

ABC sorry for bias on children's show

Caroline Overington

THE ABC has apologised to the Jewish community for presenting biased, anti-Israeli information to school children during an episode of *Behind the News*.

The educational program described Hezbollah terrorists as "soldiers" and as "refugees" whose land had been "taken by Israel".

In a letter to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, which lodged a formal complaint with Communications Minister Helen Coonan, the ABC admits the information presented on the program was "inappropriate".

Audience liaison manager

Denise Musto said the ABC acknowledged "that the content failed to meet the requirements of balance and impartiality".

"In its attempt to be simple and concise, the story did not represent key relevant viewpoints," she said. "Some of the descriptions were over-simplistic and inappropriate."

Behind the News is a news program designed for school students. The episode on the Middle East crisis was shown on July 25, with the transcript removed from the ABC website this week.

Ms Musto said the "errors of judgment" were "regrettable and not indicative of the program's overall high standards".

She said the content removed from the web was being reviewed and revised.

Council president Grahame Leonard earlier this week wrote to the ABC and Senator Coonan about "errors and lack of balance" in the program. He said Hezbollah could not accurately be described as a "Palestinian refugee organisation".

"It is an extremist Lebanese Shi'ite Muslim organisation," he said. "Its ideology is the same as that of Iran and includes the destruction of the state of Israel."

ECAJ director Geoffrey Zygier said it was "difficult to reduce a complex issue such as the Middle East to a few simple phrases".

The program said the UN "wants the two groups to stop fighting but Israel says it'll continue to fight until Hezbollah is destroyed", Mr Zygier said.

"It did not say Hezbollah would not stop fighting until all Jews are out of Israel.

"It's just wrong, straight out wrong."

Mr Zygier said the report said Israel was proclaimed a country for the Jewish people in 1948, "taking much of the land from the Palestinian Muslims".

He said that that statement "would not make sense to anybody who had read the Bible".

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Hezbollah for kids

There's a bomb in there, and Muslim anger as well . . .

NEVER let it be said that the ABC ever let the facts stand in the way of a good smear. Take the public broadcaster's "high energy (and) fun" current affairs program for students, *Behind the News*, which on July 25 delivered a potted history of the last half-century of Lebanese life that sounded almost as if it had been scripted in Tehran. According to the show's presenter, Andrea Nicolas, Hezbollah "soldiers" sparked the present conflict in the Middle East in an innocent bid to prompt a prisoner exchange with Israel gone awry. The report (hastily scrubbed from the ABC's website) also claimed Hezbollah was just a small group of Palestinian extremists who fled to Lebanon because their land was "taken over by Israel"; that in 1948 "Israel was proclaimed as a country for Jewish people, taking much of the land from Palestinian Muslims"; and that in 1967 for no apparent reason Israel "took over" Gaza and the West Bank. These were only a few of the many howlers delivered without regard to context, balance or fact to an audience lacking the historical knowledge to spot the many errors.

Given this, one would think the ABC might pause before criticising others for their coverage of Islam and extremism. Yet Monday night's *Media Watch* attacked an Arabic-speaking reporter on *The Australian* over an article last year that mistakenly suggested that Sydney sheik Abdul Salam Mohammed Zoud had delivered firebrand anti-Western and pro-jihadi sermons at Sydney's Lakemba Mosque. The only problem

was that it was not Sheik Zoud who gave the sermons but rather one of his deputies. Fair cop: the cleric was out of the country and this newspaper reported our error months ago. But here's where it gets interesting. *Media Watch* also accused *The Australian* of inciting "anger" in "the Muslim community" through a more recent article that included claims that Sheik Zoud and his counterpart Sheik Omran of Melbourne preached under different names to avoid media scrutiny. Yet the claim of "phony" names was made by a member of the Prime Minister's Muslim Community Reference Group, while the ABC's suggestion of Muslim "community" outrage came from unnamed sources. So who is really casting aspersions on Muslims? *The Australian*, with its named sources and quoted denials from the sheiks, or the ABC, which relies on anonymous tipsters to indulge the implication that all local Muslims are offended by claims about Sheik Zoud?

The ABC's wilful ignorance of the deeper issues involved in the *Behind the News* segment should be seen as part of a progressive campaign to recast terrorist groups such as Hezbollah as nothing more than social service agencies with attitude. But had *Behind the News* strived for balance, it would have noted that the terrorist group was not born out of Israel's formation but was founded by the radical Shia theocracy that deposed the shah of Iran in 1979. And that it is committed to using terror anywhere in the world to advance its cause of destroying the Jewish state. *Behind the News* also might have noted that Israel took over the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967 after being encircled by five mobilised Arab armies looking to drive it into the sea.

Meanwhile in the case of Sheik Zoud, the ABC neglected to engage with the fact that the sermons were still given at the Lakemba Mosque and that the French judge who tried terror suspect Willie Brigitte has said the clergyman is "the recruiter in Australia for . . . jihad". At our public broadcaster, it seems, Hezbollah are the freedom fighters, the Israelis are the aggressors and all Australian Muslims stick up for extremists.