

Between the nation and the profession: journalists as members of contradicting communities

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Journalists during crises – the suspension of suspicion

In the overall research about the factors shaping news coverage there is a growing interest, especially since the Gulf War and after 11 September 2001, in the study of journalists' work during times of crisis like wars or terrorist attacks. The tone emerging from these studies is one of concern. The main fear is the abandonment of journalistic norms and values such as the search for neutrality, factuality and objectivity, in favor of patriotic loyalty (Liebes, 1992). In relation to the coverage of the Gulf War, Elihu Katz wrote: 'The combination of information management, instant news, empty analysis and the best of intentions threatens the future of critical journalism' (1992: 12).

The coverage of violent conflict when the journalist is a member of one of the conflicting parties invokes a professional dilemma: the journalist's traditional paradigm – of objectivity and neutrality – is challenged and confronted by the journalist's patriotic sentiment and their ethnic and cultural belonging. In fact, journalists are members of two communities simultaneously: the professional community and the national one.

Each community's ideology contradicts the other; one might say that the journalists are caught between Nation and Profession. On the one hand, the professional community calls upon the journalist to tell a story that will be, or will appear to be, factual, objective and balanced. Although it is known that this cannot be fully achieved, these values are still at the core of the profession's ideology. On the other hand, the national-cultural community calls upon the journalist to take part in the conflict, to be its representative and its weapon, in the battle of images and soundbites – to tell an unbalanced, unobjective story. The journalists are torn between two contradicting desires: the professional desire for objectivity and the national desire for solidarity, to quote Rorty's famous dichotomy.

In this commentary we explore journalists' work in a situation in which they had to confront this dual allegiance. We examine the role played by the Israeli media¹ during the first days of the Al-Aksa intifada in early October 2000. The discussion focuses on the coverage of violent clashes between the police and Israel's Arab citizens.²

The article argues that, faced with such events – which are violent and unexpected and are perceived as threatening the very existence of the state and society – journalists, as an 'interpretive community' do not develop an intra-professional discourse. Their belonging to the national community overpowers their membership in the professional one.

What especially interests us in studying the practices of journalists during the first, instinctive reaction to the events is the *shift*, the point at which the tone of coverage changes from national to professional. This commentary explains how the national culture is the main influence on journalists during the first (patriotic) coverage, and how the political environment determines and defines for them when the crisis is over and therefore when they can revert to their professional tone.

The point of view of the foreign press – represented by two major American newspapers – serves as a kind of 'control group'. The transition of the Israeli coverage towards one that is more similar to that represented by the American press, will indicate the shift back from the national to the professional.

Journalists' loyalty: to nation or profession?

The main question raised in this research is how journalists mediate the contradiction between their profession and their cultural-national belonging during times of conflict. This commentary sees it as question of identity. We suggest that the combination between the concept of identity, Tuchman's sociological research of the profession and the cultural approach to communication can best explain this question.

Our view of identity is derived from the non-essentialist view, which defines identity as a process of historical, social and cultural construction. Each individual has a 'multi-layered' identity and, in different circumstances, in light of the situation and context, a different component (ethnic, gender, class, etc.) is preferred over the others (Woodward, 1997).

We suggest that the changes explored in this research, as well as in the research of other scholars regarding other conflicts (Liebes, 1992, 1997; Schudson, 2002), derives from that multi-layered identity: in reaction to the violent eruption of conflict, journalists emphasize their national-cultural identity and, after a while, when the violence calms down, they return to emphasize their professional identity through a process of 'paradigm repair' (Berkowitz, 2000). In order to explain this we first have to confront the relationship between the journalists' professional self-image and the view on journalism developed by researchers.

The journalists' view of their profession originates from what Schudson calls 'the neutral model' (1978). According that model, journalists see their profession as quasi-scientific. They report in an objective and balanced manner, with no obligation to any outside interest. Journalists' loyalty is to an abstract truth and an abstract public interest (Carey, 2002).

The neutral-objective model is still the default setting for most journalists, even if they are aware of its weaknesses. Furthermore, the dominance of this model is evident from the fact that its contemporary challengers always start by attacking it as representative of current journalistic values. Thus in the latest survey done among Israeli journalists (Arab as well as Jewish) almost 90 percent of them

declared that 'verification of the truth' is the most important value of the profession alongside the values of 'neutrality' and of 'objectivity' (Tsfaty and Libio, 2003).

Journalism researchers conceptualize the journalistic profession as subject to different kinds of limitations, and journalists' self-image of themselves as 'objective' is a means to enhance their professional authority. In this commentary we concentrate on two strands of thinking about the limitations on journalistic objectivity: one emphasizes the influence on journalists of the culture in which they operate (Carey, 1989; Roeh, 1994) and the other sees the journalists as members of a professional interpretative community (Zelizer, 1993).³

Scholars drawing on the cultural approach to media studies (Carey, 1989) place less emphasis on the media's direct effects upon addressees, and stress instead its sociocultural function in constructing and shaping the community. The cultural approach sees the communication process as a negotiation of meanings, in which journalists and their audience share a common understanding of events, which in itself is shaped by their common culture (Schudson, 1989). According to this approach, the journalists do not explore reality from an external point of view, but rather function as representatives of the society in which they operate and as delegates of the culture they share (Carey, 2000). This approach sees one of the main roles of the journalists/media as constructing, shaping and preserving the solidarity of a community over time (Carey, 1989; Roeh, 1994; Rorty, 1991).

Emerging from the cultural approach to communication is the perspective that perceives journalists as members of an interpretative community. The concept of interpretative communities grew from the field of literature and cultural studies, and it emphasizes the community as characterized by the common modes of interpretation of their social world (Berkowitz and TerKeurst, 1999). According to this view, journalistic work is embedded in both the broader cultural context and in the narrower context of social interaction among journalists (Zelizer, 1993). The interpretative community approach sees journalists as involved in an ongoing process of socialization that creates a professional community whose members share values and perceptions. The concept of interpretative community helps to explain why journalists are less concerned about the reaction of 'the public' to their reports than the reactions of their colleagues and superiors (Carey, 1986).

As one can see, membership in the two communities calls upon journalists' contradicting allegiances. This tension is magnified at times of violent conflict, when the journalists have to privilege one of their identities: the national or the professional.

In her seminal research Tuchman (1973) described journalists' work as 'routinizing the unexpected'. Tuchman showed how journalists use institutional practices and definitions in order to cover the 'unexpected routine'. We wish to use Tuchman's perception in cultural analysis. We argue that, in times of severe crisis, when the unexpected is perceived as a threat to the state or to the social order, the journalists use their national point of view in order to 'routinize' the events. The 'instinctive' code used to identify those events is not institutional-professional but the journalists' own national-cultural. As Waisbord wrote in relation to 11 September 2001: 'while muted during "normal circumstances" under the observance of professional rules, sheer patriotism emerges in situations in which the "national community" is considered to be at risk' (Waisbord, 2002: 206). On such occasions (tragedy, public danger and threats to national security) 'there are no sides. We are all in it together' (Schudson, 2002: 41).

Analyzing Israeli journalists' coverage of the events of October 2000, we looked for traces of the two modes of coverage. We especially wanted to find out when

the shift from the national–patriotic mode of coverage to the professional mode occurred, and what forces determined it.

The October 2000 violent protest/riots

The end of September 2000 marked the outbreak of the second intifada, when violent protest/riots broke in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. A few days later the amazement and confusion among Israelis grew when protest/riots erupted among the Arab citizens of Israel, who constitute 18 percent of the population of Israel.⁴ The clashes with the police left 13 Arab citizens dead and dozens of others injured, some of them gravely. Police officers were also hurt in these events. One Jewish citizen was hit by a rock and killed.

It is important to distinguish the events that took place inside Israel from the armed violence that erupted in the West Bank and Gaza, and which has since become known as the Al-Aksa intifada.

The protest/riots created a unique time, which influenced journalists' work: the unexpected events inside Israel, alongside the armed intifada in the West Bank and Gaza, led to confusion in Israeli society. There was no clear definition of the 'events' by the political environment, which enabled a wide range of interpretations.

Research corpus and methodology

This study is based on a qualitative content analysis of Israel's print and electronic media during the October events from 29 September to 10 October 2000. The press analysis focuses on the most popular daily tabloid newspaper, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, and the analysis of the electronic media focuses on the news broadcasts of Israel's Channel Two.⁵ We also analyzed the elite/quality paper *Ha'aretz*. This newspaper drew wide public criticism, which accused it of being unpatriotic.

In order to understand the perspective of (relative) 'outsider' we also analyzed the coverage of the American newspapers: the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, for the sake of comparison.

Analysis: Israeli media coverage of the 'riots': exclusion and inclusion of the Arab citizens

Our analysis reveals that the coverage of the October events was characterized mainly by two simultaneous tendencies: exclusion and inclusion. In the Israeli media the Arab citizens were symbolically excluded from the overall Israeli citizenry. At the same time, their struggle was integrated with that of the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The framing of exclusion and inclusion was practiced in three main ways: by (1) defining the events, (2) defining the participants and (3) using visual-pictorial illustrations.

Defining the events: preferring military over civilian discourse

The Israeli journalists defined the events in the frame of the military discourse. By doing so, the media excluded the Arab citizens and confiscated their citizenship from them. Thus the running head (the caption in the top of the pages) in *Yedioth Ahronoth* of 2 October, pages 4 and 5 read: 'Intifada in the Galilee and Jaffa'. To

the Israeli audience, the word 'intifada' connotes the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the kind of fighting that took place there in the late 1980s. The newspaper thus brought the 'intifada', with all of the term's connotations, inside the State of Israel, creating an analogy between the anti-occupation struggle in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the struggle of Israel's Arab citizens. The use of the overhead logo indicates the editor's frame of meaning.⁶

Furthermore, the journalists did not just adopt the (broad) military discourse but emphasized the discourse of a specific war – the War of Independence (1948). This terminology, connoting the pre-state days, the 1948 War of Independence, the struggle to establish the State of Israel and the fight for its initial survival, indicates the immense significance and severity of the events – according to the journalists.

A sub-headline on the front page of *Yedioth Ahronoth* (2 Oct.) reads: 'Yesterday, for the first time since 1948, the Galilee was disconnected from central Israel, after thousands of Arab demonstrators blocked most of the [connecting] roads. The severe riots also spread to the Negev and Jaffa. . . .' The story itself mentioned that protesters had blocked 'strategic roads'. But the rest of the paragraph made this menacing phrase seem somewhat ludicrous, as the 'strategic blocking' apparently had the following consequences: 'Thousands of travellers making their way south after the Rosh Hashanah holiday were stuck for long hours in enormous traffic jams created by the blocked roads.' A similar, although less dramatic, tone is found also in *Ha'aretz*. The 4 October issue, which specified what happened in different places and described the situation in the Galilee, used terms like 'town under siege' and 'the Galilee settlers were not prepared for their neighbours' violent attack'.

This kind of coverage created an atmosphere of such intense menace that Israel's very existence seemed to be threatened. This position is epitomized by an interesting headline in *Yedioth Ahronoth* (2 October). The headline was stretched across the tops of two pages (2 and 3), which featured stories and pictures of the previous day's events. Written in unusually large letters, it read: 'A War of Independence?' The open-ended phrasing of the headline, which was not attributed to any particular source or provided with an answer, created an ambiguity: it could have been referring to the Israeli-Arabs' or Palestinians' struggle for independence, but at the same time it also implied that the State of Israel was (still?!) fighting for its own independence and survival.⁷

Defining the participants: preferring the ethnic over the civil

The analysis reveals that during the violent clashes the media reported from an 'ethnic' point of view, and placed itself alongside the Israeli police and the Jewish majority, against the Arab citizens. Thus the term 'Israeli citizens' was largely reserved for Jewish victims. Prominent examples of this could be found in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, which stated: 'in the course of the stormy previous day, a soldier and an Israeli citizen, five Arabs in the Galilee and eight Palestinians were killed' (3 October: 2). Thus *Yedioth Ahronoth* cemented in its readers' mind a hierarchy of casualties: at the top are the soldier and the Israeli citizen (i.e. Jewish citizen) then five Galilee Arabs – a status conferred on them by the newspaper instead of Israeli citizenship – and finally eight Palestinians (from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip). Furthermore, the newspaper divided the casualties into two categories: Jews (soldier and citizen) versus Arabs (Israeli citizens and residents of areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority). The comma in the sub-headline creates a division between ethnic categories; that comma epitomizes the exclusion of the Arab citizens from the overall Israeli population and their inclusion with the Palestinians.⁸

Examples of the self-positioning of the journalists with the police and against the Israeli-Arabs is seen in the 2 October issue of *Ha'aretz*. While the headline on page 3 reads 'in Acre and Nazareth Arab demonstrators shot at the police', the article states: 'five Israeli-Arabs were killed in the Galilee'. The editors considered the shooting at the police as more severe than the killing of five Arab citizens. Later, the Israeli journalists' association asked the police to protect them from the rioters while covering the events.

The journalists – all of them Jewish – could not enter the Arab towns and get their perspective on the events, because they feared being attacked because they were Jewish, and because the towns had been sealed off by the inhabitants and the police. In the struggle between the Arab minority and the police, they had no choice but to cover it from the police's point of view.

Using visual illustration

The visual inclusion and exclusion process was performed by journalists in two main ways: by presenting blurred maps and by contrasting the visual with the text.

The 3 October edition of *Yedioth Ahronoth* featured a map of 'all the main points of conflagration'. The green line – indicating the Israeli border before the occupation of the territories in the 1967 War – was drawn on the map but was very blurred and unclear. Neither the map nor the accompanying text made any real distinction between 'points of conflagration' inside and outside the Israeli state.

A Channel Two television interview with a leading Israeli-Arab figure, Mohammed Zidan (3 October), was conducted against a background of pictures from Ramallah, Netzarim and Hebron: that is, the studio interview with a representative of Israel's Arab citizens was thus juxtaposed with a visual from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This combination constructed a meaning, linking and making an analogy between the Arab citizens to the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

'The return of the repressed': back to the professional mode

It took a few more days for Israeli journalists to fully understand the meaning of the events. A few days after the events started, one could see a shift in the coverage, which became more neutral, less dramatic and more similar to the American coverage.

It's hard to define precisely when the shift occurred. The first signs appeared on 4 October. *Yedioth Ahronoth* published the pictures of six of the dead Israeli-Arab citizens with their names and place of residence. This editorial decision distinguished the Israeli-Arabs from the Palestinians (these victims had no names, were just a part of the statistics) and in a sense restored their citizenship after their death. More significant signs appear from 6 October onward.⁹

It is important to notice that the change in the coverage took place after the violence stopped and after changes in the political domain. On 4 October, Prime Minister Ehud Barak met with leaders of the Arab citizens and established a committee to investigate the shooting of Israeli-Arabs. At the same time, the minister responsible for the Israeli-Arab minority, Matan Vilnaee, promised to help in the economic development of the Arab sector. It seems as if the politicians were quicker to notice the severity of the situation. The violence (from both sides – the Arabs and the police) threatened the fragile relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel, and as such was considered as danger to the Israeli society.

Following the politicians, the journalists altered the framing of the coverage from a military to a civil frame and adopted more balanced terms in labeling the Israeli-Arab citizens. For example: on the front page of the weekend news-supplement of *Yedioth Ahronoth* (6 October), the headline reads: 'Fire Inside the House'. A few days later (10 October – after acts of violence by Jews against Arab property) the front-page headline was 'Jews and Arabs in Civilian Battles: Shooting, Arson and Plunder', and on page 2: 'The Jews' Intifada'.

By using the term 'intifada' – a term used few days previously to describe the Arab-citizens' 'riots', the journalists made the equation and offered the readers 'symmetrical' coverage. That symmetry can function as a rhetoric of balance (Roeh and Cohen, 1992), allowing the journalists to create the impression of objectivity and of adherence to the standards of professional journalism. It seems that Israeli journalists withdrew from the discourse of exclusion-inclusion and moved towards a more balanced and neutral frame.

A similar tone appeared in the coverage by the other newspaper we reviewed, *Ha'aretz*, which used a less militaristic discourse from the beginning of the events and called them 'Rosh-Hashanah's riots', 'severe riots in the Arab sector', etc. This paper used military discourse, but in an opposite way, when it quoted some of the Israeli-Arab leaders saying: 'the government declared war against us'. Instead of describing the Israeli state under siege, the paper emphasizes that same feeling among the Arab minority.

Ha'aretz's 4 October issue marked the paper's transition to 'full' civil discourse (two days before *Yedioth Ahronoth*). Instead of focusing on the events, it started dealing with what had caused them. Thus headlines in that issue read: 'How can agitation be avoided when half of the city has no sewage?' or, under the title of 'Jewish-Arab relations': 'Hurt population becomes hurting population'.

This kind of more professional coverage bears a greater resemblance to that of the foreign press. The American journalists of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* carried similar coverage from the beginning of the 'riots'. Thus, on 3 October, while the military frame in the Israeli press was at its peak, the *Washington Post's* headline read: 'Restive Israeli-Arabs Complain of Having "No Rights, No Dignity"'. The cause of the violence, according to that report is the need to 'vent anger'. The *New York Times* of the same day explained that there is a 'deep sense among Israel's one million Arabs that they are treated as second-class citizens'.

Like the Israeli press, the American papers used maps for illustration. The *Washington Post* (10 October) presented a map of Israel with references to points of conflagration. The American papers (unlike the Israeli papers) emphasized the difference between Israeli-Arabs and Palestinian Arabs. In the *Post's* map, the text related to each point, explaining exactly who was killed: in places inside Israel 'two Israeli-Arabs', in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip 'one Palestinian' and 'Israeli-Jews'.

The headlines of the *New York Times* (3 October) indicate that the American journalists made a distinction between the Israeli-Palestinian violence – the 'Middle East conflict' – and the clashes inside Israel.

To sum up: the Israeli journalists shifted their coverage over time. After using the national-ethnic frame during the first week of the riots, they adopted an increasingly civic frame, which is more neutral and balanced, that is, more professional. That professional mode was used during the whole time by the American press whose journalists were not part of either side of the conflict: 'the luxury of the detachment offered by the ideology of "objectivity", "neutrality"'

and “balance” . . . is reserved for reporting other people’s troubles, not one’s own’ (Liebes, 1997: 79).

Ha’aretz is positioned between these points of view. It is as if the newspaper tried to operate according to the professional-neutral model but, at the same time, to stay within the national Jewish-Israeli framing. Part of the Israeli public could not accept the paper’s deviation from the patriotic tone, and some of them cancelled their subscription as a protest.

Conclusion: journalists between national and professional interpretative communities

In this commentary we analyzed the coverage of the October 2000 events in Israel, in order to explain the practice of journalists during violent conflict. Following that analysis, we argued that, in the first days of the violent and unexpected events – which were perceived as a threat to the very existence of the state – journalists, as an ‘interpretative community’, did not develop a professional discourse and their belonging to the national community overpowered their membership of the professional one.

The journalists were in what Daniel Hallin (1986) defined as a ‘sphere of consensus’ in which journalists feel free to stop trying to be balanced and objective but rather invoke a generalized ‘we’ and take for granted shared values and assumptions (Schudson, 2002: 40).

It took (mainstream) Israeli journalists five days to shift the frame of their coverage. It was not until the politicians understood the severity of the events, and after the clashes between the police and Israeli-Arabs had ended, that the journalists changed that framing.

After that, Israeli journalists ‘repaired their professional paradigm’. They embraced Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s initiative to form a committee to investigate the events; they emphasized the importance of the Israeli-Arabs’ citizenship and raised the notion that the events were the result of social and economic discrimination against the Israeli-Arab population.

Journalists, as members of two communities, had to confront their dual allegiance. At first, as representatives of the grief and confusion of their national community, they turned to the patriotic perspective. After establishing inner and outer discourses with their peers, and especially with the political environment, they turned to a more professional perspective, satisfying the norms and values of the trade.

The question raised by this analysis is how journalists can deal with such a major contradiction? How can they avoid identity crisis? We suggest that the key to this answer is to conceptualize journalists’ work as a constant dynamic movement between the two communities and loyalties, each carrying a different set of norms and values. The journalists have to balance, constantly, between the two in relation to the external events and the political environment. Peter Arnet’s dismissal from NBC after his interview on the Iraqi TV can be seen as an example of a failure in balancing: while he saw it as objective journalism, the audience and his superiors saw it as anti-American journalism.

Journalists avoid identity crisis because they are never in a situation of being loyal to the two communities at the same time. They prefer their national component and ‘suspend’ their professional loyalty during the first stages of the threat and revert to it after the situation calms down.¹⁰ Referring to the headlines analyzed in this commentary, we can describe journalists as engaged in a ‘constant war of independence’.

Using the concept of 'paradigm repair' together with these findings, we suggest seeing the journalistic profession as based upon a permanent fundamental contradiction, which undermines the traditional definitions of the profession. The commentary suggests a new approach to the definition of journalism: journalists' identities are not fixed and clear but fluid and unstable, and we see journalists as neither members of the professional community nor members of the national-hegemonic community – but as moving constantly between them.

Furthermore, journalists do not chose the identity-component or the community they emphasize each time. They respond to external factors. As shown in the case study, journalists did not decide – through rational, critical, professional discourse – whether to represent a national or a professional point of view, but acted almost instinctively. During a crisis, the national framing serves journalists as 'default' mode.

We suggest looking at the temporary adoption of the patriotic tone not as opposed to professionalism but as an inevitable component of the profession. Journalists cannot perceive reality only from a distant, professional point of view; they are always members of their cultural and national communities.

Notes

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1. One of the characteristics of Israeli media is the lack of Arab journalists in the mainstream media. Thus all the journalists under discussion in the commentary are Jewish-Israelis.

2. The Arab citizens of Israel constitute 18 percent of the population. Many terms are used to identify this group: Israeli-Arabs, the Arab sector, the Palestinian minority in Israel and more. The variety of terms reflects the complicated identity of the group. For more details, see Rabinowitch (1993).

3. Other main kinds are: institutional limitations (Galtung and Ruge, 1973; Tuchman, 1973; concerning the Israeli case: Caspi and Limor, 1999) and ideological limitations (Gitlin, 1980; concerning Israel see: Dor, 2001; Levy, 1991).

4. On the social and political status of the Arab citizens of Israel see Asad (1997), Bishara (1993, 1996), Peled (1993), Rabinowitch (1993). On their coverage in the Israeli media see: Aburaiya et al. (1998) and First (2001).

5. In order to follow the 'Israeli mainstream' we focused on the TV news broadcasts of Channel Two news editions, the most watched news programs, and on the most popular newspaper in Israel: *Yedioth Ahronoth*. On weekends, it is read by about 70 percent of all Hebrew-readers.

6. It is important to note that many Israeli-Arab spokesmen themselves made the connection to the Palestinian intifada in the West Bank and Gaza. These circumstances led the journalists to prefer the analogy, which fits in with Jewish-Israeli mainstream (national) public opinion, instead of producing an independent, critical, more neutral (and more professional) mode of coverage, like that of the foreign press.

7. Descriptive (not informative) headlines are a common convention in the popular paper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, but they usually end with exclamation marks. The unusual ending – with a question mark – signified ambivalence and uncertainty about the events.

8. The relatively homogeneous ethnic background of the Israeli media can explain the 'ethnic coverage'; almost all the journalists in the Israeli media are Jews (for detailed institutional analysis of the Israeli media see Caspi and Limor, 1999).

9. Schudson (2002: 36) marks the 28 September issue of the *New York Times* as the 'end of the overwhelming consensus in post-September 11 journalism'. We suggest that the shorter time it took the Israeli press to embrace the professional mode can be explained as a result of two factors: the intensity of the event (the US event was much dramatic and shocking for the community) and the degree of rarity (the fact that the Israeli society is more accustomed to violent security events).

10. There are, of course other identity components (gender, class, etc.). It might be that in other situations and contexts (conflicts relating to unemployment, economics, race, etc.) journalists privilege those components.

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