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The Media in Israel

By Michael Widlanski

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I. Introduction

Thomas Jefferson once said that if he had to choose between a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, he would pick the latter. Jefferson, in his own time, was a supporter of the press and wary of too much government control, but if Jefferson reappeared in [Israel](#) today, he might feel that the media in Israel have gotten too strong, while the government has gotten too weak..

The media in the [United States](#) are sometimes referred to as the "Fourth Estate" (after the legislative, executive and judiciary) branches of government. In Israel, however, members of the media have actually become integral parts of the three official branches of [government](#). Evidence from court cases—such as video footage of interrogations—regularly appears on television and in newspaper reports well before being presented in court.

An extreme example of this occurred recently when one newspaper, *Ma'ariv*, administered a lie detector test to a witness and published the results on its front page before the witness appeared in court. This kind of behavior prompted the late [Chaim Herzog](#), former president of Israel and a renowned lawyer, to propose legislation limiting press coverage of court cases. Herzog's proposals were largely rejected, but the debate continues.

Another way of seeing the strong power of the press is the fact that several political parties have actually built their candidate list around celebrity journalists; primarily by measuring the television ratings of the candidates, sometimes choosing television personalities or newspaper columnists to serve as the leaders of their parties.^[1] One could say that with the Jeffersonian ideal has come to fruition as coalition governments in [Israel](#) seem to come and go with singular speed and irregularity while the media— or at least major figures in radio, television, newspapers and internet—seem to stay forever.

Israeli television anchorman, Haim Yavin, was called "Mr. Television" because he anchored the evening news show for as long as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness—about 40 years.^[2] His nightly *Mabat* newscast on Israel's sole television channel at the time was literally "the only show in town" for a quarter of a century and it served as a kind of Israeli national campfire during which virtually all families turned on their sets at nine p.m. to watch. When Yavin made an announcement, the Israeli public perceived his words as having extra authority. In 1977, his voice was the voice of historical change when he announced a surprise [Likud Party](#) victory over the long-ruling [Labor Party](#) saying, "*gvirotai ve-rabotai ma-hapakh.*" (Ladies and Gentlemen, an upheaval.) As shall be seen, the Israeli media play a special role in politics and society—a role that predates "Mr. Television," going back at least

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to [Theodor Herzl](#) and the foundation of modern Jewish nationalism.

It would be a gross understatement to say that the media play a very important role in Israel. It would be fairer to state that, in at least two ways, Israel is probably the most media-obsessed country in the world:

1. Situations that would be ignored or minimized in other countries become television news flashes and front-page headlines—both in the international media and the Israeli media—simply because they occur in or involve Israel. A rock in Israel is unlike a rock in [Illinois](#) or [Iowa](#) or [Moscow](#). A rock thrown in Israel does not just cause a ripple on the surface of the water, but rather, could provoke a meeting of the [United Nations Security Council](#).
2. The people of Israel themselves consume more news than probably any other people in the world on a per capita basis.^[3] They obsess over the media; watching, listening, reading and otherwise interacting with their televisions, radios, newspapers, computers and cell-phones like no other nation does. This is especially fitting because major elements of computers and cell phones were actually developed in Israel.

Foreign correspondents and ambassadors who meet with Israeli leaders have reported that these officials will ask for a time-out in the middle of an appointment just to catch the latest hourly or half-hourly news bulletin on Israeli radio. Visitors to Israel, especially in the first thirty years of statehood, were often stunned when the drivers on public buses would ask the passengers to be quiet and turn up the radio so that everyone could hear the latest news broadcast. This phenomenon, of course, has to do with the special security situation of Israel as it feels itself to be under [constant threat](#). It is also connected to the fact that Israel is such a small country that almost everyone knows at least one person—be it a son, father, daughter or friend—who is currently on duty in the [national army](#).

II. The Role of the Media in Israel

To discuss the role of the media fairly [Israel](#) and its media must be placed in the proper context, keeping in mind the factors that make Israel unique. What kind of press does Israel have? Is it the classical model of a liberal press operating within a liberal democratic society as depicted in various press models? (For discussion of media models, see Siebert *et al*, 1976, Mattelhart, 1998 Nerone, 1995, McQuail, 1984 and 2000.) Additionally, what impact does Israel's continuing security crisis have on the performance of the press? Does official military censorship mean that Israel does not really have a free press? Is it fairer to classify Israel with some of its [Arab](#) neighbors which are said to have authoritarian societies employing a "loyalist" press or an "enlisted press" or even the "authoritarian press model"? (See Rugh, 1979 and 2004 and Boyd, 1982.)

The late American President John F. Kennedy called America "a nation of immigrants," but this perception is even truer of modern Israel, in which the [population](#) is drawn from more than seventy-two countries with its languages coming from six different continents.

What impact does Israel's [immigrant](#) and minority population have in the media? *Kol Yisrael* ([The Voice of Israel](#)), the State-supported public radio broadcasts in fifteen languages (including [Russian](#), [Georgian](#), [Yiddish](#), Spanish, Arabic and Farsi) to immigrant communities inside Israel and to expatriate communities around the world. It gains access and influence far beyond Israel's borders. During upheavals in [Iran](#) after the controversial elections of 2009, *Kol Yisrael* broadcasters maintained that "two to three million people were listening to [their] broadcasts" inside Iran. (Amir). This is likely true, and there are even reports that [Ayatollah Khomeini](#), when in exile, used to monitor Israeli broadcasts in the Farsi language. Aside from [Hebrew](#), more than 70 languages are spoken in Israel, and Arabic and Russian

are especially prominent. One out of six people living in Israel is Arab, while another one million of Israel's population of seven million are native speakers of Russian. The Arabic and Russian press outlets will be discussed in more detail a little further below.

III. The Role of Zionism in Journalism and Journalism in Zionism

Israel's obsession with its media did not begin yesterday, nor even 60-odd years ago with Israel's founding. It began more than a century ago—together with the modern Jewish national movement called [Zionism](#), in which journalism was very prominent.

[Theodor Herzl](#) was the most influential exponent of modern Jewish nationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Beginning in 1897, he led the first Zionist congresses and predicted a modern Jewish state within 50 years. The bearded Zionist visionary was also a prominent European journalist, operating mostly in places such as Vienna and Paris. Herzl used his journalistic platform both to oppose [anti-Semitism](#) as well as to promote the Jewish national idea. Although Herzl generally wrote in German, his ideas and manner had a large effect on the place of journalism in Hebrew-speaking Israeli society for years to come. (See Weisz, 2008, p. 139.) Just as Herzl was the founder of modern Zionism, he was also a founder of Israel's modern press. Herzl's idea of the press was a largely continental European model of idea-oriented and "involved" journalism. This type of journalism did not rule out the classic role of reporters as observers and recorders of events, but most journalists showed a certain political passion and a desire to effect and change events.

The ideological slant of Israel's media actually predates even Herzl. It began with the establishment of the religiously oriented papers, *Ha-Levanon* and *Ha-Havatzet*, founded in 1863 to serve two disparate communities of religious settlers. These and other newspapers had clear agendas and they were often linked to a political or religious party or philosophy and, in fact, were often the path to political success for the parties and their top activists.

"Two factors—affiliation with the [Zionist](#) enterprise and continuation of pre-state patterns—contextualize the examination of the work of Israeli journalists," observes Oren Meyers. "Journalistic practitioners did not have to invent Israeli journalism in 1948. Instead, they accommodated existing ideological stands and structural constraints to the new circumstances" (Meyers, 2005).

Like Herzl, other major writers—journalists, poets and playwrights—became major figures in both the Zionist movement and Israeli politics; among them, [David Ben-Gurion](#) (Israel's first prime minister), [Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky](#) (1880-1940, the leader of the Revisionist Movement) and [Asher Zvi Ginzburg](#) (known by his Hebrew nickname, "Ahad Ha'am").

"The politician/journalist phenomenon was familiar even in the earliest days of the [Zionist](#) movement and was common in pre-State society. The combination survives to this day, corroborating the elitist bond between the two systems or possibly the existence of a cartel of elites according to Caspi and Limor. (See Caspi and Limor, 1999, referring to Lijphart, p.275) They go on to give many more examples: "The pages of [pre-State history](#) are replete with images of newspaper editors who dedicated themselves to public activity, or senior public officials who tried their hand at editing. Berl Katzenelson was not only the editor of *Davar* but also a leader of the Labor Movement. Zalman Shazar edited *Davar* before he became a Knesset member, Cabinet minister and State President."

IV. An Embedded Press or In Bed With the Press

The interwoven nature of the ruling elites sometimes makes a mockery of the common

western conception of journalists acting as adversaries to politicians because many of the politicians and journalists are “sleeping with the enemy.” [Sylvan Shalom](#), the current deputy prime minister and once foreign minister, says that he began his political career as a journalist. He later married Judy Nir-Moses, a scion of the Moses family that owns *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's number one-selling newspaper that calls itself *ha-iton shel ha-medinah*: “The State's newspaper.” (According to some Israeli jokers, the nickname also conveys the notion that Yediot thinks it owns Israel.) But Shalom is not alone. [Amnon Lipkin-Shahak](#), a former army chief of staff and once a candidate for prime minister for the Center Party, married Tali Zellinger, the military correspondent for *Davar* and also a noted talk show host on radio and television.

[Ben-Gurion](#) had an important impact on Israeli journalism, encouraging a model of an “enlisted press” that was to be very patriotic and attuned to the security needs of the young state of Israel during its formative years. Ben-Gurion and his aides (chiefly Teddy Kollek, who later became mayor of Jerusalem) kept a wary eye on the Israeli press. Ben-Gurion and his main rival [Menachem Begin](#) of the rightist Herut (later Likud) Party were famous for reading every page of almost every Israeli newspaper daily. Ben-Gurion, who had grown up in Eastern Europe, had a strong distaste for what he saw as the superficialities of certain aspects of Western society, including gaudy newspaper and television stories and events, which he kept out of Israel until he left office. Indeed, Ben-Gurion even disapproved of the Beatles giving a concert in Israel in the early 1960s, and, in fact, the Beatles never came. However, television arrived with Ben-Gurion's successor, [Levi Eshkol](#), in 1968.

“Party newspaper activity was suffused not only with political values but also with a sense of mission, especially commitment to socialization of the large groups of immigrants” (Caspri and Limor, p. 67). Anyone passing a newsstand in the pre-state *yishuv* community of the 1930s and 1940s and in the first 20 years of statehood could find a vibrant marketplace of ideas in which ideological warfare took place daily.

Battle was waged, for example, between the socialist Mapam Party's *Al-Hamishmar* (1943-1995) and the Revisionist Movement's *Ha-Mashkif* (1938-1949) *Herut* (1948-1965), or *Hayom* (1966-1969) (which were loyal to [Ze'ev Jabotinsky](#) and Menachem Begin) as well as Ben-Gurion's favorite, *Davar* (1925-1996), which was owned by the Histadrut Trade Union Federation and was loyal to the left-of-center Mapai Party. Members of the [Histadrut](#) and certain [kibbutz communities](#) often made their members subscribe to these newspapers as a condition of membership. Other ideological warriors at the newsstand were the General Zionist party's *Haboker* (which favored capitalism) and the Israeli Communist Party's paper, *Kol Ha'am* (1947-1971). *Kol Ha'am* was actually shut down for a few days in a famous case in the 1950s that established the primacy of press freedom. The Arab Communist paper had severely criticized comments by [Abba Eban](#) that Israel would fight side by side with America if the US and the Soviet Union went to war. Israel 's Supreme Court, under the influence of American-educated Chief Justice Shimon Agron, ruled that the Israeli government had misused emergency regulations. The Court said publication could not be banned unless there was a clear and present danger to public safety—a standard that is still used in contemporary cases.

Today, as ideology and party discipline have both declined, most of these party newspapers have closed, with only the ultra-religious *Ha-Modia* [*The Announcer*] and *Yated Ne'eman* [*The Loyal Stake*] remaining along with the Arabic-language Communist newspaper, *Al-Ittihad* [Union].

V. Today's Newspapers' Cast of Characters

Over the years, [Israeli politics](#), society and media became less ideologically driven.

Television and the visual culture of personal computers spurred personality politics; putting a premium on image and the idea of “selling oneself” rather than complicated content. (See Peri, 2004, pp. 13-18). The vast array of newspapers was reduced to a less partisan mix at the center of which are three Hebrew language dailies and one English-language newspaper:

- *Haaretz*, a morning newspaper that roughly parallels *The New York Times* or what was once *The New York Herald Tribune* format of a literate broadsheet newspaper;
- *Yediot Aharonot*, a tabloid paper owned by the Moses family that was originally sold in the afternoons. Once considered a centrist paper with a right-of-center editor policy, it has developed a clear left-of-center identity in its editorial line in recent years;
- *Ma'ariv*, another tabloid paper owned by the Nimrodi family originally sold in the afternoons was considered right-of-center in its general perspective, but it too has moved to the center-left.

The Jerusalem Post—originally *The Palestine Post*—is now owned by foreign investors, but it remains Israel's voice to the [Diaspora](#) and to new immigrants who know English better than Hebrew. Once considered left-of-center, it has changed ownership twice in the last fifteen years, moving rightward in its political outlook. Earlier, the *Post*, like the Hebrew-language *Davar*, had, in the words of former *Post* editor Erwin Frenkel, “nestled under the canopy of Israel's Labor Movement.”^[4] Unlike *Davar* and the other Hebrew dailies, the *Post* displayed more of an Anglo-Saxon approach to news coverage, rather than the ideological European approach. It was also conscious of its role as Israel's Jewish voice to the world.

All four papers have survived to this day, though their form has changed a bit, and we should look at them a bit more in-depth. They have been joined recently by two new or renewed newspapers:

- *Yisrael Ha-Yom*—Like *Yediot* and *Ma'ariv*, it also is a tabloid newspaper, but is distributed free of charge, relying on advertisement revenues and the financial backing of American investor, Sheldon Adelson. *Yisrael Ha-Yom* consciously cultivates a more staid posture, trying to achieve a “less yellow” image than its two tabloid rivals, *Yediot* and *Ma'ariv*, from which it has “stolen” several big name journalists such as columnist Dan Margalit and investigative reporter Mordechai Gilat. *Yisrael Ha-Yom* claims to have surpassed *Ma'ariv* as the number two-circulating Israeli daily, maintaining a daily press run of 255,000.
- *Makor Rishon-Hatsofeh*: This is a right-of-center daily comprised of the old original *Hatsofeh* of the National Religious Party (*Mafdal*) and a new rightist journal that caters to nationalistic and religious publics who enjoy a level of writing similar to that of *Haaretz*. Recently it introduced its own web site.

The arrival of television and internet have strained and assailed the newspapers in [Israel](#) which constantly struggle to retain their readers. It is difficult to get Israeli newspapers to reveal their circulation figures, but *Haaretz* is believed to have daily a circulation of only between 20,000 to 50,000 hard copies (and about twice that on Fridays for its weekend edition). It makes up for its relatively low local paper circulation with a reputation for excellence and influence, as well as an increasingly successful web edition. *Haaretz* is still owned by the Schocken family, who also has a major publishing house, but it has undergone many changes such as the development of a well-regarded internet edition in both English and Hebrew with many hundreds of thousands of users daily. For approximately a decade, *Haaretz* has also printed an English edition which is considerably smaller than its [Hebrew](#) edition but which is read by many local diplomats and businesspeople (Based on interviews with Burston, Miller, Davidowitz and Rosner).

Over the years, *Haaretz* has been the home to many of the great Israeli journalists and authors such as Shabtai Teveth, a noted historian and biographer of [Ben-Gurion](#). It prides itself as “*ha-iton le-anashim hoshvim*” (the newspaper for people who think) and it is usually the first newspaper read by television and radio editors and producers. Therefore, for an Israeli politician getting on the *Haaretz*'s front page is very helpful in establishing oneself in a high position on the pecking order in other parts of the Israeli media world. Additionally, being published in *Haaretz* can also get one's message across to an international audience because of the reach of the English-language edition and the internet editions in English and Hebrew.

"We have customers all over the world," observes Senior Editor Bradley Burston, explaining that the newspaper takes care to edit the internet edition for the overseas audience because “they not only speak with accents but also understand with accents.” (Burston, 2008) The websites in both English and Hebrew are very user-friendly, encouraging use by students and teachers looking for material on the Middle East. "Our headlines and tag lines are written with an eye to Google," confesses web site editor Sara Miller. "Almost 35% of our on-line readers come from Google. So, we try to put ourselves into the minds of our readers and how they would search for item." (Miller, 2008)

Despite its many changes, the newsprint edition of *Haaretz* still feels much like an Israeli version of *The New York Times* or *The London Times*. Although it has increased headline size and picture components, it is still a broadsheet newspaper with a large “news hole,” with many detailed news articles and features. Its editorial line is generally capitalistic on economic issues and dovish on war-peace issue.

Yediot and *Ma'ariv* have become even more “yellow” in their tabloid make-up over the years and their front pages are usually little more than a menu featuring one or two headlines in big colored letters. Inside, both newspapers feature large pictures, sometimes with scantily-clad women or cuddly animals in a double-page-spread format.

Even people who like pictures and color feel that the papers have often overdone this approach. "Pictures are wonderful, but they can lie, too," remarks career news photographer David Rubinger, who has been covering Israel and the pre-state [yishuv](#) since 1946. (Rubinger Interview 2009) "I remember a full-page picture in *Yediot* of a man with a bloody knife sticking out of his back. That kind of thing is just not right."

VI. The Media-Government Atmosphere of Symbiosis

The Israeli press grew up together in a kind of patriotic cocoon, living and working with the pre-state governing institutions and the political leaders of the future State of Israel. This contributed to a sense of camaraderie between reporters, editors and Israeli government officials—a sense that carried over into the first two decades of [Israeli history](#). Many of the reporters and editors had worked with officials in quasi-secret [Zionist](#) organizations that were pitted against British military authorities or against hostile Arab forces. This wartime crucible continued at least through the 1967 war during the years that Israel felt isolated and threatened by surrounding Arab countries. It is no wonder that reporters and editors willingly censored their own stories, fearful of endangering national goals.

This patriotic sentiment is the background for the “[Editors' Committee](#)” which regularly met with Israel's prime minister and defense minister in order to discuss material that could not be published. The newspaper representatives were flattered to be consulted and briefed by the government on confidential issues, but more than this, they sincerely believed that their duties as citizens outweighed their duties as journalists. This is the epitome of what was called *itonut meguyesset*—an enlisted press. This enlistment was especially true during Israel

's wars—[1948](#), [1956](#), [1967](#), the [1969-70 War of Attrition](#) and [1973](#). Mishaps and mistakes were usually glossed over and military corruption was not reported. Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of such treatment was the war hero [Moshe Dayan](#) who served as Israel's army commander during the 1956 war and as its Defense Minister during the 1967 war. Dayan used his position as IDF chief of staff and later as defense minister to amass a huge personal collection of illegally retrieved archeological relics. Dayan would commandeer helicopters and trucks for his own use and his collection all of it illegally acquired, was worth several million dollars.

One exception to this kind of ideological journalism and press-government *bonhomie* was the weekly journal *Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh*, edited by Uri Avneri. The weekly produced often sensational gossipy stories with lurid pictures, but it also tried to cast a critical eye on Israel's security establishment, sometimes dropping broad hints policy scandals in a language of hints and winks that was meant to outmaneuver Israeli military censorship of security matters. Avneri's weekly frequently included indirect references to *mamlekhet ha-hoshekh* (the realm of darkness), a reference to Israel's Shin Bet domestic security service or a reference to the broader security community.

The criticism found in *Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh* sometimes had a significant impact on other reporters, though the general rule was that on matters of delicate diplomacy and national security, many newspapers and national radio steered clear of criticism of the government for fear of "giving ammunition to Israel's enemies."[\[5\]](#)

This general lack of criticism of Israel is so vastly different from what exists today in the country that it demands further explanation:

- For the first thirty years of statehood, Israel was constantly at [war](#), even if the war was unofficial and most Israelis felt that they too were at war. Often, there were terror attacks or infiltrations by Arab squads into Israel.
- During Israel's first years, the memory of the [Holocaust](#) was no mere slogan. It is safe to say that most people in the country had friends or family who had been murdered or marked by the searing Holocaust experience. No reporter or editor wanted to be accused of endangering Jewish lives.
- David Ben-Gurion and his Labor Party, as well as leaders like [Yigal Allon](#) and [Moshe Dayan](#), were treated like heroic figures because of their performance in the 1948 war or 1956 war. This heroic treatment was even more amplified after Israel's lightning victory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war that came to be known *Milhemet Sheshet Ha-Yamim*: The Six-Day War. Such beloved figures were hard for Israeli journalists to criticize at that time.

During the first 25 years of Israel's history, several security scandals were either covered up or not really investigated by Israel's press corps. Some major examples are:

- The failed espionage caper in 1954 that used Egyptian Jews as saboteurs in Egypt against American and British diplomatic targets (in an attempt to embarrass the Egyptian government)—an episode that came to be known as "[The Lavon Affair](#)" (named after the Israeli Defense Minister Pinchas Lavon). To this day, many Israelis believe Lavon was turned into a patsy by security officials who were close to David Ben-Gurion and his advisors, Shimon Peres and Moshe Dayan.
- The shooting of Israeli Arab villagers in the Israeli community of Kafr Qassem during a hastily arranged war-time curfew during the 1956 war.
- The mishandling of immigration operations as well as the botching some anti-terror operations. One clear example was Israeli Army (IDF) malfeasance during the Qibya cross-border raid in 1953, in which many Jordanian civilians were killed, as well the

1968 Karameh Operation into Jordan against the [PLO](#) bases there.

Such failures were largely ignored or covered up, but, with the 1973 war, this leniency by media professionals would change.

VII. From and Enlisted Press to an Adversarial Press

Military correspondents need to get close to their subject in order to report on it, but sometimes military reporters can get too close. For example, many Israeli military reporters knew about the IDF's lack of readiness in 1973, but most decided not to write about the army neglect or mismanagement that led up to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war with Egypt and Syria. The war itself came to be known simply as *Ha-Mehdal* –the debacle.^[6] Many Israelis also refer to the war as the [Yom Kippur War](#), a reference to the Jewish Day of Atonement when the combat actually began. Some historians say that the loss of many lives in the [Yom Kippur War](#) of 1973 is partly due to the supine conduct of the Israeli press who heeded the Israeli military and governmental demand not to warn the public of the impending war.

The October [1973 war](#) became a milestone for Israeli media just as the 1973 Watergate scandal became a benchmark for the American press. Because of the war's tremendous casualties,^[7] the Israeli press largely threw off its cloak of hero worship and its “enlisted” status. It is fair to say that from this moment on, the Israeli press became more aggressive and more adversarial. As Yoram Peri writes, “The collective conclusion reached by journalists following the debacle was that one must not assume that leaders know better than ordinary citizens what is good for the country.” (Peri, p. 87) This new sentiment of the press would effect not only coverage of security affairs but even minute political and personal affairs that, until then, had been overlooked.

Soldiers returning from the 1973 war began protesting against what they saw as the incompetence and corruption of the government of Prime Minister [Golda Meir](#) and Defense Minister [Moshe Dayan](#). The small demonstrations began with a one-man protest by army reservist Moti Ashkenazi. They picked up momentum as they were covered on Israel television, with the soldiers calling for the government's resignation. Even though Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan had won re-election in December 1973, and even though a government-appointed commission of inquiry had cleared them of wrongdoing (while finding army officers derelict in their duties), the media-magnified demonstrations forced the resignations of both ministers. This was perhaps the first case of an Israeli press corps “speaking truth to power.”

Though the Meir administration resigned, it was the next administration that felt the full effects of an aggressive press corps. General [Yitzhak Rabin](#), a hero of the 1967 war, succeeded Golda Meir. Corruption by some of Rabin's cabinet ministers and Rabin's own violation of banking laws made his first term as prime minister something less than a triumphal tour. Rabin who, after the army, had served as Israel 's ambassador to the [United States](#), had not closed his dollar account in Washington upon returning to Israel. It is fair to say that in the pre-1973 days, the Israeli press would have looked the other way. After the Yom Kippur War, however, any day that a politician was suspected of corruption could become his personal day of judgment.

This tougher press coverage was instrumental in the “upheaval”—the [Likud](#) victory that ended twenty-nine years of [Labor Party](#) domination over Israeli politics. In a deeper sense, the coming to power of Menachem Begin and his more right-wing leanings actually gave the press motivation to solidify its role as “watchdog”. This is because many in the press, though few would admit it, had come of age with the Labor party. Several generations of Israeli media—reporters, editors and news presenters—were socialized with a view of it being only

natural that the country would be governed by Ben-Gurion and his successors. With the arrival of Begin—the ultimate outsider who had never been in power—it was even easier for the media to perform an adversarial role.

There were other reasons as well for the change in the spirit of the Israeli media. The sheen of war victories and the halo of the well-muscled Israeli bending the land, region and even the world to his will were suddenly fading. The option of actual peace-talks with [Arab](#) neighbors seemed more realistic to a growing number of Israelis who joined a movement known as *Shalom Akhshav*—Peace Now, which opposed continued Israeli settlement of land captured in the most recent wars. And so it was that Begin's political and military policies gained more press attention—both domestic and foreign—than any of the policies of his predecessors

Begin's military moves in Lebanon, for example—Operation Litani in 1978 and the [1982 Lebanon War](#)—were observed critically by the press: First the foreign press and then the Israeli press itself. The press attitudes towards the 1982 war in particular were strongly influenced by the man who led the war, Ariel Sharon, who tried to shut the press out of the war theater.^[8] For more than a week, the Israeli-based press corps was kept out of Lebanon, while the Beirut press corps, which was largely under the thumb of the PLO leader [Yasser Arafat](#), amplified Arafat's false claims of Israeli massacres of civilians throughout southern Lebanon.

[Ariel Sharon](#) and the Begin government were seriously hurt when a real massacre—in the Palestinian refugee camps of [Sabra and Shatila](#)—took place while Israeli forces were in control of the Lebanese capital. A huge protest in Tel Aviv's central square underscored the change in Israeli attitudes towards security lapses by Israeli leaders. Another Israeli commission of inquiry supported by a more critical press corps found that political leaders (particularly Sharon) as well as army commanders were indirectly responsible for this massacre committed by the Maronite Christian militia allies of Israel. Press attitudes against the Israeli government also hardened and the Editor's Committee broke down after the 1982 war.

A new but short-lived daily newspaper, *Hadashot* tested the government-press relationship again in 1986 when it published (without submitting for censor approval) a front-page picture showing Israeli security personnel ([Shin Bet](#)) escorting two Arab terrorists from a civilian bus hijacked two years earlier. The two men were among four Arab terrorists who had attempted to hijack the bus to the [Gaza Strip](#). When security forces stormed the bus, all four men were reported to have been killed. The *Hadashot* picture was proof of a two-year-long security cover-up of an "execution" of the terrorists without trial. Defense Minister [Moshe Arens](#) ordered the closure of the newspaper for several days because it ran a picture showing the faces of members of the Shin Bet counter-terror security service. Later the newspaper re-opened and eventually it was the head of the Shin Bet who was forced to resign, later to admit his guilt and to plead for clemency from Israeli President Chaim Herzog. Today there is little likelihood that the Israeli military censor would even have tried to block the picture for political reasons and probably would only have asked that the identities of agents be hidden.

The change in available technology and the change in political climate have both effected censorship decisions. The censor realizes that the average reporter has so many ways to move a story or a picture that unreasonable censorship requests will certainly be ignored. The military censor actually has the right and duty to censor several other kinds of material, but the lines are pretty clear and most reporters—including foreign correspondents—understand what the rules of the game are requiring censorship screening: troop movements, sizes of forces and descriptions of weapons, identities of secret officials, sensitive diplomatic

maneuvers, sensitive movements of immigrants from dangerous locations (e.g. [Ethiopia](#) or [Syria](#)), discussion of nuclear weapons, sources of Israel's oil supply and energy consumption.

In fact, prior restraints on press freedom in Israel over the last decade usually do not involve military censorship, but rather, other limitations such as court orders from criminal courts or family judges as well as pre-existing rules about not identifying victims of sex-crimes or identities of minors involved in crimes (Rosner and Davidowitz interviews).

VIII. The Arab and Russian Media Inside Israel

The two largest linguistic minorities in Israel, Russians and Arabs, do speak and read Hebrew, but many Arabic and Russian speakers prefer to interact with media in their native tongues. *Kol Yisrael* radio, for example, uses a teaser advertisement to coax Israeli advertisers to produce special commercials for its radio shows in Arabic and Russian. Radio is not the only media outlet chasing potential profit. In 1992, in response to another wave of massive [Russian immigration to Israel](#), *Yediot Aharonot* began its own *Vesti* (News) newspaper, which has become a major Russian-Israeli newspaper. In general, the Russian media in Israel tend to be patriotic and right-of-center on war-peace issues. There are more than 100 different periodicals and broadcasting outlets in the Russian language. They display an intellectual and economic vigor that is not generally seen in the Arabic press.

There are at least three main reasons for this. One is that the Arabic press, like most Arabs in Israel, distrusts or rejects [Zionism](#)—Jewish nationalism. Most Russian speakers identify with Jewish nationalism, even if many Russian speakers are not considered Jews according to the dictates of Jewish law (because the mother was not Jewish). The Russian immigrants identify politically and culturally with the national vision of [Israel](#) as a Jewish state. [Israel's Arabs](#) generally have not generally identified with Israel as Jewish, and Israeli officials have always been concerned that Israel's Arab minority might join forces with external Arab opponents of Israel. The Jewish-dominated government has therefore kept a close eye on the Arab press over the years. The second reason for the somewhat dwarfish size and influence of the Arabic press is that the Arab media developed very slowly in general for societal and cultural reasons, and in Palestine, a preponderant share of the journalist role was filled by Christian Arabs.

[Israel's Arab minority](#) has gone through two tremendous changes symbolized by the [1967 war](#) and the Palestinian-Israeli attritional conflict—known as [Intifada](#)—in 1987. The 1967 war spurred a Palestinianization of Israel's Arab minority, which today identifies itself as “Palestinian Israeli” [Hebrew: *Palestina'i Yisraeli*] rather than “Israeli Arab.” This term stresses the shared heritage Arabs in Israel, the [West Bank](#) and [Gaza](#). The dynamic for this change was that Israel's victory in the 1967 war also re-united Israel's Arabs with West Bank Palestinians and Gaza Palestinians, bridging old geographic and societal barriers and creating a kind of Palestinian critical mass. The second change, beginning roughly in 1987, showed a sharp rise in Islamic consciousness, particularly in Northern Israel. But this change is not yet completely reflected in the major newspapers in Arabic, partly because many of the Arab newspapers in Israel were started by Christian Arabs (who are a small minority—about two or three percent—within the Arab community) and by the Israeli Communist party. Other papers (e.g. *Al-Yom* (1948-1968) and *Al Anba* (1968-1980)) received Israeli government support or indirect aid through advertising funds.

In general, the Israeli Arab media community was more conservative in its views and expression than the community itself, due to heavy government monitoring of the Arab press. For example, from 1948 until 2000, the major radio and (later) television presence was Israeli state radio in Arabic and Channel One in Arabic, both of which were carefully run and supervised by Arabic-speaking Jews mostly from [Egypt](#) and [Iraq](#). Israeli Arabs could also

receive some broadcasts from [Jordan](#) and Egypt. Since 1995, Israel's Palestinian community has been exposed to the radio and television broadcasts of the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli Arab community has also gotten access by satellite dish to pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic-oriented broadcasts from the [Qatar](#)-based Al-Jazeera, [Lebanon](#)-based MBC and many others. One can say that the outreach of satellite television broadcasts increased the media options of Israel's Arab community, taking away viewers from locally-produced news programs.

In the print realm, meanwhile, the main newspapers sometimes experience a little irregularity in their schedules, but are generally published several times a week or once weekly, including *Al-Sinarah* (Lighthouse), *Panorama* and *Kul al-Arab* (All the Arabs).

IX. The Growth of Broadcasting and Internet

Beginning in the 1980's, general Israeli television and radio news broadcasts expanded, putting pressure on the newspaper industry which now had to compete with television for advertiser availability. The broadcasters were also expanding their time slots, further competing for the available attention of consumers. For example, state television began an afternoon news broadcast known as *Erev Hadash* (New Evening) which had major success. This pressure increased still further when the Israeli government enacted a broadcast reform opening up a new private television channel (known as *Arutz Shnayim* or Channel Two) in 1993. A second private channel, Channel Ten, was added five year later, though it has only been available to homes that have cable and digital technology.

Meanwhile, Israel 's rate of internet usage is among the highest in the world – a 74% penetration rate. This is higher than [Japan](#) and about the same as the [United States](#). It is roughly two or three times the rate of most of Israel's Arab and Islamic neighbors, including Iran. (De Argaez, www.internetworldstats.com)

X. The Expansion of Radio and Television Broadcasts

At the same time, local radio channels were made available in major city markets, together with the multi-channel broadcast of *Kol Yisrael* and the smaller but popular broadcasts of *Galei Tzahal* (IDF Army Radio). [Pre-State](#) broadcasts of what would become *Kol Yisrael* began in 1936 and dominated local airwaves for years. *Galei Tzahal* began 15 years later and it was largely military-focused, with very limited broadcast hours. It began to gain a larger audience in the 1960s as its tiny crew of young soldiers and civilian workers began attracting youthful listeners with spirited programming and innovations such as “The Red Telephone” for listeners to call in news that they have just witnessed. Today, many of the graduates of *Galei Tzahal* have become some of the best-known faces and voices in Israeli broadcasting. The station has produced a special "Galgalatz" service—a popular music—that has cut into *Kol Yisrael's* audience.

The new television channels have stepped up their own competition, broadcasting both morning and late-night news shows. This list of broadcasters has been supplemented by cable broadcasts of entertainment and news—CNN, FOX, Sky, BBC and even Al-Jazeera. This inundation of global media has led to the atomization of the Israeli market—the elimination of the national campfire. Whereas Haim Yavin's Channel One had ratings of nearly 90 percent in the 1970s, Channel One now has under ten percent in its evening news hour, with Channel Two holding a 22% share and Channel Ten at about 12 percent (Eilon interview).

To protect some of the Israeli newspapers from a loss of advertising, two of them—*Yediot Aharonot* and *Ma'ariv* were allowed to purchase partial stakes in the commercial television channels. There are signs, however, that despite these efforts, the pressure of market changes may cause the failure of *Ma'ariv* and Channel 10. The Israeli government and the [Knesset](#)

have been debating what steps to take either to save the floundering institutions—or to let them die. In addition, there is widespread criticism that the commercial television channels frequently use their news broadcasts to promote their own superficial entertainment programming, including fake news items about the station's reality television shows.

XI. The Models of the Israeli Press

So what kind of media does Israel have? Much of the media are privately owned and appear to be fiercely independent. This would seem to fit the model of a liberal democratic press according to the classical model (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm). As we have seen, the “enlisted press” of the 1950s became increasingly adversarial after the [1973 war](#), employing a more involved and interpretive and less neutral philosophy. This press has been increasingly critical of government policies even in the middle of wars, which is demonstrated by biting analyses of the handling of the [2006 Lebanon War](#) by the government of Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#). Indeed, some Israeli journalists themselves felt that many reporters went too far, actually endangering troops and civilians by revealing details of IDF military plans, discussing army tactics and locations on live television.^[9]

Beyond war and peace issues, journalists have become active on many social issues, leading vocal and continuing campaigns. Some are not really controversial – e.g. they are in favor of better roads, against mistreatment of women by estranged husbands or demanding changes in tax regulations to benefit certain minority groups. Other issues, however are quite divisive. Israeli journalists even at state-financed broadcast outlets such as Channel One and *Kol Yisrael* have led campaigns for Israeli withdrawals from [Lebanon \(1998-2000\)](#) and in favor of Israeli withdrawals from the [Gaza Strip \(2003-2005\)](#). Some journalists have gone so far as to cover up political scandals so as to promote their own causes: The former editor-in-chief of *Haaretz*, David Landau, has publicly stated that he and his colleagues deliberately soft-pedaled news about alleged corruption by Prime Minister [Ariel Sharon](#) for the greater good of supporting Israeli [removal of its settlers](#) from Gaza in 2005.

A similar stance was taken by other major journalists, including top commentators Nahum Barnea of *Yediot Aharonot* and Amnon Abramovitz of Channel 2, who referred to Prime Minister Sharon as an *etrog*—the biblical fruit citron that had to be guarded from blemish and damage. Indeed, Gal Beckerman in an article in *Columbia Journalism Review* showed that the Israeli media have come full circle and have reenlisted as backers of the withdrawal from [Gaza](#) (See Gal Beckerman, “Disengaged?” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 2005).

Editors at *Haaretz* have traditionally spoken of their need to publish in a way that prods the Israeli electorate to be inquisitive and not complacent about many issues, such as Israel's day-to-day treatment of the Palestinians (Levy Interview). This approach signals adherence to the “social-responsibility model” which Caspi and Limor believe is what best describes the Israeli media. Many other Israeli journalists have adopted a professional stance similar to the journalists at *Haaretz*.

In conclusion, we must confront a question: what model of the press do we now have in Israel? Like Peri, this author would argue that the Israeli media has moved away from the role of disinterested observers and towards active advocates and adversaries on many government policies, including the war and peace issues of Gaza, Lebanon and even the whole panoply of Israeli-Palestinian relations, especially the [Oslo Accords](#) and the peace-talks of 1993-1995.

Other academic researchers, who advocate a policy of “peace journalism,” disagree, asserting that the Israeli media have not done enough to further the cause of peace. Scholars such as

Gadi Wolfsfeld and Tamar Liebes,^[10] say that the Israeli media would prefer to report on sensational [terrorism](#) rather than hum-drum peace talks and that most Israeli journalists remain largely alarmist, knee-jerk-patriotic, anti-Arab and ethnocentric in their views. Essentially, therefore, the researchers advocating "peace journalism" are advocating a special form of the social responsibility model, urging the journalists to be socially responsible and to boost peace.

This is not the place to have a full discussion on the subject. However, perhaps the most socially responsible approach is to try to report the news fairly, without slanting or boosting specific policies or politicians. This might not lead quickly to peace, but it could help citizens decide that government policies are built on false assumptions and false hopes or on false confidence. Instead, we should hope that the Israeli media will carry out their crucial duty to inform citizens on all aspects of pressing issues, allowing a broad array of differing viewpoints. After six decades of statehood, it is still not easy to fit the Israeli media into any single model or category of political communication. It is fair to say that Israelis have grown more critical and less trusting of their media, disappointed with signs of prejudice and "pack journalism." Yet, Israelis are more satisfied with their media than [Americans](#), [Germans](#) or Scandinavians, for example. That is quite an achievement for media operating under extreme conditions for so long (Peri, 302).

Even Thomas Jefferson would be pleased because he would *not* have to choose between government and newspapers [as Israel](#) has a vibrant media community that provides so much more. As Eytan Gilboa has observed, "Today, the Israeli media includes [*sic*] four general daily newspapers, three daily financial newspapers, hundreds of local papers and magazines, three national television channels, popular cable and satellite services, two public radio networks, fourteen regional radio stations and thousands of websites and portals." (Gilboa, 2008)

For a country constantly at war while constantly trying to absorb diverse immigrants from around the world, that is great achievement.

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INTERVIEWS

Note on Interviews and Sources

Unless otherwise indicated, interviews conducted by Michael Widlanski. Some of the material collected or based on observations while author worked as reporter or editor for IDF Radio , Israel Television, The New York Times, The Cox Newspapers, The Jerusalem Post. Material in interviews at various periods 1998-2009, sometimes collected during class visits to newspapers, radio and television outlets.

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NOTES

[1] There are many examples, but a few will suffice. The *Shinui* Party, which had been a small party, put tv commentator Yosef "Tommy" Lapid at the top of its list, garnering an amazing 15 seats in the 2003 elections. In 2009, the National Religious Party (re-dubbed *Habayit Ha-Yehudi*) placed popular columnist Uri Orbach of *Yediot Aharonot* on its list, while *Meretz* placed Channel Ten reporter Nissan Horowitz on its list. The results were less than

spectacular, but it is clear that Israeli parties now look for celebrities, especially from the press corps, for their candidate lists. A fuller discussion of the use of celebrity politics, especially via television, can be found in Orit Galili-Zucker, *Politika Tikshorit Bat Zmaneinu, Helek Aleph* (Hebrew: Contemporary Communication Politics [Part 1]): Online Citizenship in an Era of a New Media) Tel Aviv University Press, 2008.

[2] Mr. Yavin was an Israeli institution because Israel had only one public television channel for 25 years. When he quit a few years ago, after the Israeli market had been opened to two private television channels, the public channel begged Mr. Yavin to return to his old anchor post, hoping for a ratings boost.

[3] Noah Kliger, a senior reporter for *Yediot Aharonot*, meeting with this author's communications class a few years ago, calculated that his newspaper had close to a million readers for its weekend edition. The entire population of Israel at the time was about six million people, more than 20 per cent of whom were not Hebrew speakers and with another 20% or more under the age of 21. That kind of readership in a national newspaper was unmatched, he said, anywhere in the Western world—equivalent to *The New York Times* selling 50 million copies in the United States or something like two million or three million copies only in the New York metropolitan area. More recent estimates for *Yediot* circulation have been a 600,000 Friday weekend edition, but this is a kind of response most American newspapers would envy.

[4] Erwin Frankel, *The Press and Politics in Israel*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994, p. 1.

[5] Interview with David Rubinger and other sources. Avneri was known as a maverick who was first a member of a right-wing underground group but who later became known for his dovish and left-wing political manifestos. A fuller discussion of Israeli security censorship and other forms of pre-publication limits on press freedom appear later in this article. [Note Avneri is sometimes found as "Avnery" in some sources.]

[6] The term in Hebrew suggests a self-induced catastrophe usually born of neglect or bad judgment.

[7] Close to 2,700 Israeli dead and about 8,000 wounded.

[8] The author covered the 1982 war as a war correspondent for IDF army radio, but references are also from friends and colleagues at *The New York Times*, where the author had previously worked, especially with Jerusalem Bureau Chief David K. Shipler and with NYT Beirut correspondents Tom Friedman and Ihsan Hijazi.

[9] A fuller discussion appears in a special issue the Hebrew language professional journalists' magazine *Ha-Ayin Ha-Shevi'it* (The Seventh Eye) with an issue entitled "*Makim Et Ha-Shaliah: Ha'Am Neged Ha-Tikshoret*" ("Hitting the Messenger: The People Against the Media"), Number 64, September 2006.

[10] See, for example, [Liebes, Tamar](#), *Reporting the Arab-Israeli Conflict: How Hegemony Works*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, as well as [Wolfsfeld, Gadi](#), *Constructing News About Peace: The Role of the Israeli Media in the Oslo Peace Process*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv UP, 1997, and [Wolfsfeld, Gadi](#), *Media and the Path to Peace*, Cambridge UP, 2004.

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