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‘Reutersgate’ Becomes an Issue in Reporting the Israel-Hezbollah War [1]

The media has chosen sides in the Israel-Hezbollah War, and much is ugly.

Some errant media players have emerged. One is a behemoth news service, whose products -- including newspaper and TV news reports -- have an audience of many millions worldwide. Another is a world-renowned news brand, whose reports are said to be biased. Then there is someone from a major daily newspaper promoting a book, and saying really stupid things. But there are those who boldly set the record straight in their reports.

Someone could say that any large organization cannot be expected to control all of its employees, and that could be said for the Reuters news agency. Headquartered in Great Britain, Reuters calls itself "the largest international multi-media news agency, reporting extensively from around the world on topics ranging from financial markets to general and political news." But at least two Reuters journalists lost it while attending to their version of coverage of the Israel-Hezbollah war.

Growing tension between the news agency and the blogosphere began boiling over in late may, after Charles Johnson's Little Green Footballs pro-Israel Web log received an e-mail death threat that was soon traced to the computer of a Reuters staffer. "I look forward to the day you pigs get your throats cut," wrote the unnamed Reuters staffer, who was suspended, pending investigation.

Last week, Johnson, who was credited with breaking open the 2004 "Rathergate" scandal after Dan Rather aired a damning piece regarding President Bush's national guard service on CBS' 60 Minutes II, broke open what is now being referred to as "Reutersgate."

In the first week of August, a wayward Reuters contractor, the Lebanese freelance photographer Adnan Hajj, doctored at least two photographs to make Israeli military actions in Lebanon appear worse than they actually were. He layered double images on an August 5 photo depicting an Israeli military bombing of targets in Beirut, which made the bomb explosions appear to cause more devastation than they did.

A second photo, dated August 2, was doctored to make an Israeli jet fighter appear that it was firing three bursts. Hajj’s entire photograph archive was purged from Reuters' database. But do his actions reflect a culture of anti-Israel bias at Reuters?

A random review of TV news feeds by Reuters, which are broadcast to subscribers worldwide, show a decided tilt against Israel. In a news broadcast on its Web site August 7, which was monitored by Worldcasting, a Reuters broadcaster reported that Israel was killing innocent civilians in Lebanon, to which Hezbollah retaliated by killing Israeli military.

"Israel's bombardment of Lebanon continues," said the news broadcaster, "claiming more

than a dozen civilians, as a UN cease fire plan remains deadlocked. Air strikes on southern (Lebanese) villages have killed seven members of one family in their house, while other raids have targeted Hezbollah strongholds in Beirut and the Eastern Bekaa Valley. Hezbollah has struck back with more of the rocket attacks in Israel, that killed fifteen people yesterday, most of the them army reservists."

No mention of a Hezbollah rocket filled with ball bearing designed to kill, that fell on the house of an Arab-Israeli family, killing all three family members.

The great majority of Reuters' multiple daily news feeds monitored by Worldcasting seemed to examine events through Hezbollah's prism.

"Hundreds demonstrate in Cairo and Amman against Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Gaza," read the lead on one piece. It featured a woman carrying a doll covered in blood and a poster asking "Why?"

Reuters led into another worldwide feed of video, provided to the news agency by Al Jazeera TV, with an introduction reading: "At least 33 farmers were killed in an Israeli airstrike on Lebanon's border with Syria." There was video of soldiers carrying dead bodies, a body lying in the rubble, a line of bodies on the ground covered with blankets, scattered fruit boxes, and the newscast reiterated that "Israeli war planes killed at least 33 farm workers, mainly Kurds, when they attacked a farm on Lebanon's border with Syria….the aircraft fired rockets at a structure as a truck was being loaded with peaches."

The script stated Israel's claim that it had targeted two buildings that had stored Hezbollah weapons, but the script also noted that "footage shown on Lebanese and Arab television showed what appeared to be farm workers lined up near the ruins of fruit groves, with fruit baskets strewn nearby."

CNN has begun to raise questions about what it calls Hezbollah's slick news management. CNN's Nic Robertson told the http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0607/23/rs.01.html Reliable Sources news program that TV crews are shown bombing damage after-the-fact on Hezbollah's carefully guided tours.

"There's no doubt about it: Hezbollah has a very, very sophisticated and slick media operations," said Robertson. "In fact, beyond that, it has very, very good control over its areas in the south of Beirut. They deny journalists access into those areas. They can turn on and off access to hospitals in those areas. They have a lot of power and influence. You don't get in there without their permission."

CNN's Anderson Cooper told his viewers that Hezbollah also cued ambulances when to whiz by for video news cameras. "One by one, they've been told to turn on their sirens and zoom off so that all the photographers here can get shots of ambulances rushing off to treat civilians," Cooper reported. "These ambulances aren't responding to any new bombings. The sirens are strictly for effect." Other news organizations were videotaped by CNN as they recorded the Hezbollah-choreographed scene.

Hour-after-hour, day-after-day, the Reuters TV news feed gathers material from its own reporters, and buys video from al Jazeera and others, and delivers it to their client TV stations around the world. Another Reuters-produced video began with the introduction:

"Hospitals in Tyre (Lebanon) are flooded with casualties in the attacks." Someone said to be an eyewitness to the attack was interviewed in the story. "There are no armed men here or any form of Hizbollah or resistance activity," he said.

The story continued, over pictures of damaged buildings and wounded treated at the hospital, with the Reuters-supplied script: "Casualties of Israel's bombardment continued to pour in the local hospital. The United Nations is still waiting for Israel to permit safe passage of aid to areas of Lebanon hardest hit…blockaded for nearly two weeks."

Another video distributed by Reuters about Iranian
volunteers traveling to Lebanon began with the introduction: "Volunteers to help Hezbollah fight Israeli forces have begun the first stage of their journey to Lebanon….'The Prophet Mohammad's army is on its way to fight against the Zionists,' chanted some 50 volunteers," mostly hard-line students with no military training.

Then there was a video distributed by Reuters showing French shoppers making donations to help victims in Lebanon, with shots of "various volunteers handing out leaflets to shoppers (and) putting cardboard boxes into vans." Two small French girls were pictured putting boxes of spaghetti onto a trolley as the wife of a Lebanese politician said, "Thank you very much, darling, that's kind of you," to which the mother of the French children replied, "I wish you luck."

Other stories, each distributed by Reuters several times daily via satellite, included, by title:

"Pro-Lebanese and anti-Israel and anti-US protests have been held in the UK over the continuing crisis in the Middle East."

"Families of Palestinian prisoners in Israel jails demand their relatives be included in any prisoner exchange deal between Israel and Hizbollah."

"European Union transfers humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza."

"Egyptian police beat protesters in a large Cairo demonstration held to protest the continued Israeli bombardment in Lebanon and the Palestinian Gaza Strip."

"The Free Patriotic Movement of Christian Maronite General and MP Michael Aoun provide shelter for displaced Lebanese."

"A Jordanian charity collects humanitarian aid to assist Lebanese and Gaza Palestinians subjected to Israeli attacks."

Video segments from the Israeli side are outnumbered at least 10 to one by Worldcasting's count, with a few consisting of speech excerpts by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert saying that Hezbollah will be entirely destroyed. Other clips were of Israeli troops on the offensive and in hospitals, and there were pictures from the site where military recruits were killed by a Katyusha rocket.

Also last week, one of the world's most prestigious news brands, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), was taken to task by Tom Gross, a former Jerusalem correspondent for the London Sunday Telegraph, who wrote in the National Review:

> "[I]n spite of several hundreds of hours of broadcast by dozens of BBC reporters and studio anchors, you wouldn't really know that hundreds of thousands of Israelis have been living in bomb shelters for weeks now, tired, afraid, but resilient; that a grandmother and her seven-year-old grandson were killed by a Katyusha during a Friday night Sabbath dinner, that several other Israeli children have died. You wouldn't have any real understanding of what it is like to have over 2,000 Iranian and Syrian rockets rain down indiscriminately on towns, villages, and farms across one third of your country, aimed at killing civilians."

But one of the most egregious slams against the Israelis thus far came from a Washington Post reporter, who should know better, one would think, as he hawked his book on CNN's "Reliable Sources" broadcast. Quoting unidentified sources, the *Post*'s Thomas Ricks said Israel wants more of its citizens to be killed for public relations reasons:

"…Israel purposely has left pockets of Hezbollah rockets in Lebanon," Ricks said. "Because as long as they're being rocketed, they can continue to have a sort of more equivalency in their operations in Lebanon."

This guy couldn't find work at Reuters.