
Jake Lynch (with additional research by Catherine Dix and Stuart Rees)

Defending John Pilger's journalism on Israel and Palestine

No sooner had the journalist and film-maker, John Pilger, been named the 2009 winner of the Sydney Peace Prize, than a chorus of criticism broke out from Jewish groups objecting to his coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict. This was conducted in public media and included several contributions from Philip Mendes, a social work academic from Monash University, Melbourne, and a writer on Australian Jewish affairs. Mendes drew attention to a scholarly article he had published a year earlier, in the Australian Journal of Jewish Studies (AJJS), a critical analysis of Pilger's 'views and sources'. However, Mendes' analysis was, this article argues, based on misunderstandings of key concepts and debates in journalism, and flawed by highly selective representations of both Pilger's reporting and important historical events. This, and subsequent interventions, by Mendes and others, in public debates – including those dealing with calls for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel – attempted to demonise certain points of view, consigning them and their proponents to what Hallin (1989) called the 'sphere of deviance'. This paper argues that this is not an ethical scholarly activity, since it risks reducing the scope of public debate, rather than expanding it, whereas Pilger's journalism exemplifies a value-explicit teleological ethic in favour of peace with justice.

Keywords: Pilger, Mendes, Israel, Palestine

John Pilger's best-known piece of broadcast journalism on the Israel-Palestine conflict is a programme originally made for Carlton TV, in

the UK, and released in 2002, called *Palestine is still the issue* (PISTI). In the tradition of authored documentary film-making, it ends with a long in-vision commentary by Pilger himself, framed against the Jerusalem skyline. His concluding words were:

Israelis will never have peace until they recognise that Palestinians have the same right to the same peace and the same independence that they enjoy. The occupation of Palestine should end now. Then, the solution is clear. Two countries, Israel and Palestine, neither dominating nor menacing the other.

In an earlier sequence, Pilger made it clear that Palestinian independence meant a state in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the territories occupied since 1967:

[The establishment of the State of Israel] cost the Palestinians 78 per cent of their country. Today, they are seeking only the remaining 22 per cent of their homeland. For 35 years, that homeland has been dominated by Israel.

It was for films such as this – along with his books and his regular column for the *New Statesman* magazine – that Pilger was named the peace prize winner in succession to previous laureates including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Professor Muhammad Yunus and, in 2003, the Palestinian legislator, Hanan Ashrawi. The last of these was met with a campaign of criticism in public media and political discourse – and behind-the-scenes arm-twisting – led by groups that speak for Australia's self-defined 'mainstream Jewish community'.

Given Pilger's well-known output on the Israel-Palestine conflict, executive members of the Sydney Peace Foundation, which bestows the award, were braced for a similar reaction this time. A post on a well-known blog, *The Sensible Jew*, seemed to presage controversy, albeit in the form of a warning to community leaders to 'tread carefully' and avoid 'frothing at the mouth'. It described Pilger as a 'far more odious character' than Ashrawi, however, and attacked his journalism as 'a joke among the serious-minded' (*Sensible Jew* 2009).

One of the first to respond with a comment on this blog was a scholarly writer on Australian Jewish affairs, Philip Mendes. In it, he described Pilger as 'a much worse choice than Ashrawi' and recommended his referred research article in the contemporary edition of the *Australian Journal of Jewish*

Studies: John Pilger on Israel/Palestine: A critical analysis of his views and sources (2008). In it, Mendes does not mention the passages from PISTI, quoted above, however; and they appear to contradict one of his central claims:

Pilger adopted what I have termed an anti-Zionist fundamentalist perspective. This perspective regards Israel as a racist and colonialist state which has no right to exist, and should instead be replaced by an Arab State of Greater Palestine (ibid: 99).

The source relied on for support is a 2007 article by Pilger in the *New Statesman* magazine, which reports the view of the historian, Ilan Pappé, that 'a single, democratic state, to which the Palestinian refugees are given the right of return, is the only feasible and just solution, and that a sanctions and boycott campaign is critical in achieving this'. Pilger's article continues:

...A boycott of Israeli institutions, goods and services, says Pappé, 'will not change the [Israeli] position in a day, but it will send a clear message that [the premises of Zionism] are racist and unacceptable in the 21st century. . . They would have to choose. And so would the rest of us' (Pilger 2007b).

To equate this piece of reporting with the adoption or espousal, by its author, of the view being reported, shows confusion over the role of journalism, defined as 'disseminating newsworthy information' (Goc 2008: 45) and a form of public communication distinguished in being chiefly actuated by the pursuit of 'internally defined...goals' (Hanitzsch 2008: 73) such as 'fairness and accuracy' (Lynch and McGoldrick 2010: 91). Pilger's columns for the *New Statesman* state his opinions, but they are his opinions *as a journalist*: an understanding which, it is reasonable to assume, is shared by his readers. They are clearly recounted and framed from a reporter's perspective. The introduction to the article as stored on Pilger's own website states:

In a column for the *New Statesman*, John Pilger describes his first encounter with a Palestinian refugee camp and what Nelson Mandela has called 'the greatest moral issue of our age' – justice for the Palestinians. 'Something has changed,' he writes, referring to the world view of sanctions and a boycott against Israel (ITV 2007).

There are good reasons why a journalist might choose to report, as a witness, the growing debate over a single, bi-national state, and the views of prominent contributors to that debate, at this time. The continued expansion of Jewish settlements and the construction of Israel's 'separation fence' had already created 'facts on the ground' leading even some well-known advocates of a two-state solution to express doubts as to its feasibility: 'With the buttressing of seized land...[t]he idea of separating Palestinians from Israelis, and establishing two states, becomes virtually impossible to do' (Tamari 2004).

Those remarks were made shortly before the International Court of Justice issued its advisory opinion that the wall was in breach of international law. Israel's decision to defy the court ruling might therefore have the effect, on the same argument, of further downgrading the prospects for an independent Palestinian state on the 22 per cent of Mandate Palestine that lies beyond Israel's internationally recognised borders.

Boycott

In his *AJJS* article, Mendes characterises the call for an academic boycott of Israel as 'based on the racial or ethnic stereotyping of all Israeli Jews as an oppressor people'. This claim is not sourced, but it, too, is apparently contradicted by evidence whose omission, from Mendes' article, is significant, given its provenance. Omar Barghouti and Lisa Taraki, the founders of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), issued their own clarification of this issue in 2005:

The fact that we go out of our way to 'exclude from the above actions against Israeli institutions any conscientious Israeli academics and intellectuals opposed to their state's colonial and racist policies' follows from our realisation that there is always a grey area where an academic may be perceived as representing her/himself rather than her/his institution (2005: np).

Clearly, if an Israeli academic can be exempted from the boycott, then it cannot logically be based on racial or ethnic stereotyping. Indeed, the other text on which Mendes relies, to sustain this point, is another *New Statesman* column from 2002, also reporting Pappé's views, which highlights the support he received from other Israelis over the threat to his position at Haifa University. This, Pilger

sees as upholding 'the bravest traditions of Jewish humanity' and as a way to support 'the cause of justice in both Israel and Palestine' (Pilger 2002a). Again, Pilger is careful not to stereotype all Israeli Jews as oppressors.

Naomi Klein, in an influential article for *The Nation*, described the international campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions as an effort to 'boycott the Israeli economy but not Israelis' (Klein 2009). Mendes cannot have been expected to consider this text in his article for *AJJS*, since it appeared months later, but it is worth noting that he continued, afterwards, to characterise the case for boycott in these same terms.

In an article for the *Australian* newspaper, Mendes and co-writer Nick Dyrenfurth (2009) complain about the 'discriminatory singling out' of Israel when others, such as 'China in Tibet, the US during Vietnam, Indonesia in Aceh and formerly East Timor, and Russia in Chechnya' have been guilty of more 'brutal' behaviour. Again, this article failed to consider several prominent comments, by its supporters, setting out the rationale for the call to boycott Israel: 'a tactic', in Klein's words, 'not a dogma', and certainly not tantamount to ignoring the rights records of other countries: 'The reason why it should be tried on Israel is that it might work' (op cit).

The article by Mendes and Dyrenfurth was a contribution to public media, rather than a scholarly article, but, according to the Monash conduct and compliance procedures, such activities should still embody 'the university's key values' including 'excellence in... research and scholarship' and 'fairness' (Monash nd: np). An article in the *Australian* by a Monash academic such as Mendes should, therefore, exhibit ethical scholarly virtues, and criticism of an idea and its exponents is validated, in scholarly ethics, by giving fair consideration to what they actually say.

No critical analysis can, or should be expected to, consider in detail the entire *corpus* of works put out by its subject, of course. In context, however, the concluding in-vision commentary of *Palestine is still the issue*, and the statements by Taraki and Barghouti and Klein should, for reasons explained above, be considered prominent and clearly important pieces of evidence. That Mendes omits such evidence from any consideration whatsoever, on a consistent basis, suggests the application of a particular method, manifest in both schol-

arly and public writings. An attempt appears to be underway to represent both John Pilger's journalism, and calls for a boycott of Israel, as racist in character. This is a serious charge, and one that threatens to propel its targets into what Hallin called the 'sphere of deviance... exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus. It marks out and defends the limits of acceptable conflict' (op cit: 117).

Peace with justice

The citation by the jury of the Sydney Peace Foundation, in awarding Pilger the Sydney Peace Prize, singles out his 'commitment to peace with justice by exposing and holding governments to account for human rights abuses' and 'enabling the voices of the powerless to be heard'. Pilger himself has characterised the purpose of journalism as 'an antidote...[to] the insidious propaganda of authority' (2009).

This is to adopt a teleological ethic (Butler et al 2003: 5), in which journalists take on responsibility for countering what Jowett and O'Donnell, in their well-known definition of propaganda, call 'the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour' (1999: 6). It is for this reason that a 'propaganda orientation' is one of the four chief defining characteristics of war journalism, in the peace journalism model conceived by Johan Galtung (1998). 'War journalism' is so defined because the forms of representation of conflict denoted all serve to legitimise violent responses. The list is headed by a 'focus on the conflict arena; two parties, one goal (victory); general zero-sum orientation' (ibid.). To reduce the number of parties to two – a structure Lynch and McGoldrick describe as a 'tug-of-war' formation (2005: 8) – is automatically to construct a built-in dominant reading in favour of violence, since 'anything that is not "winning" must be "losing"' and 'defeat being unthinkable, each has a readymade incentive to step up, or escalate, efforts for victory'. As Majid Tehranian writes:

We live in a largely mediated world ruled by government media monopolies or commercial media oligopolies that construct images of 'the other'. Promotion of particular commodities and identities are the main preoccupations of both commercial and government systems. The two systems thus tend to exacerbate international tensions by dichotomising,

dramatising, and demonising 'them' against 'us' (2002: 58).

Pilger's declared vocation to bring to readers and audiences the perspectives of the marginalised and oppressed – 'them' in Tehranian's equation – can be construed as a contribution to peace journalism, a form based on a 'critical self-awareness' (Lynch and McGoldrick op cit: xvii) and applying insights from the value-explicit discipline of peace research to 'predict... the influence' of particular media responses on 'the actions and motivations of parties to conflict' (ibid: 218).

The ethical validity of peace journalism therefore depends on being able to identify who and what can legitimately be regarded as 'them' – as the subjugated terms in binary oppositions constructed and/or evoked in attempts to manipulate cognitions. It is in the nature of conflict, of course, that agreement on such points is at a premium, and Mendes criticises Pilger for declaring that, in pursuing this purpose in the reporting of this conflict, it is his 'duty to rectify' an imbalance, in which Palestinian perspectives and versions of events routinely receive less – and less favourable – coverage than those of Israel and its supporters (op cit: 104).

This is wrong-headed, Mendes argues, since the 'picture' of Western media representations of the conflict should be seen as 'greyer' than Pilger allows (ibid: 105). Perhaps the best-known piece of research on this is a peer-reviewed study by Greg Philo and Mike Berry of the Glasgow University Media Group, which is based on interview data from 800 subjects, including senior professional journalists, and content analysis of television news over a period of two years. Its conclusions are nuanced, but, on every significant analytical factor, it finds a pattern of 'Israeli dominance' (Philo and Berry 2004: 259), both in the choice of developments to report and in the way they were described, interpreted and framed. Interview subjects showed a profound ignorance of key points, to the general disadvantage of Palestinian experiences and perspectives. At one point, the study found, 'Many believed that the Palestinians were occupying the occupied territories... the great bulk of those we interviewed had no idea where the Palestinian refugees had come from' (Philo 2004).

Against this, Mendes cites a book chapter by the London correspondent for the *Jerusalem*

Post, Douglas Davis, which is not peer-reviewed, and relies on anecdotal reporting of particular broadcasts by the BBC and disputes arising from them. He does allow that this chapter is by a 'pro-Israel advocate' but does not specify that the contribution dates from 2003, when the paper was still owned by Conrad Black's Hollinger Group, and had undergone a pronounced shift to the Right. This perhaps accounts for the intemperate language in the study, such as 'the BBC's relentless, one-dimensional portrayal of Israel as a demonic, criminal state and Israelis as brutal oppressors responsible for all the ills of the region' (Davis 2003: np); language which is not supported by any systematic analysis.

To support his argument, Mendes also relies on an internal BBC study by Malcolm Balen, a former deputy editor of the main evening news programme on domestic television who was subsequently appointed to oversee the BBC's reporting of the conflict, and responses to representations received in public debate. Mendes implies that the 'nature of [Balen's] investigation' enables it to be used to refute Philo and Berry (2008: 105). However, several significant facts are ignored. The Balen study has never been published, indeed the BBC has successfully resisted attempts to obtain it under UK Freedom of Information legislation, so no-one, except Balen himself and a small group of BBC news managers, knows what it actually says.

A still more significant omission from Mendes' account is the context in which the Balen study was commissioned and produced. For some time, BBC News' coverage of the conflict had been under investigation by the corporation's own governors. The eventual report found that the BBC was in a 'straitjacket of balance' and, therefore, misrepresented a situation that was inherently unbalanced – a conflict between an occupying power, 'in control' of events, and an occupied people who were effectively rendered powerless. As Pilger himself observed:

The panel's conclusion was that BBC reporting of the Palestinian struggle was not 'full and fair' and 'in important respects, presents an incomplete and in that sense misleading picture'. This was neutralised in BBC press releases (Pilger 2007b).

There is some evidence that BBC News management saw this as an attack on them: Lynch records how Balen stepped in to prevent him,

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as a BBC News presenter, from publishing an opinion column in a magazine sent to members of a journalists' club, which quoted and supported these findings, because it would be 'very odd for a BBC presenter to be overtly siding with the report' (Lynch 2008: 122).

An unpublished internal BBC study, compiled as a 'defence document' for an under-fire news management, and an anecdotally based book chapter by a reporter for a right-wing newspaper, can hardly be set alongside the peer-reviewed, book-length study by Philo and Berry, and for Mendes to imply that its key findings should, therefore, be regarded as questionable is profoundly misleading. There is abundant evidence of injustice in Western media representations of the conflict, the Palestinians are on the receiving end of it and, in so far as it can be regarded as a legitimate stance for a journalist to set out to rectify such injustices, this represents a solid target. As Pilger comments:

The media 'coverage' has long reversed the roles of oppressor and victim. Israelis are never called terrorists. Correspondents who break this taboo are often intimidated with slurs of anti-Semitism – a bleak irony, as Palestinians are Semites, too (Pilger 2002b).

In another significant nuance missed in the criticisms by Mendes and others, Pilger's ethical stance gives his journalism a valid and important role in the UK system of public service broadcasting, in which his films are commissioned and produced for Carlton Television, and screened on the ITV network. Carlton and ITV have to comply with licence conditions set and overseen by the Office of Communication, which regulates the industry. The Ofcom programme code contains a section on news and current affairs, which obliges 'licensees [to] ensure that justice is done to a full range of significant views and perspectives' (Ofcom 2003: np). *Palestine is still the issue* was a necessary corrective to the imbalance diagnosed by Philo and Berry, as well as other studies, to help ITV to comply with its licence conditions. Mendes also omits to mention the investigation by the Independent Television Commission, Ofcom's predecessor, into complaints about the film:

In January 2003, the Independent Television Commission announced that it rejected all complaints against *Palestine is still the issue*. The commission praised the film's 'journalistic integrity', the 'care and thoroughness with

which [the film] was researched' and the 'comprehensiveness and authority' of its historical and other factual sources (Pilger 2006: 143).

The 'Mendes method'

The 'Mendes Method' is evident in his treatment of other evidence in and about Pilger's journalism on the Israel-Palestine conflict. He claims that what he calls Pilger's 'anti-Zionist fundamentalism' is 'reflected through a number of reporting frames or themes'. They include:

1. *Palestinians as ordinary human beings and victims (Mendes 2008: 100)*

Pilger in *Distant voices* (1994), as referenced by Mendes, documents the suffering of Palestinian children, with original interviews supported by quotes from an independent research report by the Swedish Save the Children and also a UN report. Both document large numbers of child deaths and injuries. The Swedish official for Save the Children 'describes research conducted over two years with 14,000 cases of child injuries. She said the shooting of children was contrary "to official military orders", but there was a "second set of orders, understood by the soldiers"'. This is not the only frame for the conflict, of course, but its significance and salience are well-attested by the most reputable sources. Mendes implies, without explicitly stating, that there is something objectionable about Pilger's application of this frame, but it clearly merits a place in a *corpus* of professional journalism whose legitimate intention is to compensate for its habitual omission or marginalisation.

Further developing his complaint about the alleged lack of 'balance' in Pilger's reporting, Mendes goes on to imply that Pilger does not attach sufficient weight or seriousness to the Israeli victims of Palestinian suicide bombers:

Pilger never balances his presentations by reporting on Israeli children or other civilians who had been killed or injured or traumatised by Palestinian suicide bombers or rockets. His compassion appears to be limited to one side of the conflict (op cit: 101).

The use of the word, 'never' imposes a heavy evidentiary burden, and, again, the claim is easily refuted. In *Palestine is still the issue*, in another passage ignored by Mendes, Pilger records a moving interview with a Jewish Israeli, Rami Elhanan, whose daughter was killed by a suicide bomber. 'Someone who

murders little girls is a criminal and should be punished,' Mr Elhanan says. 'But if you think from the head and not from the guts and you look what made people do what they do, people that don't have hope, people who are desperate enough to commit suicide, you have to ask yourself, have you contributed in any way to this despair and craziness...the suicide bomber was a victim the same as my girl was... understanding [that] is part of the way to solving the problem.'

The second in the list of Mendes' complaints:

2. Stereotyping Israelis as racist oppressors (ibid: 101)

'Pilger has rarely attempted to present the full social and political diversity of Israeli society,' Mendes complains. 'In his early reports, Pilger did at least speak to ordinary Israelis, but seemed intent on essentialising their views and attitudes. They were depicted as a harsh people living in a fortress-like Sparta who either ignored the Palestinians, or held racist views towards them.'

Mendes refers to Pilger's book *Heroes* (1986), which includes a range of Israeli voices, who are certainly not depicted as 'harsh' or 'racist'. For example, the Israeli photographer, Dan Hadarni, originally a Pole, whose family were gassed in Nazi camps, comments: 'I am full of confusion. I wish I had not seen the camp or the kibbutz...In my heart, I want them to be free, to go home, but I am afraid, and I know I have to stop them!' An Israeli farmer's wife who wrote a letter to Moshe Dayan is quoted: 'Our treatment of the Arabs, right down to our personal dealings with workmen and others, sends shivers up my spine' (Pilger 1986: 360-363). These, again, are ignored in the Mendes method. As with Pilger's supposed views on a one- or two-state solution to the conflict; as with the esteem for suffering on all sides; as with the nature and effect of the proposed academic boycott of Israel, Mendes' claims are sustainable only by ignoring important and prominent counter-vailing evidence.

Mendes continually uses selective quotations from Pilger's columns in the *New Statesman* to represent them as 'picking on' Israel. Many of the articles do discuss Israel, but also include a range of references to other regimes that commit human rights abuses, such as Iraq, Iran and Venezuela. The impression arising from Mendes' critique, that Pilger unfairly singles out Israel, is misleading, and in a substantive

way, since it obscures his journalistic orientation in disseminating newsworthy information, whatever its provenance, in order to highlight injustice.

Mendes accuses Pilger of rejecting 'any nuanced political or ideological distinction between left and right Zionists or Israelis', relying on another *New Statesman* article in which Pilger states:

In understanding Israel's enduring colonial role in the Middle East, it is too simple to see the outrages of Ariel Sharon as an aberrant version of a democracy that lost its way. The myths that abound in middle-class Jewish homes in Britain about Israel's heroic, noble birth have long been reinforced by a 'liberal' or 'left-wing' Zionism as virulent and essentially destructive as the Likud strain (Pilger 2004).

Pilger is making an observation about a particular diasporic narrative of the conflict in the UK. This may sustain the claim that he rejects distinctions among adherents of Zionism, but Mendes again, by appending the qualifier, 'or Israelis', projects on to Pilger an essentialisation of this argument that is not supported by the evidence. There are, of course, significant political and ideological distinctions among Israelis, and Pilger does not dispute this.

Mendes concedes that 'many of the historical facts [Pilger] cites are true, and may be inconvenient for partisans of Israel. But nowhere does he document or condemn the long history of Palestinian terror and violence against Israeli civilians. His moral censure applies only to one side'. Pilger does not condone Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians. He does attempt to explain why such attacks occurred, as in showing the continued violence experienced by Palestinians, as in this passage from another *New Statesman* article:

'Some say,' said the Channel 4 reporter, that ' Hamas has courted this [attack] . . .' Perhaps he was referring to the rockets fired at Israel from within the prison of Gaza which killed no one. Under international law, an occupied people has the right to use arms against the occupier's forces. This right is never reported. The Channel 4 reporter referred to an 'endless war', suggesting equivalence. There is no war. There is resistance among the poorest, most vulnerable people on earth to an enduring, illegal occupation imposed by

the world's fourth largest military power, whose weapons of mass destruction range from cluster bombs to thermonuclear devices, bankrolled by the superpower. In the past six years alone, wrote the historian Ilan Pappé, 'Israeli forces have killed more than 4,000 Palestinians, half of them children' (Pilger 2007a).

Another Mendes bugbear – number 5 on his charge-sheet – is the occasional comparisons, in Pilger's writing, of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians with the Nazi holocaust. Again, Mendes fails to reflect adequately Pilger's remit as a reporter, since these are always in the form of journalistic accounts of comparisons drawn by others.

Mendes' complaints that Pilger misrepresents the view of Hamas, as being prepared, in certain circumstances, to recognise the legitimacy of the State of Israel, also founder in the face of the evidence. Once again, the criticism is trumped by the sheer robustness of Pilger's journalistic methods: the disarmingly simple expedient of carrying out his own interviews, with primary sources, and telling his readers what they say:

Moreover, Hamas's long-standing proposals for a ten-year ceasefire are ignored, along with a recent, hopeful ideological shift within Hamas itself that amounts to a historic acceptance of the sovereignty of Israel. 'The [Hamas] charter is not the Quran', said a senior Hamas official, Mohammed Ghazal. 'Historically, we believe all Palestine belongs to Palestinians, but we're talking now about reality, about political solutions...If Israel reached a stage where it was able to talk to Hamas, I don't think there would be a problem of negotiating with the Israelis' [for a solution] (Pilger 2007a).

Public intellectuality

As this account has shown, Mendes' method is one of attack, which relies on selective quotation. Selectivity is unavoidable, of course, but what is distinctive about this method is that it depends on ignoring even prominent and clearly important evidence which flatly contradicts the claims being made about the target of the attack. Step two is to take this mis-characterisation of arguments and use it as the basis to attach demonising labels to their exponents: 'fundamentalist' is a word he does not scruple to use in a scholarly article; 'loony left' is a term of abuse handed out in his column in the *Australian*, mentioned

above, about the call for an academic boycott of Israel.

Indeed, these *aperçus* have found a ready resonance in newspapers and blogs, recalling Herman and Chomsky's observations (1988: xi) about the media 'fix[ing] the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about'. This is the opposite of what should be the effect of scholarship and public intellectuality. Pilger, at the time of writing, was preparing his City of Sydney Peace Prize lecture, under the title, 'Breaking the Australian silence'. Such a contribution becomes, in the context set out here, an overdue signal that we are entitled to know what we know, and say what we want to say about it.

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