



Covering the Conflict:

Media Discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

A Geneva Initiative Policy Paper

December 2020

Covering the Conflict: How Media Discourse Conveys Information and Analysis to the Israeli Public on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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OVER THE PAST YEAR, Israeli media have focused their attention and efforts almost exclusively on the global coronavirus pandemic and the spread of the disease inside Israel. Imagine if the media diligently and comprehensively covered the stages of infection, symptoms of the disease and its toll on human lives but, at the same time, completely ignored the circumstances that enable the spread of the virus, ways of avoiding infection and the divergent views about the best way of defeating the disease. Such partial coverage would rightly be seen, at best, as a job half-done by the media, but could also be viewed as a breach of professional obligations and as a violation of public trust.

But this is precisely how the Israeli media has been covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent years.

The media chronicles disturbances and acts of violence but refrains from dealing with their background or reasons. It ignores the conflict and proposals for its solution and is only rarely interested in the viewpoints of the Palestinians or in the conduct of their day to day lives.

Reporters who cover Arab affairs, the occupied territories or foreign policy say there's been a sharp decline in the scope and depth of the Israeli media's coverage of the conflict in the wake of the Second Intifada (2000-2005). "For lack of public interest," as they put it.

This paper will analyze the challenges and obstacles facing Israeli journalists in their coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Palestinian society in general – and suggest various ways of overcoming them. The findings and recommendations are based on a thorough examination of current trends in the media as well as interviews with over twenty journalists and communication experts.

We hope the paper will contribute to a critical review of the way the media presents the conflict to the public, suggest new and novel remedies and thus encourage change. §

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OUR WORKING ASSUMPTION is that media coverage in Israel is not fundamentally different from the practice in other countries embroiled in national conflict. This entails, in essence, the adoption of narratives that bolster the justice of their side's cause while highlighting the other side's malicious character and sinister intent, as well as its exclusive responsibility for ongoing suffering and the lack of a solution.

One intriguing way of examining the Israeli media's coverage is by comparing it to the Palestinian media, as in a 2009 research carried out jointly by the Israeli Keshev and the Palestinian Miftah NGO's, entitled [*"Reading Between the Lines."*](#) The authors of the research assert, "This is how the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is covered by media outlets on both sides, often in mirror images, with each side presenting an opposite story."

The researchers assert that "The Palestinian media narrative emphasizes the occupation—and its Palestinian victims - and paints the government of Israel as belligerent, opposed to peace and responsible for violent events in the region. On the other side, Israeli media outlets emphasize the violent and terrorist origins of the Palestinians' conduct and their unwillingness or inability to reach a solution. The Israelis, in this telling, are the victims of a conflict in which they are not to blame."

"Beyond these different perceptions and interpretations of reality, essentially similar patterns of coverage can be found on both sides, which de-legitimize and dehumanize the other. These patterns of coverage heighten mutual suspicions in both nations, fan the flames of the conflict and make it harder to reach a solution," according to the researchers.

It is important to note that Israeli media also sustain constant and completely contrary criticism, which is shared by many. The critics claim that the media systematically highlights Palestinian casualties in order to spark sentiments of guilt and responsibility in Israeli society. Their assertion is that the Israeli press has an unambiguous political agenda, which aims to advance the Palestinians' national aspirations.

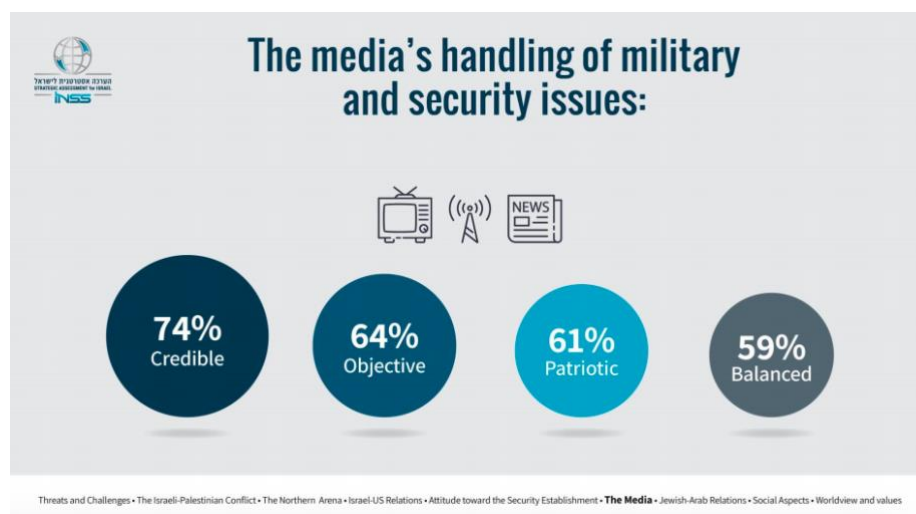
"The only thing that interests the media vis a vis the Palestinians is depicting them as suffering from Israeli injustices," according to Hanan Amiur, editor of Presspectiva, which focuses on right-wing criticism of ostensibly "leftist" media. "There will be an article about the new Palestinian city of Rawabi, but it will focus on how Israel is making life hard by blocking access roads, denying proper infrastructure and preventing the city from expanding in tandem with the Jewish settlements."



Article in "Sicha Mekomit" (Local Talk): "The City Square is Empty: Why Israel is trying to prevent the city of Rawabi from being built," 28/2/2015

This rising tide of criticism of the media, much of it inspired by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and others on the right, has precipitated a steep drop in public trust in the credibility of journalists in particular and of the media in general. News organizations, in television, radio, the printed press and the Internet, are often derided as “fake news” and “leftist mafia,” on the one hand, and ‘Bibiton’ and ‘mobilized media,’ on the other.

Nonetheless, and in apparent contradiction, a poll published last May by the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) found that the public actually gives the media high marks for its handling of national security issues. A clear majority (75%) believes the media’s reporting of defense-related issues is credible, that the media is objective (64%), patriotic (61%) and balanced (59%). In a similar poll carried out by INSS in 2015, only a negligible minority found it appropriate to rebuke the media for “presenting only the Israeli side, not explaining the factors that precipitate the terror attacks or not showing the Palestinian suffering.”



Results of the INSS poll

One can reasonably stipulate that the public’s positive view of media coverage of national security affairs stems first and foremost from Israel’s unique position as a society in ongoing and interminable conflict. Yizhar Beer has engaged in monitoring and analyzing media coverage of the conflict since founding the NGO Keshev over twenty years ago. His aim is to assist or encourage journalists who cover the conflict to pursue a deeper acquaintance with the other side and to acknowledge the built-in biases that influence their own reporting. Beer’s conclusion is that Israeli society lives in a mindset of eternal threat and danger and that, in this situation, the Israeli media’s ability or willingness to be open to the Palestinians’ viewpoint or to try and see reality through their eyes are necessarily limited.

Professor Daniel Bar-Tal, who specializes in the political psychology of societies in conflict, portrays Israelis as living with a sense of “collective victimhood” that makes them see their own suffering as unique and prevents them from acknowledging it on the other side. The sense of victimhood, Bartal says, nourishes negative sentiments toward the other side and can even produce “moral detachment and abuse of adversaries.”

Journalist Gal Gabai believes **“the media senses the wind like a weathervane and continues to preserve and protect the monolithic mainstream discourse.”** **“Even though we’re dealing with**

a complex situation with different points of view that should be presented,” Gabai adds, “the messaging is hardly complex. When you want to control the masses, on TV or in the polling booth, you speak simply.”



Journalist Gal Gabai

Most of the journalists we spoke to in preparing for this paper said the media could help alleviate the conflict or even solve it, if it would devote less attention to portraying Palestinians as victims of the Israeli regime and more to introducing the Israeli public to the variety and complexity of Palestinian society, as well as the changes it is undergoing. Not only were most of our interviewees keen to cover such human-interest, day-to-day stories; they are also convinced that the Israeli public would consume them avidly. This aspiration is shared by most of the journalists we spoke to, from left to right.

In practice, however, the Israeli press not only covers Palestinian society rarely, but also doesn't do enough in many cases to inform the public about violent events in the territories, which are, after all, under Israel's military control. The December 14 killing by the IDF of a 14-year-old Palestinian boy near Ramallah, for example, was not mentioned in any of the same evening's central news broadcasts. Channel 12 recounted the event a few days later, but only as part of a broader report on violent incidents in the territories.

“No one wants to dwell on the painful stories of occupation,” according to Jack Khoury, Arab affairs reporter for Haaretz. **Stories about the new city of Rawabi sound good but hardly reflect the situation of the Palestinians in the West Bank, never mind the two million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. One of the consequences of the Israeli media's disregard is that other than Palestinian Authority officials, most Palestinians have given up on the Israeli media. Collaboration has regressed and with it the belief that such collaboration could actually foment change.**

A MEDIA MARKET IN CRISIS

THE MEDIA'S APPROACH to events in the territories, however, is shaped not only by the attitudes of the editors and journalists who deal with them directly; it is also linked to the nature of the Israeli media in general and the crises it has been facing in recent years.

Dr. Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, Head of the Democracy in the Information Age Project at the Israeli Democracy Institute, says that the media market is suffering from three separate crises that are nonetheless interconnected.

The first crisis is the deteriorating economic viability of media organizations, mainly those privately-owned, precipitated by the rapid changes in technology. The second crisis is a consequence of the high concentration in the Israeli media market, which creates overlapping interests between the owners of various media groups and allows them to influence each other. The third crisis is the public's loss of trust in the media and the damage done to the profession of journalism itself.

The spread of the "clickbait" phenomenon, which derives from the economic imperative of increasing "ratings" at any cost, along with frequent layoffs and diminished wages, which have lowered the quality of working journalists, and of course continuous assaults by politicians – these are some of the main reasons for the ongoing deterioration in the public's trust in the media.

As journalist Raviv Drucker of Channel 13 said in a recent [interview](#) to the "Hottest Place in Hell" website: **"The media is weak, even in the mainstream. It is difficult for the media to take risks because it feels threatened and intimidated."**

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

MANY OF THE MEDIA PEOPLE we spoke to freely admitted that "there's no demand" for stories about Palestinians, the territories or efforts to solve the conflict or minimize friction. "It simply doesn't interest the public," they said.

In a commercially driven and competitive media market, especially during times of crisis, the profit line is the predominant consideration and the competition for the attention of consumers is the only game in town.

To ensure the viewer doesn't change channels, won't move to another website or won't stop buying the newspaper, news editors must constantly calculate what item is bound to grab attention, outshine the competition or provide a headline or a scandal.

The 2017 introduction of the late Sheldon Adelson's right-wing free daily newspaper "Yisrael Hayom," which quickly emerged as the newspaper with the largest circulation and the biggest share of the advertising market, sparked an escalation in the battle over consumers, which turned ever more desperate and cruel. The editors' need to obtain audiences regardless of costs compels them, even unconsciously, to prioritize the cheap sensation that delivers traffic over serious news items that don't entice consumers, and in the specific case of covering events in the territories, might even drive them away.

POLITICAL PRESSURES

THE FIERCE COMPETITION deepens the dependency of some media organizations, especially electronic media, on the government regulator: The inevitable outcome is prioritization of political considerations that might find favor with the appropriate government officials. Channel 10, for example, encountered financial difficulties and needed assistance from politicians in order to get over its debt.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the decline in media coverage of the Palestinians stems, inter alia, from a desire to curry favor with the Israeli government, which seeks to purge the matter from the public's agenda.

SOCIAL MEDIA

THE ADVENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA has sparked a revolution in the media and in the public's mindset, which has changed the way we consume news beyond recognition. Although most Israelis assert that television exerts the most influence on their view of national security issues, its past predominance is gradually giving way to social media and online journalism.

In 2015, for example, 15% of the public described social media as having the most influence, by 2018 the figure had climbed to 23%, (according to a [study conducted by the INSS](#)) and is likely to be even higher today.

News organizations today are compelled to disseminate information through online channels, although the standards of journalistic editing on social media are vastly different – and many would say inferior – to what was customary in both print and broadcast outlets.

Social media has changed the way journalists work; it has given them, among other things, the ability to reach consumers directly with no mediation involved. Twitter, for example, has become the main platform in Israel for journalists, politicians and other groups, not only for conveying information but for efforts to influence public discourse as well.

The advent of social media gives journalists a direct line to information, including news reports as well as audio and video clips, and is thus changing the very essence of journalistic practice. Reporters covering the territories, for example, who were obligated in the past to venture into the field and to be physically present at the scene of an event in order to interview witnesses and report on it, are increasingly making do with compiling news reports from the Internet or by contacting potential witnesses and sources directly through social media.

On the one hand, the Internet exposes journalists to information, opinions and worldviews that were inaccessible to them in the past; on the other hand, social media might also steer journalists towards groupthink, to more simplistic and one-dimensional views and to escalating public uproars in the wake of violence and other security-related events in which Palestinians are involved.

INDEPENDENT AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

THE LOSS OF MARKET DOMINANCE by the established media has paved the way for the growth of independent and alternative journalistic initiatives. Their ambitions are to correct the failures or to fill the vacuums left by mainstream media outlets and, while doing so, to expose what goes on behind the media's closed doors as well as the identity of external forces that use the media as a proxy to pursue their own interests.

The best of these new initiatives is free of internal censorship and editorial biases and provide a platform for narratives that are mostly absent from the current establishment media, although most of them also have an ideological/political agenda.

Increasingly, reports and exposés that originate with independent media are finding their way to commercial outlets. In this context one should mention independent news sites such as Social TV, 404, DemocratTV and Sicha Mekomit (Local Talk); independent investigative sites such as Hottest Place in Hell, Shakuf (Transparent) or Shomrim (The Center for Media and Democracy); sites that serve as watchdogs over the media, including The Seventh Eye, Presspectiva and Memri; as well as initiatives that deal with original production, or with translating news materials and making them accessible to the public, such as Ofek, a joint project of Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem and the Forum for Regional Thinking.



Lucy Aharish on DemocratTV

To conclude this section, one can state that the forces and convulsions that impact the Israeli press and media, including financial distress and political pressures, could limit journalists' freedom of action and deter them from covering important issues that might not stimulate the public, including the conflict and occupation.

On the other hand, the travails of the mainstream media are spurring the formation of alternative independent platforms with agendas that are not exclusively driven by commercial considerations. These platforms could potentially fill some of the glaring gaps that have developed in the coverage of the mainstream media and, with time, deepen, broaden and shape the entire public discourse.

THEY ARE THERE AND WE ARE HERE

IN ADDITION to the industry-wide shake-up in the media, one must also factor in recent developments in relations between Israelis and Palestinians. The permit regime in the West Bank, the construction of the Separation Wall, the public's fatigue and alienation - all of these and more have distanced Palestinians from Israelis and their awareness, certainly in comparison to interactions in the past, as in "out of sight - out of mind."

The public's emotional detachment also plays a role in the dwindling press coverage, creating a vicious cycle that ultimately leads to almost total disregard for what is happening "beyond the fence," which is what happened in recent years with regard to the Gaza Strip after the 2005

Disengagement. The Israelis' alienation and indifference foster a public attitude that what happens in the territories does not affect their lives and that they have no influence over - and are certainly not responsible for - what happens in the territories.

"It's very sad and is mainly felt in the generation after the Oslo Accords, of which I am a part, that never knew the concepts of coexistence that accompanied the agreements and has supposedly lived forever with the two populations separated. We are the generation following the one that went to the casino in Jericho or shopping in Kalkilya, with the wall and the permits cementing a reality of genuine disconnection. In my eyes, this is probably the most difficult obstacle, before we get down to actual politics." (Hagar Sheizaf, territories reporter for Ha'aretz, from a July, 2020 [interview with the Seventh Eye](#)).



Hisham Abdelraziq, a Gaza resident and former Palestinian minister, in a meeting with Israeli journalists organized by the Geneva Initiative

PALESTINIANS ARE A SECURITY ISSUE

WHEN WE ASKED one interviewee whether she would consider hosting Palestinians regularly on her show to recount anecdotes about their daily lives, she replied that it would be unprofessional of her to interview Palestinians from the territories without asking them about their leaders, the conflict and their positions on its resolution. The representation of Palestinian interviewees, it seems, is viewed first and foremost through the prism of nationality.

Palestinian content reaches the Israeli news consumer mainly in connection with the conflict and security matters. Even during the past year, when the media has been totally invested in COVID-19, its Palestinian angle on the story was the risk to the Israeli public of infection. The Palestinian Authority's performance in fighting the pandemic was barely mentioned, in contrast to the wide coverage the media regularly devotes to countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

DECLINE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST ISRAELIS

WHATEVER THE REASONS, the rate of Israeli casualties at the hands of Palestinians has declined dramatically in recent years, along with the number of violent incidents, certainly inside Israel. The regrettable but understandable truth is that there is a direct link between increases in violence and the expansion of news coverage.

This link was evident in 2015-2016, when a long line of stabbing and other violent incidents, mainly in Jerusalem, were accorded main headlines along with extended daily coverage. During this period, the media devoted time and efforts to reporting on life in East Jerusalem, incitement on both sides, crimes of hate and more.

Journalists who cover events on the Palestinian side told us, however, that after the Second Intifada there's been a sharp decline in the scope of reporting about Palestinians. During the years of violence until 2005, Palestinians would "open newscasts," were given abundant screen time and were mentioned in every news show and bulletin. They occupied a prominent place in the Israeli public's discourse and their voices were heard in other contexts as well.

"The Israeli public peers at Palestinians from only one angle, which is the security angle," according to Haaretz's Jacki Khouri. **"This is why Hamas gets more coverage in the wake of rocket attacks from Gaza. As long as Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) doesn't call for violence, national struggle, terror or any other move that tickles the fancy of the Israeli media, this is the way it is."**

PALESTINIANS ARE LESS RELEVANT IN THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ARENAS

THERE ARE MYRIAD reasons why the "Palestinian problem" has receded from its centrality on the international stage. On the global level one should mention the American retreat from the Middle East, the Arab Spring, the regional wars and their ensuing refugee crises, economic hardships and more. All of these factors diverted international attention away from the plight of Palestinians. They do not have a central role to play in the issues that have come to dominate the Middle East in recent years, chiefly the hegemonic ambitions of Turkey and Iran.

Divisions among the Palestinian leadership have also contributed to their sidelining, in addition to the intentional and largely successful Israeli effort to circumvent and isolate them: One of the main objectives of the Abraham Accords secured by the Trump administration was to undercut the widely accepted axiom by which Palestinians are "the crux" of the Arab-Israeli conflict and that a diplomatic breakthrough between Israel and Palestinians is a prerequisite for normalization between Israel and Arab countries. This target was undoubtedly secured, at least partially.

POLITICAL DEADLOCK

OFFICIAL TIES between Israel and the Palestinians have been frozen for a long time, with no diplomatic process and no dialogue between the two sides. Their leaders have served in office for many years (the Palestinian Authority has not held elections since 2006. although Abbas has

called for a presidential ballot in July) and there is a distinct dearth of formidable personalities at their side who are offering any alternative to the current deadlock. This static reality makes it difficult for journalists to drum up newsworthy reports. There is nothing new to say and there's nothing to report, journalists tell us.

"I am dying to report about a significant inter-Palestinian development," says journalist Avi Issacharoff, who has been covering the territories for many years. **"Nothing is happening. Everything is stuck. Economic distress in Gaza? We've reported it so many times, no one is interested in hearing about it anymore."**

A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

CONVERSATIONS WITH MEDIA personalities on both sides lead to the conclusion that many Palestinians feel they cannot trust Israeli media and journalists. Most don't believe reports in the Israeli media will help alleviate the Palestinian plight. Many are wary of journalists for fear they are functioning as forward outposts of the defense establishment. Indeed, many of the Jewish journalists from Israel became proficient in Arabic in the army in positions tasked with gathering intelligence about Arabs, communicating with them in times of friction and controlling them. Many of these journalists can be called up for reserve duty at any time to perform the same tasks. Many Palestinians fear that media documentation will assist the Israeli security forces, for example, to identify Palestinian protestors.

ANTI-NORMALIZATION AND BOYCOTT

IN ADDITION to the factors mentioned above, the ability of Israeli journalists to gain access to events and personalities in the territories has been significantly curtailed in recent years because of public calls - originating with Palestinian elites, including journalists - to refrain from contact with Israelis. The protest is aimed against the freedom of action and movement accorded Israeli journalists in the West Bank; it is expressed in boycotts against anyone who agrees to be interviewed by the Israeli media or collaborates with them.

Thus, Israeli journalists are finding it increasingly difficult to enter Area A, which is under Palestinian control. Arab or Palestinian journalists who work for Israeli media have said they are victims of the same protest, but to a lesser degree.

"Israeli journalists are one of the last bridges remaining, but it hardly exists anymore," according to source who asked to remain anonymous. He recounted a colleague who had broadcast **"a beautiful report about flourishing hotels and restaurants in the territories, with night life and cultural events and so on,"** but anyone who appeared in the report was subjected to a concerted campaign, including calls for them to be boycotted. The source told of a news report in which a cafe owner in the southern West Bank **"said wonderful things about peace";** the next day, his car was shot up.

"Anyone who collaborates with Israelis, particularly with the Israeli media, sparks an atmosphere of a lynching in broad daylight," the source said. He cited a colleague who told him that **"bridges are one of the first things that get bombed in a war."**

ביטחוני

דיווח: בקבוק תבערה הושלך למסעדה ברמאללה שאירחה כתבים ישראלים

הכתבים מכלי התקשורת השונים נפגשו עם שר הדתות הפלסטיני ושוחחו עמו על אודות הסכסוך המדיני. ככל הנראה פלסטינים שזעמו על אירוח הישראלים השליכו במהלך הלילה את בקבוק התבערה לעבר המסעדה שאירחה את האירוע

נאום אברהמים | N12 | פורסם 17/02/20 10:12

Report on N12 about an attack on a restaurant in Ramallah that hosted Israeli journalists, Feb. 17, 2020

FRAYING OF TIES BETWEEN ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN JOURNALISTS

JOURNALISTS often work in collaboration, exchanging information and thus often improving the quality of their reporting from the field. Ties between Israeli and Palestinian journalists, however, have been strained for many years, in personal as well as formal arenas. The Palestinian Journalists Syndicate (PJS), moreover, officially boycotts and prohibits any contact with Israeli journalists in any forum, including international gatherings.

One must remember, however, that there is a distinct asymmetry between the two sides. Israeli journalists can report from inside the West Bank while their Palestinian counterparts are prohibited from entering Israel. And while the Palestinian Authority condemns acts of violence against Israeli journalists during Palestinian protests, Israel places Palestinian journalists in administrative detention and frequently holds them for many months without bringing them to trial.

Israel also constrains the Palestinian media's ability to function, often shutting down radio stations and confiscating communications equipment, supposedly for security reasons. The Palestinian Authority, for its part, whittles away at freedom of the press on a regular basis and even arrests Palestinian journalists for making remarks it finds unsuitable. In Israel, full freedom of the press is guaranteed, at least formally.

After the renewal of an Israeli directive forbidding Palestinian TV from entering Israel, the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate issued a condemnation in which it stated: "We ask all political organizations and government offices as well as Palestinian leaders to stop giving interviews to the Israeli media, who are accomplices to this crime and serve as an instrument of occupation, trying to whitewash Israel's reputation in the eyes of the world and to distort the picture of the Palestinians and their struggle for liberation and independence."

The Palestinian press group also called on the United Nations Security Council to investigate what it described as Israel's crimes against Palestinian journalists and to implement Resolution 2222 on the Protection of Journalists in conflict zones.

“About a year ago I was in Paris to participate in a convention of Reporters Without Borders, on the Africa-Middle East desk,” recounts Oren Persico of the Seventh Eye. “The Palestinian from Ramallah didn’t want to talk to me at all, despite French efforts to persuade her otherwise. But it didn’t surprise me. There is a big imbalance in the attitude of the army towards them and hardly any solidarity with the price they pay. The Israeli Union of Journalists once hosted an evening seminar about Palestinian journalists being held in Israeli jails on administrative detention. About four people attended.”



A Haaretz article on 26/7/2013: “Palestinian journalists demand equality on borders of coverage”

But whether it is the “natural” tendency of Israeli media to reflect the central national narrative and to participate in safeguarding it or the hardships and failures of the media market, the political circumstances of diplomatic deadlock and ongoing military occupation - or all of the above - there can be no doubt that changing the dynamics of coverage in such times presents an enormous challenge.

How does one encourage open and instructive coverage that gives voice to the other side? How does one locate the cracks in the wall through which the Israeli media can be motivated to tell more of the other side’s story, to learn more, to get better acquainted?

RECOMMENDATIONS

“As soon as something reappears in the discourse, this already gives it legitimacy. Right now, there is no legitimacy to talk about anything.” Nurit Canetti, Army Radio

In this portion we will present a list of specific recommendations for media professionals - and consumers - aimed at improving the coverage of the conflict and of the Palestinian neighbor. These suggestions are meant to encourage a more complex view of the conflict while nurturing dialogue, a moderation of the conflict and a public appetite to see it solved. In an era in which the media is attacked for not being sufficiently patriotic, or for being politically biased, it may be appropriate to elaborate on why the changes in media coverage that we are seeking are necessary, if not crucial.

As the stronger side that is in control, Israelis are administratively, legally and morally responsible for lives beyond the Green Line, both Jewish and non-Jewish. This responsibility

obligates the public as well as the decision-makers to stay knowledgeable about events in the territories, in all their aspects.

Over the years, Israelis and Palestinians have become mutually dependent: What happens in the territories impacts Israeli security, including its foreign policy, economy, environment et al. The news coverage is supposed to help us to better contend with reality, to learn, comprehend and identify trends, all of which can only contribute to making better decisions. For example, if the coronavirus data from the West Bank is distorted because residents are wary of being tested or can't afford to, this is vital information that one should be aware of.

The Israeli media is capable of driving historic political development. It can help Israelis understand what they lose and what they gain from the ongoing occupation. Only in this way will the public be able to formulate informed decisions and to demand that decision makers do the same.

According to columnist Rami Livni, **"If any attention is paid to the Palestinians, it evolves around humanitarian issues and focuses on the question of Israeli responsibility or guilt for things that happen. There is no discussion of diplomacy. The assumption that an agreement is currently unattainable has percolated even into *Haaretz*. The classic constructive approach doesn't exist anywhere today. In an ideal world, the press should have kept up the pressure to negotiate, to constantly monitor the feasibility. To question [U.S. President Joe] Biden and to write about the possible need to initiate contact the U.S. on these matters. To return over and over again to Camp David, to Taba etc. and to show what exactly happened there."**

Finally, the commercial hurdles are not totally insurmountable either. One can produce coverage that will also sell. 'Soft' coverage of Palestinian life, for example, will show Israelis that beyond what they see as "the mountains of darkness" there are more than just "Arab terrorists running after coffins in funerals."

Another avenue is personal and emotional coverage that will focus on predicaments and help nurture human emotional connections. For example, a report by Hezi Simantov on Channel 13 about leg amputees who had been injured by the army's direct fire on legs of demonstrators near the Gaza fence, resonated far and wide. The entertaining and certainly the emotional have the potential to be popular. Such content could be enjoyable and enriching and at the same time open Israeli minds to differing and different perspectives.



Hezi Simantov on Channel 13

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE ROLE and the performance of the media are of critical importance to any society and at any time. Studies show that in times of crisis and conflict, the media provides an answer to the needs of society: cognitive, emotional, spatial and escapist. The media presents information and analysis about events, alleviates anxieties and fears, contributes to defusing tensions, to encouragement, to consolation and to overarching needs such as ensuring stability, strengthening solidarity and bolstering a sense of social unity.

Israeli society, which views the conflict with the Palestinians as a zero-sum game and which lives with a sense of constant crisis, threat and uncertainty, inevitably poses frequent challenges and dilemmas for the media. Media professionals are being asked to make decisions that go to the very heart of their profession - Will their reports exacerbate a crisis or rather calm it and contribute to its abatement? Should one write in a way that would bolster confidence in leaders or rather criticize them for mismanaging the crisis? Should the media foster national agreement and contribute to the country's cohesiveness or should they present disputed facts that could spark public enmity?

At this juncture, one must note the media's tendency to highlight negative news, a characteristic identified in the mid 1960's by Norwegian Professor Johan Galtung together with Mari Holombe Ruge in their seminal [article](#) The Structure of Foreign News. The researchers defined four principal characteristics of an event that is considered newsworthy: The prominence of the locale and of the personality in question, that the event is an action and not a process - and that it has a negative connotation.

The less a place or person is prominent, the more negative the aspects of the event in which they are involved have to be for them to be deemed newsworthy. In our context, there is a noticeable gap between the meager coverage accorded acts of violence such as uprooting of Palestinian-owned olive trees, spray-painting of hateful slogans in Palestinian villages by Jewish settlers or the torments endured by Palestinian children on their way to school – and the homicidal torching of a Palestinian family in their home.

The unending conflict has made Israelis oblivious to news that isn't "bad" enough. The death of a 14-year-old boy during a protest in his village, which included stone-throwing, is not considered important enough to merit a slot on the evening's main news broadcasts.



Report of a Palestinian boy killed in a demonstration on page 10 of Maariv, 6/12/2020

Understanding the constraints and limitations under which Israeli journalists operate and drawing from the discussions we held with media professionals in preparation for writing this paper, we offer a modest list of recommendations that might encourage the media to take a more active role in moderating the conflict and in advancing efforts for its solution.

EDITORIAL DECISIONS

EVERY NEWS ORGANIZATION decides on its own guiding principles, priorities, framing and rules of conduct. Editorial guidelines are necessary, of course, as long as they don't cross red lines such as silencing, concealment or cover up of corruption, don't meet professional standards or are in violation of ethical guidelines.

While acknowledging that commercial considerations, exposure and ratings are legitimate if not decisive factors and without detracting from their essentiality, we propose that editorial teams employ additional criteria when deciding on the agenda they offer, its framing and its presentation to the public.

One such criterion might be the distinction between what is interesting and what is important, between what is immediate and what has long term ramifications, between reports that are based on "our" sources and those that rely on "theirs."

Editors might decide on certain topics that will be routinely covered or on recurring features about different aspects of Palestinian lives. For example, following the personal story of a Palestinian family or dissecting the disparate ways in which a certain topic is covered in the Israeli and Palestinian media.

Another editorial line could encourage publications about existing dialogue between the two sides or about discussions aimed at ending the conflict and occupation. One might decide that in any appropriate interview with a political leader, at least one question dealing with the Palestinian issue will be posed.

Another option would be an editorial commitment to covering not only the hardships in Gaza, but what residents are doing to overcome them. Often, the authentic voices from the field can surprise even the journalist who is hearing them, never mind the public at large. Often, too, there is no compatibility between the voices emanating from the street and what the Israeli peace camp would prefer to hear. In any case, it is always worthwhile hearing the voices of the Palestinian public, and not just those of its leaders.

"I took a lot of criticism for Zvika [Yehezkel]'s report on the annexation as seen through Palestinian eyes," says Lior Landberg, former news editor at Channel 13. **"He showed something that many Israelis, especially on the right, expect to hear. Leftists didn't like the report. On the other hand, the questions are genuine - and these are their answers."**



Channel 13 News report: "In the Eyes of the Palestinians: What do they think about the annexation in the territories?"

TRANSLATIONS

THE MEDIA should allot more space for publishing materials translated from Arabic to Hebrew, whether these are original reports or adaptations that appeared in the Palestinian press, social media or think tanks as well as translations of opinion pieces, investigative reports, long form features and so forth. Such translated materials are more suitable for online publications, where the variety of channels and consumers enables it. It's crucial, of course, that the translations and editing of such articles will make them accessible to the Israeli consumer. Analysis and elucidation could be added to explain backgrounds and connotations that might not be clear to the Israeli consumer as well as creating fixed formats that are not dependent on the other side's collaboration in order to overcome the boycotts.

One example of an organization that has tackled the dilemmas of translation, from copyright to contextualization, is the Ofek Project, an initiative of the Forum for Regional Thinking and the Van Leer Institute. The project gives Hebrew readers access to a variety of content from Arabic-language news sites, magazines, think tanks and periodicals.

CONTACTS BETWEEN JOURNALISTS

RECENT YEARS have seen a decline in the scope of meetings between Israeli and Palestinian journalists, which took place in the past in and outside the region, in joint delegations with other journalists, in professional or social settings or both. Media professionals who took part in such gatherings told us they had a profound impact on them and that ties with journalists "on the other side" turned out to be crucial for their work.

Even if there is some validity to the claim that such meetings don't necessarily strengthen the forces of peace, they do contribute to a deeper understanding of the other side and to a wider range of views and opinions on both ends. Such gatherings, of course, also increase the potential for mutual professional collaboration.



A seminar for Israeli and Palestinian journalists organized by the Geneva Initiative in 2019

SOLIDARITY AMONG JOURNALISTS

AS COLLEAGUES in the profession of journalism and as journalists who value their profession, it is incumbent on Israeli journalists to acknowledge the limitations placed on Palestinian journalists by both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. They are duty bound to raise their voices against the curtailment of Palestinian freedom of the press and freedom of movement. Such a protest would help to counter the anti-normalization and boycott campaigns against Israeli media and might also alleviate the frustration felt by many Palestinian journalists about their ability - or lack thereof - to impact reality.

Concurrently, Palestinian journalists must also be held responsible and should be urged to fight for what they deem important, in collaboration with their supporters on the Israeli side.

In the words of Kholod Massalha, General Manager of I'lam, the Arab Center for Media Freedom Development and Research: "The Palestinian broadcasting service is forbidden from working inside Israel, but the Iranian is allowed. This is absurd. There are three professional unions in Israel; journalists should protect all journalists."

REPORTERS IN THE TERRITORIES

THE ISRAELI MEDIA has almost no reporters covering Palestinian society on the ground, beyond the Green Line, unlike the correspondent in the United States, for example, who resides in and broadcasts from Washington or New York. An exception to this rule is Haaretz's Amira Hass.

For a news report to be both good and accurate, one that succeeds in illuminating numerous angles on a topic, it requires physical presence at the scene, conversations with people and consistent day to day engagement with the conditions of life in the area being covered. Jewish Israeli citizens, however, are prohibited by law from entering certain areas in the West Bank, mainly Area A, and certainly can't reside in them, which creates another obstacle. One way to overcome it is to work with foreign journalists who are capable of reporting in Hebrew but also with Palestinian journalists or Israeli Arabs, who are permitted to reside in the territories and enjoy much greater freedom of movement.

MORE ARAB REPORTERS

JOURNALISTS who are Israeli-Arab (or Palestinians who are citizens of Israel) are fluent in both languages and familiar with both worlds, the Israeli-Jewish and the Arab. It is easier for them to connect with Palestinian sources. Their presence in the field can provide the Israeli news consumer with a different kind of story and expose him to different kinds of views.

There are numerous obstacles, however, in the way of employing Arab journalists. Editors told us that the Israeli public does not find news reports about the conflict that come from Arab sources to be credible. Some of the main paths to acquiring skills in the media industry - such as military service in IDF Radio - are not practical for Arabs (who don't serve in the army). On the other end, researchers told us that there is very little demand among Israeli Arabs for communication studies in the universities.

Despite and perhaps because of the existing obstacles, news organizations in Israel can and should make the effort to employ more Israeli Arabs and Palestinians from East Jerusalem. They can actively approach universities in an effort to recruit Arab students, give them professional training and deploy them as proper journalists. At the same time, editors should make more of an effort to also recruit Arab columnists and experts.

"I do not encounter rejection," says Jacki Khouri of Haaretz and Radio a-Shams. *"People collaborate with me because I cover Palestinians for Haaretz and Radio a-Shams. They look at me differently. I don't come with the same kind of Arabic as undercover soldiers or those in army intelligence. I present the Palestinian story, not the Palestinian story in the eyes of the average Jewish Israeli."*

INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

THE ISRAELI PRESS suffers from a dearth of resources for investigative journalism, which means there are few exposés and no more than a handful of investigative journalists. The risks entailed in publishing controversial investigative reports, including public protest and the threat of litigation, induces editors to steer their probes in the direction of "easy targets" that won't spark dispute. It is possible, however, that independent investigative journalism can fill at least part of the void, provided it is based on genuine journalism that will appeal to consumers.

In the context of the conflict, such independent investigative reporting can be done in collaboration between journalists on both sides and to thus contribute to the depth of the report and to the honing of professional skills in covering relations between Israelis and Palestinians. Such investigative reports could also cover domestic Palestinian affairs or run comparisons between the parties to the conflict on issues such as incitement in the education system and more.

CREATE GOOD STORIES ON DIFFERENT PLATFORMS

JOURNALISTS attest to expanding collaboration efforts between independent and commercial news outlets and to a steady increase in the frequency of reports that originate with the

independent press appearing in the mainstream media. Of course, it all depends on the newsworthiness of the story, in the public interest it sparks and whether it includes reporting from the scene and cites sources, facts and evidence that have not appeared elsewhere.

A pertinent example is the infamous incident at the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran in the Negev, in which two people were killed. Photographer Keren Manor was at the scene on January 18, 2017 when massive police forces arrived in order to carry out demolitions of structures deemed illegal. Manor's recording of events in real time, first published in Sicha Mekomit (Local Talk), was not only the source for reports in other media, but it also totally transformed the initial narrative, which had been based on the first statements put out by police.



Sicha Mekomit, Jan. 18, 2017

ACCESS

JOURNALISTS who cover events in the territories are a crucial target audience for anyone dissatisfied with the status quo in relations between Israelis and Palestinians. The sidelining of the conflict has, however, eroded much of their previous standing. This should in no way deter organizations, NGOs, PR and media advisers as well as ordinary citizens who seek to change the status quo to reach out to the appropriate journalists. What is needed is to adapt one's *modus operandi* to the evolving reality.

One of the time-tested methods for changing attitudes and even prejudices is through field excursions for journalists; these provide important exposure, especially when journalists are taken to places that might otherwise be inaccessible to them. One can arrange tours that include meetings with potential interviewees as well as other professionals and which could lay the groundwork for future collaboration.

It is critical to stay in touch with the journalists after the tour has ended and to supply them with written material, still photographs and video clips and, in short, to make a concerted effort to pique their curiosity.

Journalists we spoke to told us that meetings with people perceived as being “similar to me” - dissenters, social activists, businesspeople, peace advocates and others - have great potential to influence and change attitudes. This contrasts with officials, including senior politicians, mayors and religious leaders, who are more cautious by nature and more likely to be deterred by public pressure not to cooperate with Israelis.

“I wanted to deal with the shooting of the 13-year-old boy, but I didn’t have the means,” Nurit Canetti of IDF Radio recounts. “I wanted to interview someone, but I didn’t have a member of the family but rather an activist who had participated in the demonstration. I need someone who will describe the situation, not someone who will say that the Israeli army is an occupier. Never mind that some don’t speak Hebrew, and some won’t speak to army radio.”

Jackie Khouri adds, in relation to the same incident, that in the internet forums of Palestinian journalists he follows, “There was nothing, not even a telephone number. It’s a type of apathy. No one takes the trouble to supply journalists with contact details, an autopsy report, nothing. A proper Palestinian PR apparatus would make every place accessible to journalists.... those that are trying to do something are constrained by a lack of resources and by mismanagement.”

Indeed, responsibility for the situation lies with the Palestinian side as well. Israeli journalists complain of growing obstacles to visiting the areas they cover, the expanding phenomenon of refusals to be interviewed and even of colleagues who are waging personal campaigns against them, which literally endanger their lives. There have also been cases of violent attacks against Israeli journalists in demonstrations and other incidents.

STOP THE BOYCOTT, EXPAND COLLABORATION

THE OPPOSITION to normalization and the calls for boycott hamper the Israeli media’s ability to convey the Palestinian story to the Israeli public, the necessity of which is even greater in times of waning interest in the Palestinian issue, as mentioned above, especially in the decade that has passed since the Arab Spring.

Palestinians can certainly distinguish between journalists or media bodies before selecting the more credible ones to work with. But a blanket boycott of media organizations and of journalists - and worse, intimidating and threatening them - undermines the Palestinian own interest to expose their predicament and to demand relief. In this regard, it’s hard to expect Israeli journalists to show solidarity with professional counterparts who wage personal campaigns against them.

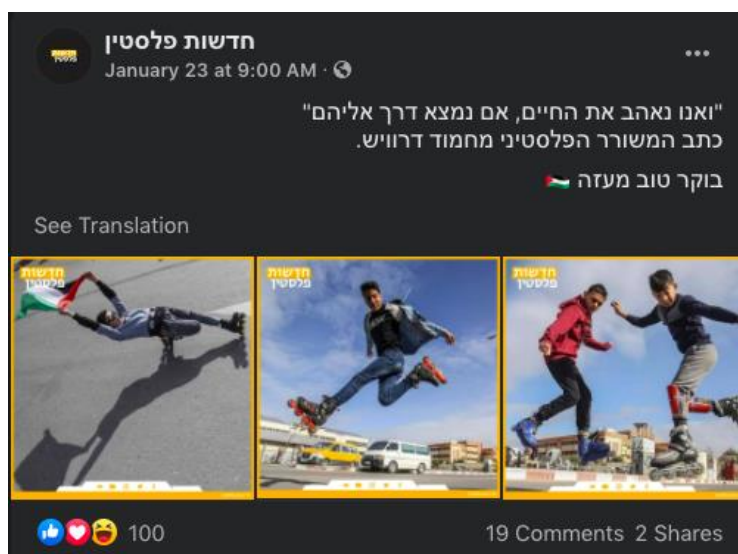
REACH ISRAELIS DIRECTLY

IN LATE 2012, the Palestinian Authority established “The Palestine Liberation Organization’s Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society.” Three years later, the Committee launched a Facebook page dubbed “Palestine in Hebrew” in which official positions of the Palestinian leadership are detailed.



Until now the Committee's main function has been to serve as a conduit for Israelis wishing to make contact with the Palestinian leadership. The Committee assists in coordinating visits to the Palestinian Authority, hosts Israeli delegations and distributes material in Hebrew, as on Facebook. Its members sometimes come to Israel to address various audiences, although most hail from the ranks of those who already support dialogue with the neighbors.

We strongly recommend doubling and tripling these outreach efforts, both officially and in the civilian realm. Mainly, one must utilize social media to convey the views of the Palestinian public to the Israeli public. This can be done via the Twitter accounts of Palestinians who communicate in Hebrew, in podcasts, Internet radio, YouTube and the like.



SPEAK HEBREW

ANOTHER PROJECT that could be undertaken officially or independently is the creation of Palestinian media bodies that communicate in Hebrew. Unlike the preceding recommendation, however, the intention here shouldn't be to speak directly to the Israeli public but rather to show Hebrew speakers how things look and how they are depicted on the other side. It can be an independent television station built along the lines of I-24 News, which broadcasts in English, French and Arabic or, more modestly, a single program in Hebrew which is aired on a national or commercial station that usually broadcasts in Arabic. One might also consider a news agency that would produce independent content.

In order to achieve these aims, it will of course be necessary to recruit Hebrew-speaking Palestinians who are proficient in the daily and contemporary vernacular.

CONCLUSION

IN THIS PAPER we ask that the Israeli media act to a certain degree against the basic instinct of any society in a state of conflict, including Israeli society. We have been brought up to believe it's either us or them, as if acknowledging their pain means we are alienated from our own, and that if they are right, then we are absolutely wrong. We are conditioned to see the enemy as a demon and any empathy we may feel exposes and endangers us.

Beyond this built-in obstacle, we have detailed the extraordinary predicaments of the present, which are largely responsible for the Israeli media's diminishing coverage of diplomatic moves and portrayal of real life in the West Bank and Gaza.

The State of Israel and the Land of Israel are rich in communities, cultures, narratives and the histories of numerous nations. One cannot erase the other side's narrative, even if there has been an effort, intentional or not, to conceal it.

We sought to present the cultural and structural fault lines that blind us to the rich variety of realities and narratives that exist inside the area of the State of Israel and the territories under its military control.

We have offered possible ways of overcoming our instincts and prejudices so that the media will be capable of accurately reflecting the space in which we all live, without one side's story necessarily coming at the expense of the other's.

We hope that in this way it will be possible to launch a process that will spark the public's interest and attentiveness and might serve as a catalyst for a stark reappraisal of the reality of the conflict and the heavy price it exacts from both societies. Finally, listening to each other, we believe, will inevitably lead to the onset of a change for the better.