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The Middle East; From Jewish Outlook, Media Are Another Enemy; Conflict:
Criticism of TV and newspaper coverage is increasingly aggressive and
widespread -- and some of it is warranted.

By David Shaw, Times Staff Writer

Major Jewish organizations and other supporters of Israel in this country have increasingly bombarded newspapers in recent weeks with charges of biased reporting on hostilities in the Mideast.

In Los Angeles, almost 1,000 subscribers to The Times suspended home delivery of the paper for one day to protest what they called inaccurate, pro-Palestinian coverage. In New York, many in the Jewish community are calling for a reader boycott of the New York Times.

In Minneapolis, an organization called Minnesotans Against Terrorism bought a full-page ad in the Star Tribune to accuse that paper of refusing to call Palestinian suicide bombers "terrorists."

Michael Getler, ombudsman for the Washington Post, says he's been receiving more than 100 e-mails and calls a day, "the overwhelming majority saying our coverage is pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel." Ned Warwick, foreign editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, says his paper has been subjected to "an intense barrage of criticism" from the local Jewish community--"100, 120 e-mails a day, a very sophisticated, ongoing campaign."

Editors deny charges of bias in their papers, and several have met with members of the Jewish community to discuss the issue. The editors say their staff members realize how sensitive the Mideast situation is and they insist their papers make every effort to be evenhanded.

"We are fallible but we're not biased," says Timothy J. McNulty, associate managing editor for foreign news at the Chicago Tribune. "A newspaper, as a human institution, can make mistakes. ... But the mistakes are honest mistakes, not a product of bias in any fashion."

Major Jewish Rallies Ignored

Several papers have made mistakes -- of either omission or commission -- in recent weeks, and that has intensified the perception in the Jewish community that the coverage is biased against Israel.

Both the Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle, for example, failed to cover major Jewish rallies in their respective cities, and Jewish leaders excoriated them for it. Executives at the Minneapolis Star Tribune say the decision to excise and replace the words "terrorism" and "terrorists" in a New York Times New Service story early this month was

made by an editor who "misinterpreted" the paper's policy of taking "extra care" in using those words.

"We were very embarrassed," says Ben Taylor, vice president for communications at the paper. "The wire editor didn't fully understand the policy and he didn't follow it."

McNulty says a similar policy at his paper is born of a desire to "be specific and avoid labels," but Jewish leaders say suicide bombings are acts of terrorism, and members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda are terrorists.

Louis I. Gelfand, reader representative at the Star Tribune, says much of the criticism that newspapers have received for their Mideast coverage in recent weeks reminds him of criticism he has heard over coverage of abortion.

"A lot of it has to do with language," he says. "People on each side got upset if we used 'right to life' or 'pro-choice.' "

Now, supporters of Israel complain that newspapers sometimes refer to Palestinians as "militants" or "freedom fighters" or "guerrillas" instead of calling them "terrorists" and that they describe the West Bank as "occupied territory" rather than "disputed land."

Arab Americans and other supporters of the Palestinians take the opposite view, both on terminology and on Mideast coverage in general, and they have long accused U.S. news organizations of slanting their coverage in favor of Israel.

"It's misleading, sloppy coverage that does not relate the true suffering of the Palestinian people," says Ahmed Bouzid, president of the Philadelphia-based Palestine Media Watch.

Pro-Israel Criticism Picks Up After Offensive

Some Palestinian supporters blame Mideast coverage on "Jewish domination and control" of many major news organizations -- and on what they see as a desire of those organizations to align themselves with U.S. foreign policy, which has traditionally backed Israel.

Editors have denied those charges as well.

Supporters of Israel have criticized the media periodically in the past -- perhaps most aggressively over coverage of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. But editors and readers' representatives at many newspapers say the criticism has been especially vigorous and voluminous since Israel launched its West Bank offensive last month after a series of Palestinian suicide bombings killed dozens of Israelis.

Much of the criticism is directed at television because of the power of its visual images.

"When you have pictures of people throwing rocks at tanks, the side with the tanks gets the worst press," says Robert Lichter, president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington.

But critics say newspapers often have failed to do what they should do best: put events such as Israel's offensive into the proper historical context. They also complain that the news media have paid more attention to the suffering of the victims and survivors of the Israeli offensive than to the victims and survivors of Palestinian suicide bombings.

The Washington Post published "powerful stories about Palestinian

suffering" from Israeli offensives, the Post's ombudsman wrote in an April 7 column, but the paper did "less well in capturing the impact of [suicide bombings] ... on Israeli families and society."

Leonard Downie Jr., executive editor of the Post, says that imbalance was not intentional but the result of having "so many of our reporters covering the military action on the West Bank."

The Post dispatched reporter Glenn Frankel to Israel, and he subsequently wrote two long Page 1 stories about the effect of suicide bombings there.

Still, criticism of the Post -- and of other newspapers -- has continued and even intensified. Emotions on both sides are raw.

"The complaints have really ratcheted up," says Lillian Swanson, assistant managing editor and ombudsman at the Philadelphia Inquirer. "I came to work [Wednesday] ... and I couldn't do anything but answer calls and e-mails attacking us for a 'remarkably biased approach' on a story we ran on Page 1 about Israeli soldiers who allegedly trashed a Palestinian cultural center in Ramallah."

The story quoted the director of the center as saying, "This was not a security operation. It was just vandalism, part of a conscious desire to ruin everything Palestinian." She estimated that it would cost \$5,000 to repair the damage, and this prompted Giora Becher, the Israeli consul general in Philadelphia, to complain, "There is a war taking place, and \$5,000 worth of damage is worth a front-page article?"

Warwick, the foreign editor, attributes some of the Jewish community's criticism to "their own apprehension about what's taking place" on the West Bank -- and to their realization that

"Israel is losing in the court of world opinion right now."

American Jews sympathetic to Israel "feel helpless to do anything about what's going on there," Warwick says. "The one thing they can do is try to influence their hometown paper, so that's what they're trying to do."

Other journalists say the speed and reach of e-mail and the Internet have played a major role in growing Jewish criticism.

"Readers are hearing directly from friends or relatives in Israel and the occupied territories who tell them what's happening in e-mails before the L.A. Times and the New York Times and CNN can even get in there to see or confirm anything," says Dan Hortsch, public editor of the Portland Oregonian, "and then they want to know why we didn't have that story."

Sanders LaMont, ombudsman at the Sacramento Bee, says he senses "more intensity, more polarity in readers' complaints of late." He adds: "The big difference is that people who have strong feelings have found sites on the Internet that they agree with -- newspapers in Europe or Israel or other sources.

"They'll say, 'Why didn't the Bee run this story that Ha'aretz [the Israeli newspaper] ran about that terrible thing the Palestinians did in Tel Aviv ... and they're convinced that they're right.'"

Sometimes, LaMont says, readers "get upset because we'll run a story about a protest or rally in Washington, D.C., and run nothing or only a very short story on a rally that took place right here." Readers are often convinced that such decisions are proof of bias.

The Los Angeles Times ran into precisely that reaction when it failed to

cover the Israel Independence Day Festival in Van Nuys on April 21 (after having covered the Independence Day celebration in Israel four days earlier). The Van Nuys event, which doubled as a rally to support Israel in the current conflict, was covered by most other media in town and drew more than 40,000 people, including the governor and the mayor.

Times editors say misjudgment and miscommunication led to The Times' failure to cover the event.

"We should have covered it, and it's inconceivable to me that we didn't ... but it wasn't deliberate," says Miriam Pawel, The Times assistant managing editor for local and state news.

John Carroll, editor of the paper, agrees. "If we didn't want to cover Israel's Independence Day, we wouldn't have had a reporter cover Israel's Independence Day in Israel," he says.

Local Jewish leaders have long been critical of The Times, and they see this latest incident as evidence of "an increasing negative bias against Israel ... that makes more and more people question if there is a conscious decision at The Times to portray Israel in a negative light," says John Fishel, president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.

The weekly Los Angeles Jewish Journal published a cover story last year on The Times' coverage of the Mideast and cited criticism from "significant swaths" of the Jewish community. Rob Eshman, editor in chief of the Jewish Journal, says feelings are running even more strongly against The Times now.

"In recent discussions with very reasonable people in the community ... the anti-Times rhetoric dominates conversation," he says.

Carroll says he has encountered criticism from Jewish communities at each of the four newspapers where he has been an editor -- in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Lexington, Ky., as well as Los Angeles -- "dating back to the 1967 war, every time the situation in the Mideast becomes acutely distressing.

"We sometimes write as many as 10 or 12 articles about the Mideast in a single day now, and while any one article might not give a complete picture, a reader who read them all will receive a very complete and balanced picture."

But not everyone reads every story in its entirety. As the Jewish Journal story last year pointed out in criticizing what it called "skewed" choices of photographs, headlines and photo captions, those items are "frequently the first and sometimes the only items" a reader will look at.

"When you start to parse the criticism of The Times, it often comes down to those items," Eshman says. "They can have a dramatic impact on readers who already feel under siege.

"They're feeling frustrated by events and feeling the world is ganging up on them, especially with the growing anti-Semitism in Europe. When they see something they don't like in their hometown paper, it feels as if the war has come home to their kitchen."