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Laughing it off

By Jennifer Sussex
6/11/07

Dearborn was recently host to the Radius of Arab-American Writers, Inc., a seminar discussing current issues pertaining to their community. One of the prominent guests at the event was Ray Hanania, a columnist and reporter who has been syndicated in both American and Israeli papers. Hanania spoke about his experiences as a Palestinian writer working for a Chicago paper and learning to live with bias.

Hanania stressed the importance of representation in the media and mentioned how public opinion is often manipulated by the media's portrayal of current events. He explained that bias is created through subtle plays with language that de-emphasize the seriousness of confrontations between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians.

One example of this is the continuing discrepancy in the use of the word "terrorist." Simply because of the subject, some acts are described as "barbaric terrorist" actions while others are not.

Another example of this bias is evident in the war in Iraq. Because the war is distilled in terms of the American casualties and commonly omits mention of the Iraqi civilian perspective of the conflict, we have a misleading image of the war.

However, at the RAWI gathering, Hanania broached this topic with a fervency and emotion that is missing in the current newspaper coverage of these events. He and others at the RAWI conference demonstrated that the Arab-American community encounters increasing amounts of prejudice because the media portrays its populace through an Orientalist, pop-culture approach. This same media also omits or down plays its suffering in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq.

The biased depiction of Arabs within the media places Arab-American writers in a delicate predicament - they are faced with the dilemma that what they write will reflect their entire populace. Arab-American writers are forced to evaluate how they seek to portray their community and if they should attempt to directly counter the stereotypical image of Arabs in their works.

But Hanania presents an interesting response to this phenomenon. He is on an Israeli-Palestinian comedy circuit that counters this image with the seemingly disarming venue of humor. Using this approach, the group reaches an

audience that would otherwise resist a critique of the American media.

Until Arab-American writers can write in a free stream of consciousness approach that ignores the politics of publishing, their Israeli-Palestinian comedy tour seems like one of the most effective ways to counter pop culture's stereotypes through the guise of pop culture itself.

Jennifer Sussex is an LSA junior and a member of the Daily's editorial board.

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