

Mobilizing the News Media for the Other War on Terror:

Norms, Routines, and Dilemmas for Israeli Journalists Covering the Second Intifada

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to develop some ideas concerning the role of the news media during wars that are supported by a high level of political consensus. It is argued that the news media have logistic, cultural, and professional reasons for constructing patriotic media frames during such crises. It was further argued that this process manifests itself through three major professional routines: increasing levels of cooperation with military and government sources, allowing military news slots to dominate coverage, and the ethnocentric coverage of death. Each of these routines facilitates the mobilization of the news media for the war effort.

The research examined these mechanisms by looking at the relationship between the Israeli military and the local press during the first stages of the Second *Intifada*. Twenty-five interviews were carried out with officers and journalists who were responsible for the ongoing construction of news stories about the conflict. The findings provide some useful insights about how and why the news media construct such frames as well as some interesting exceptions to the rule.

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A central question about media and conflicts concerns the varying ability of governments to mobilize the news media in support of a war (Knightly, Wolfsfeld, 1997, Bennet & Paletz, 1994). One of the most important determining factors in this process is the overall level of political consensus in favor of the war effort (Hallin, 1996). The greater the level of elite consensus, the more likely the news media are to become advocates of government frames and actions. In these extreme situations journalists often surrender their role as outside critics and become faithful servants for the government. In general one could argue that the greater the level of public hostility towards an enemy the easier it is to mobilize the press.

Given this fact, it is not surprising that military efforts that are considered wars on terrorism are among the easiest to promote. When elites and the broad public are convinced that the ultimate goal of a war effort is the elimination of terrorism the press quickly adapts to the prevailing political environment. The two most recent examples of this phenomenon are the Israeli reaction to the Second *Intifada* and the U.S. led war in Afghanistan.

One reason why such cases are worthy of study is that they represent important endpoints on a theoretical continuum of media independence: These are the times when journalists become the most docile and obsequious. By examining media performance during such crises it provides important insights into the norms, routines, and mechanisms that are altered. Such knowledge should allow researchers to better explain how the role of the news media can vary over time and circumstance (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

The goal of this study is to better understand this process by examining the performance of the Israeli press during the first stages of the Second *Intifada*.

Theoretical Principles

The influence of the news media on most political processes is best seen in terms of a cycle in which changes in the political environment lead to changes in media performance that often lead to further changes in the political environment. It is not a chicken and an egg problem; politics almost always comes first. A useful rule to follow in these matters is to start by looking at a particular political context, attempt to understand how political actors and journalists interact within the situation, and then examine how the resulting news stories influence the process itself. I refer to this principle as the Politics-Media-Politics (PMP) Cycle (Wolfsfeld, in press). This study will focus only on the first part of that cycle. More specifically the discussion will focus on how a high level of political consensus in support of the government policy influences media performance during conflict.

It is helpful to begin by considering the relationship between political consensus and the construction of media frames. Media frames are perhaps best thought of as organizing themes that journalists use to place events into a package that is *culturally resonant* and *professionally valuable*.¹ The actual construction of particular media frames can be seen as a process in which journalists attempt to find a narrative fit between incoming information and existing media frames about a give topic (Wolfsfeld, in press, 1997).

The level of political consensus is a critical factor in determining the range of interpretive frames available for use. When the level of political consensus surrounding government policy is high a single frame tends to govern media and public discourse. In the early years of the Vietnam War, for example, the “Cold War Frame” dominated media discourse. As Hallin (1986) points out, only after serious elites began to raise questions about the war did alternative frames begin to emerge in the press. Gamson & Modigliani (1989) made a similar point in their study of media frames of nuclear energy. In the early years the use of nuclear energy in the U.S. was seen as simply a form of “progress” and thus reporters tended to downplay any reports of problems or accidents. Thus, a very serious accident that took place in 1966 in Fermi Michigan was barely noted in the news. As anti-nuclear groups became more successful at convincing people about the risks and dangers of nuclear power, the press became more open to employing a “danger” frame in their news reports. It is not that one frame replaced the other; it was that different frames were now competing with one another.

As the level of external threat to a country rises it is both natural and inevitable that political elites come together. A sense of unity will emerge as the country attempts to defend itself against its enemies. This unity is reflected in a patriotic frame that emphasizes the

justice of the county's cause and the enemy's evil. The major opposition parties will generally throw the support behind the government, at least in the early stages of the conflict. The news media serve as important tools for mobilizing the public for the war effort.

There are a number of reasons why the media often surrender their independence at these times. One reason has to do with the difficulty in finding legitimate sources that are willing to publicly declare their reservations about the war effort. The debate surrounding American policy surrounding the Gulf War provides a good example of this phenomenon. Many forget that there was a great deal of controversy surrounding President George Bush's intention to use military force against Saddam Hussein. The final vote in the U.S. Senate approving the use of force was quite close: 52 to 47. The controversy itself was an important part of the news story. Once the hostilities began, however, it was difficult to find elected leaders that were willing to speak out against the war effort (Wolfsfeld, 1997). Whether such reluctance was due to a genuine change of heart or simply good politics is difficult to surmise. The result of this process however is clear. The official frames being promoted by the Bush administration remained unchallenged, at least in the mainstream press.

There are also cultural reasons for journalists to support a popular war. Despite the official mantra about objectivity, journalists are also citizens who have similar attitudes to those around them. It is virtually impossible to be "even-handed" when you own people are being killed. It is also important to bear in mind that when particular frames dominate cultural discourse they seem indisputable. They take on the status of truths rather than claims. Thus, during the early stages of Vietnam, few Americans questioned the Cold War frame.

The media also have powerful commercial reasons for supporting a high consensus war effort. War is good for business. The best-known historical example of this phenomenon was provided by William Randolph Hearst who made a fortune by sensationalizing (and possibly encouraging) the Spanish-American war at the end of the 19th century. A less well-known illustration of this principle is discussed in Ito's (1999) work concerning the performance of the Japanese press during the Russo-Japanese War at the beginning of that century. This research shows that those newspapers that carried "chauvinistic and sensationalist" articles and editorials during that conflict greatly expanded their circulation while those that did not lost many of their readers. One of the newspapers that opposed the war had its premises set on fire by angry mobs and eventually went bankrupt. All this may explain the comments attributed to the newspaper journalist Kuroiwa Ruiko later in that century: "Newspapers should be anti-government during peace time, and chauvinistic during war time" (Ito, 1990, p. 431). Journalists and news media that attempt to swim against a strong current of patriotism run a real risk of drowning.

News Routines for Covering a Just War

It is important to think about the news routines journalists adapt for covering what is considered a just war. While it is possible to develop a longer list of norms and routines associated with such crises, the present discussion will zero in on three important professional devices: 1) High levels of cooperation with government and military officials 2) Domination of military news slots for covering the conflict 3) The ethnocentric coverage of death. The adoption of these related mechanisms facilitates the government's attempts to mobilize the public. Each of them makes it easier to translate government positions into media frames. As with many journalistic routines the power of these devices comes from them being undetectable, somehow seamless.

When a war effort is considered just, the journalists become especially cooperative with government and especially military officials. In addition to the other reasons noted above, journalists become dependent on these officials for vital information. Wars are major news and official sources are the only ones who have the resources to meet the demand for information. The larger the news hole the greater the extent of that dependency. The high level of cooperation manifests itself in both the extensive amount of coverage given to official initiatives (press releases, official "briefings", use of official films and graphics) and in the relatively small proportion of accusatory coverage.

A useful way to examine this phenomenon is to look at what can be called the "frustration gap". While officials are rarely satisfied with the coverage they are getting their level of frustration varies over time and circumstance. In general it can be argued that the

lower the level of official frustration, the lower the level of media independence. In other words if officials have no problem telling “their story” then the news media become a passive conveyor belt. Thus in interviews carried out with U.S. Public Information Officers following the Gulf War they expressed a good deal of satisfaction for the way the war was covered (Wolfsfeld, 1997). It would be surprising if those in charge of running the information campaign surrounding the war in Afghanistan felt much differently. Although some might disagree, such a sense of satisfaction suggests a far too cozy relationship between the military and the media.

The second mechanism has to do with the domination of military news slots for covering the conflict. News slots can be defined as topic areas that are routinely covered by journalists. Changes in the political environment necessitate changes in news routines. Thus, the initiation of the Oslo peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians opened up a very different mode of reporting about the conflict and the enemy (Wolfsfeld, in press). Diplomatic correspondents tended to rise in importance and a different group of Palestinians found themselves in front of the camera. When the major story focuses on a peace process it creates news slots that were previously unavailable. Stories about diplomatic overtures, negotiations, and international attempts at conflict resolution are a different genre of news.

The same can be said about how the press gears up for covering armed conflict. Military news slots are fairly easy to spot. The Gulf War and the War in Afghanistan represent useful examples. The most familiar elements include scenes of combat, violence and devastation, military experts explaining strategy and weaponry, threatening intelligence or reports about the enemy, and ongoing progress reports about how the operation is proceeding. War correspondents become celebrities and for some it is the opportunity of a lifetime. War reporting has its own language, pace, and imagery and in many ways it is quintessential journalism.

Although they are related, news slots are not the same as media frames. The notion of news slots refers to logistic changes in the way the media operates while frames have to do with the assignment of meaning. Thus a war correspondent can cover a war effort in a negative manner by stressing the terrible costs of the conflict. Generally however, military news slots dominate the media agenda it provides enormous advantages for the promotion of patriotic frames. The notion of “mobilizing the media” takes on a whole new meaning when one considers the extent to which journalists can become so deeply immersed the military culture.

The third and final mechanism for promoting a popular war is perhaps the most powerful: the ethnocentric coverage of death. The home country’s deaths are tragedies while the enemy’s deaths are statistics. Our casualties have names, faces, families, and lives; theirs do not. Our deaths are often major news stories; the other side’s deaths are barely mentioned. The underlying cultural assumption states that if the war is just so is the death it brings to the other side.

The power of this mechanism lies in the story it tells and the emotions it engages. Who can remain objective when one’s own people are being slaughtered? It has been said that the news media’s version of events should be consider the first draft of history. If so, it helps explain why war leaves such bitter scars on adversaries. The news media from each side tells reverse stories about suffering and evil. In the age of television such news stories have become even more shocking and devastating.

Methodological Strategy

The goal of this paper is to look more directly at how these mechanisms operate by focusing on the professional routines adopted by the Israeli news media during the early stages of the Second *Intifada*. The study is based on twenty-five interviews carried out with Israeli journalists from a variety of news media and officers from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). I shall also present some evidence gathered from other interviews I conducted with officials who served under Prime Minister Ehud Barak. All the interviews were carried out as part of an ongoing effort to understand the role of the news media in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Wolfsfeld, in press, 2001, 1997). The interviews lasted about an hour; they were taped and then transcribed.

The journalists were asked about such issues as the nature of their relationship with the military, with the government, and with the Palestinians, the extent to which they felt that the Israeli media had been able to maintain an independent approach in covering the conflict, how much they felt their political beliefs were reflected in their coverage, and what role they felt the Israeli media should play in the conflict. The officers were asked a similar set of questions and were also asked about their overall strategy in dealing with the Israeli press and whether they felt the coverage was fair.

This is in many ways a descriptive case study. It is designed to demonstrate the personal and professional logic that leads journalists to adopt the professional routines that were outlined above. Equally important the interviews reveal some important exceptions to this rule which suggests that some journalists consciously adopt a more independent approach to conflict coverage.

The Building of Political Consensus:

From Camp David to the Second *Intifada*

It is important to begin the analysis by looking at the state of the political environment in Israel a few months before the outbreak of the Second *Intifada*. Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Chairman Yassar Arafat, and President Bill Clinton gathered for a summit in July of 2000 with the explicit purpose of concluding a final agreement between the two sides. The talks ended in complete failure with each side blaming the other and from here it appeared that the outbreak of violence was only a matter of time.

One of the most significant developments from this period has to do with change in Barak's political and the effect that change had on the level of political consensus in support of his policies. When Barak left for Camp David his government was falling apart and there was a tremendous amount of opposition to his policies. Three different political parties had abandoned his government after learning that Barak planned to make compromises about Jerusalem. The day before his departure for Washington, Barak suffered a humiliating defeat in the Knesset by losing a non-confidence vote. Although he remained in office (the opposition failed to mobilize an absolute majority), the Knesset had made it clear that the Prime Minister was traveling to Camp David without its support.

Interestingly however, Barak's staff was already preparing for the day after Camp David. Many had significant doubts that the summit would end in success and thus a number of scenarios were developed to deal with possible outcomes. One of Barak's chief spokespersons talked about the public relations strategies that were prepared for the summit.

We prepared public relation [Hasbara] strategies for three scenarios: Scenario one that there is an agreement that includes painful concessions on one hand but tremendous achievements on the other. The second scenario was that there is an agreement but it is a partial agreement and it will have an additional stage of negotiations that will come. The third scenario that the summit does not give birth to an agreement. Naturally each of these scenarios was possible and we built a strategy to deal with each one. And in the end the result – because of our deployment during the summit - proved that while the summit failed politically, but from a public relations perspective Israel's position was the dominant position in the international, American, and national media. (Interview #42; August 8th, 2001)

Whatever problems Barak and his team had in promoting peace to Israel, they faced few obstacles in driving the campaign against Arafat. After all, the right-wing opposition had been arguing all along that Arafat could not be trusted and this was just further proof of their point. At least in Israel when a leftist Prime Minister moves to the right (and when a right-leaning Prime Minister moves left) it makes it much easier to mobilize a broader level of political consensus around government policy.²

On September 28, 2000 Ariel Sharon - then head of the Israeli opposition - came to the Temple Mount in order to demonstrate his determination to maintain Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel. The Palestinians saw this as a provocative act and some form of violence was inevitable. In the coming weeks there was a great deal of local and international debate over whether Sharon's visit was the "real" reason for the outbreak of the *Intifada*. The Barak government defended Sharon, arguing that Arafat had only used the visit as a pretext for initiating a wave of violence against Israel. In keeping with his earlier warnings, Barak

argued that Arafat's goal was to achieve further concessions from Israel. Israel had no intention, he said, of giving in to Palestinian aggression.³ There was no choice, it was said, but to fight. There were few in Israel that disagreed.

The Three Mechanisms

The Synergy between Journalists, the Military, and the Government

The Israeli press normally prides itself on being critical and aggressive. As in other countries however, reporting about war is a very different affair. Despite a serious amount of international condemnation for Israel's actions, the amount of criticism within the country was relatively minor. There was never any serious internal debate concerning the charges that Israel was using excessive force against the Palestinians.

As with the end of Camp David there was little disagreement between the major political parties about who was to blame. Thus, when Prime Minister Barak was still in office he argued that the IDF was exercising the maximum amount of restraint possible. The right wing opposition condemned the restraint and demanded that Barak "let the IDF win". Thus, there was a wide level of agreement that the IDF was using restraint; the only question was whether such moderation was justified. The international community had a very different view of Israel's actions, but there were no legitimate domestic sources to provide a competing frame.

The atmosphere in Israel turned even more hostile as terrorism became the major form of violence. The massive riots that had characterized the first weeks of the *Intifada* gave way to an increasing number of suicide bombers and there was a shocking rise in the number of Israeli civilian deaths. Anger and fear were rampant as the conflict turned from bad to worse. Given this climate, the government had little difficulty mobilizing the political elite, the news media, and the public for the war effort. What at one time would have been considered drastic actions against the Palestinians seemed reasonable given the growing number of Israelis killed and wounded.

The only leaders crying out against Israel's actions against the Palestinians were the Arab Knesset members who were discounted as extremists. The Arab minority became even further ostracized when violent riots broke out within those communities in the early weeks of the *Intifada*. Thirteen Arab citizens were shot and killed during these disturbances. Here too it was difficult to find Jewish voices condemning the police actions; most saw them as simply another part of the battle with the Palestinians. Only months later was a Committee of National Inquiry established to investigate what had happened during the confrontation between the police and the Arab citizens of Israel.

The military in Israel is often seen as "above politics" and thus assume a stature few politicians can hope to achieve. This of course makes it much easier for journalists to cooperate with them without being accused of political bias. Thus, when the Israeli Chief of Staff refers to the Palestinian Authority as a "terrorist entity" it is more likely to resonate within Israeli society. Given the fact that the military is forbidden to deal with political issues, such pronouncements are seen as a form of strategic analysis rather than political polemic.

It was noted earlier that one indicator of media independence is the "frustration gap" expressed by those in the military. The interviews revealed very little frustration by Israeli officers concerning the coverage they were getting from the Israeli press. There is a sharp and revealing contrast between the anger such officers expressed when talking about the foreign media and their opinions about the domestic press. While those in charge of the Israeli Army Spokesperson's office found themselves constantly on the defensive with regard to the international news media, they had few complaints about the Hebrew press.

These information officers had an especially strong connection with the Israeli military correspondents, whose expertise was based on their connections to the army. It is worth remembering that all of these correspondents – like most other Israelis – have themselves served in the military. Many reporters continue to do reserve duty and often find themselves serving in the same army they are supposed to cover. One of the senior officers in the Army Spokespersons office talked about the close relationship with the military correspondents.

So, in the end they cooperate with us. After all they are military correspondents so they are very connected to the army, they have a commitment. When it comes to the army

they don't just come to attack us. They are not Army Spokespeople; they are not little Army Spokespeople. But they do have a commitment to the IDF and the want to explain what the IDF is doing. (#51; March 19, 2001).

As he notes, the fact that these reporters cooperate with the IDF does not mean that they are mere sounding horns for the Army Spokesperson's office. These reporters do exploit a variety of sources. However almost all of those sources come from within the defense establishment. Although there may be disagreements over the effectiveness of certain tactics and strategies, such informants are unlikely to question the overall righteousness of the cause. When asked about this issue, one of the military correspondents argued that his job was to provide the military vantage point. It was up to others, he said to provide other perspectives.

Military correspondents are connected to the army and talk to the army and thus they pass on materials that come from the army. Reporters from the territories, or those who deal with the settlers are supposed to bring their own materials in order to create "auto-balance". But you can't come to a particular beat and ask the reporters why do you deal with the Army. We deal with the army because we cover the army. We don't cover the Palestinian side. (#49; May 25, 2001)

A radio reporter talked about the difficulties military correspondents faced in their attempts to achieve a certain amount of independence.

There are many military terms that all of us, all of us that work with the army on a day-to-day basis fall into using. We start talking like officers, using the military terminology . . . It is easy to fall into that. I don't think we deserve a grade of 10 [%100] but we do our work. We do commit many sins of mobilization, of ignoring the suffering of the other. The people we cover, I mean the army, often talk through our throats. I can't explain why it happens. (#55, October 24, 2001).⁴

It is interesting to note that a number of Israeli reporters who were interviewed after September 11th felt somewhat vindicated. Certainly, they argued, the American press was no less one-sided in their coverage of their "War on Terror" than the Israeli media is in covering the *Intifada*. While some might balk at this comparison, the political atmosphere surrounding the two campaigns was similar.

One might expect that an alternative perspective would come from those covering the Palestinian beat. The Israeli news media did place an increased emphasis on gathering information about the reactions and intentions of the Palestinian leadership. A typical evening's newscast, for example, would include a report by the military correspondent, the political correspondent, an Israeli Arab reporting from the territories, and Arab Affairs analyst (who is Jewish). However, the outbreak of violence led to a serious crisis between many Jewish journalists and their Palestinian sources. As the death toll continued to rise it was inevitable that connections between the two sides would sour. One journalist described the change in relations.

Every journalist as a private person went through a crisis. Even those that worked with the Palestinians and tried to be balanced went through a crisis. The reaction led to a more extremist approach towards the Palestinians – for the worse: A complete lack of trust in what they say and tell and to a great extent towards their claims. It is impossible to look for objectivity, because this is a real armed conflict. (#54, May 3, 2001)

The increased level of hostilities also led to additional structural difficulties for those covering the occupied territories. Many Jewish journalists were understandably scared to go into the areas and Palestinian groups threatened others. One of the journalists said that he had received seven death threats from Palestinians for what he had written. It also became illegal for Israeli journalists to go into the territories, supposedly for safety reasons. Thus, most Israeli journalists had little choice but to depend on phones and faxes in order to keep abreast with events. This can hardly be considered the optimal method for finding out what is happening or for understanding the other side's perspective.

There were a few Israeli journalists who refused to accept the government frame with regard to the *Intifada*. They were extremely critical of the government and army from the beginning. Two names continually came up in such interviews and both were from the liberal,

non-sensationalist paper Ha'aretz: Amira Hass and Gideon Levy. It is helpful to read such pieces because they - along with news produced outside of Israel - provide an alternative frame about the conflict. These articles, as well as some that appeared in a number of local newspapers place a major emphasis on what is seen as Israeli aggression and Palestinian suffering. It is also revealing that a number of people from the Army Spokesperson's Office referred to these two reporters and their paper as the ones who were least willing to cooperate with them. This helps illustrate why the "frustration gap" provides a useful indicator of the relative independence of each news medium.

Running against the patriotic stream during war is difficult. One of the more critical journalists talk about the difficulties they face in trying to get an alternative perspective into the press.

I always feel that I have to be very careful about how I cover what's going on because if I tell what I really see, I won't be believed. In other words when I need to describe soldiers, the behavior of the army, I have to use the language of a [sterile] operating room, to water down what I say. Otherwise the Israeli public won't accept it, and how will the night editors accept it. It was made clear that I have to be very careful. (#64; 3/21/01).

This last statement reminds us of some of the commercial reasons for towing the official line during wartime. Owners and editors who allow critical reporting are also taking certain risks. Thus, one of the editors at Ha'aretz (the more liberal elite newspaper) reported that numerous readers of that newspaper cancelled their subscription, because of what they say as a "pro-Palestinian" bias.⁵ A rival newspaper, The Jerusalem Post, attempted to exploit the anger against Ha'aretz in its advertising strategy.⁶ The Post published a full-page ad displaying a letter they had received from a new subscriber who had left Ha'aretz because of that paper's "unbalanced coverage" of the *Intifada*. Thus, it is never just about patriotism, it's also about money.

Changes in News Slots: Palestinian Violence at the Core

The most general mechanism for promoting a just war has to do with change in news slots. There is rarely any problem filling news slots created for wars.⁷ There is an unlimited supply of valuable news stories about threats and destruction. This provides an important contrast with what happens during a peace process. While even a successful peace process provides a limited number of major events, wars provide multiple waves that continue for an extended period of time. While there is rarely any reason for journalists to put in overtime covering a peace process, during a war they are lucky to get home. The biggest challenge facing editors during war is to find an efficient method for shifting through the flood of information and images.

It is true that certain events become routine. Thus, while the first few times shots were fired on the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo (which the Palestinians consider a settlement) it was considered big news; such stories received much less prominence as time passed. Nevertheless, all such shootings continued to be reported on Israeli television and radio on a daily basis a full year after they began. Unlike the relatively narrow slot reserved for routine peace stories, the amount of time and space reserved for war is huge and expandable. Week after week, month after month, news of the *Intifada* dominated the public agenda driving out almost any other concern.

Reverting back to previous news slots not only had an impact on what was being covered, but also on how it was being covered. The changing political environment associated with the outbreak of the *Intifada* meant that the major framing question had changed. The major question during the years of the Oslo peace process was whether peace was possible. Now the only question on the public agenda was what Israel could to defend itself from terrorism. The entire society felt threatened and thus it was not surprising that almost all news dealt with this aspect to the exclusion of all else.

The change in the news slots were also reflected in the way the press dealt with Palestinian sources. One of the intriguing anomalies of this period was the continued interest in interviewing Palestinian leaders on Israeli television and radio. This was a radical change from the first *Intifada* in which - due to the fact that all of the territories were under Israeli rule - such leaders remained hidden and nameless for fear of being arrested (Schiff & Ya'ari, 1990). This was one of the Oslo related changes that remained in place even after the

outbreak of violence. It would seem that the drama associated with interviewing the enemy was more important than any fears about offending members of the local audience.⁸ This dynamic is also interesting from a Palestinian perspective. Despite the dramatic rise in the level of hostility towards Israel, there were still quite a few Palestinian leaders who were willing to be interviewed (in Hebrew) in order to convey their message to the Israeli public.

Nevertheless, the deterioration in relations was reflected in the tone of these interview sessions. From an Israeli perspective there was really only one question: what will the Palestinians do in order to end the violence against Israel. The Palestinian leader stood as the accused and the Israeli interviewers as the prosecutors. The Palestinians, on the other hand, strived to use such opportunities to promote their own claims against Israel. Every interview was a political struggle in which each side attempted to drag the other into his/her own world view. As an example, consider the following exchange between an Israeli anchorman and a Palestinian who was thought to be a leader of one of the local militias associated with the P.L.O. The interview was conducted in the wake of a meeting that had been held the day before between Foreign Minister Peres and President Mubarak of Egypt. The goal of that meeting had been to find a way to achieve a “ceasefire” between Israel and the Palestinians. The interview was conducted in Hebrew.⁹

Israeli Interviewer: So, Is there a ceasefire?

Palestinian Leader: The word ceasefire is not the right word, it leads to a distortion. There aren't two armies that are fighting one another. There are the Palestinian people and against them there is the Israeli army that has all of the means of combat and they are the side that is carrying out the crime of violence. So if one side wants to call for a stop to the violence, it is the Israeli side.

Israeli Interviewer: In other words, if I interpret your words, there is no ceasefire and the war goes on.

Palestinian Leader: Look, I want tell you that cannot use the word ceasefire. . . . There is an uprising against the occupation. We don't need an agreement for a ceasefire. We need an agreement for the end to the occupation.

Israeli Interview: . . . In other words, the war goes on.

Palestinian: The atmosphere that the occupation generates is the atmosphere that brings violence. If the Israeli occupation of our land ends, I think the situation in the whole area will change.

Israeli Interviewer: Because again I interpret what you are saying, because the message is clear, but it seems like you are trying to avoid talking about it, I understand that in the field for now the violence, the armed struggle will continue. (“Five O'clock with Gadi Sukenik”, Channel 2, April 30, 2001)

It is hard to find a better example of a “dialogue of the deaf”. It also shows the close connection between the notion of news slots and the construction of media frames. It is a war story and the important questions have to do with the course of the war. The positions taken by the two sides are typical of what happens in many unequal conflicts. The more powerful antagonist promotes a “Law and Order” frame emphasizing the need to quell the violence, while the weaker side focuses on the injustices perpetrated by the more powerful side (Wolfsfeld, 1997). The news media from each side adopt the appropriate frame. The struggle over the terms of reference in this interview is actually a struggle over meaning.

Ethnocentric View of Death

As in any conflict the Israeli news media covered their own dead and wounded very differently than they covered casualties on the other side (Liebes, 1997). Israeli deaths were always considered major tragedies and the news media were the central forum for collective mourning. Palestinians deaths were, for the most part, discounted. Apart from a few exceptions they were treated as relatively minor, unimportant incidents. This emphasis, although understandable, provides an extremely one-sided view of the conflict. There can be little doubt that continual exposure to such coverage serves to demonize the enemy and sanction the use of force as a means of self-defense.

It is important to stress that the coverage in the Palestinian press was probably even more one-sided. Palestinian television broadcasts included blood filled scenes of their dead and wounded accompanied by stirring music and emotional appeals. Here too there was little coverage or sympathy for Israeli deaths. These stories conveyed the idea that the only true victims of this conflict were the Palestinians, the only aggressor Israel. The Palestinian media were important tools in mobilizing and maintaining public support for the war effort.

The norms and routines for covering the two types of deaths all served to reflect and reinforce cultural beliefs concerning the conflict. The most obvious difference concerns the prominence given to different deaths. Israeli deaths are considered front page, top of the line-up news stories in the Hebrew media. Such events are considered breaking news; television and radio stations interrupt their normal broadcasts with bulletins of such deaths. There is also a tremendous amount of time and space devoted to such coverage, especially in the case of multiple deaths.¹⁰ Stories of Israeli casualties are also very detailed, often including maps, eyewitnesses, interviews with police or soldiers, and chronologies of the events. In addition, as discussed before, such coverage is also relatively dramatic and emotional and this too contributes to the prominence of such stories.

Not surprisingly, Palestinian deaths are given much less attention although here too the amount of prominence varies. When suspected terrorists are killed – which is considered a success for the IDF - such stories receive somewhat more time and space. When other Palestinians are killed such deaths are granted a relatively brief mention within more general reports about the day's events. It is rare for such reports to include details of what happened and even rarer to have eyewitnesses talk about what they saw. These reports are usually factual, analytical, and fairly easy to overlook.

There are also important differences in the level of personalization afforded to the types of victims. Israeli victims have names and faces. They have families and friends that mourn for them, that want to talk about them. The first few times the names of the victims are read on the air, the anchor always utters the Jewish prayer: "May their memories be blessed". The times and places of each funeral is announced on radio and television. It is also customary to include portions of the funerals themselves as part of the evening news. The Palestinian victims on the other hand, are, for the most part nameless and faceless. Here too, suspected terrorists enjoy a somewhat higher level of media status in that some of these names are published in the press. The Israeli press will also cover the funeral marches associated with these higher-profile deaths. This coverage, however, is much more likely to center on Palestinian threats for revenge, than on their grief.

It is hard to conceive of another circumstance in which the media's ability to construct reality has such a powerful effect. Israelis and Palestinians are being told completely different stories about the conflict. Each population becomes emotionally linked to its own victims who are killed by a vicious, inhuman enemy. We come to "know" our victims, we know nothing about the "their" victims, and we do not really care. It is an ongoing and horrifying story of one side's righteousness and the other side's evil. Given the daily scenes of (our) horror, how can anybody accuse us of being aggressors? We observe each ceasefire and they continually violate it. They continue to kill us and we are only acting in self-defense.

Amira Hass, the "rebel reporter" mentioned earlier, talked about the impact of these differences in an editorial that appeared one year after the start of the uprising:

Let's assume that for one week the entire Israeli media – radio, television, and the daily papers – would decide to report on everything that happened . . . to the Palestinians. On the same week the Israeli media would not only report on every mortar that fell on a Jewish settlement, but (also) on every Israeli shell that fell on a Palestinian home . . . They would tell about the Jews that were killed, but also about the Palestinians. The Palestinians would be given names, ages, and histories. . . The first goal of such an effort would be basic journalism: to try to report on what is happening and not only the Israeli perspective. But such a project would also have a secondary result . . . because without complete information one can not direct rational policy. It would also force the Israeli public to place more serious questions before their leaders. (Ha'aretz, September 26th, 2001, p. b1)

When Israeli journalists are asked about such differences in the way the two sides are covered, they almost always refer back to the audience. While several journalists pointed

to the logistical difficulties in finding out what really happened when Palestinians are killed, most pointed to audience considerations. There is little point, they argued, in spending much time on such stories because very few Israelis have any interest in them. One of the military correspondents put it this way:

The number of [Palestinians] killed doesn't interest anybody. But that's already a social problem, not the media's problem . . . Why isn't anything published about Palestinians killed? Because there's no demand. It doesn't interest anybody. Except for Muchammad Dura [Sic]. The faces are not interesting. [#62, March 31, 2001].

As this quote implies there are deeper reasons for these media routines. It is not simply a question of public apathy. Many citizens become very angry when the news media display sympathy for victims on the other side. The amount of anger and hate directed at the more critical journalists demonstrates this point. Thus, attempting to change such routines carries with it a certain amount of professional risk. Some also believe that providing such sympathy plays into Palestinian hands. Consider for example the remarks made by one of the television correspondents responsible for covering the territories about the reasons why he probably covers things differently than a reporter from CNN.

Yes, the [Israeli] reporter might relate to a cordon around a Palestinian town less severely than a foreign journalist because the reporter says to himself 'My God, they started it and now they are crying to me. They want me to come and cover their suffering? . . . So don't [you Palestinians] shoot at people, there won't be a cordon. What? You want me to run after you with a camera and show how miserable you are? After all, it is clear that you are miserable because war is cruel, and you started the war. (#48, March 20, 2001).

Anger and hate permeate throughout the society during acute conflict and affect journalists as much as everyone else. There is nothing surprising or discordant about ethnocentric coverage. It is only natural to mourn over one's own victims and not the enemy's. This is what makes this routine such an efficient and powerful engine for converting cultural energy into political motion. It is a collaborative effort between leaders, journalists, and the public and few have the interest, the will, or the political strength to slow it down.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to develop some ideas concerning the role of the news media during popular wars. It was argued that the news media have logistic, cultural, and professional reasons for constructing patriotic media frames during such crises. It was further argued that this construction process manifests itself through three major professional routines: increasing level of cooperation with military and government sources, allowing military news slots to dominate coverage, and the ethnocentric coverage of death.

One reason to better understand these mechanisms is that they provide a useful handle for explaining how the role of the news media in such conflicts may change. If political consensus in support of a war effort should decline one would expect each of these mechanisms to become less prevalent. We would expect increasing tensions between the military and the news media, alternative news slots for covering the conflict (e.g. protests), and perhaps even some concern for suffering on the other side. There were in fact a number of periods during the second year of the *Intifada* that some of these changes began to take place in Israel. The leftist political parties and protest movements became both more organized and more vocal and questions that had been swept away in the initial wave of patriotism began to emerge. This provided another dimension for covering the conflict that had been unavailable in the early stages of the conflict. While the harmonious relations between the military and the Israeli press continued, there were a number of cracks in the wall. Prime Minister Sharon and the Chief of Staff both made public complaints against the Israeli media for not being patriotic enough. One also saw a number of more critical stories about the number of Palestinian civilians who were killed during IDF operations.

There were two major political factors that tended to limit the extent of these changes. The first was that the Labor Party – the major leftist party in Israel – remained part of the "National Unity Government". Indeed the head of the Labor Party continued to serve as the Defense Minister for the government. Thus, apart from a number of smaller parties, the amount of political consensus in support of the government's actions remained high. The

second was the continually high number terrorist attacks. There is understandably little sympathy for disidence when so many Israeli civilians are being killed and maimed.

It is perhaps important to conclude by saying something about what we should expect from the news media at times like this. After all, if there is a broad consensus in support of a war effort, shouldn't the national news media be one of the institutions helping to achieve the goals associated with that effort? Some wars are just others are not. One could certainly make a reasonable argument that in democratic countries the amount of popular support for a war effort is the best measure of its legitimacy. If so then there is nothing wrong in the news media propping up public morale.

At the same time too much political consensus can be a dangerous thing for democracies. There are far too many risks in passively accepting official frames especially when it comes to the issue of peace and war. The true role of the press is to raise just those questions the authorities would prefer not be asked. If the government is able to answer those questions in a way that convinces the broad public then this is reason enough to stay on course in the war effort. If they cannot provide adequate responses, then it is critical for the public to know. The real peril lies in the important questions never being asked.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ A similar approach can be found in Gamson et. al. (1992).
- ² A good example of a right-wing Prime Minister moving left was when the leader of the Likud, Menachem Begin, agreed to surrender the Sinai as part of a peace agreement with Egypt. He had no trouble getting the more leftist Labor Party to support him.
- ³ One of the historical facts that is often left out of this debate concerns the sequence of events at the Temple Mount. While there was a good deal of violence associated with Sharon's visit on the Thursday the 28th, no one from either side was killed. Far more important were the events of the following few days in which scores of Palestinians were killed. Thus on Friday the 29th five Palestinians were killed during riots at the Temple Mount. The level of violence rose considerably after that and on Saturday eleven were killed including twelve-year-old Mohammed al-Dura whose tragic death was broadcast around the world. Thus, one could certainly argue that the failure to use non-lethal means of quelling the Friday riots was far more important than Sharon's visit. One might also ask whether the failure to deal with this aspect of the issue has to do with the relatively low level of prominence given to Palestinian deaths in Israeli news reports.
- ⁴ This interview was carried out by my student Roni Sorek as part of a seminar paper on the topic. I appreciate her allowing me to use it.
- ⁵ Remarks made at the annual conference of the Israel Communication Association's annual meeting held at the University of Tel Aviv on December 24, 2000.
- ⁶ The Jerusalem Post competes with the English version of Ha'aretz.
- ⁷ There are however some interesting lulls in which the media carves out a major news hole for the conflict, but a lack concrete events makes it difficult to fill. A good example can be found by viewing the U.S. coverage of the "War Against Terror" the preceded the actual attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan.

⁸ There were some objections raised about these interviews by the government and a number of right-wing groups. It is not clear whether these objections reduced the number of Palestinians who appeared.

⁹ I have shown the tape of this interview to Israeli students. One can often hear laughter when the Palestinian makes mistakes in Hebrew. This illustrates another problem Palestinians have in passing their messages on to the Israeli public.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note however, that the ongoing coverage of death became less intensive than in the early stages of the Oslo (see Chapter Two). There were very few “mourning marathons” and unless many people were killed at once, the entertainment media quickly returned to normal. Given the ongoing number of casualties, isolated shootings and the like became almost as routine as traffic accidents. It would seem that the weight editors attribute to novelty is sometimes more important than the weight given to drama.