Demediocracy: Democracy, Media and Mediocrity: Some Reflections during an Inutile War

Dan Caspi

*Shakespeare, in the familiar lines, divided great men into three classes: Those born great, those who achieve greatness, and those who have greatness thrust upon them. It never occurred to him to mention those who hire public relations experts and press secretaries to make themselves look great.*

Daniel J. Boorstin

The minimalist-maximalist debate concerning media influence may assume unexpected significance at times. Some researchers claim that the media exert little influence, while others disagree, proffering findings and public sentiments ostensibly confirming the media’s powerful effect on society as on political culture as well (Ball-Rokeach, 1998). Musings about this extended dispute began to take shape in the midst of the July-August 2006 war that has no official name to date, identifying three major dysfunctions attributable to the media.

1. Acceleration

Media presence may accelerate political processes, pressuring leaders to make swift and often inappropriate decisions, especially when the politicians involved are inexperienced or overly sensitive to fluctuations in public opinion.

The war broke out following the Hezbollah kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers patrolling the northern border on July 11, 2006. What would have happened had the media not reported the kidnapping immediately, but rather waited a few hours or even days? We may assume that the public would have been inundated by more rumors than ever, thanks to the new media – websites and cell phones. In any event, however, it is likely that subsequent events may well have developed according to a different scenario.

Prompt media coverage not only reveals but also accelerates political processes. Media presence itself generates pressure that demands rapid response. In more salient instances, even the expectation of such responses imposes stress.

The media often reveal that there is no choice other than to reconcile with the time gap. When Pope John Paul II was slowly expiring, for example, or when Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was hospitalized, reporters converged impatiently around the Vatican and Jerusalem’s Hadassah Hospital, respectively. But in both cases, the vicissitudes of fate and the pace of human biology maintained the upper hand and did not yield to reporters’ pressure. In many other instances, however, the media do succeed in narrowing the time gap in their favor and accelerating reactions, decisions or political measures. Live coverage, now achieved online as well as via the broadcast media, engenders expectations of immediate or near immediate attention to unfolding events.

The December 1989 Romanian Revolution largely took place in a television studio (Mollison, 1998), as citizens observed the events from their easy chairs in their living rooms as though they were at a sports stadium watching a match between rival teams. Consequently, many viewed the events covered in the media through a sports-oriented conceptual frame. As this “game” was covered live, with every detail of every move revealed to home viewers, the “players” too were pressured, hastening to react even if it was only to provide instant gratification for viewers/voters.

It was no coincidence that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz released bombastic assertions of certain victory when the bombing of Lebanon began in July 2006. As in any game, they were apparently attempting to encourage the home team and destroy their rivals’ morale. But the more that reality flew in the face of national leaders, the more they retreated to conventional, balanced, sportsmanlike expressions ranging from “at least we didn’t lose” through “we lost honorably” to “it’s how you play the game.”

In a tense media environment, inexperienced politicians, as well as those overly sensitive to the public mood, are more likely to succumb to temptation than their experienced colleagues, resulting in hasty and uncalculated measures as the media whisper loudly: “Your voters are awaiting your response! Don’t delay and don’t hesitate! Come on, spit it out!”

2. Demediocracy

The new media-worshipping political style has been given several nicknames, including New Politics (Leshem, 2003), Americanization, Mediapolitics, Telepolitics and Telepopulism (Peri, 2004). On another occasion (Caspi,
1999; Caspi and Leshem, 2006), I defined the new style as PASTE Politics (an acronym for Personalization, Advisors, Surveys, Telepolitics and Entertainment). Considering the changing circumstances of the past few years, however, we ought to give this pale, sticky sobriquet a new twist by adding an S (for spin, of course). So watch out for a hail of hype as the pundits pontificate in SPATES of messages. All such nicknames underscore the media’s decisive role in the political arena and its influence on political recruitment processes (Maarek and Wolfsfeld, 2003).

Many sound, qualified candidates may find themselves reluctant to enter the political arena if media skills are considered a necessary condition for winning elections and assuming office. The exposure essential to successful candidates may deter those unwilling or unable to cope with the media. Instead, photogenic candidates comfortable with microphones and cameras will take their place even if they lack the requisite leadership skills. In other words, the twofold demand for both political and media competence diminishes the reserve of qualified people willing to run for office and carry out public functions. Not everyone who is electable is worthy of being elected, nor is the converse true. In this age of professionalized election campaigns, the former group may well have the upper hand. Over the past few decades, Americans and Western Europeans alike have sensed an increasingly acute lack of distinguished statespersons. Negative selection is liable to reduce democracy to a kind of demediocracy – a democracy fully exposed to the media and populated by dull, mediocre public officials (Caspi, 1999).

3. Demystification

Ostensibly, the more an event is reported in the political arena, the more citizens are informed of it – and informed citizens are a vital resource for democracy. Broad coverage of the political process, however, entails an attendant dysfunction: The well-known demystification process that purges politics of pretense and posturing (Schnitt 1995). Formerly covert political processes are now exposed to the public eye and consequently acquire distorted interpretations. The more that media coverage supposedly leads to democratization, enabling broader and more varied audiences to monitor and participate in political processes, at times via live broadcasts, the more fertile the resulting field for rising political alienation. Apparently, a considerable measure of political literacy (Crick, 1977, 1978) is required to understand what we see and hear: Obviously, not all negotiations are wheeling and dealing and not every compromise is a con game. What we need is proficiency in placing events and developments in their proper context (Erber and Lau, 1990).

Once the results of the 2006, 17th Knesset elections were announced, especially the low voter turnout, public discourse became the victim of an interpretation tsunami. Four out of every ten voters did not exercise their right to vote. The decline in voting percentage is consistent and is given many explanations. Media exposure apparently intensifies an overall sense of participation in decision-making processes, but in practice, such participation falls far short of the ideal image, at least insofar as elections are concerned.

Table 1 reveals that in Israel’s first few elections, nearly all citizens exercised their voting rights. After the Yom Kippur War, the figure dropped to a little more than three quarters of all enfranchised voters. A dramatic change began occurring from the Prime Ministerial elections of 2001, when less than two thirds of the electorate fulfilled its civic duty. The voting rate rose slightly in the general elections of 2003 and plummeted again in the most recent elections to some 20% less than the previous average. At the same time, the media map became more extended and varied its transmission channels on radio and television, including additional televised news broadcasts. Apparently, the more information supplied by the media, the lower the Knesset election voting rate.

The broadcast monopoly enjoyed by Channel 1 was shattered on the inception of cable television in 1986. The multiple cable channels again engendered demystification, this time curing nightly news addiction, perhaps to the politicians’ satisfaction: The less news people watch, the less they know and perhaps the less critical they become. According to that same line of reasoning, the political establishment stood to gain from the dismantling or at least weakening of the sole television news program – a process that began in 1993 with the inception of Channel 2 news broadcasts and gained momentum nine years later when current events programs were also broadcast on Channel 10. In 2006, the viewing rates for all three news broadcasts came to about half the rate for Channel 1 news program, during the period that Israel Television held the monopoly on televised current events.

It is also no coincidence that each of the last few election campaign results included a surprise by an anonymous list of unfamiliar but reliable candidates. To a great extent, the Zomet list in the 13th Knesset elections of 1992, Shinui in the 16th Knesset elections and the Pensioners’ Party in the 17th were refuges for the politically alienated, for voters who had to choose between their civic obligation and their overall disappointment with the political system.

In an interview with author Meir Shalev after the 17th Knesset elections, a Haaretz reporter wondered: “Isn’t it a bit irresponsible to register a protest vote and send seven unknowns to the Knesset?” The writer clarified: “Are you satisfied with the Knesset Members whom you do know well? Unfamiliarity is their greatest advantage [emphasis
mine – DC]. The Pensioners’ Party is one proof that there are many people who think the government has to deal with everyday life here, to address the needy, the elderly, the sick – and not only Rachel’s Tomb and national boundaries. They’re no less important” (Lev-Ari, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Map Developments</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Knessel Elections</th>
<th>Voting Rate (%)</th>
<th>No. Enfranchised Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party press, government radio</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>506,567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party press, government radio</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>924,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party press, government radio</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>1,057,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party press, private press, government radio</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>1,218,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegemony of one commercial newspaper, government radio</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>1,271,285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcasting Authority Law, Voice of Israel detached from Prime Minister’s Office and moved to the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA)</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>1,499,709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inception of Israel Television (1968)</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>1,748,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First crack in Israel Broadcasting Authority monopoly – Voice of Peace (1973): Yom Kippur War</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>2,037,478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political upheaval: Voice of Israel inaugurates Third Network (1976)</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>2,236,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative stability: Local papers and local press chains flourish</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>2,490,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crack in broadcasting monopoly widens; Pirate cable stations flourish; daily press triopoly (three media conglomerates) strengthens</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>2,654,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcasting monopoly ends: Cable television (1986) and an experimental Channel 2 inaugurated</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>2,894,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First signs of multichannel era: Cable and experimental Channel 2, pirate cable television, numerous pirate radio stations; media conglomerate consolidation sparked by apprehension over multiple broadcasting channels</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>3,409,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable and full Channel 2 broadcasts (1993)</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>3,933,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Skies: Cable, Channel 2, regional radio and cable niche stations</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>4,285,428</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Awareness that the public is exposed to processes and is capable of monitoring decision makers closely, thanks to media coverage, apparently exerts a greater impact than the actual exercising of this capability. As a result of intimate knowledge of the political arena, or perhaps through disregard of potential dysfunctions, the media might erode public trust in the ruling institutions (Moy and Pfau, 2000).

The two institutions with the highest media coverage of the seven examined, the Knesset and political parties, are least trusted by the public. By contrast, three institutions that insist on judicious media coverage – the Israel Defense Forces, the Supreme Court and the State President – enjoy high trust levels among the public. The Knesset consistently lost a third of the public’s confidence: 33% in 2006, as compared with over 50% four years earlier. As a corollary to this decline, the party system incurred a loss of similar scope: 32% in 2003 vs. 22% in 2006 (see Figure 1). At present, the Israeli public’s confidence in its parliament is similar to that of its counterparts in France and Canada, somewhat greater than that of democratic legislatures with the highest media coverage, such as those of the United States, Germany or the United Kingdom, but less than that of Scandinavian countries, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

The greater the number of competing news channels and broadcasts and the more live coverage offered, the greater the chances – and also the risks – that an unprepared public will be exposed to all that is deviant and unfit. Undiscerning exposure to events in the political system is liable to develop dormant tendencies towards political alienation (Cappella and Jamieson, 1996), as reflected in expressions such as “the parties are all the same.”

Source: Democracy Index, Israel Institute for Democracy (http://www.idi.org.il/hebrew/madad_2006_2.pps#10)
“everyone’s corrupt,” “there’s no one to vote for” and the like. Apparently, the sense of alienation increased during and after the war as a result of the military and political leadership’s rather insipid performance, that also sparked considerable public support for philanthropic enterprises – oligarchic substitutes for policy.5

Demystification is not unique to the political system and certainly not exclusive to Israel. Other institutions, such as the State President,6 the State Comptroller (Zerahia, 2006), the Civil Service Commission, the judicial system, the medical system, the religious system and even the media are subject to increasing exposure and are equally vulnerable to unanticipated consequences. Israel’s judicial system, for example, has always maintained a certain media haze, with coverage limited to measured reports on deliberations and verdicts. So far, fear of extraneous influence on proceedings and their outcomes has blocked the introduction of television cameras into the courtroom. Nevertheless, the judicial institution’s halo is becoming some what tarnished as news bites, not necessarily originating in internal sources, report power plays in judicial appointment procedures or differences of opinion among judges regarding rulings: Trust in the Supreme Court declined by more than 10% within three years, dropping from 79% in 2004 to 68% in 2006 (see Figure 1). Similarly, increasing media coverage of malpractice may uncover the medical idol’s feet of clay, eating away at the once virtually unchallengeable authority of physicians (Kremnitzer, 2001).

Even in the media age, certain institutions, such as the religious establishment, still manage to maintain controlled and judicious coverage and thus retain their sound reputations. For example, the Vatican has accustomed its vast believing public to anticipate fixed dates for the Pope’s appearances, as though they were part of a religious rite.

Conclusions

There is nothing like war to expose the strengths and weaknesses of society. Apparently, the leadership crisis affecting Western democracy over the past few decades has not passed Israel by. Many months after the end of the war, debates over the media’s role in wartime still rage, with no fewer than four discussions of the topic held within one month at institutions of higher learning. Obsessive discussion of this issue is accompanied by an increasingly long series of essays dealing with changes in the democracy culture in a vibrant media environment (Corner and Pels, 2000).

The Israeli media were criticized sharply for two principal reasons. First, they were accused of not having warned the public promptly of the impending war. Moreover, their behavior during the war was condemned severely, as demonstrated by public opinion polls, particularly because of the surfeit of information and “chatter” (Zafrir, 2006; Kalina, 2006). Such criticism may have swept the worrisome signs of Israeli demediocracy under the rug for the time being, but certain questions still demand resolution: Are the media beneficial or harmful to democracy? Is democracy in a media ecology capable of producing competent leadership and sound government (Raboy and Bruck, 1989)? Could demediocracy cope efficiently with its rival regimes – dictatorships and totalitarian states? The answers to these and similar questions have far-reaching implications regarding the survival of modern democracies in the media age and Israeli democracy in particular.

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Notes

1 The article is based on a lecture entitled Valka a medialni ekologie v Izraeli (War and the Communication Ecology in Israel), delivered at a Karl University congress in cooperation with Brit Ivrit Olamit, Prague, October 16-19, 2006.

2 Apparently, the outcome of the war dictates its name. Perhaps for this reason, the June 1967 war gained the name The Six-Day War, while its successor was called The Yom Kippur War. Subsequently, it was suggested that the July-August 2006 war be called The 33-Day War, if only to test the hypothesis concerning the connection between outcome and name. There were also those who considered the kidnapping of soldiers semantically and numerologically symbolic: 7/11 as distinguished from 9/11, the day the Twin Towers were demolished in the United States.
The imagery employed by reporters and politicians reinforces the sports field metaphor as well: Immediately after the outbreak of the “33-Day War,” a caricature was published in Israel’s Haaretz daily showing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert headbutting a figure representing Hezbollah, just as French soccer player Zinedine Zidane did at the Olympic Stadium in the game against Italy a few days earlier.

It may be assumed that the war and the well-covered investigations at the President’s Residence in August-September 2006 will lower this level somewhat.

During the war, an oligarch initiated and financed the establishment of a tent city on the southern coast of the country for refugees from the Katyusha rockets in the north; four months after the war, he offered a weekend of rest and recreation at Eilat hotels to residents of Sderot, a city in southern Israel that suffered Kassam rocket barrages from Palestinian Authority territory (Greenberg 2006).

See “President complains: ‘A woman is trying to blackmail me.’” NRG, July 8, 2006 (http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/446/069.html) – one of the first news items concerning the Katsav Affair. (Hebrew)

Two weeks after the ceasefire, nearly half the public (47.2%) believed that the media damaged home front morale, a similar percentage (44%) claimed that the Israeli media offered too extensive a stage to Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and more than a third (35%) estimated that the media, especially television networks, reported too much on the IDF’s strikes at Lebanese civilians and national infrastructure (Carmel, 2006).

References


