

Israel advocacy goes hi-tech

Talya Halkin, THE JERUSALEM POST

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A new toolbar, which will enable advocates of Israel worldwide to download information about the country on-line, was launched last week by AwesomeSeminars.com.

The Web site is directed by hasbara and communication-training expert Neil Lazarus, who recently served as the Israel advocacy consultant for the hugely popular Israeli reality show, *The Ambassador*.

The toolbar, which is being run in conjunction with the Foreign Ministry, was designed, Lazarus told *The Jerusalem Post*, with what he called the "flick-click generation" in mind.

It is a small interface that sits on the desktop and gives users access to a variety of media and information sources.

"At a time when events are rapidly changing in Israel, the need to bring hasbara into the 21st century has never been more crucial," Lazarus said. "This toolbar really speaks to a younger generation who receive information in a different way."

One of the most popular features of the toolbar is that it enables users to listen to Israeli radio live from their computers.

The idea behind this particular feature, Lazarus said, was that it would enable people "to get images of Israel beyond the conflict – to listen to Israeli music and to receive the message that Israel has a vibrant contemporary culture."

In addition, the toolbar enables users to read news and receive statements directly from the Foreign Ministry about the latest political developments. It also provides links to leading hasbara organizations.

According to Lazarus, the new toolbar is indicative of a larger paradigm shift in Israel advocacy, in which the idea of "hasbara," or explaining, is effectively replaced with "understanding" and "marketing."

Hasbara today, Lazarus said, is facing new challenges that stem from a new target audience of 18- to 25-year-olds.

For this age group, what will remain in their minds after watching an Israeli soldier detain a Palestinian civilian at a checkpoint, for instance, is the emotional impact they

felt when first seeing the image, rather than facts or background information concerning Israeli attempts to prevent terror attacks.

"One of the reasons I think it is important to transform the packaging of hasbara is so that its language speaks to this generation, which doesn't watch one program but flicks to over 20 channels in five minutes," Lazarus said.

"I think this young, student population is very important to target, because by doing so you are already addressing the hasbara issues that will arise in ten years' time."

Lazarus also said that, while there is an overall sense that people don't want more bad news from Israel, students worldwide are still frustrated about not being able to deal with attacks on Israel on college campuses, and want tools to help them answer question they are challenged with.

At the same time, he said, "We are seeing an interest in contemporary Israeli culture, in music and sports."

In addition, Lazarus said, the message that Israel has a lot to offer beyond the conflict has to go together with a political message – because people coming here want to feel secure.

The Web site, which Lazarus hopes will serve as an online community for advocates of Israel through which they can share materials, is still being developed, and Lazarus said his Web site encourages users to contribute ideas for links and other content they would like to see on the site. In the future, he said, the site would have a chat room and also produce original content.

Gideon Meir, deputy director-general for media and public affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told the *Post* that the Ministry was happy to assist this advocacy project.

"We saw a tool that we hadn't yet assimilated totally, and we are happy with any tools that can help promote advocacy," Meir said.

Meir also said that over the past year, the ministry had been giving much thought to a project it is calling "Israel Beyond the Headlines." A related campaign, he said, would be launched in the near future.

The initiative, Meir said, could be thought of as a form of re-branding for Israel in a manner that will speak to an international audience of both Jews and non-Jews.

He said the program would touch upon the country's business, industry, tourism and culture communities.

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