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Thursday 6th December 2012

Dear Sir,

We are writing to complain about the appearance on four occasions, between 14 – 15th November, of the former Zionist Federation public affairs director, Jonathan Sacerdoti, as a guest on BBC News.

It transpires, from information publicised by the media monitoring website Spinwatch (Hilary Aked, 'Former Zionist Federation Official On the Run,' Spinwatch, 18 November 2012), that Mr Sacerdoti appeared to provide comment on events in Gaza as the director of the Institute for Middle Eastern Democracy but his prior affiliation and affinity were not disclosed to news viewers. Indeed, so clear are Mr Sacerdoti's pro-Israeli affinities, he has attempted to wipe away evidence and trace of his involvement in the Zionist Federation and in pro-Israeli advocacy from websites and social media pages, according to the Spinwatch report.

His activities beg several important and fundamental questions. Firstly, did the BBC undertake sufficient background checks to ascertain the neutrality of Mr Sacerdoti before inviting him to appear on BBC News? Did the BBC undertake ongoing checks into Mr Sacerdoti's background before inviting him back a further three times?

Second, given the pervasive material available, evidenced by the efforts of Mr Sacerdoti to remove their traces, what form and quality of background check does the BBC perform that it should have entirely missed the evidence of Mr Sacerdoti's background in pro-Israeli advocacy?

Third, does the BBC acknowledge that it misled viewers in providing Mr Sacerdoti a platform to air his views without disclosing to viewers his background and affiliations?

Under clause 4.4.8 of the BBC editorial guidelines on impartiality, it notes:

When dealing with 'controversial subjects' this should be clearly signposted, should acknowledge that a range of views exists and the weight of those views, and should not misrepresent them.

We would argue that the Israel/Palestine conflict is a 'controversial subject' by criteria specified under clause 4.4.6:

- the level of public and political contention and debate
- whether the subjects are matters of intense debate or importance in a particular nation, region or discrete area likely to comprise at least a significant part of the audience

It is our view that Mr Sacerdoti's appearance on BBC News without full disclosure of his background and affinity constitute a breach of these guidelines.

The Israel/Palestine conflict is one which has consistently invited criticism over the BBC's coverage with much criticism levelled at its, largely absent, effort to maintain objectivity and neutrality in its broadcasts. Studies by academics at Glasgow University demonstrate irrefutable proof of BBC bias in favour of Israel with Israeli spokespersons being offered twice the airtime as their Palestinian counterparts.

The failure to adequately check the details and history of Mr Sacerdoti, and the neglect in fully disclosing his background to unsuspecting viewers in a by-line, will do little to quell criticism of the BBC and its broadcast output on Israel and Palestine.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Shenaz Bunglawala