

Anti-Israel Venom at University of Illinois Paper

A student columnist and journalism major used bogus defamatory quotes and got away with barely a slap on the wrist



This cartoon accompanied an editorial in the *Daily Illini* accusing Middle East scholar Daniel Pipes of "Promoting Hate." The *DI* gives a free hand to columnist Mariam Sobh who recklessly uses fabricated quotes to spew hatred of Israel

editor entitled "Jews manipulate America," offering crude anti-Semitic allegations authored by one Ariel Sinovsky from Seattle, Wash. Although an editor claimed to have confirmation of the writer's identity, alumnus Jeff Kamen told CAMERA that students and community members searched all available databases and directories, but did not find an Ariel Sinovsky in Seattle or anywhere. (For the full story, see Spring 2003 *CAMERA on Campus*.)

While a new editorial staff took over in 2004, little has changed.

Mariam Sobh introduced her Dec. 11 piece with the following statement purportedly by Ariel

Sharon in order "to show a clearer picture of the Israeli leadership":

"I don't know something called International Principles. I vow that I'll burn every Palestinian child (that) will be born in this area. The Palestinian woman and child is more dangerous than the man, because the Palestinian child's existence infers that generations will go on, but the man causes limited danger. I vow that if I was just an Israeli civilian and I met a Palestinian I would burn him and I would make him suffer before killing him. With one hit I've killed 750 Palestinians (in Rafah in 1956). I wanted to encourage my soldiers by raping Arabic girls as the Palestinian woman is a slave for Jews, and we do whatever we want to her and nobody tells us what we shall do but we tell others what they shall do," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said in an interview with General Ouze Merham in 1956.

This shocking quote, a staple on Arab propaganda Web sites, is an

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The University of Illinois newspaper, *The Daily Illini*, is making a dubious name for itself as one of America's more recklessly anti-Israel student publications. Flouting journalistic norms that mandate accuracy, ethics and responsible sourcing, it has repeatedly run false, anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic commentaries.

"Stop turning a blind eye" (Dec. 11, 2003) is a recent item on this unfortunate list. Written by Mariam Sobh, a journalism student and regular *Illini* columnist, the op-ed contains a grotesque, invented quote attributed to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as well as a spurious reference to another non-existent quote by another Israeli official supposedly from the *New York Times*. This is a pattern with the *Illini* columnist. In her zeal to vilify Israel, Sobh consistently turns to unreliable sources.

Both the extreme invective against Israel and the permissive editorial policy allowing student and others to use the pages of the newspaper for propaganda are apparently habitual. A year ago, on Jan. 22, 2003, for example, the paper ran a virulent letter to the

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internet hoax for which the journalism student, not surprisingly, provided no source. There is no record of any "General Ouze Merham" or any truth to the claim that Sharon made the quoted comments. The paper's decision to run such an inflammatory statement with no attribution is indefensible.

The Sharon quote was not the only fabrication. Sobh also alleged that former Israeli Chief of Staff Raphael Eytan was quoted in the April 14, 1983 *New York Times*:

We declare openly that the Arabs have no right to settle on even one centimeter of Eretz Israel ... Force is all they do or ever will understand. We shall use the ultimate force until the Palestinians come crawling to us on all fours.

A search of Lexis-Nexis, which

contains all of the *Times* coverage since June 1980, reveals that no one, not Eytan or anyone else, was ever quoted by the paper making the purported statement.

As it did last year in the Sinovsky case, the *Illini* once again shirked its own direct responsibility. It has not formally repudiated the fabrications even though it saw fit to correct several far less egregious errors on other topics in January. Instead, the *DI* ran a

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letter to the editor by alumnus Adam H. Fleischer saying that the Sharon quote is a hoax (Jan. 20, 2004). But it is not merely a

reader's opinion that the statement was invented; it is a fact which requires public acknowledgment by the editors.

The day after the Fleischer letter, the *DI* compounded its failure to exercise editorial quality control by publishing a letter from a local resident who claimed he "did some research to validate the author's quotes. They all checked out." Of course, the letter writer provided no details on how he verified bogus information.

Judging from Sobh's next column, the aspiring journalist accepted no responsibility for her serious mistakes ("Drama, drama everywhere," Jan. 22). She briefly referred to the controversy:

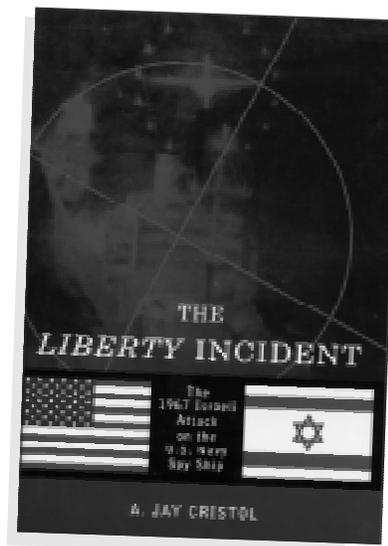
My column even brings drama to the paper. I'm sure it's because my picture shows that I'm obviously Muslim. Some people are not yet beyond the judgmental stage. They can only make up assumptions about a person they don't even know. "Let's alert all our lists and postings, Mariam Sobh is a terrorist and she writes for The *Daily Illini*." I can't believe how people have built me up into someone I'm not. It's great, though, because now I'm famous.

Perhaps experiencing increased pressure, Sobh finally acknowledged some dereliction in her subsequent *DI* contribution ("And the controversy continues," Jan. 29, 2004). She explained that her source for the Sharon quote was an email from a "friend." Sobh assumed the quote was legitimate, because she looked it up "online" and "found hundreds of Web sites that had this statement." Sobh's idea of fact-checking, it seems, had been to consult a "friend" and to do a Google search.

Recommended Reading

A. Jay Cristol's *The Liberty Incident* (Brassey's, 2002) is a thorough account of the fateful day of June 8, 1967, when Israeli warplanes and torpedo boats attacked an American naval vessel in international waters off the Sinai Peninsula during the Six Day War. The fog of war tragedy, in which 34 Americans died, has been the subject of multiple official American and Israeli investigations, as well as countless conspiracy theories.

A federal judge and former naval aviator, Cristol gains unprecedented access to inside sources and recently unclassified documents, definitively proving the attack was a case of



friendly fire and demolishing the decades-old claims of cover-ups and conspiracy.

How to Fact-Check: Yourself and Others

Investigate. Do not assume that everything you read is accurate. If a paper publishes a suspicious “fact” or quote, take it upon yourself to research it.

The Internet can be a great resource or a great source of misinformation. Before using material found on the Internet, thoroughly check it out. Try to locate the *original* source and verify the information. Reliance on extremist, fringe Web sites, for example, should be considered inappropriate in the absence of corroborating credible, mainstream sources.

Never rely on another source’s citation. When you reference or quote a work, it is assumed that you actually checked the original source and did not just lift someone else’s citation second hand.

Uncorrected statements do not disappear but remain in news databases where journalists and researchers may recycle them. Corrections, on the other hand, are appended to the original article in those databases, setting the record straight. That is why it is important to press newspapers to correct, in print, their errors. *A reader’s letter to the editor is not a substitute for a correction.*

Be persistent. Media outlets, including college publications, should strive to adhere to the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics which requires journalists to “admit mistakes and correct them promptly.” Sometimes it requires perseverance to compel a paper to correct errors. If the media outlet refuses to correct its mistake, try seeking negative publicity about the uncorrected error in other venues. It’s up to you to hold the media accountable when they do not follow their own guidelines for fair reporting.

If you need help countering media bias on your campus, get assistance from CAMERA as well as local groups and professors.

It is instructive to note that Sobh only admitted to her error after students, local advocacy groups, community members and CAMERA sent letters to the newspaper, the Illini Media board, and the Dean of the Journalism school.

The *Illini* columnist’s reckless use of propaganda is longstanding. For example, in one of her first columns for the *DI*, Sobh wrote that the security barrier Israel is building will separate Palestinians from their water supply and that “they (Palestinians) will eventually be driven to starvation if this wall is completed” (“Modern wall of apartheid” Aug. 28). She added “I think that it is sad that we can pay for genocide and act like it’s no big deal.” Her source for the “genocide” charge was an article from the site Antiwar.com. The Web site, which devotes an entire section to Israel’s alleged role in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, can hardly be considered credible.

In another column, Sobh charged that Israel’s attack on the *USS Liberty* in 1967, a case of friendly fire, “was one of the most horrific and *deliberate* attacks against the United States” (emphasis added). Her claim was primarily based on a conversation she had with Jim Ennes, a leading conspiracy proponent who has called Israel’s leaders “amoralistic murderers” who are “worse” than the Nazis. She portrayed Ennes as reliable while Sobh did not even mention the more than six government inquiries into the event, every one of which has concluded the attack was not “deliberate.” (For more information on the *USS Liberty*, see *The Liberty Incident* by A. Jay Cristol.)

Middle East expert Daniel Pipes, who recently lectured at the University of Illinois, criticized the

Daily Illini for, among other things, adding an incendiary graphic to an article about him. He notes on his Web site that an

editorial on Dec. 1 about me titled ‘Promoting Hate,’...included a graphic that is a true disgrace to this school. The drawing shows a match lighting a Star of David—a clear antisemitic provocation. Who, exactly, is promoting hate?

Indeed, isn’t a university that indulges and abets the screeds of Mariam Sobh—a journalism student no less—literally promoting hate among students? ☹

Deborah Passner

Were you successful in eliciting a correction about the Mideast from your campus paper?

If so, please send errors and corrections to campus@camera.org to receive recognition in the next issue of *CAMERA On Campus*. Include your name, university, the date of publication and the name of the newspaper in which the error and correction appeared.