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*The impact of BBC production strategies on news  
discourse*

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## Abstract

This paper explores the production strategies of the BBC and the impact they exert on the corporation's news output, namely the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We argue that the newsroom strategies the BBC has in place for the reporting of this sensitive story help shape and inform the discursive and social practices of its discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis literature abounds with studies showing how a news outlet's final product (stories) can be used to unravel reporters' social and discursive world. While we agree with what the prevalent literature suggests about the 'dialectical' relationship between discursive and production strategies, we feel there is currently little to explain how the latter influence, inform and shape the former. To arrive at the set of ideas and strategies involved in how journalists and editors order their social and discursive experiences, we start from the media outlet's production world and pursue the process in which news is transformed progressively to the point it reaches the final shape. We rely on ethnographic observation – interviews, internal style guidelines, anecdotes, secondary data, etc. – for an in-depth view of BBC's production strategies, focusing in particular on the role played by the recently inaugurated BBC College of Journalism. The paper's ethnographic angle sheds helpful light on the issues of power and hegemony asymmetry between the protagonists and how it is discursively realized in BBC news discourse. The paper reveals that these strategies play a pivotal role in how the corporation shapes its news discourse.

## 1. Introduction

Critical discourse literature has not overlooked the actions and powers through which discursive and social rules and structures are enacted but the way to interpret them has mostly been solely through textual evidence. As Mouzelis (1995: 139) says: "rules (or structures in Giddens' terminology) are 100 per cent the medium and outcome of action" by systems or institutions. In Mouzelis's words the discursive and social strategies and practices the BBC pursues, for example, are the means through which the broadcaster structures the communicative action. Relying on textual analysis and linking it to the social world will definitely show that the broadcaster is structured by the discursive and social practices of the text. But how and why these discursive and social rules and structures are there? Who decides about them? Where do they originate from? How do institutions ensure that they are included in the final news product? And more importantly, how and why they are produced and by whom? These are some of the crucial questions we feel critical research has hitherto overlooked. To answer them, we have supplemented our critical analysis with ethnographic observations, particularly interviews, and diversified and triangulated our data to see how the social and discursive rules and patterns of discourse come about. As Bourdieu (1991) says, "The structured and structuring structures" are mainly the property of institutions and not texts.

Media critical studies have generally paid more attention to analyzing textual output than the institutions churning it out. For this reason, the critical knowledge we now have on the workings of news discourse is mostly based on media texts the discursive and social structures of which critical analysts have used in order to arrive at the world of the individuals or institutions producing them. The trend has persisted despite repeated calls to have the linguistic and sociological positions of texts integrated. As early as 1966, Weiss (1966, p. 90ff) pointed to "[t]his problem of mediation ... between text and institution, between communication and structure, and between discourse and society." Some 37 years later a different Weiss writing with Wodak, finds that the issue of relations between texts and



institutions is still ongoing, urging analysts to delve into the institutional and contextual worlds of the texts they study:

Communicative actions, social and symbolic practices are things that happen within wider frames of reference and contexts, such as in social systems, in a way that microcontexts would take place with macrocontexts or be embedded in them; hence it is not a box system in which one box contains another. (Weiss and Wodak 2003, 10)

One way to understand Weiss and Wodak's "non-box system" is to view discourse in terms of three intertwined levels: texts, discursive practices and social practices (Fairclough 1995). These levels, prominent critical analysts and social philosophers (c.f. Fairclough 1989, 1995, 2003; Foucault 1972) argue are dialectically interrelated, with each level shaping and being shaped by the other. Most of our critical knowledge of discourse hinges on our analysis of texts which we have used as a bridge to understand their discursive and social world, i.e. institutions and organizations.

But institutional structures or systems in Habermas's (1984) terms are not isolated planets beyond the range of our naked eyes. They may be difficult but not impossible to access. In this paper we use our almost unfettered access to the institutional corridors of the BBC to assess this dialectical relationship between discourse and social practice, examine how far this giant media institution is involved in the production and reproduction of the Middle East communicative act. We are mainly interested to examine the engagement the institution has with news output, and how the institution discursively and socially strives to leave its marks on its news discourse.

As critical discourse analysts we agree with the assumption of a dialectical relationship between particular discursive practices and specific fields of social actions (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). But we find it hard to properly interpret social and discursive practice domains by merely relying on the domain of language. Fields of actions, mainly institutions, are complex entities with embedded and hidden discursive and social frames which are sometimes hard to unravel through the most rigorous contextual and intercontextual analyses. We depart from traditional critical analysis which normally relies on the micro or immediate elements of language to understand their macro world.

We start from the world of institutions because we are mainly interested in the institutional production of discursive and social power. According to van Dijk (2003: 88), a vital element of critical approach is to investigate

the relations between knowledge and social groups and institutions: which groups or institutions set the criteria for the very definition of legitimization of knowledge, and which are especially involved in the distribution of knowledge – or precisely in the limitation of knowledge.

Besides the questions we raised above we seek to provide answers to some outstanding queries in the literature like: How far does an institution influence the choice and selection of discursive patterns? Who decides about production and reproduction of discourse? How far do the discursive and social features influence the institutional structures? In behemoth institutions like the BBC, with nearly 25,000 people directly or indirectly involved in the production of discourse, where do the powers to



decide what to include and exclude lie? What measures or rules do such institutions have in place to make it possible for their discursive output to discursively and socially mirror institutional ideology?

## 2. Data and method

To understand the production strategies of a giant media institution like the BBC, one may need to get to the roots of the unequal distribution of discursive and social power which critical analysts have been striving to unravel and enlighten the society about. Thus our main interest lies in the backstage practices the BBC has in place to inform and 'naturalize' its Middle East discourse (Chilton 2004). We see the analysis of text as a final product not sufficient to locate institutional and social meaning. For this reason, we triangulate our data and supplement textual material with interviews, documents, editors' blog, media reports, observations and anecdotes.

The paper's first author made two tours of the BBC. In the first (May 2007), he interviewed 11 editors. In the second (December 2007), he interviewed the director of the BBC College of Journalism, a college's senior editor and the Middle East editor who helped design BBC's Middle East teaching module. Reflexivity and self-criticism are important ethnographic issues as "CDA, like other critical social sciences ... needs to be reflexive and self-critical about its own institutional position and all that goes with it" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 9). The paper's ethnography shares some common critical features of CDA because both CDA and critical ethnography target power and control and how powerful groups sustain social inequality and injustice and how to emancipate cultural members and groups from hegemonic ideologies. Emancipation and addressing the processes of social and discursive injustice and unfairness are important concepts in any critical theory. Thus, Both CDA analysts and critical ethnographers strive to go beneath surface appearances, of discourses or cultures. Both try to challenge and disrupt the status quo by upsetting assumptions that appear neutral and taken-for-granted and bringing to the fore the hidden operations of power and control (c.f. van Dijk 1993; Thomas 2003; Madison 2005).

Readers might find the conversations with the BBC editors rather assertive, occasionally assuming a rather accusing tone. But it has to be remembered that the authors have selected the excerpts because, first they see them as the most representative out of nearly 60,000-word interview transcripts and second the interviews were conducted following a thorough textual analysis of the related BBC news output (Barkho 2008b).

Here are the names of the BBC editors and their positions who were specifically interviewed for the purposes of this research:

1. Vin Ray, Director, BBC College of Journalism
2. Kevin Marsh, Editor, BBC College of Journalism
3. Jeremy Bowen, BBC Editor, Middle East
4. Malcolm Balen, Senior Editorial Adviser
5. Jerry Timmins, Head of Region, Africa and Middle East
6. Hosam el-Sokkari, Head, Arabic Service
7. Adam Curtis, World Editor, News Interactive



The following section is a brief overview of the BBC College of Journalism based on our ethnographic observation and interviews.

### 3. BBC College of Journalism

We will focus on the BBC College of Journalism, its teaching module on how to report the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the internal BBC guide to facts and terminology (see 5.2 and 6.2) of the conflict. The college is a very new institution but the story on how it has come into being is important to tell as it sheds light on how discursive power is institutionally exercised.

In 2003, the BBC appointed a panel to examine the editorial lessons that arose from the Hutton Inquiry (The Hutton Report 2004) whose findings had profound repercussions for the organization. The inquiry was the consequence of a report on the up-market Today program at 6.07 on the morning of May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003. The death of the program's 'anonymous' source, Dr. David Kelly, and the report by Lord Hutton, released on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2004, shook the institution and the army of nearly 10,000 journalists working in it. The panel, headed by Ronald Neil, was set up to examine the Hutton report and see what editorial lessons the BBC could learn from it and the editorial changes necessary to meet its recommendations.

The panel issued what has become to be known as the Neil Report (2004) whose findings the BBC governors fully endorsed. The report is a lesson in journalism, advising the corporation on ways and conditions of granting anonymity, how to break stories making serious allegations, sourcing, note-taking and the BBC's five journalistic values of Truth and Accuracy, Serving the Public Interest, Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion, Independence and Accountability. But at the heart of Neil Report's recommendations was the proposal that the BBC should establish "a formal college of journalism under the leadership of an academic principal, organized as an industry-wide training campus ... to ensure that all BBC journalists were being trained to deliver the BBC's core values at every level in their career."

The college is barely three years old. And as far as the authors are aware, there is nothing in the critical discourse literature examining how the college delivers its instruction modules, and how it produces and disseminates them. The college's website is only for internal use and so far inaccessible to outsiders. But its editors say they intend to make it public once they have the legal issues concerning fair trading laws solved, since the college is paid for by the license fee. There has always been training and development inside the BBC but it had never operated on a formal, organized and occasionally compulsory basis until the launch of the college. The BBC has up to 10,000 reporters, if we count the people whose titles do not count them as journalists but in fact do journalism. The college's editors say up to 6,000 journalists have taken non-compulsory courses, including the one on the Middle East. The courses themselves vary. They include how to deal with sources, how to cover exclusive stories, making difficult decisions, ethics, business, writing, etc. They are all part of the website, a kind of collaborative learning venture, where it is assumed that journalists learn best from other journalists. Thus, most of the teaching is prepared by respected senior journalists.

Participation is overwhelming. The nascent college's records show that nearly 8,000 journalists have taken part in the module on media law, one of the few mandatory courses. Participation in non-



mandatory courses, which may be face-to-face or online, is left to the journalists and their managers. In all the modules, the college makes no use of academics, their teaching materials, or research.

About a dozen senior editors and journalists are involved in teaching. But the college also draws on other BBC staff. The BBC is generally keen to demonstrate that it employs cost-effective ways in dealing with the tax-payers' money (license-fee). Senior journalists and bureau chiefs involved in ground-breaking stories are asked to take part in teaching the minute they are back in the U.K. to give them the chance to share their experience straight away. The college editors make use of the most outstanding learning points during these lectures by loading them on the website.

When the paper's first author visited the college on 5 December 2007, it had no physical premises or campus. But they said they were about to move to a new premises, or permanent headquarters. They insisted on not calling it a campus. Since most modules are online, there is very little need for traditional classroom teaching. And instead of bringing hundreds of journalists to London from across the U.K. or the world, it is faculty members who go to them. The college wants to spend most of its money on training and very little on overheads "which is a better use of the license fee which is after all the British taxpayers' money," says Vin Ray, the director. So, it is not a college in the 'brick and mortar' sense and it is not a college in conventional sense since it awards no degrees or qualifications and has no registered students.

The following section provides a brief overview of the Middle East teaching based on our ethnographic observations and interviews.

#### **4. The Middle East module**

The Middle East for the BBC is almost tantamount to the coverage of the struggle between Israel and Palestine for which the college has designed an online module which takes journalists through the language and a brief history of the conflict and some of what it sees as "sensitive and danger" points of reporting it. The corporation spends a lot of effort and time on how to 'balance' its Middle East reporting where, according to college's Editor Kevin March "even a pathetic mistake or a slip of the tongue is bound to generate a barrage of letters."

We have a copy of the module in our possession but, due to Fair Dealing restrictions, we are not able to describe it in great detail or depth. That said, the editors were not sensitive or secretive about it. Asked whether it was possible to have a close look at the module, the college's director Vin Ray replied:

Absolutely. There is absolutely nothing on the site that I would feel worried about. What on earth would we tell our journalists that we wouldn't want anyone to know? [And] I mean the BBC is a massive organization so any thing that is on that site in some senses is already public because the place leaks.

Most of the tasks and exercises revolve around language and specifically the Middle East glossary – a massive entry of words and phrases which the broadcaster still keeps confidential apart from two dozen terms it has opted to post on the Website for the public (see 5.2). The module sticks very closely to the glossary, its social interpretations and discursive suggestions.



The aim of the Middle East module is two-fold: First to increase BBC journalists' knowledge about the context and background of the story and then give them more confidence about reporting the story. The module concentrates on what the editors see as "pitfalls" of reporting. Drawing heavily on the glossary, it tries to challenge some of the language the BBC employs in covering the conflict and the "stereotypes" the organization is believed to have fallen into.

Four senior BBC editors are involved in the writing of the glossary but it is mainly the brainchild of Senior Editorial Adviser Malcolm Balen, nicknamed 'the BBC Tsar' by the British media (Barkho 2008) (see section 5). Everything in the module and anything new added to it must be first sanctioned by these four editors known in the corridors of the Bush House and the White City in London as 'the four wise men'. No such rigor and oversight is required for any of the other modules. Asked why the Middle East was placed under such a scrutiny, Ray said: "Because this is such a contentious subject, we wanted to make sure that it was absolutely right and fair".

The call to train BBC journalists on how to cover the Middle East was reiterated in the 2006 report by Sir Quentin Thomas (see 5.1) who the BBC Governors, the predecessor of the present BBC Trust, had commissioned to specifically look into its Middle East coverage. One of the report's conclusions stresses the need for better training in the area of covering the Middle East. The module includes some material from that report. The course presents some videos Middle East Editor Jeremy Bowen (see 5.5) has prepared based on the recommendations the report makes.

The largest part of the course is based on the glossary of terms. Students can click on a whole range of words, phrases to see what they mean, when and how to use them and if there is a kind of dispute about them. The bulk of the module exercises are straight forward multiple quizzes in which journalists are asked questions and given four options to choose and they either get it right or wrong. Editors have 45 minutes to go over the online module and the journalists will have to complete it online on their own.

## 5. The discursive and social dimensions of BBC discourse: The actors

Here we would like to discuss in some detail the forces determining the discursive and social practices of BBC Middle East discourse. These include mainly individual editors appointed to monitor the coverage or panels set up to examine it. We will first introduce two major reports commissioned by the BBC to improve its reporting of the conflict. Both have generated a great deal of interest from international media and led to fundamental editorial shakeups and transformation at several levels: personnel, guidelines and discursive practices. A brief discussion of the two reports and the actors, their positions, views, and duties is essential to understanding why the BBC's Middle East coverage is what it is, how the BBC responded to the findings of the two reports, how the actors exercise their discursive and social power, and how far the discourse producers are under obligation to heed their discursive instructions. We suggest that answers to these queries are vital if critical analysts want to grasp the what, the how and the why of the news discourse.

### 5.1 Sir Quentin Thomas report





This report was published on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006. It was written by a panel the BBC Governors (Trust) had commissioned in October 2005 and was chaired by Sir Quentin Thomas, the president of the British Board of Film Classification, to assess the impartiality of BBC coverage of the conflict. Though the panel's review covered the BBC U.K.'s domestic public service output only, many of its findings and recommendations were also adopted by the network's international broadcasting services. The report says: "Apart from individual lapses, sometimes of tone, language or attitude, there was little to suggest systematic or deliberate bias."

Of the report's 38 pages (excluding appendices), the section on language is of direct relevance to this study. "Language is an issue at the heart of impartiality," says the report. The reason for this central rule "is because words can convey judgment and value separate from or additional to, their apparent or surface meaning. Some words become over-familiar, or abused or irretrievably loaded." This in a sense mirrors what critical analysts say of both the latent and explicit power of language to label and characterize either negatively or positively. But the Thomas report, despite its critical angle, broadly approves the BBC use of language and even urges the corporation to reintroduce the 'T-word' (Terrorists). As the editorial policy of the T-word had already been approved by the Governors, which commissioned the report, it was not realistic to expect a change in policy. Thus, the report's authors, while calling for the BBC to "get the language right", fail to give examples of the loaded terminology in the coverage and provide no alternatives of what to choose in case words become a barrier to proper understanding. It cites no examples from the "key points" guide on the kind of facts and terminology its journalists "should employ and use as a reference point" when reporting the conflict.

But more interesting and more important is the view the report has on power and hegemony the two sides of the conflict have on the ground and how this reverberates in discourse. The report does not accept the notion that for the sake of neutrality, impartiality, balance and fairness, news should, as far as possible, avoid the hegemonic influences of powerful actors. On the contrary, it embraces discourse that typically reflects power disparities on the ground because the conflict

by its nature, impose[s] some constraints and imperatives of its own ... There is an asymmetry of power between the two sides and this is reflected in a number of ways which impact on the journalistic enterprise ... the two sides are not on equal terms ... This is not a question of the respective merits of the two sides. It is simply a matter of fact that Israel is a functioning state with established democratic institutions, an advanced economy and a highly effective diplomatic, defense and intelligence capability. None of this is true of the Palestinian side.

BBC editors with power to determine what terminology to use and what not to use accept the suggestion that hegemonic powers on the ground are bound to have better discursive access and that the protagonists of this particular conflict cannot and should not be treated discursively equally (see 5.2).

The report received mixed reviews in international media. The Guardian (May 23, 2006) came to the conclusion that the coverage was 'misleading'; The BBC (May 2, 2006) covered the report under the following headline: "BBC 'must improve Mid-East view'; the Jerusalem Post (May 2, 2006) gathered that BBC's coverage was 'flawed' but not 'biased'; The Times (May 3, 2006) saw that BBC news 'favors Israel' at the expense of Palestinian view; the Guardian (May 2, 2006) focused on the report's





recommendation with regard to terrorism “Call terrorist acts terrorism, BBC told”; the Independent (May 3, 2006) highlighted the report’s criticism of the coverage and from America the Washington Post’s (May 9, 2006) Jefferson Morley wrote about BBC’s faults in covering the conflict.

## 5.2 The Balen report

The Balen report is controversial in the sense it has created a heated debate in the press as the BBC has adamantly insisted on its secrecy despite a court battle which, though it won, cost British taxpayers more than 200,000 pounds. The 20,000-word report is written by Senior Editorial Adviser Malcolm Balen. Sir Quentin Thomas’s panel was given access – in response to a request – to the unpublished internal report which Balen had written in 2003. The panel says it found it “helpful” but adds no more about it due to its confidential nature which has sparked a barrage of speculative media reports. Most media coverage surmises that the BBC wanted to keep it under wraps because it points to bias against Israel. The Israeli ynetnews (October 24, 2006) said the BBC was seeking to suppress the report because it discovered that its reporting was biased against Israel; the Independent (March 28, 2007) said there were allegations that the fight to keep the report secret was due to “bias against Israel”; the Mail online (April 27, 2007) said the BBC was to do everything to keep the “report on anti-Israel bias secret”; Haaretz (February 2, 2007) struck a similar tone.

But Balen, unlike Sir Quentin Thomas, is an institutional actor and the only insider with a say on what discursive and social practices are to be present or absent in the news output. In BBC corridors he is more known for his Middle East glossary than his report. The majority of this glossary of hundreds of terms, mainly written by Balen, is only for internal use. Sir Quentin Thomas recommended that the BBC make this “key points” handbook public as one of the measures to increase audiences’ understanding of the context. But only an abbreviated version of two dozen terms has been put on the net (Key terms: 2006). Discursively and socially, the glossary is vital for both the coverage of the conflict and the Middle East teaching module. As we shall see, a large part the module evolves on how to handle these words and terms.

How did this glossary come into being? Balen explains:

When I arrived here I discovered that there was a large repository of knowledge about the conflict and about the language of the conflict ... But that knowledge was in the heads of expert correspondents ... So we collated this information and a year or so they gathered together an independent panel to look at the BBC’s coverage of the Middle East and whether it was impartial or not and one of its recommendations was that we should issue an abbreviated guide to our language so that the public could see what is the thinking behind our language.

Balen does not hide the fact that the glossary is a ‘deliberate and conscious’ attempt by the BBC to instruct journalists about what type of discursive item or term to use and when and how. But he says the BBC’s power to force its discursive practices is confined to “nouns and adjectives rather than phrases.” But the guide in both its abbreviated form on the net and the portions included in the teaching module is much more than individual words. In it, Balen or rather the BBC incorporates historical, political and legal background to the conflict and advises journalists not only on what word



or adjective to use but also what phrase and occasionally clause or sentence to include. In other words the glossary is both a discursive and social guide to the conflict. As Balen himself admits the BBC now exerts “more of a conscious effort ...to put context to the story”. The glossary in a sense predefines the conflict for the journalists and its discursive patterns and social contexts are reinforced in the teaching module. Middle East journalists or anyone involved in Middle East reporting in the BBC enter the world of the conflict with a lot of perceived discursive and social conditions in their mind. Adds Balen: “We have certainly in the Middle East, have had much more concerted attempt to have one BBC language.”

### 5.3 Head of Region, Africa and Middle East

This senior editorial position is held by Jerry Timmins, who along with Balen and two other senior editors (see 5.4 and 5.5) are usually referred to as the Middle East’s ‘four wise men.’ These are the four actors at the center of the institutional hegemony in the BBC with regard to the Middle East. But Timmins has rather a different view of the glossary whose terms he says reporters “must take note of” but are not under obligation to use:

We never say ‘you must use this word or you must not use this word ... You can’t run a good news organization by dictating to your journalists what they will or will not say or what they will or will not report ... what they should do and what they should not do.

We are not going to elaborate on this ‘very controversial’ statement which essentially gives the freedom of discursive choice to reporters since our analysis, ethnographic investigation and other editors’ statements show that journalists will have to abide by the discursive and social conditions in the glossary guide. The language of the guide itself as well as the teaching module (see sections 6 and 7) renders the terms, phrases and even a few clauses rather mandatory.

Timmins says the glossary has been compiled so that journalists can be clear about their language. He gave the example of “barrier” which the BBC prefers to use despite the fact that it is mostly a towering concrete wall: “The Israelis tend not to call it a wall because they see it has connotation of Berlin Wall, negative connotations that they don’t want to put across. But the Palestinians may well call it a wall.” Asked whether it was part of BBC strategy to avoid using the protagonists’ language regardless of accuracy, Timmins said: “ We are sensitive towards our audiences ... you try to choose the term that is less loaded and more literal and closer to the object or issues you are trying to get across.”

### 5.4 The head of BBC Arabic Service

The head of the BBC Arabic Service **Hosam** El Sokkari is another institutional actor who was involved in the drafting of the glossary. Sokkari agrees that BBC’s Middle East module centers on the glossary Balen put together in coordination with other senior editors and that he was involved in drafting it “so it was not done and sent to me.” But no attempt has been made to render the glossary into Arabic although nearly 70% of Arabic news output is a direct translation from English. Sokkari says the glossary does not only advise on what terms or phrases to use: “This piece of work is not just about terminology. It explains the context and we (in the Arabic service) use a language that is comparable to what is meant by the English terms that are there ... We have a consistent editorial line ... We are



consistent across different languages.” But ‘comparable language’ is not without problems as this conversation with Sokkari shows:

**Barkho:** How would you render into Arabic newly coined loaded and not neutral terms like “Islamists and Jihadists” which the BBC occasionally employs in its English services?

**Sokkari:** When you say ‘Jihadists and Islamists’ are not neutral, what do you mean by that.

**Barkho:** These two words have turned into labels. I mean in English when they are used they usually refer to Muslims as having an aggressive and violent agenda.

**Sokkari:** I am not sure about this in Arabic, I mean ...

**Barkho:** In your Arabic news discourse you translate them into ‘jihadiyoon’ and ‘Islamiyoon’. I went through Maalouf and even Lisan al-Arab (two most trustworthy Arabic lexicons) and could not find those appellations.

**Sokkari:** Hang on. The, the, the (laughter and nod of agreement), well dictionaries evolve. They did not exist before.

**Barkho:** Even in English the terms gained wide currency in western media in the aftermath of 9/11 and as a result of the ongoing ‘war on terror’. But in Arabic, when you use them, in reality you fiddle or rather abuse the holy terms of Jihad and Islam in the eyes of many Muslims.

**Sokkari:** I don’t know what you mean by ‘holy terms’.

**Barkho:** Let me explain. For Muslims almost everything related to Jihad and Islam is holy. Second, while you call Muslims ‘Jihadists or Islamists’ you or rather the BBC never extend the coinage to other religions even if followers commit the same acts. You will never call a Christian or Jew with the same agenda ‘Christianist’ or ‘Jewist’.

**Sokkari:** No, no. It cannot be. More important ... I think the bottom line has to be ... what we are trying to do is to come up with a language that is not emotive, and a language that is as neutral as possible.

### 5.5 Middle East Editor

The fourth BBC Middle East ‘wise man’ is Jeremy Bowen. His jurisdiction includes oversight of the Jerusalem bureau, the BBC’s largest in the region, and advices on sensitive issues of the conflict. He is the only senior editor who is directly involved in the design and writing of the Middle East module and has prepared the videos the college uses as teaching aids:

Yes, that is right. I am directly involved in preparing the module where I stress the importance of language and try to educate people (journalists) on the different aspects of the conflict ... We are very careful with language. We are careful to avoid characterizing people.

Bowen’s position was created very recently. His appointment was in response to the Balen report. His duties include ensuring that the coverage meets the standards Sir Quentin Thomas panel set up for impartiality. So the post is comparatively new and is still evolving. Bowen currently leads a monthly editorial meeting in London for an overview of the coverage. Throughout the conversation, Bowen insisted that the BBC is “not in the business of characterizing people negatively.” Here are excerpts:

**Barkho:** But the BBC is involved in characterizing the Palestinians negatively by using terms like ‘militants, Islamists, extremists, fundamentalists’. Scholarly research has shown that loaded words like



these are only used to characterize the Palestinians and even if the Israelis practice the same thing they are spared such characterization.

**Bowen:** That is absolutely not true. The BBC would use the same terms to describe the Israelis if that was the situation.

**Barkho:** Could you give just one example.

**Bowen:** I recently published an article on Yigal Amir, the killer of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in which I called him 'an extremist'.

**Barkho:** Yigal Amir is one person. You are characterizing an assassin as 'an extremist'. In the case of Palestinians the negative characterization is often used generically to refer to groups as well as people.

**Bowen:** Silence ....

**Barkho:** And to my knowledge you now even avoid the term 'Zionist'.

**Bowen:** Well, that is because there are no distinct religious Zionists in the settler movement.

**Barkho:** How could then the BBC identify Palestinians as distinct 'militants or Islamists'. BBC's persistence to use such terminology has led to a bifurcation of discourse whose patterns when examined carefully exhibit two distinct discursive strategies one malignant and the other benign.

**Bowen:** I do not really accept that. These kinds of things may be a characteristic of U.S. media. I hope the BBC presents a more subtle discourse. We are very careful with language. We are careful to avoid characterizing people.

**Barkho:** Perhaps the 'discourse bifurcation' is the outcome of your teaching modules.

**Bowen:** I would rather say there are two narratives and not 'bifurcation'. And I'd say we are always trying to be better in reporting these narratives.

**Barkho:** Narratives are not the issue. What matters is the way they are represented in discourse. I am sure you are aware of the recent report by an internal BBC commission which found that the majority of your audiences think the settlers are Palestinians.

**Bowen:** These are serious misrepresentations. This means one cannot take terminology for granted. Everybody does not know everything ... The BBC should not assume things ... I do not assume things.

**Barkho:** But we have not solved the problem of coverage so long as your audiences get it wrong with a concept that is crucial to the whole coverage of the conflict. Is it not the time the BBC admits that there is something wrong with the choice of its language.

**Bowen:** I think it is less the presence of language. It is the absence of what we do not say. We do not say enough. We do not do quite a good job.

## 6. The discursive and social dimensions of BBC discourse: Actions

In this section we will introduce the discursive and social actions the BBC has in place and which it wants its journalists to use as reference points when covering the conflict. At the heart of these actions are Balen's internal glossary known as *Guide to Facts and Terminology on Israel and the Palestinians: Key terms* (2006) and the compulsory Middle East teaching module which essentially 'inculcates' many of what the tutors see as the 'most sensitive' among its terms. As mentioned earlier, the glossary is internal and only 24 of its terms are on the net.<sup>1</sup> In our analysis of the actions the BBC takes to translate its discursive and social policies into news discourse, we shall first concentrate on phraseology which is the actors conscious and deliberate choice among other options the language provides and round up with clauses which the actors say there is no attempt to have them imposed on the discourse.



## 6.1 Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a vital role in “inculcating and sustaining or changing ideologies” and nowhere is the social relation of power, domination and exploitation more visible than in the choice of vocabulary (Fairclough 2003: 9). The choice of lexical items has the potential of characterizing people in different ways. Discourses, and mainly through the choice of vocabulary, ‘word’, ‘lexicalize’ and even ‘standardize’ the social world ( c.f. Fowler et al. 1979; Gumperz 1982; van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). In Halliday’s (1979, 1973) systemic analysis, lexical structures and their choice are the major determinants of the language’s “ideational function”. Through their choice of vocabulary, speakers and writers as well as institutions embody their experience, conscience, reactions, perceptions and cognitions of themselves and their ‘real’ world out there. “Vocabulary not only sorts out experience in general terms, it makes detailed distinctions between classes of concepts” (Fowler 1991: 82-84). Let us now examine how the BBC wants its reporters to ‘lexicalize’ and ‘word’ the world of the conflict.

The first lexical items students confront in the module are *Eretz Israel* and *Palestine*. Only Palestine is included in the glossary portion on the net. The glossary advises journalists to *be careful with the use of the word “Palestine”*. Thus, “Palestine” as a reference to Palestinian land or territories is shunned in BBC news discourse and all the documents it has on the net and is almost uniformly replaced by “Palestinians” because *There is no independent state of Palestine today ...* Does the BBC pursue the same discursive policy in reporting other world conflicts? There is no independent state of Northern Ireland, there is no independent state of Chechnya, there is no independent state of Kurdistan, and similarly of Abkhazia and Ossetia (only Russia and quite very recently recognized them as independent states). The way the BBC handles the two terms is a classic example of the power asymmetry Sir Quentin Thomas refers to in his report and how it is represented discursively. For a critical analyst it is a classic example of how hegemonic powers and ideologies (Israelis) are given preferential discursive treatment at the expense of the dominated and occupied Palestinians. *Palestine* is explained in five lines but *Eretz Israel* has 18 lines of historical background all immersed in Biblical discourse.

It is culturally and institutionally accepted at the BBC that the sides cannot be treated equally due to the social, political, military, and economic power disparities on the ground. The social asymmetry, according to Balen, is the reason for the lack of balance in discourse. He says: “Israel clearly has more power to do things, because it is a bigger country, more money, more support from America, more technological developments, more weaponry, all the rest of it.” The discursive asymmetry is clearly discernible in the way the BBC explains other religious terms in the course. The historicity, religiosity and sanctity of the main holy sites for Muslims and Jews, *the Temple Mount* or *Haram al-Sharif*, *Dome of the Rock*, *Western Wall* permeate with Biblical references. The Temple Mound is described as *the Abode of God’s presence ... where the redemption will take place when the Messiah will come*. It is described without attribution as *a profound national symbol* and *for them (religious Jews) and secular Jews, giving up the Temple Mount is unthinkable*. There is twice as much explanation for the significance of the sites to the Jews than Arabs and Muslims. As for their religious significance to Muslims, the context is confined to Islamic tradition rather than Koranic discourse.



## 6.2 The abbreviated version of the guidelines

The BBC, unlike newspapers and other media outlets, does not have a single style guide. According to March, there are six style guides within the BBC, ranging from online services to marketing and publicity. The portions that are accessible electronically are not hugely different. But none of these has generated the kind of interest and controversy as the one sparked by the guidelines related to the Middle East coverage (Barkho 2008a). The giant public broadcaster has persistently resisted demands to make this particular handbook public. And of the hundreds of words, phrases and terms, the BBC has only agreed to publicize 24 of them following a recommendation in Sir Quentin Thomas's Panel. Due to space constraints, we only mention here three terms which serve as examples of the 24 terms available online and briefly analyzed below. Readers can retrieve the online glossary from:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/middle\\_east/israel\\_and\\_the\\_palestinians/key\\_documents/6044090.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/middle_east/israel_and_the_palestinians/key_documents/6044090.stm)

- **SETTLEMENTS** - ... Settlements are residential areas built by Israelis in the **occupied territories**. They are illegal under international law: this is the position of the UN Security Council and the UK government among others - although Israel rejects this.
- **TERRORISTS** - We should try to avoid the term, without attribution. We should let other people characterize while we report the facts as we know them. We should convey to our audience the full consequences of the act by describing what happened. We should use words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as "bomber", "attacker", "gunmen", "kidnapper", "insurgent" or "militant."

Fowler's (1990) "authority differential" is vividly displayed in the glossary. Note the 'warning' nature of the command and instruction discourse *Be careful, avoid saying, avoid the phrase*, etc. Note likewise the frequent use of obligatory modal verb *should*. But more important is the way the writer or writers of the glossary assume the role of omniscient 'scholars' with the ability to suggest how Middle East reporters should write and what to include in their reports, e.g. the suggestions on how to describe *INTIFADA*, and occasionally they 'prescribe' ready made clauses (quotes) for the reporters to use such as the suggested samples in *GREEN LINE* and *SETTLER NUMBERS*.

BBC's discursive policy, as editors point out, is to shun the use of value-laden words such as 'TERRORISTS' unless attributed. But the guidelines are not consistent in this regard as they allow the use of lexical items which are no less loaded such as *militant, insurgent, Islamist, bomber*, etc (see 7.1). But what is striking about these words is that they surface mainly in the discourse describing the Palestinians fighting Israeli occupation. They and others like *extremist, fundamentalist*, etc. are not deployed to characterize other voices in discourse even if those voices do similar things or harbor similar ideologies. Also, the glossary is straightforward about the role of political power, the British government which decides the license fee and the Foreign Office which finances the World Service – the broadcaster's international services – as in *SETTLEMENTS*.

## 7. How hegemonic production practices impact news discourse

In this section, we will discuss how the above institutional practices, whether discursive or social, are intertextualized in the final news output. The discussion draws on the textual analysis of 20 BBC online





stories to see the social and discursive interactions between the remote and immediate or micro and macro practices of discourse. Ten of these stories report Palestinian casualties and the other ten report Israeli casualties. The target is to see if the power differentials or asymmetries at the institutional level creep into the final news output and, if so, at which discursive or structural levels. Another important aim is to provide some quantitative comparison between the reporting of both sides' casualties.

The corpus includes 9,636 words, 537 paragraphs and 946 lines. Statistically speaking, each paragraph comprises nearly 18 words of about two lines each. On average, each story has close to 500 words. The frequency difference with regard to the number of paragraphs, lines and words in the two sets of stories, is rather negligible. There are 4,634 words, 254 paragraphs and 402 lines in stories on Palestinian casualties. Israeli casualties are covered in 5,002 words, 283 paragraphs and 544 lines.

The figures above are very accurate but fail to tell the story of institutional power asymmetries, how they are enacted and interconnected and at what levels. The numbers above show a remarkable balance of coverage of both sides' casualties and on the surface show the BBC deals with the protagonists entirely on the same level of playing field. Thus we find qualitative analysis more illuminating despite its subjectivity. Our textual analysis below can only be understood when put into the context of the remote social and discursive practices discussed above. In the following sections we pursue some of the most outstanding discursive features in the 20 stories and try to relate them to their macro institutional world.

### 7.1 Lexical hegemony

This is the first social and discursive thread that attracts attention and it may not escape the eyes of readers with no critical analysis training. It simply demonstrates that there are two distinct discursive categories at the level of vocabulary which see the two protagonists from two different angles. The lexis at several levels characterizes the Palestinians as the 'bad guys' and the Israelis as the 'good guys'. The Israelis are spared negative or malignant characterization, a discursive feature the BBC reserves for the Palestinians. For example, the whole idea of a people under occupation and what that entails under international law is discursively neglected.

In the 20 stories the BBC avoids using the word 'occupation' in its own lexical characterization. The word is only mentioned three times – each time as an example of Palestinian reported speech, rather than what the BBC believes or says. It is what it reports Palestinian officials as saying. No understanding of the context of the conflict is possible if the notion of more than four decades of Israeli occupation is lost. Balen says (see 5.2 ) the BBC imposes its choice of individual words when it comes to sensitive issues. Note the following conversation with Marsh, BBC College of Journalism's editor:

**Barkho:** In your internal guidelines you draw on Geneva Conventions which I think sanction resistance to occupation. But that particular word 'occupation', let alone resistance, is totally absent from your discourse.

**Marsh:** It is an interesting word 'occupation' ... I think most journalists, most BBC journalists ... I don't justify that ... [but] it is just one of those funny linguistic things that we tend not to talk about.

**Barkho:** Why is that?

**Marsh:** I do not know actually. I don't know. I don't know.





The Palestinians are at a disadvantage at several other lexical characterizations. They and their groups are invariably labeled as 'militants', 'gunmen', 'bombers', 'suicide bombers', etc. The word 'militant', for example, is used 90 times in the corpus. But more interesting, is the way the BBC collocates both adjective and noun forms of the word, generating expressions like 'Palestinian militant groups', 'militants', 'a militant', 'Palestinian militants', 'a militant group', 'the Islamic militant group', etc. 'Bomber' is used 49 times with collocations such as 'master bomber', 'female suicide bomber', 'a Palestinian suicide bomber', 'the apparent bomber', 'the bomber's home', 'the alleged bomber', ' Hamas woman bomber', 'male bombers', 'female bombers', 'women bombers, 'bombers', etc.

There are no traces of negative or malignant discourse characterizing Israelis. Their occupation of Palestinian territories, their settlements in occupied Palestinian territories and the militant and combative nature of many of their settlers find no discursive echoes in the corpus. For example the word 'settlement' is contextualized within a Jewish and Israeli context amid the absence of Palestinian views and international law perspective. Note the following:

The BBC's Kylie Morris in Gaza says Israel normally defends the demolition of houses on the grounds that they provide cover for militants who attack its soldiers and settlements. (20 February, 2002)

Two discursive strategies emerge in the previous paragraph. Lexically, the Palestinians are negatively represented as 'militants', 'attack' while the Israeli 'settlements' and 'soldiers' enjoy positive discursive advantage. One might say the use of the noun phrase 'demolition of houses' by Israel is discursively negative, but one does not have to ignore the fact that it is contextualized within the benign and positive discursive logic of motivation which spurs the Israelis to do what they do. But Palestinian actions are reported, logically and linguistically, as if they are 'natural' and 'inherent' not motivated by Israeli practices. The second strategy relates to the discursive and social voice. The BBC is 'implicated' discursively and socially in bringing about this proposition. It directly interprets what it thinks of the course of events since the source is none other than 'The BBC's Kylie Morris in Gaza'. The BBC interprets and paraphrases itself regularly in discourse. Institutional voice, which used to be rather implicit, is now easily discernible.

## 7.2 Clausal hegemony

Lexical items mainly represent ideas about the world and how the speaker or writer characterizes it. In clauses or sentences speakers and writers arrange these items in patterns that mainly tell their assumptions and propositions about the world. Critical analysts have dwelt at length on interaction between the discursive and the social at different textual levels, namely vocabulary and clauses. We will first examine the headlines of our 20-story corpus and the top four paragraphs, particularly the leads, as they, according to BBC's Adam Curtis (World Editor, Interactive), are used throughout the broadcaster's different and multiple platforms, mobile, television, text, etc. Note the following two sets of examples, the first (A) drawn from stories reporting Palestinian casualties and the second (B) from Israeli casualties.



A.

**1. Deaths mount in attacks on Gaza**

An Israeli air strike on the Gaza City home of a member of the Palestinian militant group Hamas has killed nine members of the same family. (12 July 2006)

**2. Israel strikes Gaza after siege**

Israeli forces have killed at least 17 people in Gaza on one of the deadliest days for months in the territory. (4 November 2006)

**3. Palestinians die in Gaza violence**

At least five Palestinians have been killed by Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip as troops pressed on with operations against armed groups. (24 November 2006)

B.

**4. Bomb kills clubbers in Tel Aviv**

A suicide bombing has killed four and injured about 30 outside a popular seafront night club in the Israeli city of Tel Aviv, police report. (26 February 2005)

**5. Bomber targets Israeli shopping mall**

A suicide bomber has killed himself and two Israelis - including a small child - in the town of Petah Tikva, near Tel Aviv. (27 May 2002)

**6. West Bank gunmen kill six Israelis**

Palestinian gunmen have shot and killed six Israelis in an ambush near Ramallah in the West Bank. (20 February 2002)

A detailed critical analysis of the two sets of texts above is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worthwhile to say a word or two about the striking social and discursive asymmetries they display. In (A), the perpetrator or agent causing the casualties is not there in the three headlines. The patients or victims either are nominalized as in 'deaths' in (1) and if they are mentioned as in 'Palestinians' in (3) they are part of the circumstance in a complex and convoluted noun phrase which to anyone with decent knowledge of English would attribute their killing to violence originating in Gaza itself and not by Israel. The examples in (B) are discursively and socially the opposite. The perpetrator causing the casualties is easy to identify. The inequality is not confined to headlines. The leads in (A) are discursively constructed in a manner which clearly says what motivated the Israelis to cause the casualties. In (1) the Israeli strike was aimed at 'the Gaza City home of a member of the Palestinian militant group Hamas' in the third the casualties happened 'as troops pressed on with operations against armed groups'. Motivations like these, discursively realized mainly in complex noun phrase and parenthetical subordinate clauses are a feature of BBC's coverage of Palestinian casualties. But they do not surface in covering Israeli casualties as the examples in (B) demonstrate.

## 7. Conclusions

Critical analysts do not aim at generalizations and they view their findings as "qualitative claims" about how and why certain discursive patterns occur in their data "and any suggestions they make about the likelihood that the same thing will occur in other data are simply suggestions" (Johnstone 2008: 22). This study should not be viewed differently for two main reasons. In the first place, it is extremely difficult to generalize when studying giant global and multilingual broadcasters like the BBC where



different strategies are adopted for the reporting of different regions and in different languages. Secondly, discursive and social strategies in broadcasting media are not irreversible due to power pressures, whether internal or external. This is why we have resorted to institutional ethnographic observation, namely interviews, as part of a triangulated approach in an attempt to alleviate the impact of our own bias and subjectivity. And in the light of our discussion and analysis we find that BBC's Middle East reporting in English to have the following discursive and social interactional processes some of which contradict commonly held views of media discourse in critical literature.

Discursive formulations and their social implications, though the BBC presents them as suggestions, are transformed into collective, authoritative ideological moves through the institutional reality despite their being the work of only a handful of powerful individuals. The analysis of the teaching module demonstrates the high degree of power that is concentrated in the hands of these individuals. The teaching in the college reinforces this power as it inculcates the internal guidelines prepared by these individuals.

The discursive work is aimed at building support for the institution ostensibly through consensus. But the analysis shows that it does so through control. The language of the internal guidelines gives little discursive leeway for the reporters and editors to maneuver and the college's module is designed to provide social and discursive support.

Though the guidelines and the modules are the work of a few individuals, they are represented as the work of the institution and a product of history – the Bible, and the world at large – international law, the British government – all with the ostensible aim that the institution is making them available rather than imposing them. Thus, the actors at the heart of laying down the discourse production strategies position themselves as the consensual and collective identity of the institution with the right to construct social and discursive reality for the others.

Social and discursive hegemony is the work of a few but is made available for the others to see as the work of the collective construction of the institution with overarching aims of editorial fairness, balance, impartiality and credibility. But the sense of hegemony, ethnographically observable from the data, is that the discursive and social structuring processes are one way. It flows from the few powerful hands; it is reinforced by the college's teaching module and seeps through the final product.

Our ethnography shows that consent and common sense are largely absent and members are aware of the inefficiencies and to a certain extent 'unfairness' of some discursive practices, but still they can do nothing to change the discursive and social reality with which the institution views the conflict. Excerpts from the conversations we had with some powerful hands clearly illustrate that consent and common sense are not always an institutional reality.

Structuration in Giddens' (1984) terms is not totally invisible and consensual. Its consequences and actions are visible to the organizational members and cannot escape the preying eyes of ethnographic critical analysts. The reason is that 'structuration' seeps through the constitution the way the social and discursive rules and patterns BBC's powerful hands have created are transmitted to and transmuted by other institutional members who work under different conditions, i.e. reporters in the field, reporters as students in the college, desk editors, etc. Structuration is in a sense something like institutional



knowledge – in our case the internal guidelines and the teaching module which provide the knowledge on how to report can be viewed as Bourdieu's 'symbolic capital' but they both are inculcated. Knowledge is a form of power and hegemony. In the BBC it is distributed and regulated. It is also fought over.

Does hegemony always work as consent? The ethnographic evidence this study provides shows it does not. This raises serious questions about hegemony as consent. The relationship between the discursive and social patterns on the one hand, and reporters on the other, borders on coercion. Critical research has focused strongly on hegemony-as-consent and has overlooked how coercion or force is practiced in discourse (c.f. Gramsci 1984; Blommaert et al. 2003). The reason might be coercion has mostly been linked to physical force. In our case we link it to institutional hands with the power to force their (or the institution's) discursive and social practices across the organization.

Critical analysis, in its study of media texts, has strongly focused on the interconnections between discursive elements of the text and the social world. But as Fairclough (1995: 747) maintains these "interconnections and chains of cause-and-effect may be distorted out of vision". A critique, he says, "is essentially making visible the interconnections of things" and investigation of textual evidence might not be enough to reveal the distortions in "chains of cause-and-effect" and hence his call for "a closer examination of the players with the discursive and social power that make it possible for social events to be produced and reproduced." Our study, which includes an analysis of how a set of institutional actors work on forcing one set of discursive and social practices through language, has hopefully thrown light on the "chains" and "interconnections" Fairclough refers to. Hegemony in news discourse "does not fall from the sky" (Heller 2003). For its Middle East news discourse, the BBC constructs it in ways that make our hitherto understanding of news production strategies contestable, particularly the notion that institutional discursive power leads to taken-for-granted and natural discourses and practices.



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<sup>i</sup> The Glossary is available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/middle\\_east/israel\\_and\\_the\\_palestinians/key\\_documents/6044090.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/middle_east/israel_and_the_palestinians/key_documents/6044090.stm)

