



Canary Mission Is Effective Against BDS

by Edwin Black

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Canary Mission monitors, spotlights, and reports cases of online hate speech – a vital service, as hate speech often precedes hateful acts of violence. It remains to be seen whether this undertaking will be embraced by the people it is designed to defend and protect.

The [Canary Mission](#) organization has several locations from which it conducts endless social media searches, refreshes, clicks, video reviews, forwards, and saves in an effort to capture the worst of the openly anti-Semitic and anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) agitation and hate speech erupting across America's campuses. Its work also encompasses white nationalism.

BDS advocates often spew some of the most venomous hate speech visible on the Internet, hate speech that Canary Mission captures and re-publishes in personal profiles. For example, it exposed a Chicago activist with Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) who [tweeted this joke](#): "Why did Hitler commit suicide?..... He saw the gas bill. Pahahaha." It also captured this [tweet](#) by a UCLA student protestor: "Mmmaaaannnnnnnnnnnnn what's with all this peaceful approaches!?? F**k that. I want terrorism and another intifada." The same UCLA student reportedly added a photo close-up of a gun and bullets.

After the massacre at Pittsburgh, [calls went out broadly](#) to monitor, spotlight, and report hate speech, especially since hateful acts of violence are often preceded by hate speech. That is precisely what Canary Mission does. Canary Mission tracks social media and videos, capturing BDS, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic expressions. It then triangulates those expressions into [individual profiles](#): permanent, publicly visible records of the words and images really used by BDS and SJP leaders. The profiles are almost always incontestable because Canary Mission links to actual [videos](#), tweets, and other open documentation. Its intent is to shine an indelible light on students, faculty, and

others trafficking in this kind of online hate, thus creating a negative incentive – or at least a consequence for anti-Israel and anti-Semitic hate speech.

Canary Mission began in 2015 with just 50 profiles. As of December 2018, about 2,500 profiles have been listed. CM has received about 80-100 requests for removal. Very few have been made. One staffer explained, “Even small errors are exceptionally rare due to our strict [internal protocols](#). On the handful of occasions that we found an error, we made an immediate correction.”

Canary Mission has arguably proven itself the single most effective effort against BDS and hate speech. One of its programs, “Ex-Canary,” features remorseful hate speech purveyors. Thirteen reformed [Ex-Canary](#) individuals previously featured “have since rejected the latent anti-Semitism prevalent among anti-Israel organizations and activists,” explains a Canary Mission staffer, adding, “These individuals have displayed the intellectual honesty to acknowledge the problem of anti-Semitism within anti-Israel organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. They have shown moral courage to recognize their earlier mistakes.”

A recent article in the pro-BDS publication, *The Intercept*, was headlined: “[It’s Killing the Student Movement: Canary Mission’s Blacklist of Pro-Palestine Activists Is Taking a Toll.](#)” The article cited BDS activists who have shut down their social media fearing a Canary Mission profile. *The Intercept* reported, “A survey of over 60 people profiled on Canary Mission, conducted by the group [Against Canary Mission](#), found that 43 percent of respondents said they toned down their activism because of the blacklist, while 42 percent said they suffered acute anxiety from being placed on the website.”

Ironically, at a time when Canary Mission’s monitoring seems the most needed, the organization is fighting a public relations war in the Jewish media, the anti-Israel media, and the activist media. This is confusing to me personally. Canary Mission is doing the very same thing the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and many other newspapers asked me to do in 2013 when, in an award-winning syndicated series entitled “[Funding Hate](#),” I documented the virulent intersection of NGOs and anti-Jewish and anti-Israel hate speech at a UN conference in Durban. That international hate fest was [replete](#) with Jewish caricatures, Nazi emblems and Hitler adulation, in large part funded by the Ford Foundation. As a consequence of the series, the Ford Foundation [revamped](#) its funding.

Early twentieth-century media defenders of Jewish rights, such as [Forverts](#), [Der Tog](#), and the [Jewish Daily Bulletin](#) laid the groundwork with their fearless coverage of both Jew haters and those in the Jewish community who failed to stand up to them. Typical was a blistering editorial in a 1933 edition of *Der Tog*

that bitterly attacked the American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith for their “policy of fear and silence” during the rise of Hitler. They even undermined anti-Nazi protest. “What [do they] propose?” *Der Tog* asked. “Silence and nothing else! ... [Our] people are determined to fight for their very life.”

Despite generations of precedent, an unclear picture of Canary Mission has emerged in some parts of the Jewish and larger media. The admittedly press-shy organization is often negatively referred to as “shadowy.” But when the group first emerged in late 2015, it took me only 34 minutes communicating cold via their website to secure interviews for syndicated [publication](#), and eventually a [photograph](#) taken in their office. That first request contained only three words: “contact me back.” Since then, I have monitored the group, especially as ominous news stories have appeared in the Jewish media. They routinely reply at the same speed and caliber as most other Jewish groups. Like other Jewish organizations, Canary Mission admits to being selective in its media contacts. For this article, more than two dozen written and verbal exchanges transpired – as routinely as for any Jewish organization.

A mythology has sprung up about Canary Mission’s physical presence on campus. One canard surrounds a visit Canary Mission agents purportedly made to George Washington University during an April 2018 BDS vote. Canary Mission did remotely review and report on Internet postings of BDS hate speech, such as claims that Israel is “poisoning Palestinian water” and a tweeted threat “to physically fight” Zionists “the next time I see them.” But two unverified images of individuals in [yellow bird costumes](#) were circulated by some media, along with an unverified student account of costumed or masked figures dancing ominously outside the GWU BDS vote.

On its face, it is implausible that Canary Mission agents – in bird costumes or otherwise – would make an appearance at an event where they are reviled and subject to physical confrontation. Nonetheless, some publications have prominently used a picture of a [yellow beak-masked person](#) at GWU to symbolize the actual organization. When asked about any GWU appearance and the photos circulated, a senior Canary Mission staffer said, “Definitely not us. We viewed it as childish and unhelpful,” adding, “It seems more likely to be a couple of local students.”

To date, the only legitimate known [photo of Canary Mission](#) operatives is the one taken at my request—a staffer’s hand over a laptop displaying the CM website.

Similarly confusing is a common media assertion that Canary Mission’s tactics violate core “Jewish values.” One typical article cited a list of student groups complaining that the group’s tactics are “antithetical to our democratic and

Jewish values” and “morally reprehensible.” To check that, I went to the Coalition of Jewish Values, a group representing about 1,000 rabbis. CJV’s president, Pesach Lerner, responded, “Everything Canary Mission reports is public information, based upon statements at demonstrations and in social media. So on the contrary, it is a mitzvah to protect the reputations, safety and lives of innocent Israeli Jews against those who have, in their public statements and actions, embraced anti-Semitic boycotts and demonization.”

Canary Mission is funded through tax-deductible entities. The media campaign to undermine Canary Mission also includes seeking out CM’s donors in an effort to stigmatize those who financially support the blacklisting and documenting of hate speech and anti-Israel de-legitimization. Ironically, many of these media corporations are themselves tax-deductible agencies that solicit donations hourly. All too often, these publications obscure their own funding and fund-raising activities, which can be triggered with a click of the omnipresent “Donate” button. Some pre-set online buttons allow \$1,000 clicks. One such media button, when tested, allowed a \$100,000 donation. Major media grants are often solicited with written proposals promising editorial slants or directions. Some media even seek funding for specific investigations or features. Whereas major TV and print media, such as the [Associated Press](#) or [PBS](#), often identify their funding, such transparency is commonly absent from many of Canary Mission’s detractors in the Jewish media.

It all reminds me of the acrimonious divisions in the American Jewish community that arose during the Hitler regime. Today, historians recognize that such defense-minded entities as The Jewish War Veterans, the American Jewish Congress, *Forverts*, and the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* rose to the occasion and stood up for Jewish rights. The silent and fearful leaders of B’nai B’rith and the [American Jewish Committee](#) have been skewered by historians for their shameful lack of courage in the face of Nazi oppression, and for even attacking or demonizing Jewish leaders who did dare to speak up.

A generation from now, when the chronicle of our era is written, how will historians judge those who acted to defend against anti-Jewish and anti-Israel bigotry – and those who did all they could to frustrate those efforts? History’s analysis may repeat itself as historians once more view harshly those in the Jewish community who used their power to obstruct Jewish defense.

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