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# The good, the bad and the ugly

Bouquets to SBS TV, brickbats to ABC's *Four Corners*, and, yet again, utter contempt for Fairfax's Middle East correspondent.

## MEDIA MATTERS

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**T**HIS column highlights a few developments in the Australian media, one good, one bad, and one revealing event that was just plain ugly.

The good one involves SBS TV documentary programming. In July 2005, *Bulletin* columnist Tim Blair satirised the various TV networks' program schedules.

His fictitious SBS schedule involved documentary after documentary, from Germany, Norway and Saudi Arabia etc., revealing "the hidden forces behind George W Bush's war on terror". It was funny because it had more than a grain of truth to it.

At the time, any new anti-Israel polemics and conspiracy documentaries such as *Palestine is Still the Question* (October 2002), *Dead in the Water* (August 2003) and *Mossad's Hit List* (September 2003) were guaranteed to appear on SBS TV. But also, Israel was always being sideswiped by those endless, highly-ideological documentaries critical of American policies - for instance *The World According to Bush* (July 2004) hinted broadly that the Iraq War was promulgated for Israel's benefit by Jewish American neoconservatives.

Happily, there has been definite improvement over recent months in SBS documentary programming, symbolised by a recent two-week period when SBS showed three major documentaries touching on the Middle East, all of them informative, unideological and well worth seeing. These were: *Five Days in August* (August 29), examining fairly the relationship between soldiers and settlers during the evacuation of Israeli settlements from Gaza last year; *Operation*

*Bayonet* (September 5), a factual account of the Israeli operation to hunt down and eliminate the terrorists responsible for the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre; and *The Secret History of 9/11* (September 12), a Canadian documentary about the 9/11 attacks covering especially the many intelligence failures by American agencies that allowed the attacks to occur. Of course, SBS TV has a lot to improve in its news coverage, especially *Dateline*, but the real positive change toward actually approaching the stated goal of "balance over time" in documentary programming must be acknowledged.

Unfortunately, the ABC's flagship *Four Corners* program seems to be slipping back into an older, unprofessional form of ideological, current-affairs journalism, even as the daily shows, *Lateline* and the *7.30 Report* have largely been showing what fair, professional current affairs look like.

Debbie Whitmont's report on the aftermath of the Lebanon conflict ("In The Line Of Fire", September 18) was advertised as being about civilians caught in the conflict telling their story, but was really more an attempt to make a case that Israel's actions were indiscriminate and amounted to war crimes. The Israeli civilian interviewees were a minor part of the story, and seemed a token concession to balance.

Debunked claims from Human Rights Watch, which simply accepted residents' claims that there was no Hezbollah presence whatsoever in towns attacked by Israel, formed a central part of the report.

Israeli spokespeople were allowed to answer some of the charges but

Whitmont's commentary was openly sceptical of their claims, while accepting the other side's assertions without any questioning.

**I**N the same vein was Liz Jackson's report on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, where the reporter clearly set out to spruik her view that the invasion of Iraq was immoral and a mistake, and the war on terror badly prosecuted.

For example, interviewing the prime minister supposedly about the meaning of September 11, her first question was about Iraq, and then she pursued Iraq in several additional questions until the PM remarked that it was a "strange thing" that an interview about 9/11 seemed to be wholly about Iraq.

Finally, as I have previously documented, Fairfax's Middle East correspondent, Ed O'Loughlin, consistently uses language and selective reporting in ways that slant his stories toward his own clear pro-Palestinian views.

Now his language appears to have revealed how extreme those views actually are.

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* report (September 12), O'Loughlin mentioned the so-called Fatah-Hamas prisoner's document, and avoided the false claims he had previously repeatedly made that it called for recognition of Israel or a two-state solution, probably because community protests have reached his editors.

However, he repeated the language he generally uses to show his disapproval of the Oslo Accords, calling them "agreements recognising Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories"