



Media Monitoring Project: More than Words

“WAR TO THE LAST MOMENT”

The Israeli Media in the Second Lebanon War

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מרכז להגנת הדמוקרטיה בישראל (ע"ר)
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**This report is dedicated
to the memory of Uri Grossman,
who was killed in the Second Lebanon War
on August 12, 2006.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Introduction: “We’re going to win”

In the time that has passed since the Second Lebanon War, Israeli society has been washed over by an unprecedented wave of criticism aimed at the decision-makers in the Government of Israel and the Israel Defense Forces. By contrast to previous wars, many of the basic facts about this war reached the public several months after it ended, through the publication of the Interim Report of the Winograd Committee and the minutes of its meetings. In the resultant atmosphere, the impression arose that the Israeli media, which led the wave of criticism in question, had been critical of the war even while it was going on.

This report is intended to set the record straight: except for a few exceptional instances, which are set forth in the report, all of Israel’s main media covered the war in an almost entirely mobilized manner – even when their correspondents reported news items which included almost everything that the Winograd Committee discovered months later in its investigations. Those items were marginalized in the editing process. The media created a general atmosphere of complete and absolute support and justification of the war, and systematically suppressed questions that arose as early as the first day of the fighting. From time to time, this support was accompanied by criticism of this or that tactical component of the fighting. The criticism gradually increased toward the end of the war – as it became clearer that the IDF was not managing to win. But the general spirit of the war coverage, in the broad strategic sense, was utterly uncritical – from the beginning to the end of the war.

The report is based on analysis of the complete coverage of the war in the main news programs of Israel’s three major TV channels (Channel 1, Channel 2 and Channel 10) and in Israel’s three largest daily newspapers (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Maariv* and *Haaretz*). The volume of coverage in question was immense: more than 9,000 articles. It should be noted that not all of the media covered the war in exactly the same way. Channel 2 and *Maariv* provided their audiences, in the absolute majority of cases, with patriotic, furious, overtly mobilized coverage. *Yedioth Ahronoth* and Channel 1 were also mobilized, but more moderately. The coverage by *Haaretz* and Channel 10, at certain times, was more critical and profound; occasionally, the reporting on Channel 10 was not only critical, but courageous in every sense of the word. This fact is noteworthy. It is important to notice the differences between the various media, but no less important to understand that even *Haaretz* and Channel 10, like Israel’s other media, presented coverage which was mobilized in many definitive ways.

Since the war ended and to this day, we at Keshev have received considerable testimony, direct and indirect, from members of the press, who spoke of the self-mobilization of the newsrooms throughout the war. Many of these persons asked to remain anonymous; accordingly, we could not publish some of their testimony, as its content would have betrayed its sources. Nonetheless, the testimonies which we heard were consistently similar: members of the press spoke of a frenetic atmosphere, a sense of emotional overload, self-censorship and instructions handed down from the top, and of the fear of expressing opposing views in the face of the uniform and unequivocal reflection of the situation expressed day after day in the press coverage. The overall picture which arises from this testimony is a grave one: this is not how the press should conduct itself in a democratic society.

Of the material that reached us, we have chosen to publish two items in this report. One is the testimony of journalist Yael Gvirtz from *Yedioth Ahronoth*, who was one of a team of writers responsible for the paper's editorials. On August 9, Gvirtz wrote a trenchant article under the headline **HOSTAGES IN THE TURRET**, which warned against an irresponsible military operation. The next day, Rafi Ginat, then editor-in-chief of *Yedioth Ahronoth*, suspended her. The second document is an internal, unsigned document which was distributed to *Maariv* employees after the war, by the Deputy CEO for Marketing of the paper. The document describes the way in which *Maariv* conducted itself in the course of the war, and states, among other things, as follows:

Maariv proved, yet again, in the course of the Second Lebanon War, that it is the most patriotic of the three major dailies. By contrast to *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Haaretz*, which behaved during the war as they do every day of the year and did not formulate a clear editorial line, *Maariv* continued to do what it did, with its head held high, in the difficult times of Operation 'Defensive Shield' and during the disengagement – to support the Army, to stand firmly on the side of the State, and to call a halt to criticism as long as the war went on.

Even when we had problematic material related to the management of the war – the situation in the Emergency Supplies Units, the problematic appointments in the Northern Command, the embarrassing arguments between senior commanders, and heart-rending complaints by reservists going into battle with incomplete and worn-out equipment – we restrained ourselves. In a certain sense, we betrayed our role as journalists, but we did so because we took national, patriotic considerations into account and decided that in the event of war, and certainly a war which was not progressing as it should and was going awry, we were part of the Country; that it was permissible, and even required of us, to postpone disputes and criticism; and that we did not have to apologize, or to feel abashed, for our support and backing of the Army and the Government. [...]

The citation above is backed by testimony of *Maariv* employees.

In this sense, we may – in fact, we must – consider the Second Lebanon War as an opportunity from which we should learn. Today, two years after the war, after the report of the Winograd Committee, after the public fury, we all know more or less what there is to know about the war. Accordingly, we can now go back to the media coverage of the war as it transpired in real time, examine the patterns displayed by that coverage, what it contained and what it did not contain, understand the public significance of those patterns – and initiate a process of change.

2. The coverage of the goals of the war and the decision-making process: “Consensus around the Government table”

The complete support given by the media to the Second Lebanon War, from its very first days until its end, was primarily reflected in the way the media reported to their readers and viewers on the goals of the war and the decision-making process which gave rise to its outbreak. Following the publication of the conclusions by the Winograd Committee, we all know a thing or two about all that. It is hard to find words as unequivocal as those of the Winograd Committee, which stated that “the way in which Israel went to war is inadmissible; it must not be allowed to repeat itself; and efforts must be made to correct the situation as soon as possible”. Nonetheless, throughout the entire war, the media, again and again, fed their consumers with the impression that launching the war was a well-planned move, and that its objectives were clear, distinct, and – from Israel’s point of view – desirable. In so doing, the media created a misrepresentation of clarity and purposefulness – which, in reality, did not exist.

In the first days of the war, significant coverage of the decision-making process was almost entirely absent in Israel’s media. In the absolute majority of cases, the decision to go to war was covered in an official, almost ceremonial manner: “we are about to do what must be done”. The Government session was described as a dramatic and historic event, and the consensus among the ministers was emphasized time and time again. Only very few, very marginal items indicated that the consensus was not complete; that the IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, evaded answering questions regarding the goals of the war, and that the Government actually approved going to war without having seen any real plans.

The media presented the goals of the war as absolute and clear, even when those goals changed from one day to the next; even when different players presented different goals, at times on the same day; even when it was obvious, from the very first day, that some of

the goals were unrealistic; and even when the goals contradicted each other. The most important contradiction of all was between returning the kidnapped soldiers and harming Hezbollah. It was not difficult to understand, from the very beginning of the war, that an operation intended to "change the rules of the game" in Lebanon would make the return of the kidnapped soldiers almost impossible. This basic insight, however, was never seriously discussed in depth and was never given any real headlines.

3. The coverage of the decision makers: "A backbone of steel"

The uncritical coverage of the decision-making process in the Second Lebanon War was almost ludicrously reflected in the way in which the media, at the beginning of the war, chose to portray Prime Minister Olmert and Defense Minister Peretz. Instead of asking both of them the obvious, difficult questions, the media proclaimed a transformation: lo and behold, the two civilian leaders had become tough military commanders. They spoke without fear, acted with confidence, controlled the situation with a strong hand – and enabled the IDF to take action against Hezbollah with an iron fist.

This fictitious image prevailed until the fighting in Lebanon began to go awry. At that point, more and more voices from the military establishment, claiming that the political establishment was preventing the IDF from acting freely and not allowing it to win, began to make themselves heard. Those voices took over the headlines of all Israeli media.

Throughout the fighting, reports on the back seat taken by the political establishment in favor of the IDF, and the scandalous nature of the working relationship between them were marginalized. This extremely newsworthy material was emphasized to a significant degree on Channel 10, and to a certain extent in *Haaretz* as well. Israel's other media never even touched it.

Reports on differences of opinion within the military establishment also appeared only rarely during the war. Nearly the only times such reports were emphasized were when critics called for the use of more force. The subject dominated the headlines for two or three days, when the Chief of Staff decided to appoint Maj. Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky as his representative in the north – thus, in practical terms, removing Maj. Gen. Udi Adam from his position as O/C Northern Command. But even at that moment, the reports on Maj. Gen. Adam's dismissal, in the overwhelming majority of cases, refrained from any in-depth examination of the way the war was being managed, focusing instead on the interpersonal relations between Adam and the Chief of Staff.

4. The fear of defeat: “The countdown for the entire Zionist enterprise”

As the war continued, and particularly toward its end, a profound feeling of disappointment began to dominate the media. The grave events in the course of the war, the kidnapping of the soldiers, the direct hit on an Israel Navy missile boat off the shores of Lebanon, the fierce battles in which dozens of soldiers were killed, the supply failures – all these were covered in a way which did not attempt to conceal the fact that the IDF was having difficulty functioning and, notably, was not managing to win. This kind of coverage gave rise to quite a few complaints against the media, which was felt to be too critical in its coverage of the war. This coverage, however, must be examined a bit more closely. The criticism voiced by the media against the IDF nearly always, with almost no exceptions, resulted from the declared and unequivocal media support for the war itself. This was criticism which called for harsher and more effective action and at times for revenge; it demanded more massive damage to Lebanon, and, most importantly, more results in the field – that is, more victories in battle. The criticism which appeared in the media, at the end of the day, conveyed the following message: “The war is just and right, but the decision-makers are not conducting it as they should, and that’s why we’re losing.” Not one article said: “There is something basically wrong with the war itself.”

When the media despaired of the decision-makers – the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff – they began to cling to the soldiers in the field, who had severe complaints against the higher echelons and reported failures which were not letting them, the soldiers, vanquish the enemy. The media, speaking on behalf of those soldiers, demanded again and again: “Let us win!” These reports on the frustration of soldiers and officers in the field joined many hundreds of articles which extolled the bravery and absolute devotion of those very soldiers and officers. All these reports together gave rise to the feeling that Israel’s media was totally mobilized in support of this war.

The overall feeling aroused by this coverage was not one of criticism, but rather, one of defeat. And that feeling grew stronger in light of the media coverage given to the other side – Hezbollah and its leader Nasrallah. Like Arafat and Bin Laden before him, Nasrallah was described as a figure from the world of legend: an evil genius, a sophisticated demon who, time and time again, succeeded in striking at us and coming out alive.

All this eventually gave rise to a near-hysterical feeling of existential war, a war of “to be or not to be”. This being the case, the IDF’s failures were deemed to have only one meaning: Israel was losing its deterrent force – and therefore, the war should never have been stopped before victory had been achieved. This apocalyptic picture obviously left no room for truly critical coverage of the type which attempts to examine the actual practical, political and moral justification for the war.

5. Israel's home front: Jews "don't break" – Arabs "believe in Nasrallah"

Today, following the publication of various studies of the subject, we know that Israel failed to care for the residents of the North during the war. In this state of affairs, which was hardly a secret even in the initial days of the war, the media might have been expected to present a serious examination of the relevant questions, in real time, to the decision-makers: Is there a functional civil defense system? Are the shelters serviceable? What has been done to provide protection to civilians who stayed in the north? Are there instructions which tell civilians how to behave in this state of emergency? Is the State prepared to evacuate civilians if necessary? Were these data taken into account when the decision to go to war was made?

This, however, is not how the media covered the story of the home front during the war. The media chose to present their readers and viewers with a different story, a mobilized story. The suffering of civilians in the North was harnessed by the media and used to support the war, and was, accordingly, told in two parts. One part told of Jewish civilians, who, in keeping up their day-to-day routine, were conveying a clear message to the enemy, the Government and the IDF: "They won't break us. We're strong, and we give the Government and the IDF our backing in whatever they do." The other part, which told of Arab civilians, was almost obsessively devoted to the question of loyalty: "Are you with us or against us?" This state of affairs left almost no room for reports on the actual situation of Israel's northern citizens.

The reports on residents of the North who weren't as resilient – the ones who needed help and didn't get it, and the ones who didn't exactly support the military operation – were all marginalized by the media coverage. Just as marginalized was the crucial fact that the State, notwithstanding its proclamations which embraced the citizens of the North, in fact abandoned them in its actions: it extended no help to them, did not ensure that they had proper shelters, and did not prepare an evacuation plan for them. In this context, *Haaretz* and Channel 1 did more impressive work than any other media outlet. But even they drowned this type of reporting in a sea of mobilized articles and reports.

6. The damage in Lebanon: "As if it had been hit by an earthquake"

The civilian population of Southern Lebanon and Beirut was extremely hard hit during the war – much harder, in fact, than civilians in Israel. According to various reports, the Israel Air Force attacks on Lebanon were responsible for the deaths of some 1,100 people, about one-third of them children. More than 4,000 people were injured. About 1,000,000

civilians fled northward and became refugees. Obviously, the overwhelming majority of Lebanese war victims had nothing at all to do with Hezbollah.

Coverage of this massive damage in Lebanon, in fact, reveals a fascinating pattern. Before the Israel Air Force bombing of Kafr Qana, on July 30, in which dozens of civilians were killed, the media, in the vast majority of cases, operated according to a principle which we, in this report, have termed the “separation principle”: the suffering of Lebanese civilians was given rather broad, and sometimes even empathic coverage – but it was almost entirely separated, by all possible editing means, from the IDF operations which caused the suffering in question. The IDF was described as being busy fighting Hezbollah, harming only the terror infrastructures, and taking pains not to harm the civilian population. The Lebanese suffering was described separately, as a disaster which befell the citizens of Lebanon out of nowhere – as if the sky had fallen in on them. Beirut, for example, was described in those articles and reports, in the words of one correspondent, as looking “as if it had been hit by an earthquake”. The combination of these two descriptions broke the chain of causality between the IDF operations and their results on the ground.

Critical reports on the massive IAF bombing of civilian population centers in Lebanon, especially Beirut, were marginalized by the coverage. Just as marginalized were reports on severe differences of opinion within the defense establishment, with regard to that very question. Obviously, these reports on the debates between the various defense and security entities cast a very grave shadow on the IDF’s repeated claims that it “had not known” about the civilians who were in various places which were bombed. The question was expressly raised at meetings of those defense and security entities, and correspondents received clear indications of it. This pattern was emphasized in the enthusiastic reporting of international support for Israel. The general feeling was one of “if the outside world does not reprove us, we needn’t reprove ourselves.”

After the incident in Kafr Qana, things changed. At that point the absolute majority of the media rallied in an attempt to prove, in various and sundry ways, that Israel was not to blame for the killing in Kafr Qana. The coverage, more than anything else, reflected the defensive propaganda adopted in civilian and military official circles in Israel following the incident. International reproof of Israel was depicted as anti-Israeli propaganda, and the coverage focused on the familiar arguments: “The IDF is the most moral army in the world; it does everything it can to avoid harming civilians; Hezbollah is the one using people as human shields.” It should be noted that, a day after the Kafr Qana bombing, it turned out that no targeted intelligence information had pointed to the building which was attacked. Out of the tangled web of excuses woven by the IDF in order to shake off any responsibility for the incident, extremely newsworthy information arose concerning the way in which the IDF selects its targets in Lebanon. The IDF strike on a building

which collapsed and buried its residents alive was not carried out *in error*: the selected targets had been defined, in a broad and unfocused manner, and they included all of the residential buildings within the targeted area. It also turned out that Defense Minister Peretz had “lifted all restrictions against IDF strikes on the civilian population”. This information, however, was no more than a needle in the haystack of excuses and denials, and never reached the Israeli public’s awareness.

7. The diplomatic negotiations: “We won’t call a ceasefire now”

This mode of coverage, in its various components, had a decisive effect on the way in which the media covered the various diplomatic attempts to reach a ceasefire and bring the war to an end. Throughout the war, various players made various proposals for diplomatic solutions. A number of ideas for compromise were raised at a summit conference of the eight industrialized states which met in St. Petersburg in mid-July; at the Rome Summit at the end of that month; and throughout the entire period, by the President of Lebanon, the United States Secretary of State, the United Nations and the European Union. Israel’s official spokespersons – Prime Minister Olmert, Defense Minister Peretz and the IDF commanders – overtly and extravagantly derided those proposals throughout most of that time. Eventually, however, when the ceasefire went into effect on August 14, quite a few persons within and outside the governmental establishment estimated that Israel could have attained greater diplomatic achievements if it had listened to those proposals in the opening stages of the war and thereafter. Such a listening attitude could obviously have saved many lives on both sides. Today, following the publication of the Winograd Committee Report, we know the extent to which the decision-makers were caught up in the fury of the war, which they had waged without really knowing what its goals were – and, accordingly, without knowing under what conditions it could and should be stopped.

In the absolute majority of cases, the media covered the diplomatic option in such a way as to reflect the derision expressed by the decision-makers. The reports on the diplomatic contacts appeared in the inside pages of the newspapers and deep in the news broadcasts – and were buried in a mass of headlines, which were mobilized with a patriotic fervor on behalf of the war effort. The proposals by the Prime Minister of Lebanon were interpreted merely as “signs of breaking in Lebanon”; the diplomatic proposals by the Great Powers were viewed as permission for Israel to continue operations on the ground. Muffling the voices which held that a diplomatic solution was in Israel’s best interest, including the voice of Israel’s Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, unequivocally showed that the Israeli media preferred a military victory over a diplomatic solution. Throughout the entire war, this coverage of the diplomatic option primarily reflected the IDF’s fear that a diplomatic arrangement would only keep the IDF from “finishing the job”.

The growing frustration at the IDF's performance on the ground, in the second half of the war, only increased opposition to efforts toward a diplomatic arrangement. In the first part of the war, the message was: “Now is not the time to talk; now is the time to strike.” The message in the second half of the war was: “Now, when we're being accused of war crimes, or when the weakness of the IDF is showing – we have to strike even harder.” In the end, when a formula was found which enabled the fighting to be stopped, the media received it with a general feeling of defeat. Now, when the war was over, the media suddenly started to feature voices saying: “We should have accepted the original diplomatic proposals, from the beginning of the war.”

On Friday, August 11, 2006, when the UN Security Council was about to vote on the ceasefire resolution, Israel's security cabinet decided to launch an extensive ground operation in Lebanon. The declared objectives of the operation were to seize the territory up to the Litani River, to wipe out additional members of Hezbollah and stockpiled Katyusha rockets, and to attempt – as much as possible, and up to the last moment – to tip the draft agreement in Israel's favor. That operation was to cost the lives of 34 IDF soldiers. The concerns about the ground operation were hardly a secret on that day or in the days that followed; even then, however, they were consigned to the margins of the media coverage. Only Channel 10 asked courageous, critical questions about the reasons for approving that scandalous operation – including the Prime Minister's popularity ratings. The rest of Israel's media, almost without exception, called for “war to the last moment”.

8. Conclusion

Of all the feelings, opinions and habits which mobilize the media when war breaks out, one of the most persistent attitudes is that criticism must not be expressed while the fighting is still going on, but must be withheld until it ends. Of all possible feelings, opinions and habits, this is also the most absurd attitude of all.

Courageous, critical media reporting is meaningless when carried out in retrospect. The really difficult questions have to be asked while the war is still being waged, because that is when there is still a chance for change. If the media had headlined the fact that there were no shelters in many cities and towns, and that the State was not providing assistance to the residents of the North – the State might well have been forced into taking action in real time, and would not have left the work to Arkady Gaydamak. If the media had emphasized the fact that various international actors had raised favorable proposals for a ceasefire in the first days of the war, we would probably not have had to consider, in retrospect, the question of why Olmert and Peretz ignored those proposals. If the media

had stressed the fundamental criticism of that war, the understanding that it never had defined goals, the fact that it was launched out of a sense of insult and frustration – the war itself might well have been shorter. The political players who objected to the ground operation up to the Litani River, at the end of the war, might have succeeded in preventing that unfortunate decision, which cost the lives of 34 more soldiers. If the headlines had broadcast the fact that Defense Minister Peretz had released the IDF from the restrictions on opening fire, as the media should have done, it might have been possible to prevent some of the fearsome destruction that was sowed in Lebanon. Critical coverage which arises when it is already out of date is a meaningless ceremonial act. The media criticize, publish, disclose – and then move on to the next topic. Precisely for this reason, Prime Minister Olmert, during the period when he was most severely criticized, following the publication of the Winograd Committee Interim Report, was able to decide that he would stay in office. He knew full well that the wave of public criticism would subside. After all, it was already outdated when it began.

In light of all the above, the question is not only how the Israeli media covered the Second Lebanon War. The really important question is how the media will cover the next war. The media professionals, the editors and managers, the correspondents and commentators, must subject themselves to the moral reckoning which they demanded after the war, and rightly so, of the decision-makers in the Government of Israel and the Israel Defense Forces. This must happen – and it must happen now. Before – not after – the next war breaks out.



הדאגה התקדמית

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■ עשרות אלפי חיילים נלחמים בקרבות
■ צה"ל הוציא לפועל את מבצע ההנחתה הגדול ביותר
■ המעורבות המסך לחימה בהיקף כה רחב תגבה מחיר כואב

הסכם הפסקת אש - בלי החטאים

