

Book Review: Mass Communication in Israel: Nationalism, Globalization, and Segmentation

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Mass Communication in Israel explores the roots and evolution of newspapers, journalism, radio, television, and the debut of the Internet on both the cultural and the institutional levels, and examines milestones in the socio-political development of Hebrew and Israeli mass communication. **William Eichler** thinks this is a useful contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the mass media and identity formation – not to mention the history of mass communication in Israel.

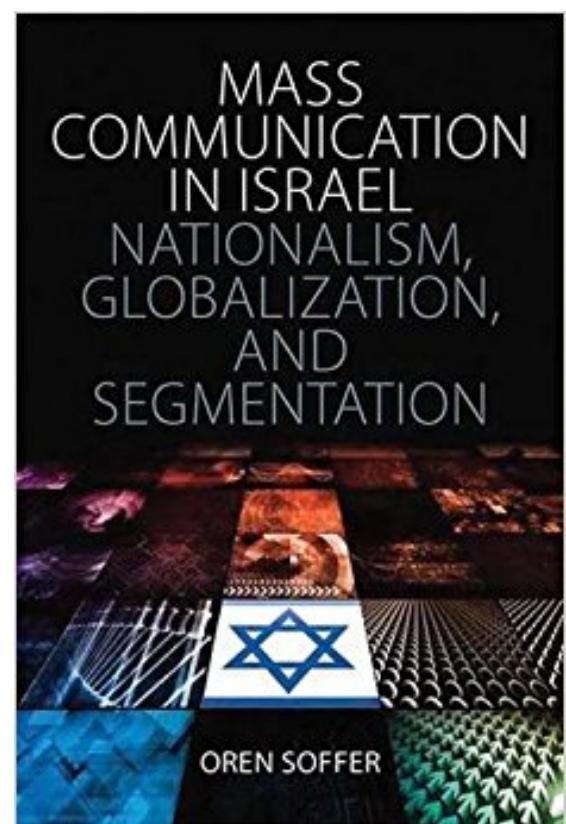
Mass Communication in Israel: Nationalism, Globalization, and Segmentation. Oren Soffer. Berghahn Books. November 2014.

One year after the Six Day War, Israelis readied themselves to watch the first official TV broadcast in their country. They saw a sight that was both familiar and new at the same time. Soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) – still enjoying kudos from the previous year's victory over what, at the time, seemed like an existential threat – marched past the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. This scene had the effect of telescoping the full expanse of Jewish history into a singular moment. It linked, writes sociologist Oren Soffer, "the Israeli present (Independence Day, the IDF Parade) with the history of the Jewish people and their hold on the land of Israel since time immemorial."

The role of the mass media in shaping Jewish nationalism is the subject of *Mass Communication in Israel*. "The book's main theoretical axis," Soffer tells us in the introduction, "draws a connection between the mass media, the formation of the Israeli national identity, and nation-building processes on the one hand, and the place of the media in social fragmentation and globalization on the other." He documents in some detail the history of the Hebrew and Israeli press, Israeli radio and television, and the introduction of the Internet into the Jewish state, all the time showing what role these forms of media played in creating, reinforcing and, to some extent, fragmenting Jewish national consciousness.

The book opens with a brief explication of the theoretical framework employed. Soffer, head of the Department of Sociology, Political Science and Communication at the Open University of Israel, gets straight to the point in his discussion of the debates surrounding the study of nationalism. He subscribes to the modernist viewpoint that the nation is a product of the modern world, a historically new phenomenon whose roots do not stretch all the way back into some misty past but are, in fact, the result of the last two to three hundred years of European history.

Following Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, Soffer holds nations to be "imagined communities" that have been crafted out of "invented traditions". This does not, of course, make them any less "real" or "meaningful" than older identities. The Israelis watching the IDF Parade in the Old City all imagine themselves to be connected to one another and to the Jewish community of Ancient Israel regardless of their socio-economic background, geographical location or any other factor that might engender divisions. There is no essential, organic link between those



watching the parade and the Jews who were driven out of the area two thousand years ago, but this is unimportant. The mere act of imagining *together* and taking part in invented traditions *together* makes it real enough.



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Soffer observes that nationalism is, effectively, a communications phenomenon. He draws on Anderson's observation that the rise of the printed press played a significant role in the creation of modern national identities. Anderson pointed out that reading a daily newspaper is to the modern secular member of a nation what prayer once was to his forebears. The act of reading a national newspaper has a comparable ritualistic element to it that connects you to something bigger: "It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull," Anderson wrote. "Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion." This simultaneously private and communal act has a unifying function. All of the readers are consuming the same information from the same papers at the same time and this creates a sense of togetherness. The press is, to use a phrase that Soffer repeats frequently, a "printed-word public sphere," where people meet and bond.

Soffer then carefully analyses the history of mass communication in Israel through the prism of this framework. He begins with a fascinating (but rather too brief) look at the importance of Hebrew dailies for creating a sense of Jewish national consciousness in the European *diaspora*. These Hebrew dailies "nourished Jewish inter-community ties" and helped to create a "public sphere" where Jews of all backgrounds could come together and begin to view one another as members of a modern nation and not just a religious minority. Hebrew newspapers continued to have this function in the *yishuv* (Jewish community of Ottoman, and then Mandatory, Palestine) and in the State of Israel itself. Radio ("a virtual town square") also did the same job and Soffer tells us that it "played a key role in inventing a Hebrew tradition" by producing broadcasts that "stressed the link between Jewish tradition and pioneering values and the love of the land."

From the late 1970s onwards the mass media began to have a different impact. For roughly the first century of Jewish nationalism newspapers, radio and (much later and after bitter disputes) television helped to hone a sense of Jewish national identity and acted as a broadly unifying force. This began to change, though, in the last quarter of the twentieth century during the period of globalization. Satellite and cable television, and then later the Internet, introduced Israelis to a world outside of their country. Cracks began to appear in the national edifice and new voices began to be heard in the "public sphere". However, contrary to expectations, Soffer finds that the period of globalization hasn't lead to the disappearance of the media's national role. While it is true that "new political

identities are surfacing to challenge the national hegemony”, the death of the nation-state is not imminent. “It would be premature to assume,” he concludes “that nation-states are about to give way to a post-modern global village.”

This is not an original conclusion. Many have pointed out that predictions of the emergence of a globalised liberal world order where nationalism was a thing of the past were optimistic at best. However, *Mass Communication in Israel* is a useful contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the mass media and identity formation – not to mention the history of mass communication in Israel.

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