



Conflicted: The *New York Times* and the Bias Question Epilogue

New York Times Executive Editor Bill Keller's [rebuttal](#) ran adjacent to Ombudsman Clark Hoyt's [column](#) on the *Times*' website on February 6, 2010. Neither Hoyt's column nor Keller's response ran in the paper. Keller opened by offering a quick and forceful endorsement of the *Times*' Jerusalem bureau chief, Ethan Bronner. Then Keller argued that the decision to keep Bronner in Jerusalem was made out of respect for open-minded readers who, he said, Hoyt improperly implied were not capable of distinguishing reality from appearances.

He noted that the paper's rulebook properly gave editors wide latitude to act in conflict of interest cases. Indeed, he continued, a journalist's personal connections to a subject could contribute depth and texture to their reporting. As examples, he cited C.J. Chivers, Anthony Shadid, and Nazila Fathi. However, he chose not to go into detail about their biographies. Nor did he write about columnist Thomas Friedman and the instances in which he was touched by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead, Keller observed that, as a reader, he could discern nothing in these journalists' reporting that betrayed their personal feeling about the issues they covered.

Finally, he closed with the argument that the paper had to be careful not to capitulate to partisans on either side of a conflict. To submit to their demands would rob the paper of experienced journalists like Bronner, whereas in fact the partisans were incapable of fairly evaluating him. This did not mean, he said, that he was denying the significance of Bronner's family connections to Israel. Rather, he concluded, Bronner and his editors must remain alert to how those connections could compromise him going forward.

Hoyt and Clark's public exchange sparked a national debate among media observers at both traditional journalistic organizations—including the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and the *Guardian*—as well as among bloggers. The pro-Palestinian bloggers—who were the most vocal online voices—tended to see Bronner's son's enlistment as proof of his pro-Israel bias. The media critics focused on the question of whether Bronner was actually compromised. Most of them concurred that he should keep his post, assuming there was no proof of bias.

Hoyt published several reader responses on his blog. These were more evenly split between people who felt that Bronner would be compromised by his son's enlistment and those who agreed with Keller that Bronner should be evaluated strictly on the merits of his work. One reader, who wrote in on February 9, 2010, suggested that Hoyt was employing a double standard for Bronner because few Americans would object to the *Times* assigning a reporter to the Middle East because he had a son in the US military. Hoyt responded:

Readers expect American reporters and their family to be part of this society and to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. But they don't expect a correspondent sent to cover an intense overseas conflict to wind up heavily invested in one side—or to be perceived as such—even if it is through the action of a close family member over whom the reporter has no control.¹

On February 12, Keller talked with host Brooke Gladstone on the NPR program *On The Media*.² Gladstone wanted to know if the best way for the paper to inoculate itself against the constant guessing games and “gotchas” about reporters’ lives was for the *Times* to post their intellectual and “experiential” biographies online. Keller countered by asking just what a reader is entitled to know about a reporter. However, he conceded that fuller disclosure of personal and professional background might be the direction in which journalism was headed.

Bronner continued as chief of the *Times*’ Jerusalem bureau and was still there as of June 2010.

¹ Letters to the Public Editor, “Other Voices: Reporters’ Allegiances,” *New York Times* website, February 20, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/21/opinion/21pubed.html?pagewanted=all>.

² “Family Ties,” *On the Media*, National Public Radio, February 12, 2010, <http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2010/02/12/02>.