

Community news

Executive director of HonestReportingCanada:

Organization tries to ensure fair, accurate coverage of Middle East in Canadian media

By **MATT BELLAN**

When Dov Smith enters his Toronto office, Israel is always on his mind.

He goes through major Canadian dailies and views all national newscasts from the night before.

"I monitor every reference to the word Israel in the Canadian media," Smith said, during a visit to Winnipeg last week that lasted several days. "I analyze them for fairness and accuracy."

Smith is executive director of HonestReportingCanada, an organization that describes itself as "promoting fair and accurate Canadian media coverage of Israel and the Middle East."

In workshops with Gray Academy of Jewish Education high school students, members of Herzlia Synagogue, Jewish community officials and others, Smith explained what HonestReportingCanada is, how it operates and what it does on a daily basis.

HonestReporting, its American predecessor, started shortly after the El Aqsa Intifada started in September, 2000.

Its purpose: to ensure fair and honest media coverage of Israel and the Middle East after stories and photographs appeared, demonizing Israeli soldiers and police trying to control Palestinian violence.

Note to readers

When pictures with photo captions, stories and other announcements appear in boxes, that indicates the material inside the box is paid for. Stories with headlines in a typestyle other than the one used for standard news stories (samples of standard news headlines appear with all stories on page 1) are also partly or fully paid for.

Notice to organizations, publicists

The Jewish Post & News now is charging for publicity about upcoming events running in this newspaper.

- Anyone running a display ad at least "business card size" (2 columns wide by 2 inches deep) publicizing a Jewish organizational upcoming event will be entitled to up to the equivalent amount of editorial space free every time the ad runs.
- Announcements of synagogue service times run for free, but are subject to editing for length.
- All publicity about upcoming events submitted for publication must include the names and addresses of the individuals authorizing publication, for billing purposes.
- All news releases and announcements published in The Jewish Post & News are subject to editing, and all references to ticket prices, admission charges and phone numbers will be deleted, unless the items are authorized to run at the full display advertising rate.
- All news and advertising should be in our office by noon, Friday, for the following week's paper.
- We can't be responsible for the delivery time of the paper. You may wish to run your publicity or ad at least two weeks in advance of the event.



DOV SMITH with the HonestReportingCanada website onscreen, in the background, at the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg office last week: "I monitor every reference to the word Israel in the Canadian media."

A group of Toronto "business people" felt Canada needed its own HonestReporting to "deal with the press".

That means "the CBC" and "several other Canadian media", in particular, Smith added.

Smith had years of training and experience that led to his heading HonestReportingCanada, starting three years ago.

Born in Kingston, Ontario and raised in Montreal, he completed the public relations program at McGill University after other university studies in that city.

His first PR job was with the press office of the Israeli Consulate in New York.

"I got to the consulate and three months later (in November, 1995), Prime Minister Rabin was killed. There was terrorism. Then Netanyahu got elected. It was a fantastic way to get your feet wet."

During his years in later PR jobs for high tech and other firms, Smith watched media coverage of Israel "with tremendous frustration."

"I felt I wasn't using my skills in a cause I care very much about."

A friend told him about the creation of HonestReportingCanada, and "the shidduch was made: I joined in late 2003."

The new organization then had done "a few things," and had an initial membership of "maybe 1000 people."

"The big challenge was to be accepted by the media as a credible organization, and to be accepted by the Jewish community."

Another was to build a membership base with "big enough numbers" to effectively apply pressure to Canadian media to report Middle East news fairly.

In his daily analysis of news coverage for "fairness and accuracy", Smith watches for any reporter who's "injecting opinions" into a "fact-based" story.

"Selective omission" of relevant facts, giving "only part of the story" is another problem, along with "lack of context".

"You see a tremendous amount of anti-Israel coverage in the Middle East, and very little

explanation of Israel's situation - its size, the fact Israel is the only liberal democracy in the Middle East and shares Canada's basic values."

In contrast, journalists reporting from Arab or Palestinian-controlled territory are "extremely limited, in terms of freedom of the press."

CONTACTS NEWS ORGANIZATIONS

"ALMOST DAILY"

Smith will often contact the news organization directly, "almost daily", to discuss stories he considers inaccurate or unfair to Israel.

"Last week, that generated several corrections in Canadian newspapers."

"We also have a "mailing list of about 12,000 Canadians," from coast to coast.

Smith uses that to get members to "engage the media directly," by calling the reporters in question, or sending letters to the editor.

He also encourages HonestReportingCanada members to provide positive feedback, when reporters have done a good job.

When Smith enlists help from members, he usually sends them an "e-mail alert" about a story.

"We give them a basic description of what we found, why it's problematic. We say what you can do to make a difference - give them advice, and sometimes phone numbers to contact."

HonestReportingCanada doesn't, however, put words in peoples' mouths.

"If it's an article, we make the article available - if it's a (news)clip, we'll post a copy of the clip."

The organization also encourages people to "keep their communications polite, and to the point."

As examples of HonestReportingCanada's success, Smith cites the organization's responses to reporting by Neil Macdonald, CBC TV's previous Middle East correspondent.

"For five years, he reported on Israel, and it was very contentious."

The CBC then reassigned him to Washington, and in one story, he included "a person who said Israeli intelligence agents were involved in the torture of prisoners at Abu Graib in Iraq."

The CBC later apologized for that and issued a correction, on air.

HonestReportingCanada and its members also took exception to a comment Macdonald made that "if Palestinians committed terror, Israel has certainly committed war crimes."

Shelley Faintuch, Jewish Federation of Winnipeg community relations director, arranged for Smith's visit to Winnipeg.

She also asked him to conduct a workshop last week with local aboriginal leaders on "developing good relations with the media".

"We were very happy to share Dov with them," Faintuch said.

If you're interested in finding out more about what HonestReportingCanada does, supporting or joining it, visit www.honestreporting.ca

On our cover

Some Gray Academy of Jewish Education Grade 4 students last week hold "Next year in Jerusalem" art they were creating as a Passover project in art teacher Dolly Chisick's classes. The students, holding their art in various stages of completion, are, front row, from left: Gabriel Teichman, Aaron Stone and Liam Pollock. Standing, from left: Nico Berman, Lea Zaufman, Lexie Zimmer and Samantha Morry.