

Enemies Also Get Their Say: Press Performance During Political Crises

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The literature on press–state relations has shown that a high degree of consensus among officials limits the appearance of dissenting voices in news coverage. In the present article, we examine this proposition with regard to the debate in the Israeli media concerning how Israel should have reacted to Hamas’ victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections. The data presented here show that even though the debate within the Israeli leadership was limited, national newspapers did produce counterviews that strongly challenged the government’s position of penalizing the Palestinian Authority. In addition, the longer the debate continued, the larger the proportion of oppositional actors, especially Palestinian, that were heard. Finally, the study also points to the important role that the journalists themselves can play in preventing official control by presenting their own views on the issue.

Keywords: Press independence, media discourse, foreign actors, indexing

Press independence is a major concern in political communication. A considerable body of literature, mostly from studies of U.S. media, has claimed that the media have difficulty exercising independence from government officials and views (e.g., Bennett, 1990, 1996; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006, 2007). Nonetheless, most researchers agree that journalists are more likely to exercise independence in certain types of circumstances than in others. Since the news agenda is so heavily influenced by the workings of governmental institutions, views that run counter to governmental policy—which would indicate press independence—are most likely to emerge when officials are publicly divided

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over the policy (e.g., Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2003, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 1997). When domestic officials agree on policy issues, journalistic practice suggests that this consensus defines the relevant story. We argue here that, because of changes in the media environment (Liebes, Kampf, & Blum-Kulka, 2008), journalists have expanded the circle of their sources beyond government-controlled locations. Dissenting actors and their opinions, which were not considered newsworthy in the past, have become legitimate news sources. Therefore, even in situations where domestic officials are unified in support of a policy, dissenting actors and challenging stories occur in much higher volume than previously assumed.

The case selected in the present study examines Israeli media coverage of the Hamas victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections in the Gaza strip, which Israel's government and press both viewed as a genuine threat to Israel's security. At first glance, all of the political circumstances seemed to point to a perfect opportunity for the government to dominate public discourse: government consensus on the meaning of the event; a divided political opposition that mostly supported the government's position; and a foreign challenger, Hamas, which is considered illegitimate by most Israelis. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that not only were Hamas' leaders given space to air their views, but their position was often granted greater salience than that of the Israeli government.

Why Do Journalists Go Beyond the Official Debate?

A wide range of case studies, most of which deal with foreign policy issues, have emphasized the power that officials have to dominate the media discourse (Mermin, 1999). The theoretical framework of these studies is generally based on journalists' reliance on official sources (Bennett, 2009). The best documented and most theoretically nuanced area of research focuses on the tendency of journalists to index coverage to levels of conflict within governmental circles (Bennett, 1990). According to Bennett's (1990) original formulation of this hypothesis, "Mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to index the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic" (p. 106). This suggests that, in the absence of vociferous opposition to government positions, the mass media will mostly echo official positions. As a result, according to Bennett, the American public is often not exposed to "other" (that is, nonofficial or dissenting) voices because the media in the United States restrict themselves to presenting the views of the two major political parties.

However, there are certain types of situations and circumstances in which journalists are less dependent on official positions. These situations usually start with unexpected events. In a recent modification of the index hypothesis, Bennett et al. (2007) suggested that the press may be more independent in the aftermath of such unexpected events, but only in situations that Lawrence (2001) described as "event-driven news reporting." A typical situation would be some shock to the government's consensus: "a catastrophic event or policy failure, a scandal, an electoral realignment, or a building political opposition that changes the power balance within institutional decision making circles" (p. 60). In such cases, the range of voices may narrow or expand depending on how officials respond to the event. If the officials present a united front, critical counterviews may be curtailed; on the other hand, counterviews may expand if serious official debate breaks out, particularly with implications for policy making (Bennett et al. 2006; Hallin, 1986).

Wolfsfeld (1997) made a similar claim as part of his political contest model, arguing that when authorities successfully dominate the political environment, the news media find it difficult to remain independent. When the authorities lose control over the political environment, the news media have a greater array of sources and perspectives from which to choose. This provides an important opportunity for challengers to promote their own views to the press. In his cascading activation model, Entman (2003, 2004) also discussed what happens when governments lose control over the consensus. Entman argued that when officials at the highest level are not united and issues are culturally ambiguous, as often happen with foreign policy, journalists are strongly motivated to include oppositional voices in their stories (Entman, 2003, 2004, 2008). Moreover, Entman claims that journalists will sometimes take the initiative and raise their own opinions and criticisms (see also Hallin, 1986).

What causes journalists to shape news coverage around the official consensus? First, when domestic officials agree on policy issues, it is harder to find opposing voices. Second, because government officials tend to agree on basic principles, even when they disagree on how to translate those principles into policy, journalistic reliance on official sources often limits the debate in the press to procedural issues rather than substantive ones, and to tactical matters of implementation rather than the strategic dimensions of policy problems (e.g., Althaus, 2003; Mermin, 1999). Third, public opinion is an important consideration in journalists' working norms. When journalists have reason to believe that the public supports official policy, they are unlikely to challenge it (Entman, 2004).

Nevertheless, one could argue that even in the face of unified governments, journalists might seek out counterviews and shift the story beyond the scope of government officials. What would cause journalists to construct news stories that deviate from the official consensus? One reason might be that the market for conflict and drama in journalism creates room for oppositional voices even when government officials have closed ranks (Althaus, 2003). An additional reason related to the transformation of media ecology, whereby news media organizations are much less restricted to national boundaries, has introduced new actors and voices that were not easily accessible in the past. Whereas the main target audiences of national channels remain within national boundaries, the new exposure of a domestic public to international channels enables journalists to show their independence by expanding their range of legitimate sources (Liebes et al., 2008; Seib, 2005).

Can the Enemy Also Become a Legitimate News Source?

Many studies have focused on domestic actors, such as opposition parties, congress members, and ex-officials, that wish to challenge government policies. Such actors are believed to be the most accessible in a journalist's working memory (Althaus, 2003). This choice is particularly puzzling with regard to foreign policy issues in which nondomestic actors are sure to be an important part of the story. Some researchers have justified journalists' decisions to focus on domestic actors on the grounds that their audience is unlikely to find foreign actors relevant (e.g., Mermin, 1999). However, the importance of foreign challengers became apparent in a study by Hayes and Guardino (2010), which examined television news coverage of President George W. Bush's administration's decision to launch an attack on Iraq. Little dissent was found when only domestic actors were analyzed, but when foreign actors were included—especially French and even enemy Iraqi actors—many counterviews emerged. Therefore, giving attention

to foreign actors may result in a wider range of counterinterviews as well as criticism (Althaus, 2003; Althaus, Edy, Entman, & Phalen, 1996; Hayes & Guardino, 2010; Lawrence, 2001; Sheaffer & Wolfsfeld, 2009).

The phenomenon of allowing enemies to express themselves was also found in a study of Israeli news coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Liebes and Kampf (2009) suggested that this situation, in which enemy actors become legitimate news sources that were frequently covered in the mainstream news, may be related to a changing media environment created by the revolution in communication technologies. In Israel, as in other countries, new and competing media channels have been established. Some of these new stations broadcast 24 hours a day, and many originate in other countries, providing material to local stations (Liebes & Kampf, 2009; see also Seib, 2005). In fact, many news organizations have agreements with multiple foreign stations to exchange information and footage. As a result, talking with the “other side” has apparently become increasingly prominent in the media environment (Liebes et al., 2008).

Still, one could argue that antagonists are only granted entrance into the media to be further marginalized in the news. Liebes and Kampf (2004, 2009), who compared Israeli news coverage of the first Palestinian Intifada with that of the second, argued that this is not always the case and supported this claim with three main findings. First, during the second Intifada, the Israeli media covered the suffering of Palestinians on a regular basis. Second, there has been a gradual shift whereby terrorists have become frequently sought-after actors, achieving a status in which they speak for themselves and are listened to and given a platform to explain their motives. Third, the positions of the Palestinian leaders are often covered in a way that gives them a genuine opportunity to present their version of the events, despite the resulting tension between Israeli journalists and the government.

Liebes et al. (2008) demonstrated how, in the midst of the intense violence of the second Intifada, the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was interviewed on Israeli public television. Although the interviewer’s outraged tone and preachy, challenging questions led Arafat to lose his temper at times, the authors concluded that there was no intention to destroy Arafat’s credibility and that the interviewer edited out a segment in which Arafat looked utterly ridiculous. This interview provoked a political storm, exposing journalists and editors to criticism first for what had been broadcast and, second, for what had been edited out.² An example of this phenomenon in the United States is an interview in which American journalist Dan Rather allowed Saddam Hussein to present a positive image designed to suit the Western idea of a civilized, enlightened political leader (Liebes et al., 2008, p. 319). These examples demonstrate that, at least in some cases, not only are enemies allowed to speak, but they are also given a platform on which to state their views.

² Liebes et al. (2008) had access to the full interview, including edited material.

Do Officials Lose Their Ability to Dominate over Time?

The question arises as to whether official positions are likely to dominate media coverage when a crisis continues for an extended period. There may be logical reasons why official actors become more or less dominant. They might become more dominant as the amount of space devoted to an issue decreases, at which time powerful actors will be more likely to make the editorial cut. Officials might also become more dominant over time if situations become more complicated and ambiguous, because journalists tend to rely on such officials for direction. Alternatively, one could also argue that the proportion of challengers increases over time as the government turns its attention to other issues, providing challengers with opportunities that were unavailable at the beginning of a crisis. In a long-term crisis, major challengers may also become more familiar to both journalists and audiences.

The evidence from the literature suggests that what happens again depends on the particular circumstances in question. For example, Nacos' (1990) study of the 1983 crisis in Grenada found that media coverage during the initial phase of the intervention was dominated by the position of the Reagan administration (see also Burbach, 1995). However, the question remains as to whether declining official coverage can lead to increased coverage of oppositional actors. In coverage of wars or crises, there is some evidence to suggest that the proportion of dissident voices grows as time goes on (Entman, 2004; Hallin, 1986). In wartime, there may be other reasons for this rise. While wars and crises often begin with a broad base of support, oppositional actors are more likely to emerge as the conflict drags on and hopes for a quick victory begin to fade. In addition, journalists are likely to feel more comfortable challenging the government and the army once the initial passions associated with a war start to subside.

The Hamas Victory in the Palestinian Elections

On January 25, 2006, elections were held for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), which is the legislature of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Notwithstanding the 2005 municipal and presidential elections, this was the first election to the PLC since 1996. The two main political parties, Fatah and Hamas, competed in the election. Fatah, led by the incumbent Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia, is a major Palestinian party confederation that had dominated the legislature since the previous elections a decade earlier. In Palestinian politics, Fatah is considered center-left of the political spectrum. Hamas (meaning "Islamic Resistance Movement"), led by Ismail Haniya, is an Islamist Palestinian political, social, and military organization. Hamas has launched numerous suicide bombings against Israel and has also been responsible for rocket attacks and shooting targeted at Israeli towns. Unlike Fatah, Hamas is viewed as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union, Canada, Japan, and Israel. Before the election, the Palestinian president was Mahmoud Abbas (also known as Abu Mazen), a founding member of Fatah who was elected in January 2005 on the Fatah ticket.

According to the official election results, Hamas won a large majority in the new Palestinian parliament. Although Hamas' success had been considered a possibility, the scale of the victory was a shock to Israel and the international community and became a focal point of Israel's own ensuing election campaign. The government in Israel at the time was headed by the centrist Kadima Party led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Opposition parties, especially on the right, criticized the government for failing to

stop the radical Islamic Hamas movement from rising to prominence within the Palestinian Authority. For the international community, principally the "Quartet" (the United States, the European Union, Russia, and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan), the election result was a major embarrassment. Hamas' victory set in motion mounting hostility and violence in the area, which eventually led to hundreds of deaths in the Gaza campaign of December 2008.

This is an excellent case with which to examine the extent of press independence during a foreign policy debate, largely because the Hamas victory in Gaza was viewed by Israel as a major crisis that represented a clear threat to its security. In fact, it was just three months before the Palestinian election that the Hamas-affiliated military wing, had attacked Israeli civilian targets, to which the Israeli Air Force had responded by striking several targets in the Gaza Strip. Moreover, we would argue that the victory of Hamas in democratic election represents an even greater crisis than violent clashes or military involvement with Hamas; it marked the point at which an illegitimate terrorist organization became a legal government with which Israel should negotiate.

As discussed, most research in political communication suggests that these are the type of circumstances in which the news media should exhibit the least independence. The major policy question for the Israeli government after Hamas' election victory was what type of response was warranted. While most Israeli politicians called for Israel to take a tough stand against the new Palestinian government, some called for a more moderate response and to respect the results of the election. Previous literature on this topic would have predicted that a high level of political consensus among political elites would lead to a similar level of consensus in the news media. Accordingly, under these circumstances one would expect to hear very few oppositional voices in press coverage. What actually happened was very different and provides strong evidence of the independence of the Israeli press.

Research Questions

The major focus of this study is the range of actors and opinions heard in the Israeli press during the crisis that began with the Hamas victory. The range of voices is usually defined as either the range of actors in the news (that is, elite versus nonelite, government versus opposition) or the amount of counterviews or critical news about the government (Bennett, 1990). However, examining actors in the news does not necessarily tell us enough about the spectrum of opinions (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009). Indeed, Bennett et al. (2007) argued that the mere inclusion of opposition voices does not meet the standard of meaningful opposition. Therefore, the current study attempts to examine not only the range of actors given voices in the debate, but also the range of their positions.

To highlight the contribution of foreign challengers to the range of voices, we distinguish between the range of domestic voices, which considers only Israeli actors, and the full range of voices, which considers all actors aired in the Israeli press during the Hamas victory crisis. Therefore, the first two research questions focus only on Israeli actors.

RQ1: To what extent did official actors from the incumbent Israeli government dominate domestic discourse on the Hamas victory during the weeks following the event?

RQ2: To what extent did the official position of the incumbent Israeli government dominate domestic discourse on the Hamas victory during the weeks following the event?

We have assumed that when it comes to domestic debate (Israeli actors) about the Hamas election victory, the Olmert government would have substantial advantages over the opposition. It is important to consider not only the normal advantages enjoyed by incumbent governments, but also the particular political context of the policy debate. As noted above, Israel regards Hamas as a terrorist organization whose ultimate goal is the destruction of Israel. There is a broad consensus in support of this belief among political elites and the general public. Olmert had nothing to fear from the right-wing opposition because it was firmly in favor of tough sanctions against the Palestinian Authority. The only groups that could theoretically oppose such a policy would come from the left. However, with the possible exception of what are traditionally called the Arab political parties (who almost exclusively represent Arab Israelis), it would be considered a form of political suicide for the Zionist left to take what could be seen as a "pro-Hamas" position.

The third and fourth research questions consider all actors—domestic and foreign. Two dimensions are integrated here: the number of foreign actors heard and changes during the crisis period.

RQ3: To what extent did Israeli official actors, as opposed to Palestinian actors, dominate discourse concerning the Hamas victory, and how did this change in the weeks following the crisis?

RQ4: To what extent did the official position of the incumbent Israeli government, as opposed to the Palestinian position, dominate discourse in the Israeli press concerning the Hamas victory and how did this change in the weeks following the crisis?

Our working assumption was that when the analysis includes foreign actors, especially Palestinian actors, one would expect to find substantial media coverage of these actors and their viewpoints. The underlying rationale is that Palestinian actors on the ground are considered to be critical for telling the story and while this type of reporting may have been considered taboo in the past, it has now become standard journalistic practice.

We further assumed that dissenting voices would receive increasing coverage as time passes. As noted above, there are two major reasons for this hypothesis, despite the plausibility of the opposite scenario. The first is the idea that as the first sense of crisis and threat begins to fade, journalists would feel more comfortable publishing dissenting or even enemy views because they run less risk of appearing unpatriotic. The second reason is that government leaders rarely have the luxury of focusing their attention on one particular issue for an extended period of time. In most cases, journalists tend to rely more on official actors in the early phases of a crisis (Burbach, 1995; Nacos, 1990).

Methodology

To explore these questions, we employed two research methods. The primary methodology was content analysis of leading Israeli newspapers. In addition, to try to gain a better understanding of the reasons for including or not including dissident voices, we conducted 34 semistructured interviews with Israeli journalists and with spokespeople of several political parties.

Content Analysis

The content analysis has two major purposes. The first is to identify and classify all types of actors (that is, sources) appearing in Israeli mainstream news items covering the Hamas victory (that is, the range of actors). These might be actors in the incumbent Israeli government, other official right-wing or left-wing actors, other organizations that identify with the left, center, or right of the political spectrum, analysts and commentators (such as military commentators and Arab commentators), other members of the Israeli elite (such as public servants, former members of the Knesset), Palestinians belonging to Hamas, Palestinians not affiliated with Hamas (such as, Fatah), and leaders of Arab and non-Arab countries. Journalists and political commentators also make an important contribution. The latter were coded as actors only when expressing their own opinions of possible policies about Hamas' election victory. However, we should also consider that journalists and political commentators may base their own opinions on voices that were not mentioned or directly quoted in their report (Carlson, 2011; Reich, 2009). However, the information in the report was still presented as the journalists' own view. For example, Boudana (2009) said,

the voices animate the story without being devoted to the transmission of pre-existing information that is present outside of them. They would rather express their feelings, political or ideological positions, etc., in reaction to a given event reported by the journalist. (p. 285)

The second purpose was to identify the explicit policy positions of each actor with regard to the question of how Israel should react to Hamas' election victory (that is, the range of *positions*). These might include opinions such as: "Israel should penalize the Palestinian Authority (economically, politically, or militarily) for Hamas' victory" or "Israel should respect the Palestinians' democratic choice." The following excerpts from Israeli mainstream newspapers illustrate the use of this coding model in practice:

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert: "Starting tomorrow, the crossing point to the authority will be closed" [PENALIZE THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY] (*Yediot Aharonot*, February 16, 2006, p. 1).

U.S. State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack: "Law and policy in the U.S determine that money will not be transferred to terrorist

organizations; Hamas is a terrorist organization." [PENALIZE THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY] (*Ha'aretz*, January 27, 2006, p. 3).

Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres: Israel should negotiate with Hamas [RECOGNIZE THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY ELECTION RESULTS] (*Yediot Aharonot*, January 29, 2006, p. 2).

It is important to emphasize that, unlike other studies, we are not focusing here on criticism of the government's policy or action. For example, Neiger, Zandberg, and Meyers (2010) dealt with the conceptualization and negotiated dimensions of criticism and demonstrated different variants of criticism such as the source of criticism, content of criticism, and object of criticism (see also Schudson, 2002). However, in the current case, the main discourse was the question of how Israel should react to Hamas' election victory. Accordingly, our main focus here is the range of actors and viewpoints heard in the news and especially the role that dissenting voices and challengers play in such discourse.

The data for content analysis comes from two leading Israeli daily newspapers (*Ha'aretz* and *Yediot Aharonot*). All items (that is, full articles) relevant to the Hamas victory appearing between January 27, 2006 (Palestinian Election Day) and March 28 (Israeli Election Day) were included in the analysis. A total of 276 full newspaper articles were retrieved. The unit of analysis was an actor (and his or her position) appearing in an article ($N = 550$). Five trained coders, all of whom were BA and MA students in the social sciences, conducted the content analysis. An intercoders reliability test was conducted on 20% of the coding units. This resulted in a Krippendorff's Alpha reliability no lower than .84.

One could argue that the named and quoted actors that appear in a news article are not the sole providers of the information that the journalists used to create their articles (Carlson, 2011; Reich, 2009). How can we be sure that only the explicit policy positions of each actor was coded, and not someone else's position? As mentioned above, our unit of analysis was a specific actor who was quoted directly in a news article and his or her specific position, not the full content of the article. Therefore, although it is reasonable to assume that the quoted actor in a news article is only one of several information sources used by a journalist, we only coded direct quotes from the actors listed above.

Interviews

We conducted semistructured interviews to provide insights into how journalistic routines influence the ability of various actors to have their views expressed in the Israeli news media (see Appendix for more details). We conducted 34 interviews with expert witnesses, including 19 journalists and commentators, three television news editors, four newspaper editors, and eight spokespeople for political parties. The interviews dealt with topics such as the extent to which mainstream news media in Israel represent different opinions of political parties, the media's general willingness to interview nonnational and foreign political actors, particularly members of Hamas, and whether they received responses from the entire political spectrum in regard to Hamas' election victory. Space limitations

prevent us from reporting these interviews in full, but they were helpful in obtaining a better understanding of the journalistic process.

Results

We have divided this section into two subsections according to the research questions. The first subsection focuses solely on the domestic range of voices (that is, official Israeli actors and their viewpoints), thereby providing answers to the first two research questions. The second subsection widens the list of actors by including the full range of actors and viewpoints that appear in the news. This subsection attempts to provide answers to the third and fourth research questions. Each subsection includes the results of both content analysis and interview analysis.

The Range of Domestic Actors and Positions

Our first research question asks about the extent to which official actors in the incumbent government dominated domestic discourse in the Israeli press concerning Hamas' election victory. We begin by looking at how often various Israeli actors appear in the news, as a proportion of the overall total. Figure 1 reveals a narrow range of Israeli political actors. The ruling Kadima Party, led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, was mentioned in almost 40% of the news items, compared with only about 10% of items in which other parties and right- and left-wing leaders were mentioned, with similar coverage of actors from other elites. Ending the analysis at this point would lead to the conclusion that the news media presented to the Israeli public a narrow range of actors and viewpoints.

The interviewees explained that journalists naturally focused on Ehud Olmert's centrist government, neglecting the two ends of the political spectrum (left- and right-wing parties) because Olmert was prime minister at the time, which meant that his view was important as he was the one actually implementing policies on Hamas. This journalistic preference is expressed in the following comments from a reporter for a leading daily newspaper:

It was probably more important to get Kadima than the other marginal parties. Although it was very interesting to hear them, it was less relevant because Kadima is the party that will most likely have to lead this country and deal with Hamas. (Israeli political commentator)

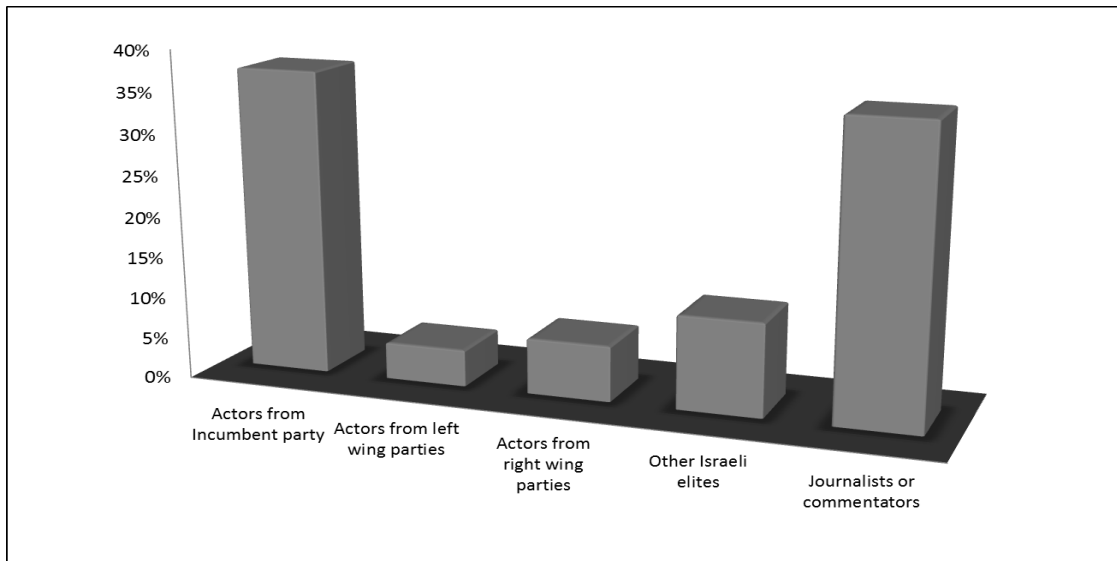


Figure 1. The domestic range of actors in the news media.

Note. The X-axis represents the percentage of all Israeli actors who appeared in the mainstream news ($N = 264$).

These results are consistent with findings from numerous studies that politicians who can potentially influence political outcomes generally receive more attention in the news than those with less power (e.g., Sellers & Schaffner, 2007; Wolfsfeld, 2007).

Figure 1 also shows that journalists and commentators themselves played leading roles as actors in more than one third of the items, which is equal to government actors. We coded these media personnel as actors only when they made it clear that they were expressing their own opinions on the topic. The prevailing view in the press independence literature has been that journalists serve as gatekeepers rather than actors of oppositional discourse. Consequently, little attention has been given to the possibility that journalists could be making independent contributions to critical policy discourse themselves (Althaus, 2003, Entman, 2003, 2004). Therefore, although journalists are not usually considered actors in these analyses, they should still be taken into account as important voices. Including journalists provides a somewhat different understanding about the relative power of the authorities to dominate media discourse. Additionally, as discussed below, these journalists do not always “dance to the government’s tune.”

However, the analysis in Figure 1 does not tell us enough about the range of opinions of these domestic actors. We cannot simply assume that the range of political actors represents the range of opinions. This brings us to research question 2, which asks about the extent to which the official positions of the ruling government dominate media discourse. The bars in Figure 2 represent the percentage of positions that each group of Israeli actors expressed about how Israel should react to Hamas’ election

victory; that is, whether to penalize the Palestinian Authority or to accept the democratically obtained results.

Figure 2 shows that all three political blocs were mostly in favor of sanctions. Moreover, with apart from 17% of left-wing actors, who represent no more than 1.1% of all internal opinions, none of the Israeli actors felt that Israel should simply accept the results of the Palestinian election. As anticipated because of the high level of political consensus surrounding this issue, the range of opinions expressed by the Israeli leadership was extremely narrow. The range was almost as narrow after including political parties that were not members of the governing coalition.

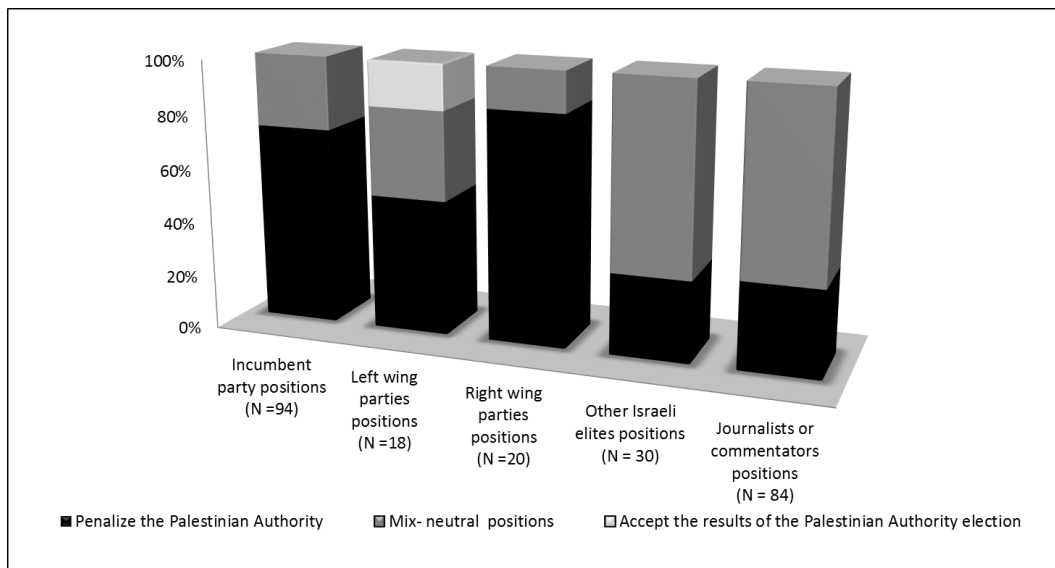


Figure 2. The domestic range of opinions in the news media.

Note. The X-axis represents the percentage of the expressed positions by each Israeli actor in regard to the question of how Israel should react to Hamas’ victory in the Palestinian elections (that is, penalize the Palestinian Authority, accept the results of the Palestinian Authority election, or mixed-neutral positions). The differences are significant at .001 level using Cramer’s V test.

Figure 2 accurately illustrates the difference between the range of actors and the range of opinions. The editor of a popular Israeli TV news channels in Israel put it as follows:

When we examined different responses in the political system, in the end all parties said the same thing.

Another noted Israeli political commentator, referring only to the Israeli parties, also said:

We expected to hear some different reactions, at least from the [Israeli] left-wing parties, but they gave us the familiar mainstream reaction.

We did find that many reactions were mixed, neutral, or not related specifically to the question of whether to penalize the Palestinians or to accept their democratic choice. Such positions were more prevalent among nongovernment Israeli elites and among journalists and commentators than among the three main political blocs. These opinions included: "To stop the army's policy of withdrawal [by Israel]"; "to continue the process of disengagement in the West Bank, as in Gaza"; "to seek other interim arrangements"; "to strengthen Abu Mazen";³ "to expropriate the government from Hamas"; and "to maintain restraint." The considerable variation in these reactions can be explained by the nature of the actors themselves. Nongovernment Israeli elites or journalists and commentators, as groups, have no common political ideology, which made it impossible to code their many varied opinions under one category. However, since these mixed-neutral positions constituted a majority of the positions proposed by the other Israeli elites, and by journalists and commentators, the range of opinions they expressed was much wider than the opinions of the government and the other elected political actors. We saw this as evidence of journalistic independence, not just in terms of the raw amount of challenging coverage, but also in the decisions to report the story beyond the confines of government-controlled beats. One could argue that in the absence of a coherent message there is no genuine opposition. However, the lack of direct support for the government's position certainly suggests that, despite the very supportive political environment, the Olmert government was incapable of dominating media discourse during the crisis.

The Full Range of Actors and Positions and Changes during the Crisis

Research questions 3 and 4 introduce two additional dimensions into the analysis: foreign actors and changes in the news coverage during the crisis. Research question 3 asks about the extent to which Israeli official actors dominated discourse in the Israeli press concerning the Hamas election victory, as opposed to Palestinian actors, and how this changed during the crisis debate. We assumed that the number of foreign actors—especially Palestinians appearing in the news—would rise over time.

To test our assumption, we broke down the data into three different periods, selected according to two other crucial events that took place during the study period. The first event was a serious clash between the Olmert government and West Bank Settlers that started on February 1, 2006, when authorities decided to demolish illegally constructed buildings in the Amona settlement. While no one was killed during the incident, many people were injured and the event generated a tremendous wave of news coverage. Therefore, the first period runs from January 27, 2006—the day after Hamas' election victory—

³ Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) has been the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization since 2004 and was elected president of the Palestinian National Authority on 2005 on the Fatah ticket. Calls to strengthen Abu Mazen cannot be interpreted necessarily as support for the Palestinian government. While Abu Mazen is recognized as the Fatah leader, the leader of the chosen government of the Palestinian Authority was Hamas.

to February 1, before the Amona clashes were reported. The second period covers the "Amona period" and February 2–21, the day before the official start of the 2006 Israeli election campaigns. The third period covers those campaigns, from February 22 to March 28, which was Election Day in Israel.

Figure 3 represents all the actors appearing in the media during each period. The range of actors here is considerably wider than in the analysis that focused exclusively on domestic actors. Looking at the whole period, it is clear that the proportion of external actors included in news coverage is extremely high. In fact, more external actors (52%, $N = 287$) appear in these stories than Israelis (48%, $N = 264$). Another interesting point is that the percentage of Israeli actors decreased from one period to the next, while the proportion of Palestinian actors increased over time. These results support our working assumption that dissenting voices would receive increasing coverage as time passes.

These findings demonstrate the growing importance of foreign actors as important news sources. Palestinians are by far the most important external actors represented, which again suggests how much hearing from the other side has become integral to this type of coverage. Although it is difficult to reach a firm conclusion about why this should be the case, it seems logical to assume that one reason was the government's urgent need to deal with other major events, namely the violent confrontation at Amona and the upcoming election. Once a government turns its attention to other issues of public import, it has little choice but to invest less time and fewer resources in controlling the flow of information about an older topic. This finding leads to an insight we alluded to earlier: when events remain newsworthy for a substantial amount of time, the government's attention may be sufficiently diverted to provide important opportunities for oppositional voices to be heard.

The fourth and final research question asks about the extent to which the official position of the incumbent government dominated discourse in the Israeli press concerning Hamas' election victory, as opposed to Palestinian positions, and how this changed during the crisis debate. The results are presented in Figure 4. The bars in Figure 4 represent the percentages of positions expressed by all the actors together, which means they speak for the full range of voices heard in Israeli mainstream news. The percentage of Palestinian actors increased from one period to the next (Figure 3), while support for the Palestinian position also increased (Figure 4). These intriguing results tell us that not only did the official government position not dominate media discourse in Israel, the minority opinion was being expressed. As the Israeli public became exposed to more Palestinian actors, they became exposed to very different types of opinions about what should be done in Gaza.

Sanctions against the Palestinians became less popular from the first to the third periods (Figure 4). During the second period, however, the sanctions option received more coverage because of an increase in coverage of right-wing actors during this period. Since many right-wing settlers were directly involved in the Amona evacuation, they were frequently interviewed in the press during the second period. Although they were interviewed specifically with regard to Amona, they also talked about the Hamas victory in the Palestinian election and how Israel should respond. Not surprisingly, most right-wing activists supported a policy of sanctions.

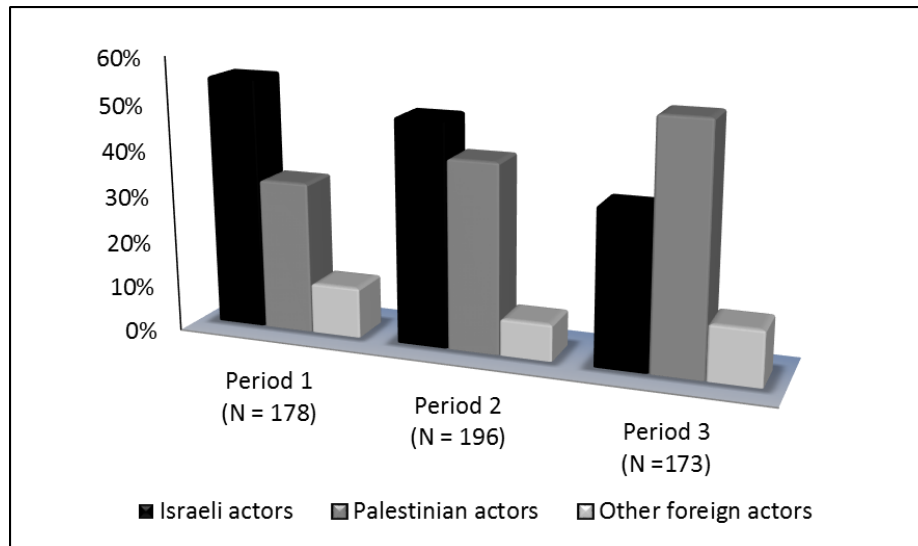


Figure 3. The full range of actors in the news media.

Note. The X-axis represents the percentage of all actors (e.g., Israelis: actors from incumbent party, left-wing parties, right-wing parties, other actors from Israeli elites and journalists or commentators; Palestinians actors belonging to Hamas and Palestinians not affiliated with Hamas; and other outside actors as foreign leaders) appearing in the Israeli mainstream news at three points in time. The differences are significant at .03 level using Cramer's V test.

One concern that emerged from this analysis is that even if Palestinians are allowed extensive access to the Israeli media, they may be relegated to minor stories in the back pages of the newspapers. The marginalization of oppositional voices in the media would be almost as problematic as leaving them out of the discourse altogether. To investigate this possibility, we examined the average page number and size of the articles reporting opposition opinions. The comparison revealed not only that there were no significant differences between the average page number featuring Israeli and Palestinian actors, but also that articles featuring Palestinian players had a small advantage with regard to length ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.66$) over those featuring Israeli actors ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 0.58$) ($t_{(481)} = -3.157$, $p < .002$).

We should note, however, that we removed the mixed-neutral category from the analysis represented in Figure 4, which means that there were many other opinions covered in the media that this finding did not take into account. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that, by the third period, the Palestinian viewpoint received considerably more coverage than the official government line. While this does not mean that Israeli public opinion was persuaded to soften its position, it does indicate that they were exposed, on a regular basis, to the Palestinian view of Hamas' election victory. These findings are widely supported by the majority of the interviews we conducted. All of the news editors and journalists agreed that when covering events such as the Hamas election victory, it was essential to cover the other side's perspective. The following excerpts from interviews with two news editors illustrate this position:

It is very important and necessary that reporters go to the Gaza Strip and interview Hamas members in their own homes (first newspaper editor).

Everyone, all TV channels and all the newspapers, discuss and interview Hamas members, Fatah members, and masked terrorists. The days when interviewing the PLO was not allowed in Israel are gone. There is no such thing as not interviewing the enemy (second newspaper editor).

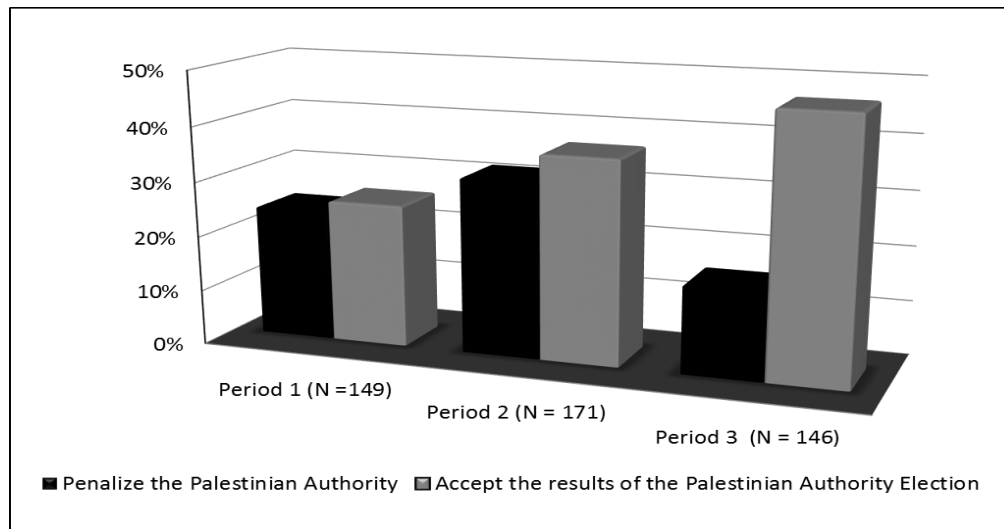


Figure 4. The full range of opinions in the news media.

Note. The X-axis represents the percentage of the positions expressed by all the actors combined about the question of how Israel should react to Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections (that is, penalize the Palestinian authority or accept the results of the Palestinian Authority election). The differences are significant at .001 level, using Cramer's V test. The percentage of the bars does not sum up to 100% because the "mixed-neutral positions" category was excluded from the table.

Moreover, when journalists were asked if the responses of particular actors or political parties were especially important when dealing with the Hamas election victory, many agreed that, in addition to official Israeli sources, it was important to interview foreign actors such as Omar Suleiman,⁴ Haled Mashal,⁵ Hosni Mubarak, Hashem Abd al-Rahman,⁶ Mahmoud a-Zahar,⁷ and Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya.

⁴ Omar Suleiman is an Egyptian politician and has been a leading figure in the country's intelligence system since 1986.

⁵ Chair of the Hamas Political Bureau, and considered to be the most senior figure in Hamas.

⁶ Spokesperson for the Islamic Movement.

Overall, these findings show that an assessment of the richness of any public debate must examine the full range of voices available and consider how the range is likely to change over time and according to circumstance. The question is not whether the press play an independent role in such processes, but rather which conditions would lead to a change in that role.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the autonomy of the press from government. The chosen case, Israeli mainstream news coverage of Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections, had all of the elements that should have precluded press independence: a consensus within the government with regard to the actions Israel should take in response; a political opposition generally supportive of such sanctions; a degree of political support from the international community, principally from the "Quartet"; and challengers (Palestinian and mainly Hamas actors) who were largely considered to be illegitimate voices within Israel. Nonetheless, close examination of the extent to which various voices were heard reveals that the news media presented the Israeli public with a wide array of actors and their viewpoints. This wide spectrum of actors and positions seems to go well beyond the expectations emerging from existing models.

This study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, which only analyzed domestic (that is, Israeli) actors, it was found that the Israeli press grants extensive space to actors from the incumbent government, leaving other political actors from the opposition parties with negligible space. Nevertheless, owing to the high level of internal consensus surrounding the Palestinian election results, the opposition rarely provided alternative positions. By focusing only on the range of voices coming from the political spectrum, one could conclude that journalists shape the news according the parameters of official debate. However, journalists and commentators also played an important role as independent actors. The independence of journalists is not only reflected in direct statements of opposition to administration policy, such as "voiced opinions" challenging the policy positions staked out by the president or prime minister. There are also more subtle forms of oppositional discourse. The current study found that journalists expressed a wide range of voices that were not related specifically to the question of whether to penalize the Palestinians or to accept their democratic choice. Rather than simply opposing or supporting the government position, Israeli journalists suggested different solutions to Israel's dilemma. These more subtle types of challenging discourse play important roles in policy debates. In this sense, our findings join others in stressing the important role journalists play as active news producers, not just as news reporters (Althaus, 2003; Entman, 2003, 2004; Hallin, 1986)

The second phase of this study analyzed the full range of voices. We found evidence that even what many would consider the views of the most extreme actors possible— those of the enemy—were given a significant amount of space, and that this space increased as the crisis continued. Previous studies have contended that the range of voices varies with the degree of official consensus during unexpected events (Bennett et al. 2006; Entman, 2004; Hallin, 1986; Wolfsfeld, 1997). However, our findings indicate

⁷ Co-founder of Hamas and a member of the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip.

that even though the debate within the Israeli leadership was very limited (officials and opposition parties presented a united front), challengers (the enemy) still managed to express their own views. Under certain circumstances and in certain countries, the notion of balanced coverage of a foreign policy event may mean devoting a large amount of space to those external actors directly involved in the story. A more cynical view may be that, in keeping with the increasing emphasis on infotainment, journalists have realized that using enemy sources makes for a more dramatic story.

These findings represent a serious challenge to the dominant theories of press-state relations, especially because the Israeli news media was able to exert a high level of independence despite a high level of consensus among the political elite. When these findings are combined with those of other studies, there is good reason to believe that similar trends would be found in other countries, although the results may be less dramatic than what was found in the present case. The most logical argument is that the extent to which any press allows the government to dominate political discourse will vary over time and circumstance. The researchers' job is to better specify the nature of those circumstances. This approach is the one that is most likely to lead to a more dynamic, nuanced, and comprehensive theory of press-state relations.

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Appendix

List of interviews

	Date of interview	Position of interviewee	Phone/personal meeting
1	February 6, 2006	Newspaper editor	Phone
2	February 6, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
3	February 6, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
4	February 6, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
5	February 6, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
6	February 6, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
7	February 7, 2006	Television news editor	Phone
8	February 7, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
9	February 7, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
10	February 7, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
11	February 7, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
12	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
13	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
14	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Personal meeting
15	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
16	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
17	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
18	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
19	February 7, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Personal meeting
20	February 8, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
21	February 8, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
22	February 8, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
23	February 8, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
24	February 8, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
25	February 8, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
26	February 9, 2006	Newspaper editor	Phone
27	February 9, 2006	Spokesman for political party	Phone
28	February 12, 2006	Newspaper editor	Phone
29	February 12, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Personal meeting
30	February 12, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone
31	May 14, 2006	Television news editor	Phone
32	May 14, 2006	Newspaper editor	Phone
33	May 24, 2006	Television news editor	Phone
34	May 29, 2006	Journalist/communicator	Phone