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Since arriving in Haifa almost a decade ago, I have taught a course titled “Religion, Media and Culture.” Originally, the course centered around American Protestantism — an exotic Other for the average Israeli student who often knows little about Christianity in general, let alone Protestantism in all its rich variations. Over the years my syllabus has become more and more Israeli-centric, and not just as a result of my increasing acclimatization. Rather, throughout the 1990s the Israeli media underwent a series of structural and technological changes (Caspi and Limor, 1999; Peri, 2004).

From a country in which the newspaper reigned supreme, and government-sponsored radio and television (one channel) ruled the airwaves, Israel is now a multichanneled, increasingly networked society (Koren-Dinur, 2006). The introduction of commercial, cable, and satellite television; the growth of community-based, pirate, and Internet-based radio stations; and the relatively rapid adoption of the Internet by the Jewish public have all contributed to these developments. While Israeli television and radio were once the monopoly of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, the contemporary media landscape is far more diverse, far more segmented, and far more “global” in nature (Caspi and Limor, 1999; Katz and Haas, 2001).

Electronic media is no longer produced or controlled with the aim of creating collective solidarity (Katz and Haas, 2001), but rather is reflective of a market-segmented population with shows, channels, and Web sites directed to particular markets rather than the amorphous Israeli collective. In this changed and changing context, those segments of the population that define themselves primarily in religious terms are increasingly creating and consuming their own media

— audio cassettes, CDs, Web sites, alternative news on the radio and through webcasts, synagogue pamphlets, etc.

At the same time, the news has decreased in importance for my students. While their parents and grandparents may still listen to the news on the radio several times a day, read the newspaper, and watch the official government Channel One news at 9 PM (see [www.iba.org.il/](http://www.iba.org.il/)), my students are more likely to see news snippets on Web sites as they scroll down the corner of the screen (such as [www.walla.co.il/](http://www.walla.co.il/)) in between browsing on chat sites, writing e-mail, or other more mundane entertainment. Where they once would have all cited the Channel One news television program as their primary source of information, now they are just as likely to note CNN or BBC or Al Jazeera, or one of the several Russian news programs.

Subsequently, my course has become increasingly devoted to understanding the ways in which religion is constructed in and through the media in different contexts and communities (Hoover, 2006). Students clip stories and editorials, tape newscasts, and download video to bring to class and analyze. Together we discuss how the mainstream (secular) media frames stories about religion and religious personas across the spectrum (see, for example, Helman and Levy 2001). Likewise, we look at stories written in the religious press (*Hamodiya*, *Yated Ne'eman*, *HaTzofe*,

*Arutz 7*

) to see how alternative, competing narratives are constructed.

For instance, the withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005 offers an important example of this process. While in the past Israelis would have had to suffice with the government-sponsored news program which, as the hegemonic voice, emphasized the correct conduct of the army (even in the face of clear provocations by the largely national religious settlers) and the smooth execution of the withdrawal, this time those who were interested in hearing the settlers' account were able to watch Channel 7's Web site news program, which offered an alternative, competing narrative of settlers treated improperly, of indignities endured by a community of families being expelled from their homes by Jewish soldiers, etc. ([www.israelnationalnews.com](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/) / ).

In both cases, viewers participated in a formative media event — but the interpretative frameworks differed so drastically that the cleavages in Israeli society were only emphasized as a result (on media events, see Dayan and Katz, 1992; on alternative readings of media events, see Yadgar, 2002). As Roger Silverstone so perceptively suggested: “Our media allow us to

frame, represent, and see the other and his or her world. They do not, by and large, in their distancing, invite us to engage with the other, nor to accept the challenge of the other. In effect, they provide a sanctuary for everyday life, a bounded space of safety and identity within and around it. But sanctuaries insulate and isolate as well as protect” (Silverstone, 2002: 777). Nonetheless, through this comparative process, students begin to question the limited frames that the media employ and not only in the case of religion, per se.

The negotiation of new media by religious communities is also a central theme in the course. As Israeli culture becomes more media saturated, some religious leaders have responded with harsh condemnations of unregulated uses of new technologies (i.e., cell phones or Internet) by their communities. Beginning with the example of the Amish and their negotiations with the telephone (Umble, 1992), my students reexamine claims of technological determinism made both by scholars and religious communities, and analyze the process of negotiations that new media demand of their users and nonusers alike (Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003).

In recent years, we have followed the creation of so-called “kosher cell phone” (a secular nomenclature) and the “kosher Internet,” (cell phones and Internet services marketed to the ultra-Orthodox community with rabbinic approval). Students track the coverage of these phenomena in the mainstream press, the changes in the industry’s approach to the ultra-Orthodox community (see, for example, the advertising campaigns directed to these communities specifically), the responses of leaders in official pronouncements, and the everyday practices of community members.

The categories of ritual and myth are also explored within the context of the media (Couldry, 2003; Grimes, 2002; Rothenbuhler, 1998). Students have explored how traditional life-cycle events are being reconstituted and reshaped as they are increasingly mediated. For instance, Internet matchmaking for communities which once relied on the personal mediator of the matchmaker; Hasidic weddings that are sponsored by cell phone companies replete with advertising banners in the banquet hall; the gift of cell phones by illicit boyfriends to young women in order to bypass the traditional channels of familial authority (Hijazi and Ribak, 2007). These are just some of the research projects students have undertaken. Myth and remembrance as aspects of civil religion also emerge within the context of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination and commemoration, a formative event for the current generation of students (Peri, 1997; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2001).

Most of the published research has focused upon different uses by the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel, but my students, who represent the whole spectrum of Israeli culture — Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox Christian and Catholic, Druze — write

original research papers on diverse topics such as the use of cassette tapes to counter secular influences within the Druze communities, religious commercials on Saudi-sponsored television stations, the virtual Bahai community, Internet use amongst Muslim women, the framing of the Ethiopian Jewish community in the mainstream newspapers, healer and televangelist Benny Hinn's performances in Israel (see [www.bennyhinn.org/](http://www.bennyhinn.org/)), new age magazines in Israel, etc.

At the end of the year, they present their research to their fellow students for feedback and comments before turning in the final paper. In ideal circumstances, the dialogue that emerges at this point in the course not only investigates the contents of religious media or the framing of religious phenomena by the secular media, but also points to broader, still unanswered questions concerning the nature and meaning of religion in the media age.

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