

How To Make An Ass Of A Story

Michael Kuttner

As part of the annual seasonal ill will media reporting about Israel which seems to occur prior to Christmas, the New Zealand Herald published an article by Pete Wedderburn about donkey abuse in the "Holy Land". It was obviously sourced from the UK Independent, although interestingly enough it seems to have since disappeared from their on line site. The same story also appeared in the UK Telegraph on line page. The interesting aspects of this story are the way language can be used to distort and create negative vibes plus the manipulation of photos, captions and headlines.

First of all let us concentrate on the narrative itself. Mentioning Christmas and donkeys in the first sentence is a neat way to get readers' attention. It also focuses effectively on the theme of abuse by none other than of course, Israelis. It does not take much of a leap in imagination by the end of the story to associate Israelis with abuse of not only donkeys but of course also humans, especially Palestinian Arabs. The negative theme continues with the author's arrival at Ben Gurion airport which he explains is covered in dust. Not only is the airport covered in dust but also it seems the whole country, thus conveying the impression that Israel is some sort of backward, dirty outpost of the uncivilized third world. He inadvertently lets the cat out of the bag by stating it was boiling hot, thus confirming that he had arrived in the midst of a sharav, the climatic condition which afflicts the Middle East at certain times of the year and is accompanied by strong winds, intense heat and sand blown in from the desert. However why explain this fact when one can instead convey a negative connotation?

The "bad" news continues with the author taking a taxi from the airport. He makes sure to tell us that the driver is surly. Needless to say there are no surly taxi drivers in the UK (or NZ). We have not yet reached the gist of the story and already readers know that Israel is dusty and the taxi drivers are unfriendly.

The main theme is about the abuse of donkeys in Israel and the work of a donkey sanctuary which tries to rehabilitate these animals and restore them to health. A most interesting subject one can assume and one which would touch the heart strings of animal lovers everywhere. However there is a major problem.

Nowhere in this report is it made clear that the vast majority of donkey owners, users and abusers are Palestinian Arabs or perhaps Israeli Arabs. Donkeys are indeed used for transportation, agricultural work and as beasts of burden by Arab villagers working the land and traveling from one village to another.

They are also used in parts of Jerusalem's Arab Old City where the alleyways are too narrow for cars. In the 20 years I have been in Jerusalem I have never seen these animals in the Capital and my guess is that for the majority of Israelis their only close encounter with them would be either in a zoo or at a vacation site where children ride as part of their holiday activities. This is not the impression you would glean from the story because it just talks about Israelis and therefore the logical conclusion is that it must be Jewish Israelis who are the perpetrators of this animal abuse.

Headlines usually set the tone and many readers do not get past them so that the way they are presented is critical in creating first and lasting impressions. The Telegraph used the headline: "Animal Welfare – Israel's donkey sanctuary.." That is a fair and balanced headline.

What was the NZ Herald headline?

..." Heavy burden of abuse for donkeys in the Holy Land..."

Hardly balanced and designed to create an immediate negative impression.

I have saved the best part for last. The Telegraph used 4 photos on their online site. One showed the author hugging a donkey in the sanctuary. Two other photos showed injured and abused donkeys. All these were relevant to the story and perfectly acceptable. The fourth photo showed Mary & baby Jesus on donkeys presumably traveling to Bethlehem. I presume that the paper wished to highlight the abuse by modern day Israelis compared to the loving warm feeling associated with this idyllic Biblical scene. So what photo did the NZ Herald use? None of these. Instead they must have dug around in their archives and found a photo which they published as part of this story. It showed a miserable looking donkey, fully laden, in a rubble strewn field.

In the far distance loomed some buildings and an outline of a Mosque dome. The caption that the NZ Herald used was so unbelievable that I had to read it several times in order to make sure I had read it correctly. It stated that donkeys were used in Jerusalem as a mode of transport by those people who were too poor to afford public transport. In case you have not yet realised the implications, read on. Firstly, readers are asked to believe that the photo shows Jerusalem. From the rubble strewn field and distant indistinct buildings one could easily assume that Israel's Capital is nothing more than a derelict outpost of some sort with stray donkeys wandering around its streets. Nothing of course could be further from the truth. Secondly, the statement about poor people commuting by donkeys in Jerusalem because they cannot afford public transport is transparently false as any visitor to the city can attest. In recent months Jerusalem has inaugurated Israel's first modern light rail commuter system which is the envy of many other countries.

In an article laden with generalisations, omission of salient facts and negative language about the Jewish State, the use of this photo and its accompanying caption is a classic case of blatant unbalanced and unfair reporting. Why did the NZ Herald use this photo and its completely false description? The Editor obviously did not feel it important to double check the veracity of what was published and therefore once again tendentious items about Israel were printed. I wrote a letter to the Editor which was never published. No opportunity to counter this inaccurate report will presumably be given and therefore readers will be left with the false impression that Israel is a nation of donkey abusers and that its Capital operates a donkey express line for those unable to afford buses or the light rail.

Finally one needs to ask this question. At a time when Syria is murdering thousands of its citizens, Egypt is in turmoil, the Arab spring is fading fast and Iran threatens to eliminate the Jewish State, why is it that the NZ Herald finds it necessary to print yet another story full of misinformation about Israel? One does not need to be a genius to work out the answer.

Michael Kuttner is a Jewish New Zealander who for many years was actively involved with various communal organisations connected to Judaism and Israel. He now lives in Israel and works for The Israel Resource News Agency in Jerusalem.