences.

So perhaps Indymedia is informed in part by truth, in part by culture. Ditto the *Jerusalem Post*. What is unclear is whether they reflect more what has happened or their respective online readerships experience of what has happened. Our sense of who we are is bound up with how we see ourselves perceived or represented, for example in the media. The open online forum, making many heard, may be both a champion and cipher to its cause. In any case the forum has potential for change and influence. Consider how fascinating it would have been as a Londoner to read a German newspaper during the blitz, to be on the Ho Chi Minh trail reading about protests in Berkeley, to be in Japan, and read a *Washington Post* editorial on the destruction of Hiroshima. We may not have impartial truth, but with the online forum we may have the stories of all sides. ♦