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Structuring the Sacred: Media Professionalism and the Production of Mediated Holocaust Memory

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Structuring the Sacred: Media Professionalism and the Production of Mediated Holocaust Memory

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In this study, the authors explore the considerations that guide media organizations when they narrate the past. To operationalize this research interest, the authors interviewed 10 senior Israeli electronic media professionals about the production processes that shape the broadcasts of electronic media on Israel's Memorial Day for the Holocaust and the Heroism. The analysis of the interviews illuminates the constructed and negotiated (rather than natural and inherent) nature of media professionalism.

The creation of a routine media flow seems to be intrinsically embedded in the discourse of the present: Journalists report on current events; programmers and producers are constantly looking for new shows and fresh formats while tracking the immediate feedback received from audiences. This assumed prevalence of the present in the work of media professionals has been challenged by scholars with regard to phenomena such as the use of nostalgia in advertising (Meyers, 2009), the representation of the past in popular culture (Anderson, 2000), the ongoing presence of the past in news dealing with current events (Edy, 2006), and the operation of journalists as an interpretive memory community (Zelizer, 1993).¹

¹ The prevalence of the present in routine media flow has also been challenged by studies looking at the use of speculations about the future in the news (Neiger, 2007).

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In the ongoing contest over the authority to narrate the past and to infuse it with meaning, the mass media are uniquely positioned: On the one hand, they provide a public arena for various agents (e.g., political activists, academics, local communities) who want to influence the ways in which collective pasts are narrated and understood. On the other hand, specific media outlets, as well as individual media professionals, operate as salient memory agents who aspire to provide their own readings of the collective past. Such readings are always anchored within individual or institutional experiences of the past and the present; professional, commercial, and ideological inclinations; and varying perceptions regarding the role of the mass media in the process of narrating the past. All of this points to the significance of studying “media memory” (Kitch, 2005, pp. 175–184); that is, the systematic exploration of collective pasts that are narrated by the media, through the media, and about the media.

Within the context of the three traditional trajectories of communication research (text, production, reception), the majority of media memory studies analyze print and broadcast texts that address the past. A far smaller number of works have probed the mediated memories and “media biographies” of audiences, or have aimed to assess the role of the mass media in the shaping of “collected memories” among audiences (Volkmer, 2006). Similarly, few studies have explored the phenomenon that stands at the heart of this investigation: the process by which media professionals construct mnemonic outputs. Such a research agenda is significant because it enables scholars to position collective recollecting within the larger scope of the production of culture (Peterson & Anand, 2004); it assists them in addressing—within the specific context of media memory production—questions regarding the ways in which media professionalism is defined and negotiated by members of relevant communities of practitioners; and what interrelations exist between the values and norms of media professionalism and the norms and values of other cultural agents that surround and interact with these media organizations. A salient example that demonstrates the contribution of this production-focused approach towards the investigation of media memory can be found in Ashuri’s (2007) study of the dynamics of international co-productions of historical television documentaries. Her analysis shows that the current discussion of the role of mass electronic media in the transformation of national collective memories into globalized memories tends to overlook the actual production dynamics that frame the work of media professionals.

To operationalize our research interest, we interviewed Israeli electronic media professionals, all prominent operators within the “culture industries,” with regard to the production processes that shape the programming structure and specific contents aired on Israel’s Memorial Day for the Holocaust and the Heroism (MDHH). We focused our attention on the case study of MDHH broadcasts production because this phenomenon presents a unique

opportunity to study the making of media memory. Israeli electronic media are legally instructed to memorialize on MDHH; the 1959 MDHH law asserted:

On MDHH two minutes of silence will be observed nationwide. All manner of work and transportation must cease to operate during this period of time. Memorial services, public gatherings, and ceremonies will take place in military bases and educational institutions . . . **Programs aired on the radio² will express the uniqueness of the day;**³ Entertainment establishments will feature only appropriate contents.

And so, on MDHH, all major Israeli media outlets consciously turn their attention to the collective past and focus on the commemoration of the Holocaust.

Given this specific legal instruction, this study contributes to existing media memory scholarship as it illuminates a unique media production process in which the commemoration of the past is not a mere context, but rather the topic that stands at the heart of professional media decision-making processes. Moreover, while most former media memory studies have looked at the ways by which a specific media narrative or a genre construct the past, the case of MDHH broadcasts enables us to investigate the more integrative logic guiding the programming of an entire broadcasting day, composed of various genres and contents.

Last, the establishment of MDHH as a day of collective ritualistic mourning has created a unique situation in which the memory of the Holocaust is addressed by the majority of Israeli media, on the same day every year (Zandberg, 2010). This, in turn, assists the tracking of the diachronic development of Israeli Holocaust media memory across time. Thus, the exceptional circumstances that shape MDHH broadcasts—especially the ways in which they stress the tension between the conventions of Holocaust representation and the routines of media work—help elucidate the constructed and negotiated nature of “media professionalism.”

The article consists of four sections. The first section discusses the main theoretical concepts guiding this study as an exploration of how mass mediated memories are produced and disseminated. The second section details the study’s research questions and methodology. The third section analyzes the findings gathered from the interviews. We probe the ways in which Israeli media professionals acquire their knowledge regarding the Holocaust, their perceptions regarding the role of the mass media in the commemoration of the Holocaust, and the various processes, considerations, and limitations that shape the production of MDHH media contents, as well as

² Israel’s first television channel started broadcasting in 1968.

³ Emphasis added by the authors; all translations were made by the authors.

the ways in which these professionals assess the success of MDHH media. The final section discusses the implications of the findings for the study of media memory.

HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF MASS MEDIATED MEMORIES

According to Turow (1991), “research on the production and dissemination of mass media messages requires seeing organizations and industries as creators of meaning” (p. 224). This type of study is in its core “interinstitutional,” in that it probes the ways in which media organizations operate as well as “the way structures of power within institutions of society insinuate themselves into the work of elements of the mass media institution” (p. 222). The greatest challenge of such research lies, according to Turow, in the inevitable gap between the nature of academic explorations, on the basis of abstract concepts such as “ideology” or “hegemony,” and the nature of organizational study, which investigates small social units and non-abstract media professionals. Hence, any attempt to reach a generalization on the basis of organizational inquiry will always be an inference rather than a mere observation (p. 229).

As mentioned, this study focuses on the ways by which media memory is produced and programmed by Israel’s electronic media professionals. What follows, therefore, is an exploration of the theoretical foundations that informed the study’s design and its interpretation of the interviews conducted. The generalized inferences we generated from the interviewees’ expressed views are anchored within scholarly discourses addressing Holocaust commemoration, the nature of media rituals, and the study of media professionalism.

During Israel’s first decades of existence, its public Holocaust discourse was dominated by official voices (Shapira, 1998). The fact that most of the murdered Jews did not revolt against the Nazis did not fit the prevailing Zionist ethos. This perception was encapsulated in the dichotomous title “Memorial Day for the Holocaust and the Heroism” given to Israel’s official day of mourning, which was established in 1951 and has become, over the years, one of the dominant rituals of Israel’s civil religion—a mourning day marked by Israeli Jews who are directly related to the Holocaust, as well as by those who have no personal connection to the tragedy. The title MDHH stresses the supposedly inherent tension between the alleged “passive” conduct of most of the victims (represented by the term *Holocaust*) and the courageous Zionist actions of the few victims who did revolt (represented by the term *heroism*).

The 1961 Eichmann trial is usually identified as a turning point in the shaping of the way Israelis understand the Holocaust, because

media coverage of the trial exposed many Israelis for the first time to the stories of the victims (Pinchevski, Liebes & Herman, 2007; Yablonka, 2004). Subsequently, traumatic experiences such as the sight of helpless Israeli POWs during the 1973 war led to an increased erosion of the victim/hero dichotomy. Through this gradual process, Israeli perceptions of the Holocaust and the memory of the Holocaust have changed in several ways. First, Holocaust memory has become more privatized, because of the shift from official memory agents to individual ones (Rein, 1993). Second, over the years Holocaust discourse has expanded beyond the well-defined borders of the official remembrance days and infiltrated day-to-day Israeli life, to the extent that the Holocaust functions as a filter through which Israelis interpret foreign and domestic affairs. Last, over the years Israeli Holocaust discourse has gradually shifted from a constant discussion of the event itself to an increasing emphasis on the memory of the Holocaust and the challenges of preserving it.

Social rituals are symbolic instruments through which members of a given community manifest and perform their sense of belonging to the group. Neiger and Roeh (2003, p. 479) identified several common core characteristics of social rituals: *repetitiveness*—rituals can only become significant once they are repeated; *liminality*—rituals exist within a differentiated time, distinct from the routine time surrounding them; *high social significance*—rituals use symbols that emblemize social significance; and *collective activities*—rituals are shared by members of given communities.

Social rituals are characterized by the saturated use of symbols. The heavy reliance on symbols enables a multitude of social actors to take part in rituals and to interpret these symbols according to their specific worldviews. Therefore, the ability to take part in social rituals via the infusion of various meanings into these rituals explains why on such occasions the sense of social solidarity is intensified (Alexander, 1988). At the same time, rituals can never be perceived as mere tools of conformity and cohesion (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Therefore, beyond all generalizations, the meaning and significance of specific social rituals can only be fully comprehended while considering the unique historical context in which the rituals were shaped and the history of their practice (Connerton, 1989, p. 51).

The exact definition and nature of media rituals is often debated. Most conceptualizations follow the Durkheimian tradition and perceive media rituals as a form of social action; but while some scholars focus on the role of the media in representing rituals performed by other social agents (Dayan & Katz, 1992), others emphasize the ritualistic elements that characterize the operation of the media themselves (Couldry, 2003).

Scholars are similarly divided over the relative prevalence of media rituals. Some researchers perceive media rituals as exceptional phenomena: interruptions of the routine media flow by meticulously planned media spectacles, or else the intensive coverage and public discussion of terror attacks

and disasters (Katz & Liebes, 2007). In contrast, other scholars emphasize routine communication as a ritual in its own right. This approach is identified with Carey's familiar conceptualization of the mundane operation of mass modern media as a social ritual that "centers on the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (1989, p. 43). In this context, MDHH broadcasts constitute a media ritual that is unique and routine: On the one hand, the contents and programming patterns of MDHH broadcasts differ from the usual flow of daily broadcasts in various aspects (Meyers, Zandberg & Neiger, 2009). On the other hand, this interruption of the regular broadcasting flow is a routine in its own right, as it occurs every year on the same day. Hence, as a media phenomenon, MDHH broadcasts routinely break the routine.

Numerous commemorative ceremonies are held on MDHH throughout Israel's educational system and in various public spaces. In this array of social rituals, Israeli media constitute their own ritual: for 24 hours, the majority of Israeli media outlets—television (including movie channels) and radio stations, newspapers, and Web sites—dedicate their resources to the construction of Holocaust commemoration. Such an orchestrated effort to produce media memory—in Israel or elsewhere—is significant because in this media-saturated era, what most people know about the past, according to Kitch (2005), "is encoded in stories, which today are told primarily through the media. When they are recycled and redefined over time, and when they are ritualized in the inclusive language of reminiscence, such narratives themselves become part of cultural history" (pp. 183–184).

During MDHH, Israeli media perform a distinct role: They are the most important venue through which the state bereavement ritual is transmitted to the public; despite the difficult and demanding contents of MDHH broadcasts, the average ratings achieved by Israeli television channels on the eve of MDHH⁴ over the years have been similar to those recorded on regular prime time evenings.⁵ At the same time, on MDHH Israeli media devise their own programming schedules and infuse this officially sponsored ritual with contents that reflect ideological, financial, professional, and personal considerations and preferences. Such programming schedules inherently integrate the conventions and norms of routine media production and the unique characteristics of Holocaust commemoration.

The contents that are ultimately aired and printed in Israeli media on MDHH reflect a nuanced approach toward this state-sponsored ritual: Some media outlets or specific media contents seem to forcefully echo

⁴ Following Jewish tradition, MDHH commences on the eve of MDHH and comes to an end on the following evening.

⁵ The average ratings (1999–2004) for the airing of the Yad Vashem ceremony were 14.5%.

the institutional interpretation of the memory of the Holocaust in the context of Israeli reality. The most emblematic example for this pattern can be found in the simultaneous airing of the MDHH opening ceremony at *Yad Vashem* (Israel's national Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority) by Israel's public radio news channel and all of Israel's television broadcast channels—commercial and public—all using the same footage or soundtrack. In contrast, and especially in recent years, some outlets or programs have used this media ritual to convey critical or even subversive messages. Hence, for example, on the eve of the 2007 MDHH, Channel 2, Israel's leading commercial television outlet, aired the investigative report *The Ethics of Reparations*, which criticized the Israeli government and other institutions for their unwillingness to support needy Israeli Holocaust survivors with German reparations monies allocated for that purpose.

The decision to air or print particular media contents on MDHH are made by a group of specific Israeli media professionals. Media industry studies traditions range from political-economic macro-level explorations to micro-level analyses focusing on interpersonal and organizational dynamics (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009). In this context, our study embraces a production of culture perspective (Peterson & Anand, 2004). In his influential *Inside Prime Time*, Gitlin (1994) pointed to the difficulty of understanding the manner by which television executives decide which “pitches” will eventually materialize into scheduled shows. Because the guiding principle of commercial media is financial gain, the overwhelming imperative of commercial media executives is to create programming schedules that are safe and will not disturb advertisers, political pressure groups, and audiences. To use Bourdieu's terms, the subfield of mass cultural production in which such executives operate involves high levels of economic capital; however, the price to be paid for gaining this financial capital by agents and institutions in this sub-field is a much lower level of symbolic profit (Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 215). At the same time, television producers are occasionally allowed to experiment with more sophisticated and cutting-edge contents that will grant them creative prestige among members of their professional community and upscale demographic groups of viewers (Gitlin, 1994, p. 307).

The case of MDHH broadcasts sheds a new light on this delicate balancing act between material and symbolic forms of capital. As this study shows, the production and programming of MDHH contents are part of the responsibilities of the same Israeli media executives who make these decisions all year long. Yet, the considerations that characterize MDHH programming position such professional decisions at the extreme end of the entire spectrum of the year-long media operation. As mentioned, Israeli media are legally instructed to memorialize on MDHH. Beyond this legislative instruction, the legal regulation of electronic broadcasting in Israel prohibits the

airing of advertisements and commercial endorsements on all local outlets—commercial and public⁶—on three commemorative dates: MDHH, Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers and Terror Victims (MDFS), and the 9th day of the month of Av (*Tish' Be'av*).⁷ The mere fact that Israeli media outlets invest financial resources in such a nonprofitable broadcasting day suggests that money (i.e., ratings) is not the only currency used by broadcasters. Rather, on MDHH, Israeli media replace material capital with symbolic capital; that is, they use their commercial-free broadcasts on this day to promote their status as legitimate agents of collective memory.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND DESIGN

According to Bourdieu (1996), “the charismatic ideology of ‘creation’ . . . constitutes the principal obstacle to a rigorous science of production of the value of cultural goods.” Such a misguided worldview “directs the gaze towards the apparent producer—painter, composer, writer—and prevents us from asking who has created this ‘creator’ and the magic power of transubstantiation with which the ‘creator’ is endowed” (p. 167). And so, although some of the ten electronic media professionals interviewed for this study have created media contents that are directly related to the memory of the Holocaust, our main goal was to gain insights regarding the ways by which media organizations address the challenge of Holocaust commemoration. That is, the interviewees were chosen according to their ability to address the full scope of considerations directing the decision to produce and program MDHH media.

The choice of these specific interviewees also aimed to capture current dynamics in Israel’s media map: For many years, the broadcast version of MDHH was dominated by official-statist agents, as Israel’s television and radio outlets were all noncommercial and publicly owned. Since the beginning of the 1990s, however, Israel’s media map has changed drastically, with the introduction of two commercial broadcast television channels, cable and satellite broadcasting, and local-commercial radio stations.

All of the interviewees have at least 15 years of experience working for Israeli electronic media organizations. Five of the interviewees work or have recently worked for television outlets: the head of the documentary department of a public television channel; the head of the documentary

⁶ The funding of the majority of Israeli electronic media is based—partially or entirely—on advertising revenues: commercial media outlets and Israel’s civil public radio stations air commercials; the Israeli military radio and public television channels air commercial endorsements and advertisements for non-profit organizations. Public broadcasting is additionally supported by a state tax. Satellite and cable channels are funded via subscribers’ fees.

⁷ A mourning day commemorating the destruction of the first and second temples.

department of a commercial broadcast channel; a head producer and vice chief executive officer of one the two franchisees operating Israel's largest broadcast channel; the manager of an Israeli cable documentary channel; and the manager of an Israeli children's cable channel. Three of the interviewees work or have recently worked for radio outlets: two public radio newsmen who were reporters, editors, and former news department managers; and a veteran public radio music editor. One of the interviewees is the manager of a local-commercial radio station; he is also a television reporter who created a series of documentaries narrating the stories of Holocaust survivors. The 10th interviewee was, at the time of the interview, the manager of a major public foundation that supports the production of Israeli documentaries. Of the interviewees, 8 are men, and 2 are women.⁸ Most of the interviewees were in their 50s; the oldest interviewee was in his early 60s, and the youngest were in their late 30s. All of the interviews were conducted in 2008; they were approximately 90 minutes long and were mostly conducted in the offices of the interviewees.

The interviews could best be defined as informant interviews, because they were based on a purposeful selection of individuals who are knowledgeable with regard to the specific topics that are relevant for this study (Lindlof, 1995, pp. 170–172). The interviews were semistructured and were based on open-ended questions; all interview schedules included a first section composed of questions that were relevant for all interviewees, and a second, differentiated section composed of questions regarding specific media or specific outlets; beyond this basic framework, the conversations developed in many cases in various directions.

To comprehend and contextualize the underlying considerations, motivations, and tensions that shape the production of MDHH media, the interviews addressed themes such as the interviewees' personal experiences regarding the Holocaust and its memory; the processes through which the media organizations they work for plan their MDHH broadcasting schedules; the various considerations that guide their media organizations in the selection of materials to be aired on MDHH; the external and internal pressures that are sensed through this process; the ways in which new employees learn how to operate on MDHH and more. The transcripts of the interviews were categorized using the Narralyzer software (Kibbutz Yakum, Israel, 2011). This enabled us to construct analytical categories on the basis of the systematic identification of recurring thematic patterns in the texts of the interviews.

⁸ There are no official data on the distribution of employees by gender in Israeli media. Studies of Israeli journalism estimate that around 40% of Israeli journalists are female. Yet, female journalists are still mostly employed in low-ranking positions (Lachover, 2000).

ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

Asking how and where Israeli Jews learn about the Holocaust is, to a certain extent, a redundant quest, because the Holocaust operates as an all-encompassing interpretive frame in Israeli culture. Nevertheless, we aimed to discern the various layers of personal and collective experiences that shape the interviewees' understanding of the Holocaust and its meaning. A first framework of knowledge could be traced back to the personal biographies of the interviewees: 6 of the 10 are children of Holocaust survivors, and the parents of another fled from Germany to Mandatory Palestine in 1939. Children of Holocaust survivors, known as *second-generation survivors*, were in many cases born shortly after the war and were supposed to substitute for the families that the survivors had lost. Such children were thus confronted from an early age with nearly impossible expectations (Wardi, 1992). It is important to note that we did not select our interviewees according to this biographical characteristic, which we were mostly unaware of. Rather, what this similarity reflects is the dominance of a certain ethnic background (Jewish European descent) and age group among Israeli elites.

Interviewees who grew up in homes of Holocaust survivors all felt the presence of this traumatic memory, even if the parents insisted on not speaking with their children about the war. "My father survived the Holocaust, but his parents and all of his brothers and sisters died in the Warsaw Ghetto," explained Nachum,⁹ a vice chief executive officer of a television franchisee. "He [the father] paid a heavy emotional price for that. And so my entire upbringing was in a post-Holocaust world." The lingering presence of this traumatic memory influenced the lives of all of these interviewees: one of them refuses to this day to travel to Germany or to buy German products, and some interviewees have created media contents that address the stories of their families during the war. Ron, a foundation manager, linked this experience to his overall professional world view:

I think that among other things, the fact that my parents are Holocaust survivors made me very connected to and supportive of stories where you can find human drama; it's hard for me to connect to stories that are very abstract . . . In contrast to the need to deliver information, to be an encyclopedia . . . I cling to the human experience. And so, I try to infuse the documentaries I support with the values of drama.

A second framework of knowledge about the Holocaust could be described as institutionally sponsored memory: the Israeli educational system, youth movements, military, and of course the mass media all take part in the construction and dissemination of the memory of the Holocaust

⁹ All names were changed to preserve anonymity.

among Israeli Jews. The third framework of knowledge was more frequently mentioned among the younger interviewees, who addressed their professional experiences as a framework of knowledge. As Tali, the manager of a children's cable channel, noted:

My deep connection [with the Holocaust] started when I was involved in the production of related contents . . . During one of our productions we sent Michal Yannai [an Israeli actress] to Anne Frank's house . . . Another time, we made a film about one of Janusz Korczak's orphans, who we took back to Poland . . . I admit that all of these productions connected me to the issue. Just like a teacher who has to teach a subject, and then she meets this topic from a closer point of view.

HOLOCAUST REPRESENTATION AND ROUTINE MEDIA FLOW

In the context of the study of how media professionals construct collective memories, the case study of the mass mediated representation of the Holocaust bears a unique significance. This is because the extreme nature of the Holocaust clearly illuminates both the limitations and the capabilities of the mass media in their representation of difficult pasts. When asked about the representation of the Holocaust during the routine operation of Israeli media, all interviewees stressed the importance of addressing the topic. Some emphasized the national-Zionist lessons that could be learned from such media contents, while others focused on more universal morals; still, the overwhelming rhetoric of the interviews portrayed the commemoration of the Holocaust as an ongoing social obligation of Israeli media. At the same time, several interviewees asserted the problematics of addressing the Holocaust in their day-to-day work.

The challenges of depicting the Holocaust within the public arena have led to the development of conventions demanding that the representation of the Holocaust be accurate and solemn, and that it be presented as a unique historical event (Des Pres, 1988). Conventions of this type contradict the premises of the operation of most mass media in three fundamental ways. First, as discussed by Gitlin (1994), in order to please consumers, mass media products are designed according to schemes that have been proven to be successful in the past. The reliance on schemes such as the dominance of conventional and active heroes and a definitive happy end contradicts the harsh realities of the Holocaust. Second, one of the defining characteristics of current mass media, and especially mass commercial media, is their insistence not to challenge the consumer. These traits conflict with the notion that representations of the Holocaust ought to command maximum attention and have lasting effects. Last, a conflict exists between the understanding the Holocaust as a unique event and the standardized nature of

mass media production: The mere fact that television and radio shows are part of a flow of entertainment that is frequently interrupted by commercials necessarily “secularizes” any representation of sanctified subjects such as the Holocaust (Shandler, 1999).

The inherent tension between the conventions of Holocaust representation and the ways in which our interviewees interpret the tenets of media professionalism could be best conceptualized through the notion of attention. Several interviewees argued that the best way to gain public attention to Holocaust-related contents is to position them on any day other than MDHH. Airing a Holocaust-related item on MDHH is counterproductive, because on that day all media contents deal with the Holocaust, so it is difficult for a specific item to stand out. Moreover, scheduling a feature film, a documentary, or a news item on MDHH is interpreted, according to the interviewees, as a sign that it could only be aired on that day. “If you want to gain public attention to such [Holocaust related] issues,” explained Nadav, the head of the documentary department of a public broadcast channel, “it is best not to air them on Holocaust Day.”¹⁰

At the same time, *attention* is an elusive concept when it comes to the common aesthetic and commercial conventions guiding the operation of the mass media. Dealing with the Holocaust is necessarily unpleasant; such a programming decision thus draws the viewers’ attention in a way that supposedly contradicts the notion of proper media broadcasting flow.¹¹ Perhaps the most emblematic concretization of this tension can be found in the instances where programmers have to schedule commercial breaks during the airing of Holocaust-related items. The complexity of all the aforementioned considerations is best described by Moshe, who created a series of documentaries about Holocaust survivors who had excelled in various fields after the war:

My condition was that my “victory films” would not be aired on Holocaust Day. It was clearly stated in the contract—the first airing of every film will not be on Holocaust Day. Holocaust Day films are sad and gloomy. And I unequivocally wanted something else. Something that is victorious. Besides that, no one will fund a Holocaust Day film. I wanted my films to receive the respect they deserve, and that could not happen on Holocaust Day . . .

. . . During the first two screenings of two of my “victory films,” there were no commercial breaks. But when ×××× was aired, I knew that there were going to be commercial breaks. So I scheduled, in advance, specific points along the film that were designated for the purpose of

¹⁰ A common abbreviation for MDHH.

¹¹ For a discussion of the tensions between Holocaust commemoration and commercial broadcasting in the American context, see Cory (1980).

interrupting the story in order to air commercials. What happened next was horrific; I thought I was going to die. One of the scenes included an interview with a Holocaust survivor who [after the war] became involved in the development of Israel's nuclear project. And he said that there would be no second Holocaust because of Israel's nuclear capabilities. But in the middle of this very-very strong sentence they cut to a Coca Cola commercial.

MAKING MDHH MEDIA: MOTIVES, CONSIDERATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

MDHH is scheduled in the annual Jewish-Israeli calendar as a part of a larger Zionist "master commemorative narrative" (Zerubavel, 1995, p. 12) manifesting a cycle of creation, death, and regeneration. This emblematic continuum starts with the celebration of Passover, representing the birth of Jewish national identity. MDHH is scheduled 11 days later, and it represents the ultimate perils of diasporic existence. Seven days later—a deliberate choice that stems from the traditional Jewish seven days of mourning—Israel observes MDFS. Last, this meta-narrative concludes with Israel's Independence Day, celebrated immediately after MDFS. The coupling of MDFS with Independence Day symbolizes the inherent connection between the sacrifice of the fallen soldiers and Israel's existence (Ben-Amos & Beth-El, 1999). This deliberate effort to construct national time (the "Zionist high holidays") has created an annual 3-week-long timeframe that is heavily populated by preplanned obligatory media contents. Thus, one of the most salient features of MDHH media programming is its predictability. Different media outlets operate according to different schedules; still, in most electronic media, MDHH programming is discussed and decided months in advance, usually alongside the discussions regarding MDFS programming.

Naturally, there are no specific media professionals whose sole responsibility is to program MDHH or any other commemorative dates. Yet, it is understood that some people are more qualified to do so: "This is not a job you assign to the head of the entertainment department," explained Nachum. "You might want to think about the head of the documentary department; someone whose mental orientation fits." Tzvi, a veteran music editor, added that the task of planning the MDHH musical lineup requires "professionalization," which could only be acquired through experience: "Younger musical editors always ask the veteran ones: 'Does this song fit?' There's a sense of awe in making these decisions."

Throughout the year, managers receive Holocaust-related materials from outside sources, which they deem to be relevant for airing on MDHH. During programming meetings, the airing of these materials is discussed and

complemented by decisions regarding the independent production of media contents. The attempt to decipher the mechanisms by which media professionals make MDHH-related decisions reveals a host of seemingly conflicting yet intertwined considerations.

Negotiating Material and Symbolic Forms of Capital

A first set of considerations is related to the tension between symbolic capital and material capital. As mentioned, Israeli media are prohibited to air commercials on MDHH. This ban upsets the regular operation of the mass media, and especially mass commercial media. High ratings on MDHH have no financial impact on broadcasters, and thus one of the fundamental motives guiding programmers is the need to cut costs on MDHH programming.

One method of cutting costs is to constantly rerun films and documentaries that were previously aired on MDHH. Arguably, the most evident influence of financial pressure is the tendency to air contents that were not produced or originally commissioned by the media outlets that program them. Hence, MDHH schedules often feature contents, especially documentaries that were produced by various institutions, or at times by private people. Such contents include the annual *Yad Vashem* ceremony opening MDHH and other similar ceremonies held at other institutions. Other contents include documentary films made by Holocaust survivors who filmed their commemorative voyages with their families to Europe. While previous scholarship has addressed “information subsidies” mainly within the context of news production studies (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990), the similar pattern found here could be termed *commemoration subsidies*: powerful mnemonic agents such as *Yad Vashem* and the Shoah Foundation, or wealthy individuals who can fund the production of professional documentaries, provide broadcasters with free or nearly-free relevant media contents. In turn, this outsourcing of media memory work means that these institutional and individual memory agents gain a significant advantage in promoting their interpretations of the memory of the Holocaust.

Financial considerations also come into play in the context of the legal obligations of commercial broadcasters. Israeli law compels local broadcast, cable, and satellite television outlets to meet quotas of quality productions. These obligations were legislated to support the local television industry, and they obligate these channels to dedicate an annual number of broadcast hours to documentary films. Documentaries do not usually attract vast audiences, and thus one method of meeting the quotas requirement is to schedule a large number of documentaries during the non-profitable MDHH broadcasts;¹² or, as Nachum put it: “Because regulation forces us to air a

¹² Since 2006, local television channels have been issued some limitations on their ability to concentrate the airing of many documentary hours on specific days.

certain amount of documentaries annually, Holocaust Day has become a documentary clearing house.”

Of course, this is not the only reason for the dominance of the documentary genre in MDHH broadcasts.¹³ The complementing reasons for this phenomenon are rooted in the opposite pole of this set of considerations: the wish to acquire symbolic capital on MDHH. Israeli media aspire to gain the status of authoritative narrators on MDHH, and airing documentaries is one means of advancing this goal: such films are perceived as higher forms of communication, so they bestow an aura of respectability upon the broadcasters. Moreover, the airing of documentaries defuses the difficulties caused by the implementation of popular-commercial conventions of representation while depicting the Holocaust by showing the unmediated (rather than the scripted and acted) past supposedly “as it was.” The wish to gain symbolic capital on MDHH is echoed in the words of interviewees addressing their role as integral participants in the construction of this national bereavement ritual. “During Holocaust Day we work to preserve a symbol of the state,” explained Hillel, a veteran radio editor and manager. “On such a day *Kol Israel* [Israel’s public radio] is just like *Yad Vashem* or Mount Herzl.” Tali added:

Traditionally, there is a sense of mission and investment on such days. I think that this notion grows out of the understanding . . . to put it in a banal way, that this is not a fun day. There is nothing to see on television on this day . . . you [as a child] address it as something that is related to your grandma and grandpa and not to you . . . so our challenge, many of us [working for the children’s channel] young mothers . . . is to sell Holocaust Day to children.

Israeli media professionals identify media contents that advance the worthy cause of “proper” commemoration—which yields symbolic capital—according to various cues and signals: these include documentaries that were produced by notable sources (e.g., the BBC); films that won prizes at international film festivals; and films that document the Holocaust-related memories of important individuals. In this context, an argument often mentioned in support of the selection of specific media content is its ability to tell the story of Holocaust survivors in their own words, because in the next decade or so the last survivors will pass away. Arguably, the most contradictory way of acquiring symbolic capital on MDHH is by operating against the material interests of media outlets. One salient example of this phenomenon

¹³ An analysis of Channel 2’s broadcasts on the eve of MDHH 1994–2007 demonstrated that 29% of the aired shows were documentaries. In comparison, during a regular week of 2008 prime time broadcasts, only 5% of the shows aired by Channel 2 were documentaries (Meyers, Zandberg & Neiger, 2009).

is the 1998 airing of *Schindler's List* on Channel 2 on the eve of MDHH, which yielded the highest ratings (48.8%) throughout the channel's entire first decade of broadcasting. As Nachum noted:

On the one hand, there is the need to save money, but on the other hand there are issues of branding. *Telad* [one of Channel 2's former franchisees] spent a huge sum of money on *Schindler's List* . . . They broadcast it when everyone was at home, and it was great for their branding.

Negotiating Repetitiveness and Renewal

A second set of conflicting considerations guiding MDHH production and selection decisions is anchored in the tension between the wish to work within the ritualistic framework and the attempt to offer new and even challenging perspectives. Media professionals view the tendency towards repetitiveness on MDHH broadcasts as an essential component of the social ritual. These modes of operation, learned mainly through practical experience (rather than formal training), assist media professionals in their attempt to engineer national time and set national moods of bereavement and contemplation (Kaplan, 2009). Staying within existing ritualistic frameworks involves intertwined conventions of style and content. The most fundamental convention is that all media contents on MDHH deal with the Holocaust, except for breaking news. At the same time, various media interpret this convention differently: television channels, as mentioned earlier, air many Holocaust-related documentaries. One of the essential methods by which radio outlets set the national mood is the airing of Hebrew-only "Holocaust Day songs." As we show elsewhere, the repetitive musical repertoire of MDHH includes some songs that are directly related to the Holocaust, but most of the songs that are identified as Holocaust Day songs have gained this status because their creators are related to the Holocaust (namely, second generation survivors), because their texts are affiliated with elitist cultural production (poetry), and in many cases, just because of their tone, as in the case of melancholy love songs (Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, in press).

Other conventions that construct the MDHH media ritual involve the programming of contents shortly before and after MDHH. Several interviewees addressed the restraining of broadcasts as a means by which audiences are moved in and out of the MDHH mood. Such conventions include, for example, the airing of films dealing with WW2, but not necessarily with the Holocaust, on the evening following the end of MDHH. Following the same line, the first two thirds of the newscast aired just before the opening ceremony of MDHH deal mostly with routine current events, while the last third of the newscast features items that deal with the commemoration of the

Holocaust. The complementing pattern could be found in the closing newscast aired on the end of MDHH. The first section of the newscast focuses on Holocaust-related items, whereas the second part directs the attention of viewers and listeners back to current news events.

The implementation of the unwritten, yet closely followed MDHH media ritual conventions is at times met with dissent, or at least discontent. This notion of inescapability and highly structured operation is illuminated by the terminology—*autopilot*, *copy-paste*, *Pavlovian instinct*, and *off-the-shelf programming*—used by some interviewees when asked to discuss MDHH programming. This unease reflects the professional ethos of innovation and originality. It is manifested in the common reference by interviewees to the novelty of a story as a criterion by which they select proposed MDHH contents. As Eli explained:

This is a difficult moral dilemma. All of the survivors' stories are unique and difficult and heartbreaking; they are all huge dramas. But at the same time all of these stories are very similar . . . and so we do not necessarily think that the right thing to do is to tell yet another horror story. We look for new angles to deal with the Holocaust, and the ways in which it influences us today.

In Eli's case, the wish to offer a new angle was materialized via the programming of a documentary about the voyage of an Israeli family to Poland, which featured scenes of familial tension and moments of black humor; another alternative documentary depicted the story of a Jew who had fled from Vienna before the WW2 to South Africa, where she witnessed how racist apartheid policies were inflicted upon Black South Africans.

The tension between repetitiveness and renewal is arguably most evident within the context of the airing of contents that are perceived as critical. Hence, for instance, while virtually all MDHH programming deals with the Holocaust, it does not feature satirical shows mocking, among other issues, the ongoing attempts by Israeli leaders to achieve political gains by capitalizing on post-Holocaust guilt feelings (Zandberg, 2006). The notion that MDHH should be set aside from the business-as-usual operation of Israeli media is further advanced by the newscasts' address of high-ranking politicians. David, a public radio editor and manager, admitted:

We will air whatever they say [during MDHH ceremonies] even if it's worthless, and we would never air it on any other day. On such a day we succumb to the ceremony . . . on such a day, politicians represent something different; they are the state.

At the same time, some of the interviewees insisted that the sacredness of the ritual cannot suspend all forms of criticism.

ASSESSING MDHH MEDIA SUCCESS

Three fundamental points of reference contextualize the assessment of the success of MDHH media. The first point of reference is routine media work, which means that the success of MDHH broadcasts is evaluated according to conventional measures such as their popularity (namely, ratings), the coverage they receive in other media, and so on. The second point of reference emphasizes the uniqueness of MDHH. Because MDHH media broadcasts are positioned as a unique phenomenon, the evaluation of their success rooted in this approach is based on criteria rarely used to assess regular media flow, especially in commercial media. Such uncommon indicators include educational impact and the construction of national collective memory.

The third point of reference mediates, to some extent, the void between the two aforementioned contexts of evaluation. This perspective assesses the success of MDHH broadcasts in comparison with MDFS broadcasts, and to a lesser extent to *Tish' Be'av* broadcasts. By embracing this frame of reference, media professionals reject the notion that MDHH media have no parallels; at the same time, the media flow in which MDHH broadcasts are embedded, according to this perception, is the exceptional flow of national ritualistic bereavement. A thorough comparison between media operation on MDHH and MDFS is beyond the scope of this article; yet, it is important to note that MDFS figured in many of the interviews as a parallel and a yardstick. Thus, for example, David explained that “from a communicative point of view, the story of the Holocaust is far weaker than the story of [national] security. We will always prefer heroic soldiers’ stories over heroic stories of survivors.” The difference between the two memorial days in terms of media operation is materialized via various practices, such as a childrens’ channel decision to air live broadcasts only on MDFS. As Tali explained:

It’s easier with Memorial Day, because it’s a sexier day. Among our audience there are already children that unfortunately lost older brothers [who were fallen soldiers] . . . so it’s easier from our point of view . . . Though in the last 10–15 years Holocaust Day has also become more sexy.

This frequent comparison between the two memorial days sets a hierarchy between them. Thus, MDHH broadcasts are perceived as successful if they manage to engage audiences in a manner similar to the assumed effect of MDFS broadcasts.¹⁴ On another level, the constant conjunction between the two memorial days helps blur the differences between them, as they become two complementing components of a meta-narrative of national bereavement: MDHH becomes more embedded within the here and now

¹⁴ MDFS has as ongoing significance to the lives of Israeli Jews because of Israel’s continued involvement in violent conflicts and the fact that most Israeli Jews serve in the Israel Defense Forces.

of Israeli security realities, while MDFS is positioned as yet another site of traditional Jewish lament.

CONCLUSIONS: THE ENDURING HERITAGE OF THE “PROFESSIONAL PAST”

On the basis of interviews with media professionals, this article explored the processes through which Israeli mass media construct the memory of the Holocaust on MDHH as well as on regular broadcasting days. In sum, what does this exploration tell us about the study of media memory production? Tuchman (1973) famously discussed “routinizing the unexpected”; that is, how technological and logistical considerations influence the categorization of events as news items and determine the ways in which they will be covered. At the same time, Tuchman’s analysis stressed the point that this process occurs within specific cultures, which contextualize and shape the priorities that frame such categorizations. As mentioned, MDHH broadcasts are a media ritual that routinely breaks the routine. The fact that MDHH diversion from regular media flow is anticipated annually and the wish of media professionals to operate within familiar frameworks have led to the establishment of conventions that enable Israeli media to represent and commemorate an extreme event such as the Holocaust. Hence, these conventions enable media professionals to “routinize the trauma.”

The construction of such conventions illuminates the nature of media professionalism on MDHH and other, similar memory-laden days. A look at the vocabulary used by the interviewees to describe their work on MDHH delineates their unique positioning as mnemonic agents: on the one hand, some of the most commonly used terms to address the overall approach of Israeli media toward MDHH were “pathos”, “awe”, and “sacredness”. At the same time, while addressing the specific mechanisms through which MDHH media is made, the interviewees frequently used far more “secular” terms and phrases such as “branding,” “[to] sell Holocaust Day to the children,” and “off-the-shelf programming.” Therefore, media professionalism on such unique occasions involves an ability to construct communicative liminality; a set of practices and conventions that build upon the shared professional knowledge of media workers, while using them to achieve a complete departure from regular media operation.

The creation of commemorative conventions is embedded within the ever-growing self-awareness of media professionals regarding their role as mnemonic agents. The interviewees’ discourse often combined discussions of the stories they narrate about the past alongside references to alternative ways of telling this story and the ways in which narrative choices shape collective consciousness. Specifically, this reflexivity is sensed in the awareness of media professionals not only to the general patterns of Israeli commemoration of the Holocaust, but also to the specific patterns of media

memory shaped through the years on MDHH. Media professionals correspond with these familiar media practices—trying to work within them, and at the same time aspiring to challenge them; which it to say, that the operation of media professionals as memory agents is framed through a constant negotiation between individual memories, national-collective constructions, and the enduring heritage of the “professional past.”

Last, to create useful conventions, media professionals need to position MDHH within the context of similar events that appropriately receive similar treatment. As shown in the article, the event most readily used to contextualize MDHH media work is MDFS. The juxtaposition between the media practices used to mark these two mourning rituals illuminates the possible ideological implications of media memory professionalism: this coupling, in terms of style and content, obviously echoes the ideological decision to position the two days as complementing components in a larger Zionist meta-commemorative narrative; at the same time, the use of media practices that blur the differences between these two mourning rituals assists the process of dimming the constructed nature of this narrative.

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