

Introduction

The Union of Media and Politics in Israel

Media and politics are tightly intertwined in the State of Israel, and have been since the beginnings of the Zionist movement, when the state was only a dream. Their union began with Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl's coverage in 1889 of the Dreyfus trial. Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, was the Paris correspondent of the Viennese paper *Die Presse*. The scandal, in which a Jewish officer in the French army was falsely accused of being a spy, unraveled the depth of anti-Semitism in French society. Appalled by the scandal, Emile Zola published his historic op-ed, "J'accuse," on the entire front page of the newspaper *L'aurore*. In the history of journalism, Zola's article emerges as a reference point for advocacy of moral and social causes. Herzl was an assimilated Jew from Vienna, and the Dreyfus trial proved to be his traumatic encounter with the "Jewish problem." Ultimately, it caused him to acknowledge that the only solution to the Jewish problem was for Jews to establish a separate sovereign state. He thus founded the Zionist movement whose goal was to create a national home in the Holy Land. One of his first gestures as movement leader was to start a weekly magazine called *Die Welt*.

The close ties between politics and media continued after Herzl's premature death at the age of forty-four in 1904. Exactly fifty years after he proclaimed, "If you will it, it is not a dream," the Jewish state was formed. Since that time, journalists and men and women of letters have stood at the helm of the national movement. Nachum Sokolov, Herzl's successor at the head of the World Zionist Organization, was also a journalist, and the Journalists' House in Tel Aviv is named after him.

The movement has achieved even more, however, than the establishment of political sovereignty; it has also birthed the revival of the Hebrew language. The man who led this effort in Palestine was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who established the first secular Hebrew newspaper there in 1885.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the formative years of Jewish society and pol-

itics in the Land of Israel, journalists were at the head of two major political movements that later became the Labor Party and Likud Party. Berl Katzenelson was the founder and the first editor of *Davar*, the paper of the social democratic party, which was dominant in Israel for forty-four years. Leading the rival Revisionist movement, from which the Likud Party later emerged, was Ze'ev Jabotinsky, a well-known journalist and editor of *Do'ar Hayom*. His colleague and rival in this movement was Meir Grossman, the man who established the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), which still exists.

Even after the state was established, journalists continued to lead political parties and state institutions. The list of politicians who also worked as editors at *Davar* is long and includes Zalman Shazar, the third president of Israel, Moshe Sharett, Israel's first foreign minister and second prime minister, as well as leaders of many other parties.¹ Indeed, Israeli journalists were keenly aware of their political status, as evidenced in a statement by Arie Dissenchik, the editor of *Maariv*, who said that "journalism was the main carrier of the Zionist idea. Newspapers built the Land of Israel with letters before the JNF [the Jewish National Fund that bought land in Palestine to give to Jewish settlers] acquired and developed the land" (Harshefi 1977: 226).

Although Dissenchik's description is somewhat exaggerated, typical of the hubris of the editor of Israel's largest newspaper in the 1970s, there is certainly a significant amount of truth in it. Words and intellectual activity were instrumental to the success of twentieth-century leaders of anti-colonial national liberation movements, and as a result, their journalistic work was different from the profession practiced today. These leaders' attachment to the written word was inherent in national movements that lacked political or military power. This was particularly true of Zionism in its early days: for the Jewish nation, as Emmanuel Levinas wrote, paraphrasing Heine, "books, and not land, carried it through time."²

Jewish preoccupation with the written and spoken words, including emergent magnetic, electronic, and digital formats, also results from an exceptionally tight web of social ties in Israel. The high level of "social density" that exists in Israel today is expressed by the fact that interpersonal connections and communication are extremely important. One recent example is the remarkably high usage of cellular phones, which in Hebrew are called the "*pele*-phone," meaning "magic phone." Israelis only began using these phones in 1993, but by 2000 cell phones were already being used by one out of three Israelis — the third-highest penetration rate in the world. In 1998, Israelis ranked second in the world in their number of cell phone conversations per capita (1,100 calls on average per person annually) and held the world record for length of cell

phone conversations, averaging 150 minutes a month per person.³ The abundant use of cell phones and the loud conversation style of Israeli culture have privatized the Israeli public sphere.

These close social ties are expressed both in primary social systems — family ties in Israel are much stronger than in many urban, Western, modern societies — as well as in larger social networks (Katz et al. 1992).⁴ Camaraderie is an Israeli national value and receives an almost mythical aura through art, literature, and folk songs. This social density is expressed not only in interpersonal communication but also in the extensive consumption of mass media. Any tourist who uses public transportation in Israel will note that bus drivers do not forget to switch on the radio news every half hour.⁵

The same applies to the consumption of written and broadcast news. Eight out of ten adult Israelis regularly read a daily newspaper, six out of ten viewers watch the main television news broadcast every evening — compared with a bit more than four out of ten in the United States. This boundless need for news is in part explained by the external reality in which Israelis live: almost one hundred years of prolonged conflict with their neighbors, and outbreaks of war occurring almost once a decade. Living in Israel means living in an area where existential surprises are a daily matter, and it is well known that the media have a special role in crisis situations. Added to these dramatic events are Israeli national characteristics such as dynamism, energy, agitation, and overactivism. Taken together, it is easy to understand why the mass media are as necessary in Israel as water is to a traveler in the desert.

Close ties between politics and media have thus always existed in Israel. This relationship took a dramatic turn in the 1990s, however. In this period, two revolutions occurred simultaneously — the communication revolution and the political transformation. Although Israel belongs to the group of developed states, the media revolution reached it quite late — about ten years after similar transformations in Western European states. During the 1990s newspapers lost their status, and commercial multichannel television — “neotelevision,” in Umberto Eco’s terminology (1990) — became the hegemonic medium. Israeli culture quickly moved from the written age to the visual era.

Israel still lags behind the United States and other advanced societies in its development into a network society (Castells 1995).⁶ It is too early to speak of a “digital citizen,” “virtual community,” or “cyberspace democracy.” All of these are titles of books or articles that deal with the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and new media on post-modern society and culture in developed states. However, the fact that parallel to the communication revolution Israel also went through a polit-

ical transformation has made the country into a testing ground for the new sociopolitical phenomenon of “mediapolitik.”

During the 1990s, one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union joined the five million people already living in Israel. This tremendous change in Israel’s demographic equation brought a significant cultural transformation with it, as the melting pot model was replaced with pluralism, if not multiculturalism. During this period Israel was also thrust into the era of globalization, after many years of being the most planned economy in the free world. It was transformed from being a net exporter of oranges in the 1950s into being a major arms producer in the 1980s, and emerged in the 1990s as the Silicon Valley of the Middle East. Today, Israel is a major center for high-tech research and development in the world.

A digital divide has thus been created, which has further polarized the social cleavages in this already deeply divided society. To add to this, the country continues to suffer from the colonial situation that has existed since 1967: Israel rules over more than 3.5 million Palestinians. This situation has intensified the painful ongoing struggle over the national identity and the Zionist *leitkultur* — the dominant or superculture of society. In sum, these factors have intensified in Israel the crisis that most mature democracies go through: that of achieving legitimacy.

Scholars in many fields of social science have argued that Israel is an excellent laboratory for researching social processes. What happened in the 1990s in the field of political communication provides further evidence of this. The synergy caused by the two revolutions created a tectonic shift in Israeli politics. Parties that were the cornerstones of the political structure are now in demise. Instead of a party-state, Israel is morphing into a media-centered democracy.

The phenomenon of the mediatization, or medialization, of politics has been analyzed by political communication researchers for more than a decade. Mediatization is the process whereby the media, particularly television, invade the center of politics, become the arena for political action, influence political processes, and even become a dominant political actor. However, an analysis of the Israeli case shows that these changes are in fact much deeper. The relations between media and politics in Israel have been shaped in a completely new way, as they never had been before. Politics has lost its autonomy and has been dissolved into the media space. Media and politics have become intertwined in a symbiotic or fusionist manner, and politics has now adopted the logic of the media.

The first part of this book analyzes mediapolitik. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the Israeli communication revolution of the 1990s. Chapter 3 deals with the political transformation, and Chapter 4 describes the pat-

tern of relations that have existed between the media and politics throughout Israel's existence. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 deal extensively with the new mediapolitik formation. In this framework I will also treat some of the issues that have occupied media scholars for some time. The first is the question of who influences whom—do journalists have sway over politicians, or vice versa? Has politics become media-driven, or has it tended to be guided more by political substance than by media antics?

The term “mediapolitik” provides a way out of this dilemma, as the answers to these questions cannot be found solely among journalists or politicians. In this book, I show that the distinction between political and media institutions in a media-centered democracy has lost its meaning. It overlooks the uniqueness of this new phenomenon created at the end of the twentieth century. Although the system has been created out of the combination of two ingredients, in fact it has an intertwined and fusionist nature.

An important question that arises in dealing with this new pattern of media-centered democracy—one frequently dealt with by media scholars—is also tackled in this study. Many experts have been troubled, and rightly so, by the negative impact that multichannel, market-driven media have had on the democratic system. They have expressed worries that the news media harm the public space; do not supply citizens with the breadth of knowledge necessary for informed, active, democratic citizenship; turn citizens into consumers of infotainment; reduce social trust and shake the legitimacy of the government; lower public involvement in social policy matters; reduce voter turnout; and create a spiral of cynicism. Critics argue that these types of media do not enable inclusiveness and a deliberative democracy, and in the end they create a “democracy without citizens,” a “sound-bite society,” and a “republic of denial.”

These scholars have not been concerned about the power of the media as such; indeed, strong journalism has always been perceived as a positive element in democracies because of its power to place limitations and constraints on governments. Their worry has been, rather, that the penetration of market values into political communication was detrimental to the democratic model of an informed citizenry that actively participates in the political process.

The dilemma today has changed, however, because the media have become part and parcel of the political sphere in the new mediapolitik. To borrow from Bourdieu, the mere intrusion of the journalistic field into the political arena is the problem. Bourdieu expressed his worry that television would take control over all fields of cultural production and would insert heteronomic principles into these fields, rather than leaving them intact as autonomous spheres. He therefore called on scientists and artists

to safeguard autonomy of the cultural fields and redefine the boundaries of each, and to break free from the idea that the media must have a monopoly over the means of the distribution of their products.

Is such a solution realistic for the political field as well? Can the political arena that has been overtaken by media logic regain its independence? Today, in the visual culture, when visibility is the *sine qua non* for political action and a basis of legitimacy for political power, is it possible to revert to the situation that existed before the fusionist model? Must we not admit that the media are now an integral part of the political arena and even of government? We have now to ask how to require the same principles from the media that democracy demands from politicians to prevent tyranny, to ensure accountability, and to keep power in citizens' hands.

The question that one must ask is, on the one hand, what tools should citizens be given in order to stand up to the power of the media, and on the other hand, how should the media itself behave in this new situation? Do the rules of behavior that were suitable in the past, when the media stood outside the halls of power and confronted the government, fit the new *mediapolitik*? What kind of social responsibility should be given to the media, and how should they behave so as not to harm democracy?

TELEPOPULISM AND COMMUNITARIANISM

Mediapolitik was not the only product of the social laboratory in Israel in the 1990s. The accelerated processes that took place there also created something else, something even more distinctive than the first product: telepopulism, a political genre that emerged in several states at the close of the twentieth century, most prominently in Italy, Bolivia, and Peru. Populism is certainly not a new phenomenon; it appeared in various forms in different places long before the advent of television. Contemporary populism, which has been called "new populism," "neopopulism," or "postpopulism," has its own particular features. However, in some cases, television's role has been so central to the emergence and the continuing existence of this new political construct that there is warrant for using a new term — "telepopulism."

Telepopulism is the embodiment of populism in the era of *mediapolitik* and is the most concrete expression of the new symbiosis between media and politics. It is the political formation whereby television serves a critical function and acts as the major tool in the hands of the populist leaders. However, in contrast with media outlets in the past — radio or the town square — in telepopulism the medium of television itself creates

conditions that foster the development of populism. It constitutes a cultural and social infrastructure that enables the ascent of populist leaders. This phenomenon will be dealt with in the second section of the book, in Chapters 8 through 11. As in the first section, in the second section the particular Israeli case can also be used for comparative research and for general and theoretical propositions concerning the relation between media and politics.

The collapse of the old political order and a host of new social and cultural trends encouraged the development of populism in Israel in the 1990s. These developments, particularly the process of globalization, barely harmed the hegemonic elites at the top of the mediapolitik structure. They possessed a large amount of symbolic capital, controlled the old center of society, and ended up gaining from globalization. With the collapse of the previous political system, they were able to use their human and cultural capital to quickly integrate themselves into the new system. Many of them were able to weave new social ties beyond the limited boundaries of the nation-state and to adopt the new cosmopolitan culture of the global class.

The crumbling structures did, however, severely damage several other social groups: "Old Israelis," who could not integrate into the new economy tumbled down the rapidly upward-moving escalator of social mobility; those immigrants who could not adjust to the new homeland; and the youth who grew up on the periphery of society realized that the economic growth had surpassed them and that they were doomed to remain marginal. Israel, which had the highest level of economic equality in the democratic world for the first forty years of its existence, descended in the 1990s to the bottom of the comparative tables. Now, at the beginning of the new century it is second only to the United States in inequality indexes. The income gap between the poorest and the richest families is now 1:12, and the Gini coefficient that measures income distribution using a scale from 0 to 1, now exceeds 0.5, whereas it was previously fixed at less than 0.4.⁷

Certain populist moods and tendencies existed in Israel before the 1990s, encouraged particularly by Likud leader Menachem Begin during his term as prime minister from 1977 to 1983. However, the social changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s brought about the return of populism in a new form. Some Israeli social groups were intensely anxious during that period due to the social instability and status incongruity, typical of transition periods, particularly during modernization and accelerated economic development. The excluded groups had a deep sense of deprivation, could not put forward their claims for inclusion and entitlement in the new politics, were unable to express their wishes and

dreams, and felt excluded from shaping Israeli's symbolic order with their own worldviews and perceptions. These groups reorganized themselves for a counterreaction, which expressed itself primarily in the cultural and identity spheres. The most radical manifestation of this was the ascent of Jewish fundamentalism and the spread of folk religious practices. A much wider reaction was the creation of the politics of identity and recognition. All of these groups became potential candidates for a neopopulist reaction to the old order.

What was now needed in order to trigger this potential populism was a leader who fit into this new world — someone who could gather the unorganized masses into a counterhegemonic bloc that would have a direct link to the populist leader. A leader with nationalistic ideology and rhetoric could lead this new political movement, which adopts principles of direct democracy, antistatism, social protest, and ethno-centricity by using the new political tool — television. The new leader who made use of television to mold this movement in the 1990s was Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu's news management style put him on a collision course with the media. The need of the telepopulist leader to use the media to build his position and then to control media outlets in order to solidify it necessarily creates a severe reaction by journalists. And so Netanyahu, the politician who understood the media better than anyone and was the best at manipulating them, unintentionally turned them into forceful opposition to him. Indeed, as is shown in Chapter 11, it was the desire of the media to resist his manipulation and to keep their autonomy that made them mobilize against Netanyahu and contribute to his downfall in 1999.

Although the telepopulist leader can inspire a wealth of hope among disenfranchised classes, his answers cannot solve the real problems of mature democracies. Such a solution is in fact a mirage: it is presentation, not representation. Indeed, as opposed to those who were caught up in the populist solution — under the influence of the leader who created symbolic meaning, prestige, and recognition — there were many in Israel who sought a different answer, one that supplied genuine belonging and participation. This was done by cultural groups based on communitarian principles. Indeed, the transformation from class politics to identity politics quickly created several cultural groups at the subnational level, which included Russian-speaking immigrants, Israeli Palestinians, ultraorthodox, religious nationalists, and to a lesser degree “southerners.”⁸ These were mnemonic communities that were formed on the basis of traditions, whether renewed or invented.

Like the new populist solution, the communitarian response also took shape in a media-saturated society, and the media were a significant force in its formation. Whereas national mainstream media supported the pop-

ulist solution, small, alternative media helped the cultural groups. Indeed, alternative media played a major role in the constitution of the separate collective identities of each co-culture within Israeli society and had a major part in the constitution of the new sectarian or multicultural society.

This part of the story — the creation of the sectorial society and the role of the small media — appears in Chapters 12 and 13. Beyond presenting a historical description, that section of the book attempts to deal with the question of the impact of both mainstream and alternative media on the future development of Israeli society. Will the tendency to split the public sphere into small, secluded sphericules that create a mosaic of closed sectors continue? Will these changes possibly even bring about the disintegration of society, or will they cause the crystallization of a deep multicultural framework?

The different themes that are raised in the three parts of the book — the new mediapolitik, telepopulism, and the alternative media of the sectarian society — will be synthesized in the Conclusion and the perspectives of journalists will also be considered. The book ends by drawing conclusions regarding measures that should be taken in order for society to better respond to the challenges imposed by the media's new role as part of the body politic.

As for method, the book endeavors to present an empirically anchored theory of media-political relations in advanced democracies and uses Israel as a case study. I have used an integrated system, which includes both historical and analytical approaches and relies on extensive content analysis of newspapers and magazines in Israel, making wide use of primary sources. I have also collected relevant data from other sources, including journalists' surveys, public opinion polls, and press council statistics. This approach seemed fitting for research that attempts to span a period of more than fifty years and to encompass many diverse factors. I was also aided by my students in the Department of Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who conducted a series of empirical studies. Together we did viewer and listener research, analyzed changes in news style and talk shows, and examined the small media of various co-cultural groups.

I also made use of ethnographic methodology, which included extensive interviews with members of the political and media elite in Israel, and added my impressions as a participant-observer of politics and the media. I was able to do so because over the course of a thirty-year career, I have been involved with political communication in three circles: journalism, politics, and academe.

My journalistic career began at the daily newspaper *Davar*, where I was a reporter, investigative journalist, columnist, managing editor, and,

finally, editor in chief. I was also a member and president of the Association of Editors of Daily Newspapers and a member of the Press Council. I was involved in politics for several years as well, first as the spokesman of the Labor Party during Golda Meir's term as prime minister in the 1970s, then as the representative of the party in international organizations, and finally as political advisor to the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

My academic research has revolved around different aspects of political sociology, particularly in Israel. I focused first on the role of the military in Israeli politics and society, and later on the relationship between the media, politics, and society. This triangle of professional journalism, political involvement, and academic research has given me a broad and multilayered perspective and hopefully a deeper sense of political communication in Israel, as well as a comparative and theoretical view.