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"The Israeli army treats journalists as enemies"

In Israel it is not easy to propagate the reality in which the Palestinians live every day. David Sheen, a Canadian Jewish activist who works as a journalist in the Middle Eastern country, talks to Report.cat about the misinformation and poisoning information that is submitted to the population.



David Sheen is a Canadian activist who came to live and work as a journalist in Israel due to various circumstances. He began working at Haaretz, where he covered a series of events that happened within the Israeli and Palestinian territory. A few years later, he quit the job to practice journalism more autonomously. Sheen gave a talk at Dublin Palfest, a festival created by over 400 volunteering Irish artists to commemorate the first anniversary of Operation Margin Protector in Gaza, which occurred in July 2014. At the conference, he talked with Report.cat about the reasons for the perpetuity and legitimacy of violent attacks on Palestinians. Sheen spoke about this and many other delicate aspects that come with the profession.

You have been living in Israel since 1999 and you always have shown your criticism of the Israeli regime in your different articles and reports. Recently, the Israeli treatment of African immigrants has been the main theme of your pieces. Do you consider yourself a journalist-activist?

Certainly, in my reports I dump a lot on the subject of racism. And it is no secret that before being a journalist I was an activist who participated in many battles on racism, ecology, and other issues, both in Canada and Israel. I'm not ashamed to admit that certain current views on certain issues are the root of these experiences that I've had throughout my life. As a journalist, you know it's a little more complicated because you have an obligation to explain things neutrally. However, I do not think a report clashes with having opinions about it and, even more, express them clearly. It's much more honest to admit and explain what you think and certify it with facts rather than pretend that you do not have any opinion on that at all.

“The majority of the worst attacks by the Jews to non-Jews have never been documented”

I'm still very junior in journalism and I constantly keep learning, but I really think it is possible to write carefully and passionately about what you care about with a serious, clear and direct language. There have been people who have criticized me and my journalism accusing me of being biased. However, I think that accusing me of not being neutral is ridiculous, especially when you live in a country where racism is a real and palpable problem and, therefore, something that has to be explained.

Have you ever been in trouble for being critical through articles?

The state has never directly caused me any problems like when I'm leaving or entering the country (Israel carries out checkouts at its airports on arrivals and departures to know where their visitors go) or some other time; I have never been threatened by the state due to my own articles.

But, there is propaganda, the authors of which are closely linked to the political Israeli authorities who attack me directly via the internet, campaigns, etc. They accuse me of being a liar, of being someone who hates Jews and who dedicates to spreading hatred. Of course I have never done that and, in fact, it really pisses me off because I am Jewish myself, my family is Jewish and my grandparents have lived through the Holocaust. I guess that's just the way they can attack me but, these and other reasons bother me that accuse me of making propaganda against the Jews.

And yes, I have also been physically attacked by the Israeli army when I covered events or attacks that occurred on the streets. This happens because there is much resistance against the media, and they don't let anything be covered; there are no witnesses to try to explain what happens. So yes, I have been attacked even when I film, especially because sometimes they recognize me, they point me out and I have to run to avoid major problems. Unfortunately, and because of this, the majority of the worst attacks committed by the Jews to non-Jews have never been documented.

What does your family think of your articles and reports?

The family living in Israel understand it, they love me. They have another opinion and different political perspectives, but they see my work as something legitimate, correct. However, part of the Canadian family does not see it so well and it is very difficult to make them understand because they do not live here. They live in Canada where the pro-Israel propaganda is very powerful.

Recently, some correspondents have had to leave their countries of residence due to their opposition to and criticism of the respective governments. You explained at the Dublin talk that some of your colleagues in Israel have also had to do the same. Do you think one day you will be forced to leave Israel?

Yes, many of my colleagues have fled Israel as they were conscientious objectors against the regime (military service is mandatory in Israel). I hope I do not have to do the same but I admit that tension and fear is increasing. It is something which I have been thinking lately; I need to watch out for my family and our future. Meanwhile, as long as I am living here I will not stop writing.

How do you stay motivated and engaged to a conflict of this scale when seems that nothing is changing?

What happens is that my conscience calls me to stand up, speak out and act against or denounce what I see. So I'm always motivated when I see cases of injustice around me. The lack of motivation does not worry me, what I do ask myself is whether my writings will have some effect, if things will change for the better.

Is it useful to write about conflicts?

It's frustrating. It is not difficult to write and report about what I see, as long as I stay here, but it's hard to keep motivated to live in Israel because things do not improve. On the contrary, as I said, they are worsening. Fortunately, thanks to social networks I receive answers, comments, opinions and messages of support from people around the world in times of doubt and they help me to succeed, to keep working. The job of the journalist is to speak for people who have no voice. When I receive messages of support, they give me the courage I need to speak for the voiceless.

What links journalism, activism and Internet?

It is fascinating to live in the world in which we live in. Most of the media are controlled by large corporations and I personally found myself in situations where my articles have been rejected for being too critical of the regime and for showing the reality of Palestine. The New York Times, for example, a newspaper which supposedly is fairly liberal, has refused to publish an article I wrote because it was too honest. And that's very scary because we are talking about quite a liberal newspaper which is refusing to publish on certain topics.

Luckily, we have the internet and anyone can publish on the Web and anyone can read or listen to you, making the lack of support in publishing no longer a problem. Even more interesting is the fact that your posts can be shared, re-tweeted, etc; doubling the coverage and the effect of the message. And so we could join journalism, activism, and the Internet like this. Do not be afraid. The internet can help make good things.

How are the Israeli media covering the conflict within the country?

Most Israeli media support the government and the ideology behind it. And that includes even the few liberal newspapers that exist in Israel. *Haaretz* is under pressure because it has to stay within the general opinion if they don't want to be accused of being traitors. And because of this pressure, they fall into the dynamics of other media.

Don't the media conceal their support of the government?

I will give you some examples to answer this question. A few months ago, the best-selling newspaper in Israel, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, openly asked citizens to join the campaign that the Israeli government had initiated against the BDS campaign (Boycott Divestment and Sanctions international campaign). Another example: a year ago, a young Palestinian was tortured and murdered by young Jews. They tortured him as much as they could before forcing him to drink gasoline and incinerating him from inside out. Just the day before, the Councillor for Public Safety of the City of Jerusalem gave a public speech in front of a large group of citizens. Through this he instructed attendees to commit acts of Phinehas. He said: "Go and commit acts of Phinehas". Phinehas, in the Bible is a symbol that shows the Jews how to be violent against people who are against the Jews. So he was urging to commit acts of violence, torture, and murder.

And the same day, people went off and did what he said! And what did the media do? No one mentioned what had happened. No one! Only *Haaretz* published a small notice in the Hebrew edition, not in English. The crime was not reported in any media, I was the only one. This is ridiculous. The media just simply ignored the facts. I would think that it was simply a coincidence. But it was not because when

the police arrested the killers, they themselves admitted that they had committed the crime because they felt motivated by the story of Phinehas that as told by the councillor. And, as of today, today, no Israeli media, absolutely no one, mentioned this event. Only me. It is extremely sad because there should be fifty journalists like me publishing and denouncing these facts.

"Haaretz is under pressure because it has to stay within the general opinion in order to not be accused of treason"

And why they are not there?

I live in a society where such comments are the normal routine. If you go online and do a little research, you will find much more. In fact, it would be strange not to hear any of this. So, for the people who live in this country these comments do not leave your everyday routine because you interact with people, talk with people

who think and say such things openly. When you live in a society that feels so much hatred towards another and expresses those feelings with total impunity you can get to understand that, people who do not have the same opinion are afraid to say it and don't discuss these racist comments.

Although I can understand it, I feel shame and sorry for such people. I think the only way to change, to alter the situation, is to speak up and talk about the problem, say what one thinks. Exposing these opinions would force us to discuss the conflict, talk about it, discuss it with the people who derive that much hate and probably we could come to a point where society itself will correct itself and the situation would change. Today, people who say these comments are not punished, on the contrary, receive promotions. Israeli society is moving more and more towards the right wing. And it is a constant movement.

Why is this shift occurring?

For several reasons. It all started during the Second Intifada in September 2000. Before, if you were talking about something with your group of Israeli friends and someone made a racist comment, it was common for someone to say "hey, listen, this is not true". This was possible because, back then, Palestinians and Israelis lived together and shared more civic spaces. It was customary for Israelis to have Palestinian neighbours, Palestinian shops around and Palestinian friends or acquaintances. And there was this approach, this direct and personal contact that were references to hold on to refute against xenophobic comments. They were able to identify lies. But, after the Second Intifada, the distance increased, the separation has become larger and now the Israelis have no contact with the Palestinians. So, you can think that your friend who makes racist comments exaggerates but you cannot say anything because you do not know anyone who can prove it, you do not know anyone who gives you a clear and real reference.

Another reason is the media propaganda. *Israel Hayom* is the most popular publication of the country because it is a free newspaper. It is free, not because a genius of Finances has devised a model from which he makes profit, but because its owner, Sheldon Adelson, manages losses. Adelson invests millions of dollars every year just so his newspaper full of government propaganda can be the most distributed and read. And of course, this has helped to spread extremist ideas.

Are the Israeli media also in favour of the army?

Yes, the vast majority provides clear support of the Israeli military structures. For example, when Prime Minister -Benyamin Netanyahu- appoints a new general, Israeli newspapers enclose posters and other materials for the people to hang in their homes and on the streets. The Army is one of the few institutions that have the support of the whole population. *Haaretz* is amongst the few newspapers that criticize certain actions of the army. But of course, we must note that only 5% of the population reads *Haaretz*. So...

"The vast majority of the media provide clear support to the Israeli military structures"

Who is behind the media?

The bestselling newspapers in Israel are *Israel Hayom* and *Yedioth Ahronoth*. Between them, they have 80% of the readers and their owners are Sheldon Adelson and Arnon Mozes, respectively. Adelson, for example, is the primary contributor to the Republican Party in the US, providing tens of billions of dollars, as well as to the Netanyahu campaign. He also said openly and clearly that he does not want democracy in his country, that it is not necessary. The fact that when someone with so much power, who heads one of the most widely read newspapers in the country, says openly that there is no need for having a democracy and there is no reaction whatsoever, is very scary.

The Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedom released a report last May which said that between 2010 and 2015, 103 violations or physical assaults were committed against Palestinian journalists.

The Israeli army treats journalists as enemies and, therefore, treats them with violence. In fact, Israel was listed as the second country – Syria was the first – in number of atrocities on journalists in 2014. Journalists, in general, not just the Palestinians, are subjected to a lot of violence and persecution by the army.

Many times we talked about humanitarian crises, emergencies and other situations of conflict that are easily forgotten when the media fail to cover them. How can we avoid this in Palestine?

I personally believe that Palestine is still attracting a lot of interest among the media compared to other conflicts around the world. I do not think the problem is that the Palestinian conflict is in danger of being forgotten, but how we frame it. The media constantly speak about the violation of the human rights of Palestinians and readers end up suffering from media fatigue. And in fact, I think this is not the real problem. We should speak more about the violence and the colonialism which are driving the country towards ethnical purity.

But I also understand that it is difficult to understand it and to read about the conflict from other angles because, in fact, there are increasingly fewer correspondents on the ground and, therefore, we have little access to a variety of perspectives. Fortunately, today we have the Internet. And although the network has caused a great setback in the profession, I do not consider it our enemy. Thanks to the Internet I can publish everything that happens in Israel and I can reach a lot more people.

Marta Alemany.