

# Israel from the Outside and Inside



# Israel from the Outside and Inside:

## *Israeli Politics and “Alien” Media*

Edited by

Dmitry Strovsky, Nitza Davidovitch  
and Eyal Lewin

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# INTRODUCTION

DMITRY STROVSKY

This book, entitled *Israel From the Outside and Inside: Israeli Politics and 'Alien' Media*, summarizes, to some extent, my personal experience as an individual who had the good fortune to view Israel from outside and then, after moving to this country at the age of 53, to observe it from inside, combining thereby various insights and perspectives on the country's present development. This personal standpoint is of great benefit understanding the peculiarities of cultural processes, no matter what profession and occupation one comes from. Yet, if a man is a media historian and researcher, this extensive personal experience is inevitably complemented by a scientific perception of events, affording an opportunity to see not only what is happening today, but also to impose it on the historical features of evolution. To be honest, I will always remain an outsider and an insider at the same time, but from a scientific point of view that seems to be a blessing.

Living in the Soviet Union and later in Russia for many decades, I never carefully thought about what the State of Israel was and how the modern world corresponded with it. Since early childhood, I seem to have known that Israel was surrounded by many Arab countries, and more than once I read media news that condemned an aggressive policy that Israel allegedly fostered in order to control the Middle East and beyond. The schedule of lessons or Komsomol meetings of that time inevitably included political information, the meaning of which was to negatively brand the policies pursued by Israel. Even initiatives at home on collecting waste paper and scrap metal at schools were intended to bring up 'decent individuals' who would show political vigilance in the fight 'against global imperialism and international Zionism.' The last phrase is still, after so many years, remarkably well remembered.

In the meantime, I could not say that Israel deeply penetrated my thinking and emotional perceptions. My environment at that time was far from Zionist, which was typical for the cities in my country. Jewishness had never been a part of my life, due to the lack of specific traditions considered Jewish. Even the tradition of cooking Jewish food was almost entirely lost, not to mention visits to the synagogue. One ought to bear in mind that in my



native town of Sverdlovsk (later renamed Ekaterinburg), the last synagogue was demolished as early as the 1920s. My mother worked as a journalist, and my father was a professor of economics at the Technical University. Given their backgrounds and current occupations, my parents were the bearers of Soviet ideology. They never were zealous executors of the decisions of the Communist Party, but our conversations in the family circle, as far as I remember, never went beyond the ideas that were allowed by the political system of the country. Although my dad remembered stories told to him by his parents and grandfathers about the Jewish community in our city, all of these memories were gone from his daily life when he grew old. In fact, they had never been a part of his reflections. Having inherited Jewish origins, he nonetheless was a ‘pure’ Russian in terms of his upbringing and education, like many Jews of his age born in the 1930s and later. It was, in fact, a strange and even abnormal situation that my father, like millions of other Jews living in the Soviet Union, well understood his national background but never stressed, at least publicly, his attachment to it. This attitude was largely shaped by daily realities under which Jewishness itself appeared very provocative.

In addition, Soviet education, largely, never took into account the specifics of different nationalities. In the meantime, the Jewish culture, unlike cultures of Ukrainians and Uzbeks and many other ‘big’ nationalities, never received any proper attention and was even neglected. The main reason for this was political. In fact, it was rather unsafe to show Jewish identity openly in the USSR, and it was almost taboo to speak about it; this was certainly reflected in the lack of any information about art and literature created by Yiddish speakers in the Russian Empire before 1917 and in the Soviet Union. People were scared to discuss publicly even neutral issues that were in one way or another connected with the ‘Jewish topic.’ Most of the Soviet people still held a collective historical memory, formed long before the time of my youth, of a time when talking about this topic could lead to undesirable consequences for an individual, including being fired from work or going to prison.

True, it is impossible to say that the ‘Jewish topic’ was never raised at my home, but when it was, it was mostly connected with specific reminiscences. These were somehow in the category of family memories about my great grandparents who had died a long time previously. The multi-volume Jewish Encyclopedia that was released before the Bolsheviks came into power had a place on the bookshelf, but it was treated exclusively as a family heirloom, nothing more. Thus, all my impressions of Judaism were limited by visits to the cemetery where the members of our family

were buried, and by lovely stories of some people of Jewish nationality who were hosted by my parents.

Many sources note that the consciousness of Soviet Jews began transforming and approaching their 'real' Jewishness only after the 1967 Six Day War. When this war broke out I was only five years old and, to be honest, it did not register in my memory at all. Almost the same went for the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Although the Soviet media covered those events, I was too young to take them seriously. Israel at that time seemed very distant from my everyday routine. As I clearly understand now, it was the environment that made sure matters relating to Israel would not influence me. Even the mass repatriation from the USSR to Israel that commenced in the late 1980s and continued later did not particularly affect my feelings and being. I worked at the university and pursued research projects that were not connected with the Israeli topic, and therefore, perhaps, put aside anything that was outside of my usual realm.

My consciousness started to change after many years, when I turned 45 or so. I got the impression that I had done almost everything in the professional sphere in Russia and had reached a peak as a media historian and professor on the journalism faculty of Ural Federal University, one of the oldest academic institutes in Russia. Simultaneously, thoughts that seemingly had nothing to do with my previous career began gradually swarming through my head. In short, they were generated by a growing attraction to my ancestral roots – by an idea that for many years, as I mentioned before, was safely asleep in my consciousness. I now realized that it was important to get closer to my ancestry, and partly for that reason, I began later to learn Hebrew as an important element of Jewish identity. Through the language, I started learning about the culture and public life of modern Israel and the traditions of the Jewish people. Visiting the synagogue twice a week where the local branch of the Jewish Agency was located – and studying there – also had a strong impact on me.

Staying outside of the boundaries of any country makes it impossible to fully understand its specific traits, its mentality, and the attitude of its people with regard to various facts and events. In the long run, I realized clearly the extent of my eagerness to understand Israel and to feel I was part of this territorially small country, which had become special for the rest of the world. In late March 2016, I moved to Israel with my wife, to become one with this very complex but extremely attractive society, primarily because of its unique development and specific religious concepts.

From the outset, I wanted to clarify for myself, as an individual and as an academic, why, despite all the historical vicissitudes, persecutions, sufferings and even catastrophes that the Jewish people endured over many

thousands of years, this nation has not only survived but has managed to build a surprisingly unique ethnic group. I could accept the idea of influence from the Torah and other sanctified books on the everyday existence of Jews, but this explanation in itself seemed insufficient. Meanwhile, this nation did not only create magnificent inventions in scientific and industrial areas, but also survived spiritually, regardless of all formal grounds for its demise.

I also wished to comprehend for myself why, having survived and reached great heights in technological advancement and the natural sciences, Israel remains in a difficult position in which it is often disputed and criticized at the highest international level by many other nations and communities. Some countries still consider Israel an invader of foreign territories, the initiator of the destruction of the Palestinian people, and an active supporter of using military force in resolving any conflict. They publicly blame Israel for a lack of humanism and for misunderstanding the mentality of the Arab countries that surround it.

It turns out that Israel is considered hostile toward other countries and peoples; this, to begin with, did not correlate in my mind with the idea of the importance of constant moral perfection, noted in the Torah. Understanding the origins of these attitudes towards Israel was very important to me, having just started to live in the Holy Land.

I asked these questions before arriving in the State of Israel, and they have become the focus of my research after settling here. As for the questions concerning the survival and success of the Jewish people, the answer is readily apparent in general. In extreme conditions, any organism starts working with double and even triple energy. Like the frog from the well-known tale, the body furiously begins whipping the milk, turning it into sour cream, which ultimately allows an individual or community to survive. Something similar happened to Israel. As a very young state, it managed not only to protect itself and to defend its independence on the battlefield, but also to achieve results in diverse areas of science, technology, art, etc. – i.e., in those fields that had never even been mastered in its neighboring states.

It is much harder, in my view, to answer the second question: why is the attitude towards Israel in the world still too wary? Why do wealthy and prosperous countries continue to harbor warmer feelings for the Palestinians, constantly sending their money for ‘restoring’ the territory where they live and paying no particular attention to what eventually happens to these funds? Meanwhile, the money is permanently stolen, the Palestinian territory continues to be neglected, and the vast majority of its inhabitants remain unsettled and as poor as they were before. All this

continues for decades, and international communities and institutions do not seem to notice what is going on in Palestine and how accusingly its people look at Israel, blaming her for all the misfortunes that they inherited. At the same time, the UN and many European organizations, including UNESCO, still frequently oppose Israel and favor the Palestinians, totally ignoring the basic reasons for the current Israeli policies – expressing its opposition particularly through some financial assistance to Palestinian infrastructures. Israel, rather than the Palestinians, is accused with atrocities.

One of the most recent incidents of this kind was the death in May 2018 of more than 60 Palestinians who decided to cross the Israeli border. The Palestinians resorted to protests by responding to the decision of the U.S. administration to move its Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Almost no news abroad mentioned that the Palestinians had massively violated the Israeli border, but almost all of the media pointed out that Israel during those days acted unnecessarily brutally by opening fire. At the same time, the fact of conscious provocation used by the Palestinians and their violation of the principle of the inviolability of the border, received partisan coverage not only in the Palestinian media but also in the media of many countries.

Media in the modern world is largely dependent on the political strategy of its country. Even if the media is a private institution, it absorbs the spiritual and political values of society and reflects them in its information coverage of politics. Hence, along with analysis of media coverage, it is worthwhile to look at the political strategy of any government and to analyze political and media issues together, without separating one from the other. This principle of selection has become extremely important for this book aimed at understanding the media's attitude towards Israel in different countries. In this regard, the book seems to be a pioneer investigation.

Following the principle of objectivity in such analysis, it is appropriate to ask if Israel itself seems to be responsible for the reactions that are set off in different countries. Finding a proper answer for this perennial dilemma is not an easy burden: much depends on who is supposed to reply. Obviously, non-biased analyses of complex situations predetermine the presence of pros and cons related to them; otherwise, the origins of any problem can never be revealed. In the meantime, there have been many incidents in which Israel has had to resort to tough measures to protect its integrity and the safety of its people. This very provocative stance puts another question on the agenda: does Israel provide timely and reliable information that would protect the interests of this country?

The protection of its territorial interests has not so far guaranteed for Israel a stable positive reputation in the modern world. Nowadays Israel does not seem to have a clear understanding of how to respond to

information challenges that different sides initiate, and therefore the country is often provoked. Constant clashes between the Israeli army and the Palestinians lead to totally unresolved situations, which stimulate the foreign media to splash out a great amount of negativism and even sarcasm about Israeli policy. Even in cases of the most humane initiatives, Israel often cannot persuade the world community about the activity that it promotes, and thereby entirely loses in the information war that is currently being waged against this country. In fact, Israel is still far from developing an information strategy that would help to repel constant media attacks from abroad. This slowness on the part of Israel keeps leading this country to sad results when it comes to gaining a self-confident position relative to the entire world.

To be more precise, an Israeli state information policy, aligned with the complexity of political, legislative, economic, socio-cultural, and organizational measures, aimed at ensuring the right of people to access to information, should be established. This state information policy can be interpreted as a special sphere, where the interests of the international community in getting information are going to be satisfied, and a constructive dialogue between media and its representatives in state structures and institutions is ensured.

There are two aspects of the state information policy in any modern society: a technological one, which predetermines the regulation of the process of transmitting information, and a substantive content oriented aspect, representing the communication priorities of the socio-political process. The peculiarities of the above policy demand special attention; this is necessary because today foreign media occasionally outstrip Israel in interpretation and delivery of information concerning its reputation and public trust.

Proof of this lies in Israel's reputation – which is often unprotected from attacks and insinuations – construed by many international organizations. The example of numerous terrorist acts that escape mass denunciation by the highest political institutions, including the UN, confirms this imbalance existing so far. Misinformation also emerged with regard to the latest incident involving the Palestinians who protested against the transfer of the American Embassy to Jerusalem and who themselves were the worst violators of the status quo between Israel and Palestine. Meanwhile, UN official representatives, except for those of several countries including the U.S. and Australia, still keep taking an exclusively Pro-Palestinian position. One of the serious problems for Israel in this case is not only the position of foreign diplomats, but also the inability of the country itself to explain to the world in a timely way the essence of a conflict situation. Consequently, the stance of foreign media carries more weight.

This inability is clear from the articles represented in this book. It describes the political position of the media from various countries and the Palestinian Authority towards Israel. The overall picture is far from rosy: the media in these states, although different from each other in social structure, religious and political traditions, and in many other ways, display a cautious attitude towards Israel. The word ‘cautious’ can seem neutral. In fact, the reaction of the media existing not only in the neighboring countries but also beyond, often looks even threatening and ominous to Israel. Sometimes foreign media make outright insinuations against Israel that have very little in common with reality. One does not have to be a profound expert in political and media spheres to comprehend that such misinformation does not promise a positive perception of Israel – not in the minds of the political establishments of these countries, nor in the eyes of the mass audience. Misinformation posed against Israel promises for the latter evident difficulties for international promotion of its initiatives, no matter what aspect of life they touch. The Israeli reputation deeply suffers within the consciousness of the world community, which, as has been said, adopts a negative attitude towards Israel.

Israel is undoubtedly losing today in the process of spreading relevant information. Efficiency of information is one of the most important conditions for debunking misinformation and creating a positive image for Israel. The term ‘efficiency of information’ includes the speed of collection and transmission of the needed data as well as the facility with which information follows the dynamics of events. The lack of efficiency with regard to Israeli media can be seen when comparing the rates of acquisition and transmission of the same information by the Israeli TV channels and the broadcasting company *Al Jazeera*, which despite its formal distance from Israel, demonstrates in most cases greater responsiveness of information. The informative approaches of *Al Jazeera* become more diversified with the years and therefore more professional. This broadcasting company suggests biased information, which nonetheless, looks balanced, at least outwardly, due to representation of diverse expert views and even live discussions on different topics concerning Israel. This applies, in particular, to the confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians, where entirely different actors and priorities can be observed. A viewer of this TV channel gets an opportunity to form his own opinion about the situation. Owing to developed information dissemination approaches, *Al Jazeera* for many years has maintained a highly rated position among the leading TV channels in the world.

The information politics of many leading TV channels have long been following the principle of providing viewers with a variety of views on what

is happening. However, it is obvious that the editors themselves have a clear position on political issues that are being transmitted and do not deviate from this principle. This applies not only to *Al Jazeera*, but also to *BBC* in the UK, *CCTV* in China and some others. Despite tremendous differences in the selection processes of information and political priorities, these channels look very professional – largely due to good technical opportunities and an extensive network of correspondents working in different countries.

There is no doubt that the states that are advanced in creating and distributing information keep investing a lot of money in the work of these TV companies, which are able to respond quickly to all kinds of challenges undermining Israel's reputation. One also ought to bear in mind that technical and content opportunities in Israel lag behind leading world TV channels. In addition, over recent years Israel has not made advances in competing with its communication rivals, although the necessity of improving media reputation for Israel remains very high.

Obviously, for various reasons, the financial resources of *BBC*, *Al Jazeera* and some other media giants significantly exceed those of Israeli television. Additionally, many problems in shaping a positive reputation for Israel in the modern world are defined not only by financial issues but also by insufficient attention paid by Israel to the ramifications of its information policy. One of the pivotal trends for this policy is to organize a flow of information from state structures that would create an information exchange with the public. The question in this case is not about how to ensure the independence of mass media concerning governmental interests or any agenda dictated by the authorities.

The development of a coherent information policy in the country means the provision of timely information for the audience, both domestic and international, about facts and events. Simultaneously, this policy assumes timely responses to the queries of the audience. An Israeli information policy should also ensure transparency of information in *force-majeure* conditions. In the socio-political environment, the state information policy is aimed at meeting both state and public interests. This is displayed, in particular, in maintaining social stability and undermining political actors whose activities encourage a dividing social competitiveness.

It would be improbable to say that the Israeli media do not present their evaluations of state powers. They regularly and with enviable constancy transmit noticeable criticism of official structures and initiate the spread of acute and conflictual information, tackling even the country's leaders. In this respect, the Israeli media respond to social queries and the legitimate right of everyone to know what is happening in the government. However, such information is often predetermined for ‘domestic use.’ As for the exterior

world, Israel seems to be very slow to reach foreigners. Much greater effort is needed in order for foreign audiences to receive information about contemporary Israel, its achievements, problems and characteristics. It is a reliable method that enables proactivity and reduces, perhaps even eliminates, opportunities for the penetration of disinformation and for the creation of distorted impressions about our country in the minds of foreign audiences. With such tactics, media in any country can manifest itself as a real public institution. This approach should be advanced within the framework of the state information policy, which presumably guarantees for foreign people the right to receive comprehensive information about Israel. There should be a special information infrastructure that is capable of ensuring a stable and open flow of information abroad.

Nowadays Israeli efforts to establish a positive reputation outside the state focus mainly on the delivery of press conferences with senior officials as participants and on the distribution of press releases. Many countries resort to these measures, but they are insufficient for Israel, particularly because of its constant military conflict. Considering modern conditions, the Israeli political establishment requires a much greater awareness of its responsibility for the image of the country and for forms of conveying the appropriate information. Obviously, the attention, or lack thereof, to these things affects prospects for the future development of Israel and its reputation.

Largely, the shaping of Israel's reputation by means of the media appears to be the pivotal issue for this book. This issue, to a great degree, is challenging because not all of the problems, as noted above, that determine Israel's image in the modern world have been resolved. However, it is necessary to think about these problems, primarily for the sake of ensuring Israeli national security. Hence, this volume covers a broad spectrum of challenges with which Israel is bound to cope, along with the ways in which these challenges are comprehended from the inside, within Israeli society, and from the outside – in the spheres of foreign media. This was the exact logic with which my colleagues and I completed the jigsaw puzzle of the chapters that highlighted Israel's challenges at its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We magnified some external problems as well as domestic ones. In addition, we touched how precisely Israel is seen from the outside, mainly by foreign media, as well as the ways in which its internal politics takes action. Above all — in order to make sure that unlike other analyses this volume covers a large variety of points of view — we gathered chapters that were written by experts from different areas, including India, Russia, Turkey, Sweden, Poland and Israel. These chapters, in turn, cover contemporary issues of



media and politics related to Israel, all over the world, including in Israel itself and among its ultimate rivals – namely, the Palestinians.

This book views media and politics and what falls in-between, peeling things like an onion — starting from the outside and then, layer after layer, advancing toward the inside and finally plunging straight into the complexities of Israeli politics.

In *Chapter 1: The images of contemporary Israel on Facebook*, Marek Kaźmierczak analyzes the images of contemporary Israel on Facebook and how these reflect the average knowledge of the users. The importance of this media goes beyond mass media; in practice, Facebook is part of daily life, and people treat it as a reliable source of knowledge, a tool of communication, the embodiment of individual and collective expectations, imaginations, needs, prejudices and frustrations. Accordingly, Kaźmierczak shows, the images of contemporary Israel, which users from either Israel or from other countries create, are strongly determined by semiotic, symbolic and rhetorical confrontations inherent in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Leaping to Far East Asia, in *Chapter 2: Israel and Palestine in India: Depoliticization in the Media*, Tapas Ray links the two states – India and Israel – and analyzes their relationship. Ray focuses on the view promoted by the Indian mass media on this issue – mass media being the most powerful agent shaping public opinion in any country – on this issue. Ray briefly examines the changing relationship between these countries in its geopolitical and ideological dimensions, and attempts to connect this relationship to the Indian media’s approach in the context of the major changes that India itself and its media have undergone since 1991.

Getting somewhat geographically closer, in *Chapter 3: Ambivalent Politics: Mediated Histories and Realities of Turkey and Israel Relations*, Veysel Batmaz raises the issue of how contemporary Turkish media affects Turkey’s international politics, particularly as it applies to the ambivalent relationship between Israel and Turkey. Batmaz clearly shows how the contemporary Turkish media distort reality by using psychological methods of influence. Furthermore, the media create their own virtual world that fails to share much with the real one. According to the Turkish contributor, this gradually but overwhelmingly changes the mentality of the Turkish society and influences the relationship between the two countries.

Perhaps no discussion of the media impact on international politics can take place without insights from the British *BBC* as one of the most influential media companies in the world. It entirely concerns its information politics in the Middle East. Hence, in *Chapter 4: BBC News on Israel: Coverage and its Criticism*, Greg Simons reviews the major news media outlet in the

United Kingdom and the way it covers the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Simons demonstrates the use of news as a means to influence and to form public opinion in a situation where there are two confronting actors, fighting for legitimacy and justice in order to justify their actions. In addition, Simons' chapter covers the ongoing debate between the *BBC* and its critics concerning news coverage of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, laying out the main narratives used by the opposing sides.

Turning from one major political actor to another, in *Chapter 5: Israel in the Soviet and Russian Media: From Hostility to Mutual Understanding and Cooperation*, Dmitrii Gavra, Elena Bykova, and Anna Smolyarova review how the state of Israel has been portrayed in the mass media of the USSR and Russia, from the very first days of the emergence of this state in 1948 to the present time. The authors relate how the reflection of Israel in the eyes of Soviet and Russian audiences has been changing, and how the image of Israel in these media has always played a role in the political trends promoted within the Soviet Union and Russia, as well as in the relationship between them and Israel during different historical periods. Gavra, Bykova and Smolyarova also notice that even in the most difficult years of mutual hostility the Soviet media never questioned the legitimacy of Israel as an independent state. Overall, this chapter shows that throughout its seventy years of existence, Israel's image in the Russian media has undergone a metamorphosis, from hostility to mutual understanding and cooperation.

Still in the Russian vicinity, in *Chapter 6: The Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Russian Media*, Evgeniya Gorina shows that when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Russian media defiantly manipulate and create a counterproductive picture of current realities, and in line with this, the audience acquires no real knowledge about basic facts and political priorities. Consequently, the picture produced suggests that the Russian media, as an inalienable aspect of its evolution, is unlikely to serve as a balanced and non-biased source of mass information on international politics and military conflict.

One of the curious connections between international matters and domestic affairs has to do with the Russian-speaking communities in Israel and in Russia. In *Chapter 7: The Russian-speaking Community in Israel: Problems of Identity*, Alexey Antoshin and Vadim Kuzmin rely on press materials to analyze some complex identity issues of the Russian-speaking community in Israel. In particular, they discuss the mental priorities of Soviet Jews who repatriated during Brezhnev's era and organized two of the most popular Russian journals, *Vremya i mi* ('The time and us') and *Dvadsat' dva* ('Twenty-two') where traditionalists held discussions with intellectuals who believed that Israel was a part of the Western world. This

phenomenon, in the authors’ opinion, helps readers comprehend special traits that influence the contemporary Russian-speaking community in Israel.

Whatever happens in the media all over the world, the sources of information and disinformation lie within the boundaries of the conflict itself and the intentions of the rival actors in the arena of the Middle East. In *Chapter 8: The PLO’s Information Politics: Frameworks, Ideological Trends and Outlines*, Dmitry Strovsky and Ron Schleifer provide readers with a detailed analysis that shows how the Palestinian media function during the ongoing conflict with Israel. The authors reveal the organizational structure of this media, inherited from the Soviet media tradition and its political attitudes in terms of agitation and propaganda – aimed against Israel and its people. This chapter reveals universal frameworks within which any authoritarian system manages its media, and the consequences of this for the development of civic society.

The fact that the Israeli media uses propaganda techniques, not only in wars but also for the ‘enlightenment’ of people living in this country, sounds like a conspiracy theory. At the same time, the idea of managing and controlling populations for certain political purposes is very far from new. The idea that the Israeli government manipulates citizens and ignores political groups that are not counted reliable is probably unacceptable to most Israelis. Yet, in *Chapter 9: The Major Factor of the Israeli Crisscrossed Politics*, Eyal Lewin analyzes the sociological background for Israel’s lack of national strategy on matters of security and foreign policy. Lewin introduces the various cleavages that seem to tear Israeli society apart, but eventually focuses on one specific split — the political controversy that affects the social identity of the nation. Understanding of this identity helps to clarify the principles of decision making, for better and worse, in the Israeli political sphere.

Thus, overall, this book does not pretend to be an exhaustive source of knowledge for understanding the media realities in which modern Israel operates. That would be impossible in a single book. However, our work provides the key to a better understanding of the information sphere – which is continuously in progress – relative to Israel’s actions and to the resolution of its vital issues, in the context of modern political realities. I am pleased that my decision to move and live in Israel has facilitated an understanding of these issues – which would have been unlikely realistic if this had not happened in my life.



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE IMAGE OF CONTEMPORARY ISRAEL ON FACEBOOK

MAREK KAZMIERCZAK

### **Abstract**

The development of the Internet has put on the agenda the question of whether this media source can remain formally independent of the obstacles that face any media in contemporary conditions, as well as the question of political bias in particular. This issue is very understandable in the case of such a popular social network as *Facebook*, the popularity of which is increasing worldwide year by year. Due to *Facebook's* coverage of modern politics, Israel often gets on its electronic pages with diverse information. This also concerns news related to Palestinian-Israeli relations. Through content analysis of some publications, the author concentrates on the trends that are the focus of this information, the level of the information's political engagement, and the influence of this information on mass consciousness. This article suggests that *Facebook's* information is not always neutral. At times, it appears to be noticeably biased, which significantly reduces the level of its political impartiality and non-partisanship. This weakens Israel's political capabilities and the level of public confidence in it abroad. What kind of knowledge can one gather when reading messages about Israel presented on *Facebook*? Who are the messages' recipients? Can *Facebook* change the 'average' mind about Israel? What images of Israel are supposed to be seen on *Facebook*? This article addresses all of these questions; it focuses not only on the specifics of evaluations, but also on expression in terms of language, which is very important for understanding basic political trends.

**Keywords:** Facebook, public opinion, communication, mass information, Internet technologies, linguistic confrontation, cognitive prosthesis.

## Introduction

Thanks to technical resources and attractive design that enable the amount of information being released and its orientation, *Facebook* is considered one of the most developed Internet websites in the world. Millions of people regularly sign on to this media source and consume information concerning many different fields of study and practice. *Facebook* has become a long-standing universal ingredient of people's daily life, treated not only as a source of universal knowledge about one's environment but also as a tool of multilateral communication between different strata of a large audience. This provides additional opportunities for *Facebook* to attract various communities, including a tremendous number of individuals. In this regard, this network looks like the embodiment of individual and collective expectations, imagination, feelings, needs, prejudices, and frustrations, due to the burgeoning role it plays in the modern world.

Many people who are interested in specific themes also welcome *Facebook* in searching for diverse information on various life trends. Therefore, it is not surprising that the number of respondents to this website becomes bigger year by year. Israel looks like one of the topics being actively consumed by the audience.

The images of contemporary Israel on *Facebook* reflects the knowledge of those who contribute information and those who consume it, at least where those processes occur superficially and unprofessionally. According to Alexa.com, *Facebook* occupies a position as a leading source of information in global networking<sup>1</sup>. Public opinion polls monitored in this country have already proved that Israeli Internet consumers consider *Facebook* to be the fourth most important source of information, whereas Palestinians living in the occupied territories place this social network seventh in consumption compared to other 'public arenas.'<sup>2</sup>

Immediately after its emergence, *Facebook* began to pay profound attention to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, following the appearance of numerous texts on this topic, added regularly with corresponding photos and people's opinions on what was happening. Today hardly a day passes without information related to this issue on *Facebook*. A similar very interesting reaction to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is noticeable in academic investigations. Some of these highlight very emotional reactions by average people to what takes place in Israel and Palestine. For instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Top Sites in PS, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/PS>, accessed 3.01.2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

David Kirkpatrick in his book *The Facebook Effect*, refers to the behavior of Jewish settlers who for many years lived in the West Bank and were outraged one day by *Facebook's* position demanding that they admit that they were permanently staying in Palestinian territory. Some activists even created a group that strongly supports the idea that the West Bank belongs only to Israel. Having named itself 'It is not Palestine, it is Israel,' this group almost instantly acquired 13,800 members. A few days after the emergence of the above article, in March 2008, *Facebook* agreed with the argument expressed by the residents of few large settlements that they did live within the borders of Israel. At the same time, a group called 'All Palestinians on Facebook,' numbering about 8,800, also fiercely blamed *Facebook* for deceit. They insisted, among other things, that Palestinians who lived in East Jerusalem were forced to admit publicly that they belonged to Israel, even if the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem had not been internationally accepted. Nowadays, concludes Kirkpatrick, *Facebook's* users in the West Bank can make their own choice as to how to position themselves: if they belong and live in Israel or in Palestine (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 279).

Currently, neither the group 'It is not Palestine, it is Israel,' nor the group 'All Palestinians on Facebook' promote themselves anymore and publish information on the Internet. Times have changed, and the activity of these groups has faded. In the meantime, they still have active followers represented by numerous other groups and individuals, who interpret in their own way the problem of the relationship between Israel and Palestine. Their voices create an additional setting where both sides can disseminate different views and feelings regarding this issue on the Internet and attract new supporters and opponents.

Various forms of semiotic, symbolic, and rhetorical confrontations generated by the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians actively promote images of contemporary Israel created by local users or by those who live abroad. The conflict has become part of vivid and largely hostile interactions led by *Facebook* users (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 286). The new digital social media became the augmented realm of old and complicated real problems.

It is commonly acknowledged that people who speak about any social or political problems purposely, albeit implicitly, express their own interests. Therefore, it not surprising that from the beginning, *Facebook* was a medium where users wanted to see the world through their personal perceptions and feelings (Lambert, 2013: 8). It became a vehicle for the power of imagination where individuals, institutions and communities wanted to impose their 'monopoly of interpretation' (Napiórkowski, 2014:

61). This diverse picture undoubtedly originates and strengthens contradictory images of Israel.

The power of imagination often starts with language and with purely linguistic signs, but it is also present in audiovisual and visual messages. Critical knowledge seems to appear the least; sentences and phrases are built exclusively on people's emotions. This happens due to the nature of the information that comes up on the Internet. This information often looks hectic, spontaneous, and unprovable. Thus, the standard of coverage fails to take into account the pros and cons of one situation or another. Moreover, instead of an equal exchange of views stimulating dialogue, the people resort to banal utterances that simplify the contexts or that lead them away from initial topics. With regard to this situation, information exchanges are frequently filled with simplistic or specifically 'painted' lexics (for example 'Pallywood').<sup>3</sup> There also might be a more complex interpretation of occurrences that distort the whole content (for example, through a community page or short video showing Israel as a natural defender of Europe in the war against ISIS)<sup>4</sup>. As a result, the problem reflected in primitivization of the context remains.

The relationships between the various social interactions that arise from the process described above may create either a discourse of unconditional acceptance of Israel, or, on the contrary, a discourse that negates the country. However, in both cases, the cognitive framework of the discourse turns out to be counterproductive and more likely shaped by different and contradictory myths and symbols rather than by critical knowledge which *a priori* has to stimulate social changes. Myths and symbols allow many stories to penetrate the public conversation; in terms of conflict situations, they may provoke very negative consequences for public consciousness. Myths substitute for real backgrounds and encourage a lack of knowledge, which inevitably becomes more crucial in a society that does not have enough professional comprehension of the logical and structural components of texts. Negative results can thus become clearly noticeable, because the whole item of information becomes seriously biased and partisan, creating a virtual world.

This artificial world is undoubtedly able to stimulate real problems for people's psyches. Due to the emergence of textual and picturesque information having very little in common with authentic priorities, the represented situation might look extremely unrealistic. Although they are made for the satisfaction of primary needs of the audience, these depictions

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<sup>3</sup> Europeans Against Antisemitism, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/313425098771153/>, accessed 5.08.2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, accessed 2.08.2016.



inevitably lead to serious distortions in public consciousness. Against the common background of the media sphere, *Facebook* creates even bigger problems in terms of influence on people's consciousness. This social network, first, unites people with different communication goals, and secondly, it uses different native languages, which makes the idea of comprehension and public agreement even more difficult (Miller, 2013: 88; Mejias, 2013: 107; Lambert, 2013: 46).

In this chapter, we shall mainly observe the profiles and messages concerning the image of Israel written and posted in English, and therefore consumed by much bigger audiences than if they had been written in any other language. In addition, English language pages inherit, largely, symbolics of the so-called Western culture, with its symbols functioning in a rhetorical way, and using synecdoches, metaphors, or irony. All of this enables us to see not only a set of topics represented within the Israeli issue, but also a conditional profile of the information consumer.

For a period of six months, from July through December 2016, for consideration with regard to *Facebook*, the author has been investigating different pages of both individual users and communities. In order to write this chapter, the author became a member or follower of 47 groups<sup>5</sup> and communicated with more than 40 different individual users. I looked through over 200 messages (presented in visual, written and audio-visual forms) and read more than 1,000 different commentaries (some shown in single sentences, some more connotative). The most attention was paid to the messages shown only once, although this investigation also touched on some other messages that were transmitted and then repeated by different users, describing the same context, influenced by these interpretations.

What kind of knowledge can be gathered when reading messages about Israel presented on *Facebook*? Who are the knowledge's recipients? Why does *Facebook* seem to be particularly important among other information

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<sup>5</sup> Among them were Jews and non-Jewish friends worldwide, The Keffiyeh Monitor, Israeli Side, Europeans against Anti-Semitism, Israel Fans, Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel, Israel Voice, Israeli Side, Jewish Media Agency News, Israel at the UN-Geneva, Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign, United with Israel, Israel Supporters, Jewish and Christian Alliance for Israel, Israel in Europe, Israel in Toronto, Israel in New York, Irish4Israel, Muslims and Arabs against Anti-Semitism, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Stop Hamas, The Israel Project, Israel Armenian Solidarity, Israelis and Zionists, Israel in Montreal, Zionist Federation, Israel in Europe, StandWithUs, Everyday Anti-Semitism, Truth and Facts about Israel, Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Free Palestine, Israel in Australia, Jewish Art from Israel, The Jew in You, Humans of Judaism, Al Jazeera English, Free Palestine From Israel, Tears of Gaza, Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors.

sources that discuss Israel (which becomes clear after viewing the opinion polls)? Can this social media change the ‘average’ opinion about Israel? What images of Israel should be seen on *Facebook*? All of these questions are pivotal and treated as priorities for this chapter.

### **Social dialogue on *Facebook*: why it does not happen**

When one thinks about social, cultural and cognitive dimensions and forms of knowledge about Israel on *Facebook*, it is worth remembering that this media reflects particular forms of consumer rationality. True, some people cannot go beyond common sense, but others try to display a much more critical, even academic, paradigm of consciousness. However, the number of critically thinking individuals is small. This is explained by the specific device of an ‘average’ brain, which cannot always be in a state of tension from accumulating problematic or negative information. With regard to the messages gathered during the author’s investigation, more than 81 percent of the Internet users referred to their knowledge without showing any criticism or even pretense of being objective. Regarding Israel, most suppliers of information on *Facebook* hold onto well-known images of Israel they acquire most likely from media texts and talks with their friends and colleagues at work.

This preliminary conclusion can be reached based on numerous opinions represented predominantly in black and white about Israeli reality. Most views that deal with Israel are one way or another full of clichés and sometimes very superficial. One of the most circulated judgments is the assertion that this country is inhumane towards the Palestinian population and forcibly demands that the latter ‘align’ itself with Israeli interests. No less common on *Facebook* is the claim that Israel is greedy to ‘exploit’ and undermine the economically weak Palestine, and therefore permanently takes advantage of this territory. In this regard, we often see a deliberate contrast in the texts, differentiating between good Palestinians and bad Israelis. Against this background, any opposite views inevitably are treated as somewhat unnatural and therefore almost non-existent. It is obvious that a one-sided picture portrayed by *Facebook* is far from accurate about what is happening in the Middle East and what the real goals of each of the actors participating in the political process are. It is impossible to deny that the picture painted in this way affects the holistic knowledge of the surrounding world. Even a cursory look at the content of information messages appearing on *Facebook* on the topic of Israel makes clear the one-sided perception held by the majority of respondents.

Moreover, it is practically impossible to find opinions that could counter the positions of the contributors. This most likely means that a dominant part of respondents still judges Israel only from the outside, via correspondence. It is difficult to condemn people for having had no chance to visit Israel; therefore, a variety of circumstances can explain this situation. At the same time, when reading the opinions expressed one immediately notices frequently sounded categorical evaluations of Israel. This clearly confirms the biased position of many people speaking about this issue based on agendas already in their minds, without taking into account information that in most cases influence the situation. This situation demonstrates that the culture of polemics, which implies a collision of different views, constitutes an indispensable condition that is lacking on *Facebook*, which sometimes provides a one-sided source of information only.

Given the importance of *Facebook* as social media, it is possible to introduce the following hypothesis: because of the particular collection of information on the social net, *Facebook's* type of social networking does not facilitate any development or emancipation of knowledge. Such emancipation would mean that an average consumer of information could change his opinions, attitudes, and intellectual habits because of communication and interactions with other users who present different views on the same topic. Regarding Israel and the entire environment of the Middle East, the average user is not ready to accept a status quo that he does not agree with, nor is he interested in interpretations that do not fit his point of view. Therefore, *Facebook* is entirely dominated by a mentality that is shaped by common concepts, albeit a very naïve and even hypocritical one (Geertz 1983: 76).

This media seems to promote the social growth of vernacular cultures, which as early as before the Internet created political and religious centers. In contemporary anthropology, these centers are referred to as the hegemonic official culture (Napiórkowski 2014: 62). Vernacular means acting from the bottom of society predominantly by individuals, who nowadays can present their own opinions and identities on the Internet, a place where everybody can communicate with the entire world. Simultaneously, vernacular often implies apologizing for ignorance in public discourse. Many information consumers are convinced that their opinions are thorough and not subject to criticism, and therefore they tend to write what they wish but simultaneously treat critical knowledge as an unnecessary ballast (Miller, 2013: 171).

For example, when discussing on *Facebook* the Judo wrestling match between Israel and Egypt, one of the contributors concluded that the Egyptian sportsman should not have shaken the hand of his rival who came

from a country that ‘does not exist.’ The words obviously confirm this spirit: ‘Due to the fact that the entire world still believes in the existence of a country called Israel... we are forced to shake hands.’<sup>6</sup> One does not have to be a great psychologist to find in this statement a pronounced dislike for Israel. This offensive statement promotes not only a careless assertion and even vividly expressed hatred towards Israel, but highlights well-known prejudices in the evaluation of this country, which influence such statements that circulate on *Facebook*.

Consequently, the consumer of information starts to consider this attitude toward Jewish and Israeli nationality, mentality, and culture as natural, without any limitations and responsibilities. The author of this article should refrain from all similar judgments presented on *Facebook*, a number of which are significant. Their content, level of argument, and tone seem, without exaggeration, to be vile and therefore unacceptable in a civilized society. However, the one statement cited above makes it possible to understand how xenophobic and even racist attitudes form in people's minds. If not for such statements, these sentiments could never be formed on *Facebook* and directed against Israel and its citizens. As a ‘free arena’ for discussion on a wide variety of issues, *Facebook* moderates in large numbers certain judgments that have nothing to do with basic human principles.

Why does this happen? It is difficult to answer this question quickly and easily. A number of reasons can explain such a reaction of intolerance, and finding the proper answer probably demands special research. In the meantime, one of these reasons looks undisputable: the possibility of uncontrolled and unrestricted transmission of information within any framework as well as positive reactions to all ethical violations by Internet users lead to an increase in general intolerance. The ‘Jewish theme’ is a fertile niche in this regard, which has a long tradition formed in the public mind, and it is therefore bound to engender new insults.

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<sup>6</sup> The quoted commentary gathered during one day (14.08.2016) 11 likes and 33 responses. Some users who criticized the Egyptian sportsman liked Israel, but for most of them, the most important factor was the Olympic atmosphere. The users who accepted the behavior of the Egyptian were against his Israeli counterpart and Israel as a state. Some of them even wrote that the Egyptian could not shake the hand of the Israeli wrestler because the latter represented the state being unbenevolent to Palestinian children and ‘brothers.’ Reading responses and commentaries, we can see that the discussion itself looks less important than the expressions of a certain angle. Compare with: The Israeli Project, [https://www.facebook.com/theisraelproject/?hc\\_ref=PAGES\\_TIMELINE&fref=nf](https://www.facebook.com/theisraelproject/?hc_ref=PAGES_TIMELINE&fref=nf), accessed 14.08.2016.

This situation seems to illustrate quite a dangerous example of *vernacular thinking* having negative effects on various texts, due to signs of xenophobia being noticeable without scrupulous investigation. Paraphrasing Roland Barthes' idea (Barthes, 2008: 264) about the 'stolen language,' it is worth mentioning that the above phrase concerning the attitude toward Israel reflects an offensive form of thinking. The latter can be treated as a specific disposition in international and multi-national relations when actors do not worry very much about the ethics of expression. However, both discussants' sides undoubtedly seem to be losers, due to a very primitive interpretation of the presenting situation. Both sides are overtaken by rude interpretations that depart from the framework of common sense. Consequently, all those who consume such information become 'losers,' being unable to adequately evaluate all of the pros and cons of the positions.

It is impossible to find a proper solution or a constructive view of the conflict if one of the confronting sides relies on a monopoly of understanding that he/she/they created and on an undisputed exclusiveness in grasping the world. In this regard, it is hard to disagree with the following phrase also expressed in the text: 'You call us animals and then you call us haters. I think we should respect each other, and everyone should respect the other if we want to live in a better world. What you've said right now is very far away from that.'

The paradox of the situation, however, is that these words were pronounced by the same *Facebook* user, mentioned above, who suggested not shaking hands with the person who allegedly came from Israel, a 'non-existent' country. We may speak in this regard about an evident lack of logic in the promoter's consciousness: it is obvious that two parts of the same statement are totally out of line with each other. Critical knowledge demands some consequential logic in thinking and talking. However, the main problem lies in the fact that vernacular culture often leaves out this form of rationality. According to Fredric Jameson's assertion about postmodern identity, these angles of observation accumulate even a schizophrenic quality (Jameson 1991: 28). The author of this chapter is not an expert in psychology and medicine, and thereby is unready to pin certain diagnoses on an actor who makes these judgments. Yet, under no circumstances can we describe the formation of chaotic knowledge of reality that has nothing to do with the desire to discover causal relationships between phenomena of the surrounding reality.

The user's ideas about creating a 'better world' and reaching a more proper 'respect for each other' in the above post on *Facebook* are surprisingly combined with writing the name of Israel with a small letter "i". This was done to re-emphasize that this country is indeed not respected.

Therefore, the author of this opinion correctly observed this cognitive dissonance. According to Jameson's judgment, 'anxiety and loss of reality' go hand in hand (Jameson 1991: 28). To be more precise, the user's complex tactics of communication can be attributed, first, to provocation, and then to victimization or self-sacrificing. Both tactics seem to involve a strategy of the above-mentioned 'stolen language,' taking into account the incompleteness and inconsistency of these judgments. Repeating the same offensive statements deforms the facts, and creates a mechanism that eliminates the necessity for critical logic and knowledge. In addition, this approach implies the substitution of facts with assumptions, leading the conversation away from clarifying the core issues. This inevitably leads to a manipulated picture of the world.

Reflecting on the idea of social dialogue on *Facebook* leads us to conclude why it is not very realistic. Human social life provokes many contradictions among countries, nations and individuals. Most people permanently hold many prejudices, and these develop more quickly than any positive attitudes. Without seeing each other, people become all the more ruthless, letting off steam at each other while knowing that nothing will happen to them. The Internet in general and *Facebook* in particular wonderfully stimulate this opportunity, without any limitations. 'Hot' themes facilitate it even more. All this brings negative consequences for the possibility of mutual understanding of the stands of different actors.

### **Israel on Facebook: observations, pros and cons**

It would be wrong to say that *Facebook* provides consumers with only negative assessments of Israel. As has been said, a number of them are dominant, but as in any other modern media, *Facebook* portrays quite a wide picture of the world rather than one reduced to politics. This also goes for Israel, which becomes on the net a spot of crystallization of different views, although often provided without sufficient background and adequate arguments. Looking at the set of judgments presented on *Facebook* about Israel, one can see three main groups who create the images of the country: pro-Israel users, anti-Israel users, and so-called neutral-users.

In addition to any arguments, the first group is represented by numerous *likes* that fill entire Internet pages. *Likes* regularly substitute for positive words but serve as a universal reaction. Within the context of diverse conflicts promoted by social media, there is a strong connection related to the *like*. Over the last few years, it has acquired a very strong political connotation. To some extent, liking or disliking a post or a profile on *Facebook* implies a certain correlation with the fixed context. An individual