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'Post' boycotters continuing protest efforts

by Eric Fingerhut

Staff Writer

Organizers of last week's boycott of *The Washington Post* say their protest brought attention to what they believe are problems in the *Post's* Middle East coverage, and that they will continue their efforts in other ways.

Hillel Glazer of Silver Spring said the group's goal was never to make an economic impact on the *Post* but to "create visibility of the problem," and in that regard the campaign was a success.

While a number of boycott organizers now subscribe to *The Washington Times*, many also have restarted their subscriptions to the *Post* and are coming up with new methods to make their efforts known.

Gaithersburg lawyer Laurel Anchors said the group has contacted a handful of *Post* advertisers, and some have been willing to participate in an effort to show their unhappiness with the paper, perhaps through letters or phone calls to the paper's editors to register their displeasure. Anchors said the group is not currently considering organizing an advertising boycott and is not interested in hurting the paper financially.

Germantown's Peter Hebert said the *Post* boycott group will be joining other newspaper protest groups in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Tampa and elsewhere around the country for a nationwide joint demonstration in front of their local newspaper offices sometime within the next month.

Glazer said the group is working on developing an "objective

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checklist" that could be used to evaluate the *Post's* Middle East stories and detect whether coverage was improving.

Glazer, who maintains the group's Web site (www.boycottthepost.org), could not provide exact figures on how many *Post* subscribers canceled their subscriptions June 10-17, but he said that about 1,300 people either registered on the site that they were joining the boycott or signed the group's petition calling for the paper to "critically self-examine whether their reporting lives up to the Journalistic Code of Ethics" with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Glazer believes from anecdotal reports that even more people participated in the boycott without informing the Web site.

But *Post* spokesperson Eric Grant said that the paper recorded 422 stops of subscriptions that were "directly applicable" to coverage of the Middle East between May 10, around the time the boycott effort began, and June 17. He said about 55 percent of those subscribers canceled their subscription outright, while 45 percent had provided "restart dates" for delivery of the paper. The *Post* Monday-Friday circulation, according to Grant, is 760,000.

Grant said the *Post* is concerned about the cancellations.

"We never want to lose readers," he said. "We always want to be able to receive feedback, and we value our readers. We don't take it lightly at all."

Grant said *Post* foreign editors met with American Jewish Committee members about Middle East coverage last month, and said the paper believes that it has been "very receptive to concerns of the community regarding Middle East coverage."

David Bernstein, the AJCommittee's Washington area director, said his organization does not support a boycott of the paper, but has been concerned about the *Post's* Middle East coverage. AJCommittee compiled a 14-page report analyzing articles from the first three months of this year.

He said that in the meeting, "the *Post* was very open to hearing criticism," but that the committee still has "major differences" with the paper.

For example, Bernstein cites as an example of editorializing in a news story a March 9 *Post* article that talks of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "longtime struggle ... to crush Palestinian armed resistance among refugees from Israel's

1948 war of independence" and Israel's efforts to "break the will of Palestinians."

Bernstein said he does not believe that *Post* reporters and editors are purposely distorting the news, but "share common assumptions" or a "specific world view" that may "color their news coverage."

Leaders of the *Post* boycott group say they have been rebuffed or ignored so far in their efforts to schedule a meeting with *Post* editors, but were pleased by acknowledgments of some of their complaints in the *Post* itself. A June 9 column by ombudsman Michael Getler said it was a "fair criticism" to say the *Post* "frequently fails" to point out that organizations like Hamas and Islamic Jihad "do not want an end just to the occupation but to Israel as well."

Howard Kurtz's June 10 "Media Notes" column quoted assistant managing editor for foreign news Phil Bennett as saying that criticism of some stories -- including a wire service report in which the *Post* changed the attribution of a quote from "one masked militant" to "one of the mourners" -- had prompted the paper to be more careful about language.

Bethesda optometrist Michael Berenhaus said he has noticed some improvement in the paper's Middle East coverage in recent weeks. He pointed to a story last week in which the *Post* referred to "West Bank territory captured from Jordan in 1967." Usually, Berenhaus said, the paper uses the term "occupied" to describe the territory and does not explain who the territory was captured from in 1967, which could lead a reader to believe Israel captured the territory from the Palestinians.

Organizers of the boycott group stress that they are not looking for a "pro-Israel bias" from the *Post*; they want the paper to report the "truth."

For example, an article might report that three Palestinians and three Israelis died in violence, but does not report until much later in the article that the three Israelis were killed while sleeping, while the dead Palestinians were their attackers.

A group called Palestine Media Watch has set up a Web site (www.boycottthepost.com) with an address very close to Glazer's group, and has similar complaints about the *Post*, although in reverse.

Marvin Kalb, executive director of the Washington office of

Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, believes that press coverage of the Middle East tilts toward the Palestinians. He notes that Israel is considered "Goliath" by many journalists while the Palestinians are looked at as "David." But the fact that Goliath's 5 million Jews are surrounded by 300 million Arabs "is not factored in."

But Kalb, a longtime diplomatic correspondent for CBS and NBC News, said he opposes boycotts because he does not believe in "cutting yourself off."

"American citizens need as much information as they can get, and to deny themselves information provided by one of the best newspapers [in the country] is self-defeating," Kalb said.

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