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The Role of Narrative within the discourse of Colonialism and Palestine

The standard of South African journalism is generally gauged by compliance with the Press Ombudsman's Code of ethics and conduct for South African print and online media. When reporting on the Palestinian issue a large deal of focus is placed on the requirements of balanced reporting as opposed to reporting fairly or providing content which is contextual not only with regard to the news story but also the discourse within which the topic is located. The failure to embrace issues of fairness and context has an impact on the narrative which is absorbed by the public. It was stated by Maxwell & McCombs media (mainly the news media) **is not only successful in telling us what to think but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about**¹. This underscores the importance and impact of narrative and correctness thereof.

Prior to any discussion on balance, **the issue of context has a direct implication on narrative. If there is failure to unpack and engage with the larger context in which the story is located, it can be argued that there is a violation of the basic tenets of fair and contextual reporting which results in a distorted narrative.**

The question then turns to, what is the larger context particularly within the framework of this conference and its correlation to the Palestinian issue. The roots of racism can be traced back to the grotesque system and structure of colonialism. According to Dr Jazbhay and Professor Grosfoguel²: These native peoples were originally considered in the late 15th century and early 16th century as "people without God" in the Catholic Spanish imaginary. It is this conceptualisation below what is considered 'human' (the belief in God), in effect as animals ("people without a soul"), which transformed the native peoples into the first racialised subjects of the modern/colonial world installed in 1492 after the conquest of Al-Andalus (Dussel 1994 cited in Grosfoguel 2013, 83). It is precisely because of this persisting mentality that we have reprehensible statements such as those expressed by Penny Sparrow and company. **This racism morphed in late 15th century from a discourse of a "people with the**

¹ McCombs, Maxwell E. (2005). A look at agenda-setting: Past, present and future. *Journalism Studies* 6: 543-557.

² Jazbhay A (2015). Coloniality and the obliteration of Islamic history and identity: A story of epistemicide, epistemic racism and Islamophobia, *Media Review Network South Africa*

wrong religion” (imperial difference) into inferior “savages and primitives” of “people without civilisation” (colonial difference) in the 19th century (Jazhbay). As global populations became increasingly unnerved by the unjust colonial system, it comes as no wonder that in 1960 the United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples an extract of which reads: “Believing that the process of liberation is irresistible and irreversible and that, in order to avoid serious crises, an end must be put to colonialism and all practices of segregation and discrimination associated therewith,” It therefore flows that racism is an inextricable characteristic of colonialism. Strangely, a remnant of the colonial era remains in full view of the global media in the form of the State of Israel and its conduct towards Palestinian people. It was the a claimed jurist, international law expert and former UN Rapporteur said in 2009 at the Jerusalem Fund Lecture :

“So, there is a form of colonialism in the West Bank, and colonialism is not tolerated by international law. It’s clearly unlawful. Not only do settlements constitute a form of colonialism, but they also violate the Geneva Convention. So, that’s a clear illegality on the part of Israel.³”

This inextricable connection between race, colonialism and Israel locates the Palestinian issue appropriately within the discourse of this conference. This positioning then gives rise to the questions; does colonialism require balance and fairness? Does something as morally and legally reprehensible require a voice in terms of context and balance?

It is my submission that the issue is not so much about whether there should be an accommodation of the views that may be legally and morally reprehensible but rather whether or not those views should be venerated and justified under the lofty pursuit of balance. Sadly, the main stream media whilst reporting on the Palestinian issue equalises the coloniser and the colonised, the occupier with the occupied which warps the narrative. The warped narrative silently justifies the narrative of colonialism and colonial violence. This silent justification provides a false context of the larger discourse (colonialism) which is in violation of the terms of the Press Ombudsman’s Code of ethics and conduct for South African print and online media⁴. In the code in section 1 it reads:

1. Gathering and reporting of news

1.1. The media shall take care to report news truthfully, accurately and fairly.

1.2. News shall be presented in context and in a balanced manner, without any intentional or negligent departure from the facts whether by distortion, exaggeration or misrepresentation, material omissions, or summarisation.

The interpretation of balance linguistically and legally has different impacts on narrative. According to the Cambridge dictionary balance is defined as: considering all sides or

³ <http://normanfinkelstein.com/2009/03/31/john-dugard-on-israel-south-africa-and-apartheid/>

⁴ <http://www.presscouncil.org.za/ContentPage?code=PRESSCODE>

opinions equally. The legal embodiment of balance is the Latin maxim *Audi alteram partem* which translates to "listen to the other side", or "let the other side be heard as well". When journalists absorb the linguistic definition of balance this is often at the expense of context and fairness which is also a crucial component in the Press Ombudsman's code and thereby warping the narrative. This is particularly so within the sphere of reporting on Palestine and the Palestinian issue. By "balancing" the narrative of the colonialist and the colonised, media is effectively whitewashing and sterilising the narrative, making it more palatable for the public and perpetuates its existence. This linguistic "balance" is by its very nature a violation of the true context and fairness. This presentation advocates that reporting on Palestine and the Palestinian issue must be located within the discourse of colonialism and that the standard of "balance" should be the legal *Audi Alteram Partem* interpretation as opposed to equalising an unjust and illegal situation. To venerate the Israeli narrative via balance does not only provide a false narrative but positions journalists as enablers of colonialism which has given this world dehumanisation, occupation and racism.

The clips that I will show evidence how an attempt to balance the narratives decontextualizes the plight of Palestinian children in occupied territories leaving the viewer with the sense that Israel's defence force is a protector of Palestinian children and their rights to education. This balancing presents an exception as the status quo which fails to be truthful, accurate, fair and within context. The second clip incorporates the exception but presents the context which is absent in the "linguistically "balanced" clip. In conclusion, the words of el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (Malcom X) provide a sobering warning to both the media and the recipients of their content. He said :

"The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses."

May we not fail in our obligations to the people, the story and most importantly to principles of Justice and conscience.