Mira Feuerstein & Lea Mandelzis

Israeli college students challenge media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Kurzfassung: Diese Studie beruht auf dem Critical Media Litaracy Education (CMLE) Programm, das im Rahmen eines Projektes zur Friedenserziehung durch Medien gleichzeitig an drei israelischen Colleges mit arabischen und jüdischen Studenten durchgeführt wurde. Ziel war es, kurzfristige Veränderungen in der Wahrnehmung der Medienberichterstattung über den Konflikt zu identifizieren und zu untersuchen, welche Rolle ein medienkritischer Ansatz für die Förderung von Toleranz und die Anerkennung beidseitiger Opferrollen spielen kann. Das pre-post Design der Studie ergab einen allgemeinen Trend in Richtung auf moderatere Positionen. Nachdem sie an dem Programm teilgenommen hatten, erkannte eine größere Anzahl der Studenten, dass es wichtig sei, den „Anderen" zu kennen, und welchen Einfluss die Medien auf extreme Wirklichkeitskonstruktionen und die eigene Wahrnehmung des Konfliktes ausüben.

Abstract: This study is based on a critical media literacy education (CMLE) program in a "peace education through media" (Pet-Med) project conducted simultaneously in three Israeli academic colleges amongst Arab and Jewish students. It sought to assess general short-term trends of changes in the students' perceptions of the media coverage of the conflict and the role a critical approach towards the media can play in promoting tolerance, and recognizing mutual-victim roles. The pre-post quantitative questionnaires evinced a general trend towards a more moderate position than the students took in response to the conflict. In the wake of the program, more of them acknowledged the importance of knowing the "Other" and the media effect upon constructions of extreme reality and their own perceptions.

1. Introduction

This study forms part of a CMLE program that sought a) to enhance students awareness of the way in which the mainstream media tends to focus on the threat of continued violence in the Israel-Palestinian conflict via the use of war frames; and b) to demonstrate how adopting a critical approach to the media coupled with learning about the vested narratives of both sides, can deepen students' understanding of media frames effects, and mitigating their suspicion of the "Other."[1]

The theory of framing posits that the media selection of certain aspects of reality makes them more salient, promoting particular definitions of an issue, causal interpretations, and moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation (Goffman 1974; Entman 1993). The manner in which information containing diverse facts, perspectives, and opinions is presented and the narrative form chosen are essential (Cappella & Jamieson 1997).

In this sense, the media can either fuel conflicts or promote reconciliation by employing de-escalation-oriented peace frames. Peace journalism can thus frame stories in such a way as to encourage analysis and non-violent response, explaining the underlying causes of the conflict and seeking to avoid polarizing the parties (Lynch & McGoldrick 2005: 5). Proscribing black and white stereotypes, it contributes to gaining genuine understanding (Kempf & Thiel 2012). War journalism, in contrast, presents conflict as competition, framing it in win-lose terms and reinforcing typical misconceptions that escalate the conflict (Deutsch 1973) and in the long run harden into social beliefs (Kempf 2003). *Inter alia*, these beliefs include the justness of one's victim role, de-legitimization of the enemy, and the defense of national security through a policy of strength (Bar-Tal 1998).

The present study was based on the core principles of CMLE in accordance with the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), and the current academic research in the field.[2] Constituting the attempt to examine the attitudes of Jewish and Arab college students engaged in intercultural dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it set out to assess whether and how this context affected their frames of the conflict (short-term effects)—in particular, their attitude towards the Other. Based on a narrative approach (Bar-On & Kassem 2004; Litvak-Hirsch & Bar-On 2007), the dialogue was designed to familiarize the students with diverse narratives and identities and help them reexamine them. It focused on the nature of media intervention and its interpretation in order to allow the students to work cognitively (ideas and conceptions) and emotionally (feelings) through their views concerning the conflict.

Many dialogical encounters take place between Jews and Palestinians, playing a central role in sociopolitical activities designed to promote peace in Israel. These have been examined in order to advance multifaceted understanding and guidance models in multicultural environments and the boundaries of identity (e.g: Salomon

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[1] Coverage of the Middle East tends to focus on violence, only a minute proportion relating to positive stories: see "Measuring the Media: Special Report," Institute for Economics and Peace, 2010

[2] Media literacy is defined in accordance with www.NAMLE.net.

2006; Maoz 2006; Maoz, Bar-On & Yikya 2007). The present study's originality is however, in focusing on the way in which the media functions as a significant mediating factor, fueling intercultural dialogue around the messages of the central news discourse.

The study's contribution lies in its focus on the program's potential to modify the frames in which students perceive the conflict that forms such an integral part of their co-existence within Israel's complex social-political reality.

As previous studies have evinced, people evaluate media frames in the light of their presuppositions (Haider-Markel & Joslyn 2001), the more knowledgeable they are about a certain subject the more critically they can assess the frames presented to them by the media (Sniderman & Theriault 2004). Combining this approach with inter-actionist theory (Kinder & Sanders 1996; Scheufele 1999) – which distinguishes between media frames and individuals' frames in relation to a topic – we assumed that students' experience with the program would affect their perceptions, leading them to some cognitive dissonance, expand and revise their frames of reference for the conflict. Some sought to create alternative media frames on their own initiative, looking for counterarguments and verifying information sources.

According to media-framing theory, media social constructions (Entman 1993) help shape our views regarding political, social, and economic conflicts (Wolfsfeld 1997/2001), in particular affecting attitudes towards cultural and national groups with whom we have little contact (Liebes & Kampf 2009). As Galan (2011) contends, the formation of mental representations of the enemy is reinforced by a form of "Manichaeism" that sets the bad against the good guys, the heroes against the villains (Morgan 2002). Adversaries are routinely stereotyped by media images, myths, and political leaders (Mandelzis 2014), and a distinction also being made between legitimate and illegitimate victims (Chomsky & Herman 1990). Studies demonstrate that the description and coverage of the Other usually makes extensive use of generalizations, negative stereotypes, and prejudices, ignoring the reasons behind the socio-political context that led to the conflict and thereby strengthening suspicion and distrust of the Other (Weimann 2000; First 2002; Avraham 2002).

Scholars of political communication agree that at times of crisis, journalists also tend to abandon their watchdog role and reiterate the establishment, military, and political line, that at these moments, are seen as identical to the public (Hallin 1986; Schudson 2002). At such moments, journalists do not hesitate to declare that they consider themselves first of all citizens and only afterward journalists (Liebes & Kampf 2009). The suffering of Israelis is thus always framed more empathetically than that endured by the other side.

In recent years, however, studies have evinced that the public is being exposed to a more intricate and complex picture than in the past (Ellis 2000). Greater coverage of the Palestinians' woes has increased public emotional involvement, Israelis beginning to experience a 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger 1957) and becoming more open to acknowledging the human face of the Other (Liebes & Kampf 2009). Considering the media effects research, studies also indicate the influence of education (Hiscox 2006) and motivation (Chong & Druckman 2007) on the effectiveness of framing. In addition, discussion of topics with others who have been offered a different frame (as in this study) also plays a role (Druckman & Nelson 2003). Mutz (2002) found that exposure to different viewpoints in cross-cutting groups increases awareness of alternative perspectives, fostering a change in attitude or strengthening existing attitudes in accordance with the cognitive response adopted towards contrary information (Sieck & Yates 1997; Petty & Wegener 1998).

The critical approach adopted by the present program thus sought to deepen students' media understanding, expand their spectrum of their opinions and knowledge of the conflict, and call attention to Otherness (see below, 1.1). In light of the importance of prior knowledge and the effect of media-framing on perceptions, we assumed that the program would help the students recognize the importance of identifying misperceptions and adopting new interpretative frames. As Druckman & Nelson (2003) have demonstrated, interpersonal conversations characterized by a wide variety of views promote an understanding of alternative frames that can modify and/or replace initially-held frames. The program was thus based upon group and class discussions, the intention being to expose students to diverse opinions.

1.1 CMLE –The program

The theoretical underpinnings of the CMLE program lie in the critical paradigm of the cultural-studies and new digital literacies (Hall 1998; Masterman 2001, Ferguson 2004; Kellner & Share 2007; Morrell 2012).

The program encourages reading information critically in multiple formats, form alternative representations, questioning hierarchies of power, social norms, and injustices, and become agents of change (Funk, Kellner & Share, 2016). It thus seeks to cultivate critical thinking (CT) with regard to the media and the ability to place media texts in broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Hereby, it helps students strengthen their civic engagement via critical inquiry with and about news media. Recognizing the crucial role the media plays in shaping political processes and agenda (Kellner & Share 2007), it is designed to deepen students' awareness and

comprehension of the politics relating to media conflict-representations. The students were encouraged to challenge problematic dominant narratives in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with their own counter-narratives as a form of reflection and action.

A growing consensus exists amongst scholars and educators that CMLE constitutes a promising means for creating the informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society, encouraging citizens to take communicative action and participate in public democratic discourse (Dahlgreen 2001). The critical approach of CMLE is defined as an aspect of a dialectical, socio-cultural and analytical process, an understanding that invokes CT seeking to develop in students a social consciousness as well as a working knowledge of how media operate (Campbell et al. 2013). It is intended to develop the Freirian (1970/2010) idea of "critical consciousness," a humanist understanding of living on solidarity with the world.

According to Ennis (2001), CT is a form of reasonable and reflective thinking that focuses on deciding what to believe or do. It highlights the importance of understanding others' views and the ability to empathetically grasp at least two alternative positions on the same subject without losing sight of one's own stance and its grounding in a particular frame of reference (Paul 2003). In encouraging knowledge of the Other and contextualizing conflicts, CT seeks to turn students into responsible decision-makers capable of grasping and dealing with opposing ideas and complexities (Harpaz 2010). As Banks (2001: 9) explains, "To become thoughtful citizen actors (we) must understand the ways in which knowledge is constructed and how knowledge production is related to location of knowledge producers in the social, political and economic contexts of society."

The curriculum for this study consisted of a number of units—core CMLE concepts, media-framing theory, and milestones in the history and politics of the conflict narratives. In the lessons, the students acted as both critical consumers and producers (Livingstone 2004: 4), positioning themselves as selective and receptive and participating as active critical citizens. From a pedagogical perspective (Vygotsky 1978), they engaged in groups discussions, in a collaborative process designed to construct meaning through problem-solving, decision-making, and reasoning—i.e., a "thoughtful learning" (Perkins 1993) that employed CT skills relating to media frames of the conflict gained through weekly broadcast news analysis.

1.2 Students' perceptions/frames

Drawing on audience-reception theory (e.g., Eco 1979; Iser 1980), we addressed changes in student perception of the conflict and the Other (the Palestinians). As sociologists, social psychologists, and media researchers note, perceptions/frames are a function of the complex relationship between readers and media texts, resting on previous interpretive frameworks regarding the conflict coupled with the emotional positioning aroused by news media framing. Given the dominant role news plays in Israeli public life (see below, 3.1) and in general in young people's political socialization and civic empowerment in particular (Lee, Shah & McLeod 2013), we examined the students' perceptions of the conflict in the framework of their habitual news usage.

Previous studies have demonstrated that news selection directly influences conflict perception and/or the conflict-relevant attitudes of the recipients' individual frames through which they interpret the conflict (Thiel & Kempf 2014: 6). Despite its effect on the way in which recipients make sense of news stories, it is limited by their individual frames and simultaneously with the complex interaction with media frames and contents (Annabring et al. 2005).

Addressing these issues comparatively, we analyzed changes in student perception within each group, taking into account the characteristics and level of student participation in the program, news-media usage, and trust in the media—three significant variables in shaping student perceptions. Participation in the program being a prerequisite for meaningful and insightful learning, it is based on internal motivation, experiences linked to identity, and the value attributed to studying (Harpaz 2010; Ryan & Deci 2000). An important variable when taking the learning tracks and fields of knowledge of the students in each college into account.

The students' "news diet" also played a role in the way they perceived the conflict messages in light of the fact that news media serve as a major source of information relating to politics and current affairs. Trust and mistrust in the news media were also important as they are positively associated with news consumption (Tsfati & Cappella 2005; Tsfati 2010; Tsfati & Ariely 2014). Research demonstrates that trust in the news media plays a significant role in shaping audience selection of and response to media, thereby potentially influencing perception of the political system at large (e.g., Ladd 2012; Tsfati & Cappella 2005). Those who trust the mainstream media tend to consume more news from mainstream news sources. Conversely, traditional media skeptics tend to consume more non-mainstream media news "(Carr et al. 2014; Jackob 2010; Tsfati 2010; Tsfati & Cappella 2005).

In this context, the primary research question was: What changes, if any, occurred in student perception of the conflict and its coverage after the program and how, if at all, did this differ compare across the colleges?

2. Material and methods

2.1 Design and participants

The sample consisted of 61 students (aged 18–35) from three academic colleges—Oranim (23), Netanya (24), and Levinsky (14)—over the course of a semester (2010–2011). 89.5% were Jewish (mostly secular [62.5%]) and 10.5% Arab (mostly traditional [95%]). 67% were female and 33% male. The youngest and most homogeneous group were the Oranim students (M = 26.91, SD = 4.11 vs. Netanya [M = 28.37, SD = 6.37] and Levinsky [M = 27.8, SD = 6.59]).

The groups represented the multicultural nature of Israeli society, the majority of the students coming from large cities and the rest from kibbutzim (collective communities) and outlying villages. Most of the Oranim students came from Media Studies, a sprinkling from the Education Department. The majority of the Levinsky participants were Education and Social Sciences majors. Those from Netanya College were all Communication students. The elective course based on the CMLE program, research, and workshops, consisted of a weekly class across a full semester as part of the academic year in each institution. As an explorative study and due to the small sample sizes only dramatic effects will become statistically significant.

2.2 Procedure

An intercollegiate comparative study using quantitative methodology for pre-post comparisons within each college was employed. Three colleges served as the sample, a statistic analysis being conducted by chi-square and t-tests in order to measure the changes the program prompted. A pre-post questionnaire was administered, including statements, a multiple-choice section, and two open questions relating to perceptions of the conflict[3].The four sections pertained to the students' personal and demographic characteristics ,news-media usage, views and perceptions relating to the news and current events, and stances towards the conflict and Jewish-Palsestinian relationships and their representation in the media. Crosstabulation enabled us to cross-check group variables across the three colleges.

3. Results

3.1 Students' news media usage

Interest in news leads to gains in public affairs knowledge, as well as to an increased sense of being informed (Curran et al. 2014). Broadly speaking, news forms a necessity part of Israeli life, news flashes being broadcast every half hour. A series of studies of over-21-year-old Jewish Israelis found that news consumption was correlated with intensified feelings of belonging and participation in society and public discourse (Adoni & Nossek 2007). In a cross-national research of 12 countries, Israel ranked highest on the supply of political information – i.e., "the supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources" (Esser et al. 2012: 250). In a recent comparative European study, Israeli students (Jewish and Arabs) were also the greatest news consumers (67.9%) (Feuerstein, Philips & Elvestad 2015). Contextualized within the changeable political information environment, this news-addiction is amplified by the on-going Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is part of a broader concept that was established in Israel, under the name of the "security culture" – "military values that penetrate civilian areas that give legitimacy to solving political problems in aggressive ways" (Elbaz 2015: 54).

The picture of the students' media usage that emerged from the questionnaires demonstrated the significance of their habitual news-consumption – in particular, mainstream news broadcasts (TV and online news).

The results evinced a high rate of engagement with news and current events across the three colleges, 70%–80% of students reporting watching such content. This finding is consistent with a recent survey according to which TV news formed a significance media source for 32% of 18–25-year-olds during the Israeli elections (Toker 2015). High levels of interest in online news also obtained in Oranim (76%) and Netanya (73%) in contrast with the Levinsky students (32%).

From an intercollegiate perspective, the findings indicate that the Netanya students were the largest news consumers. 36.4% of them customarily watching Channel 2 (the major commercial channel in Israel) "several times a day" (vs. Oranim [19%]; Levinsky[15%]) and 30.4% surfing Ynet, the major news site in Israel (vs. Oranim [18.2%] and Levinsky[15%]). The Netanya students also used more on-line news (79.2%) than the Oranim (76.2%) and Levinsky (71.4%) students.

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[3] The questionnaire was based on Prof. Anat First's doctoral dissertation (Netanya Academic College, Israel) and the researchers' cumulative experience

The disparity between colleges can be explained according to the orientation of the curriculum in each college. The news consumption in Oranim and Netania was in line with their media-studies orientation, which embodies students greater involvement with media content and through online learning activities.

In light of the changes in media environments and its effect on people's opportunities to choose news sources, the role of individual motivation and ability takes on more significance (Luskin 1990; Prior 2007). Both Netanya and Oranim reflect the students' involvement in the program, which can be attributed to their media learning track. Although we did not examine their level of interest in politics, this may lay behind their greater interest in the news due to their professional specialization in the media and the media studies focus on the context of the political environment. One consistent finding is that education and political interest are strongly related to news media usage (Aarts et al. 2012; Albaek et al. 2014; Norris 2000; Prior 2007; Strömbäck & Shehata 2010). Research suggests that political interest has become a more important determinant of news consumption in today's high-choice media environment (Boulianne 2009; Strömbäck & Shehata 2010). Those very interested in news increasingly tune in, those less so tuning out (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre & Shehata 2013).

Given the undisputed dominance of mainstream media, TV, and on-line news sites, we assumed that these media frames would have a considerable effect upon students' perceptions of the conflict. That is, escalation-oriented war frames – "war journalism" – tending to promote violent and competitive "us vs. them" attitudes rather than the conflict as a long, complex process (e.g., Shinar 2011; Wolfsfeld 2004).

3.2 Trust in the media

Trust in the media is a common mediating variable in measuring the relationship between news consumption and participation (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman 1998), media frames being rejected when the information source is mistrusted (Druckman 2001). More broadly, trust in media constitutes a major contributing factor behind citizen trust in democracy, this fact having numerous implications for media social influence. It is also closely associated with citizen willingness to learn about the political environment (Tsfati & Ariely 2014; Aarts et al. 2012).

Confidence in the media is also an important factor in tracking changes in perceptions of the conflict. In a survey of Israeli public trust in the news media regarding coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict conducted among a representative sample of 505 adults (18+), the Jewish population evinced low levels, balanced reporting being particularly suspect. The index of public trust was 2.92, on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), a majority of the respondents (around 55%) expressing low satisfaction with the news coverage of the conflict and only around 40% being highly satisfied (Peri, Tsfati, & Dor 2004).

A meta-analysis across 44 countries recently found that levels of political interest, interpersonal trust, and exposure to television news and newspapers are positively correlated with trust in the media. The more people watch TV news and read newspapers, the more they trust the media (Tsfati & Ariely 2014). In 2014, TV news was still perceived as the most reliable medium among young (16–43-year-olds) Jewish Israelis (Maagar-Mochot 2014).
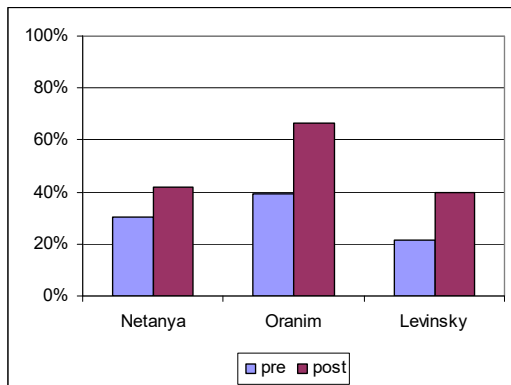
Research of online news suggests that in practice online current-affairs sites present audiences with an alternative form of news consumption. Offering information not available on other channels, they thus contribute to a feeling of immediacy and speed of news delivery (Tsfati 2010: 39).

In a broad sense, in the digital news environment citizens are expected to be both "reader" and "writers" – i.e., active participants in public discourse, whose engagement in the public sphere is connected to person and social identity ("actualizing citizens") (Bennett, Wells & Freelon 2011). This circumstance requires a learning environment that focuses on producing information created and shared by peers, in which the students can be producers ("writers") of news by themselves – as in the case of the CMLE program. Previous studies have demonstrate that the more informed people are about the process of producing news media the less hostility they exhibit towards the media (Gunther & Schmidt 2004). In this sense, media literacy education (MLE) curriculum raises awareness of production techniques and social responsibility. It focuses on revealing the fact that media messages are constructed representations rather than accurate reflections of reality, seeking to encourage more thoughtful processing. MLE studies suggest that enhancing cognitive awareness during media exposure increases skepticism, thereby strengthening logical thought processes and decision-making in such a way as to improve message interpretation processes. Results also revealed considerable changes in knowledge, skepticism, and perceived peer norms, as well as a significantly greater sense of self-efficacy (Austin et al. 2002, 2005). In line with this view, the CMLE program thus targeted toward critical analysis and production, encouraging students to probe questions about the media framing of conflict/ideology and the politics of its representations and context.

Student trust in media is thus presented here in relation to student perception of representation of the "Other" (the Palestinians) and Jewish-Palestinian relations.
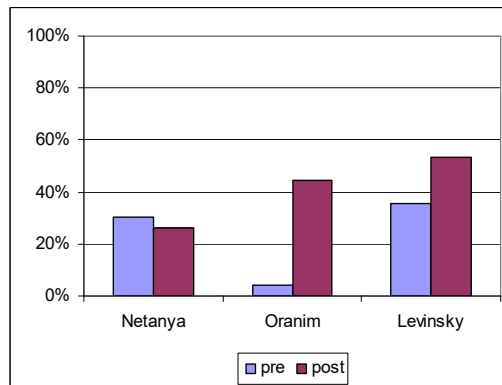
A significant ($p < 0.05$) change was registered in the students' responses to the statement that the media presents the Palestinians as "an agent out to destroy the State of Israel" (Fig. 1.1). This trend was most

prominent among the Oranim and Levinsky students, whose responses rose from 39% to 67% and from 21% to 40% respectively (vs. Netanya , from 30% to 42%). At the other end of the spectrum, a significant ($p < 0.05$) change also obtained in the students' responses (Fig. 1.2) to the media presentation of the Palestinians as a "national entity seeking to establish a sovereign state," more subscribing to this statement among the Oranim (from 5% to 45%) and Levinsky (from 35% to 55%) students.

Netanya: Chi-square = 0.617, df = 1, p > 0.05;
Oranim: Chi-square = 3.064, df = 1, p > 0.05;
Levinsky: Chi-square = 1.167, df = 1, p > 0.05;
Total sample: Chi-square = 3.896, df = 1, p < 0.05

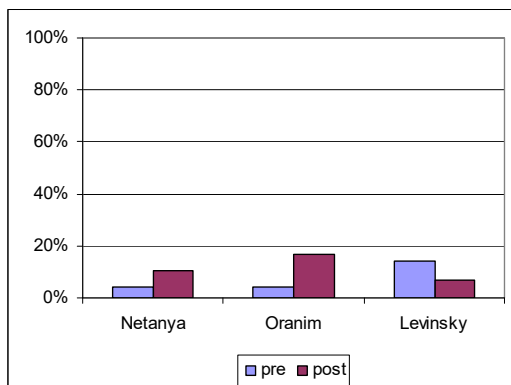*Figure 1.1:* Do you think the media present the Palestinians as an agent out to destroy the State of Israel?

Netanya: Chi-square = 0.086, df = 1, p > 0.05
Oranim: Chi-square = 9.476, df = 1, p < 0.01
Levinsky: Chi-square = 0.909, df = 1, p > 0.05
Total sample: Chiu-square = 4.617, df = 1, p < 0.05

Figure 1.2: Do you think the media present the Palestinians as a national entity seeking to establish a sovereign state?

These results (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2) indicate the extent to which the program increased student awareness of the media tendency to demonize the Other rather than presenting them as partners. The gap among the three institutions are associated with the focus of each curriculum and the students' experiences. Although student knowledge was not examined, we assumed that the Netanya and Oranim Media Studies orientation was responsible for their high levels of news usage and their more constructed basic framework of knowledge of the mass media for evaluating conflict coverage.
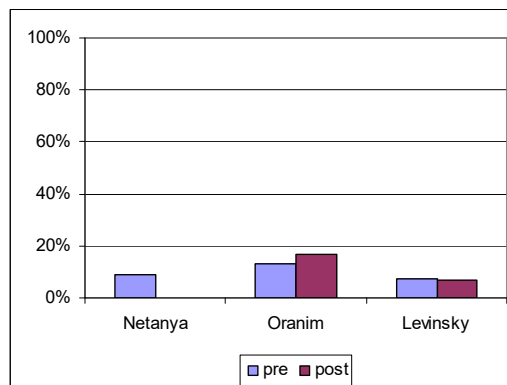
The students in these two colleges were more accustomed to examining conflict representation, stereotypes, and ideology in weekly online discussions. They were also more actively involved in online learning activities, producing alternative media texts with their teachers and peers. This circumstance may well have expanded their views, helping them unravel the true nature of trust in the media.

Across all three institutions, only a minority of responses and a small and not significant measure of change occurred in relation to the relatively few moderate statements regarding the Palestinians – "to negotiate peace arrangements" (Fig. 1.3), "ready to enter discussions and compromise"(Fig. 1.4), and "as not partner for peace"(Fig. 1.5)
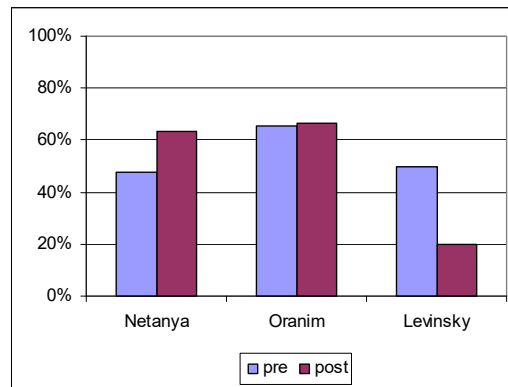

Netanya: Chi-square = 0.599, df = 1, p > 0.05
Oranim: Chi-square = 1.740, df = 1, p > 0.05
Levinsky: Chi-square = 0.453, df = 1, p > 0.05
Total sample: Chi-square = 0.813, df = 1, p > 0.05

Figure 1.3: Do you think the media present the Paletinians as ready to negotiate peace arrangements?

Netanya: Chi-square = 1.735, d f= 1, p> 0.05
Oranim: Chi-square = 0.106, df = 1, p > 0.05
Levinsky: Chi-square = 0.003, df = 1, p > 0.05
Total sample: Chi-square = 0.182, df = 1, p > 0.05

Figure 1.4: Do you think the media present the Palestinians as ready to discuss & compromise?

Netanya: Chi-square = 0.987, df = 1, p > 0.05
Oranim: Chi-square = 0.009, df = 1, p > 0.05
Levinsky: Chi-square = 2.885, df = 1, p > 0.05
Total sample: Chi-square = 0.106, df = 1, p > 0.05

Figure 1.5: Do you think the media present the Palestinians as not a partner for peace?

These findings may be attributed to two causes – the effect of cumulative exposure to the extrematization of the framing of the conflict in mainstream news which, as noted above, served as the students' primary source of news, and the explanation of the process of change in perception.

While it is widely accepted that media framing significant influences public attitudes toward important policy issues (e.g., Chong & Druckman 2007) and impacting people's perception of reality (Entman 1993), both prior opinions and specific knowledge also play important moderating roles. When media frames are incompatible with people's actual (Möckel 2009) or suspected attitude frames and biases, they tend to become ineffective or even induce contrary effects (Stuntebeck 2009).

The degree to which the program is relevant to the students' worldview is also an important factor in the promotion of significant learning. According to Petty & Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration-probability model, people direct more attention and expend more effort in understanding and evaluating subjects of personal interest and relevance to them. New information may undermine and disturb existing approaches and views. As Eilders (1997) has demonstrated, better- informed readers form their own views about which aspects of an issue are relevant to them.

In the present case, the degree of the students' familiarity with the historical and political context and the expansion of their media knowledge regarding it was seminal. The program prompting students to acknowledge the narrative of both sides for the first time, it is reasonable to assume that it created some dissonance and/or fostered a greater sensitivity, the students' newly-founded sympathy for the Palestinians making them more suspicious of media bias.

A general decrease in trust of the media was thus registered in all the colleges following the program, as reflected in the responses to the question: "Do you think the news presents Jewish-Palestinian relations as they really are?" (Fig. 2). Trust declined "a lot" in all three colleges – from 33.3% to 21.9% in Netanya, from 26.1% to 22.2% in Oranim and from 38.5% to 21.4% in Levinsky. This finding is supported by the rise in the "usually not" category, in particular in Oranim (from 21.7% to 44.4.%) vs. Netanya (from 23% to 25%) and Levinsky (from 25% to 30%).[4]

Consistent with our previous explanations, we found that more students identified media bias after the program (Fig. 3).[5] This was particularly true of the Netanya students, many more of whom regarded "the media as overemphasizing the conflict": the proportion of those "totally agreeing" with the statement rose from 31% to 43% (cf. Levinsky, from 15% to 27%), the Oranim students agreeing "a little" and exhibiting an increase (from 28% to 38%).
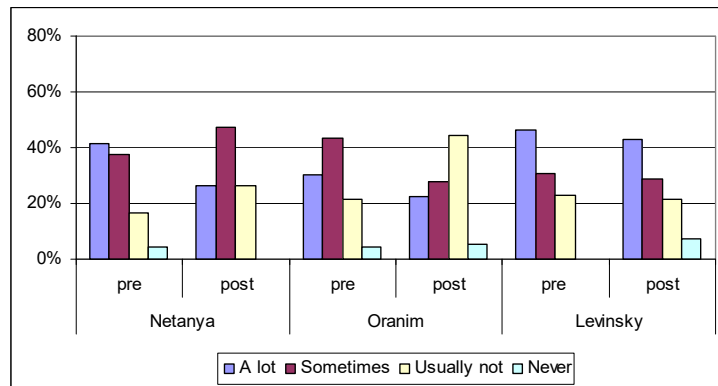
The results are consistent with Oranim students' general trend toward perceiving the Palestinians as a "national entity seeking to establish a sovereign state" (Fig.1.2) – a reflection of their alignment with the Israeli social-

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[4] Handling the response categories as a 4-point Likert scale and testing for mean differences between pre- and post-test did not yield significant results, however.
[5] Similar as in figure 2, the mean differences between pre- and post-test are not significant, however.
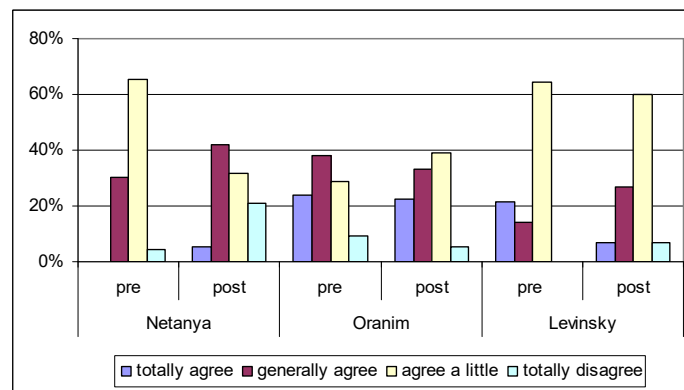
political center due to the college's political-culture orientation and their heavy involvement in producing alternative media texts and messages of the conflict (see below, 4).

We thus assumed that, broadly speaking, the program's critical pedagogy, coupled with learning about the conflict narratives of both sides, would foster a more complex view of media representations, addressing students' attention to news media constructions in relation to the conflict, media biases and political contexts.

Netanya: t = -0.691, df = 41, p > 0.05
Oranim: t = -1.303, df = 39, p > 0.05
Levinsky: t = -0.051, df = 25, p > 0.05
Total sample: t = -1.091, df = 109, p > 0.05

Figure 2: Do you think the news present the Jewish-Palestinian relations as they really are?

Netanya: t = 0.236, df = 40, p > 0.05
Oranim: t = -0.134, df = 37, p > 0.05
Levinsky: t = -0.813, df = 27, p > 0.05
Total sample: t = -0.354, df = 108, p > 0.05

Figure 3: To what extent do you agree with the statement "The media overemphasize the conflict"?

3.3 Knowledge of the Other

The persistence of stereotypes and prejudice on both sides of the conflict leads to a distorted vision of the Other, limiting the opportunities for developing and fostering intercultural understanding. As noted above, during national crises and war, journalists' patriotic is an opportunity to gain popularity with their national audiences: Suffering on 'our' side (Israelis), would always be documented more extensively and empathically than the suffering on the other side (Palestinian). This means that the claim that there is a bias in the coverage will always be correct (Liebes & Kampf 2009: 438).
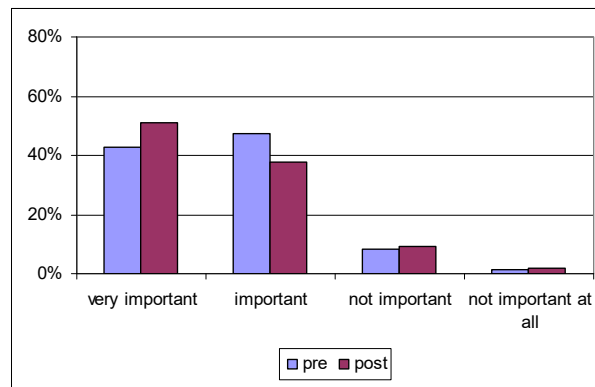
As the sole channel of news information, the media becomes the exclusive source of representation of the Other. We thus assumed that the CMLE program would help students explore the relationship between news information, knowledge, and power, widening their perspective regarding the multifaceted reality of the conflict. In other words, it would offer them alternative, more nuanced views, thereby allowing them to recognize that their own side might be responsible and/or to blame in some instances rather than a dichotomy in black-and-white terms.

We further assumed that the new trend towards representing the Palestinians in more human terms evident since the 2nd intifada in 2000 contributed to the students' understanding, acknowledging the shades of the grey sides of the conflict. As Liebes & Kampf (2009: 451) observe:

"Exposure to images and stories that testify to the human misery on the other side opens the window to feelings of empathy (toward "them") and guilt (toward "ourselves"). This type of image, which constitutes the "negative" of the pictures Israelis had been accustomed to seeing, has the potential to undermine entrenched viewpoints."
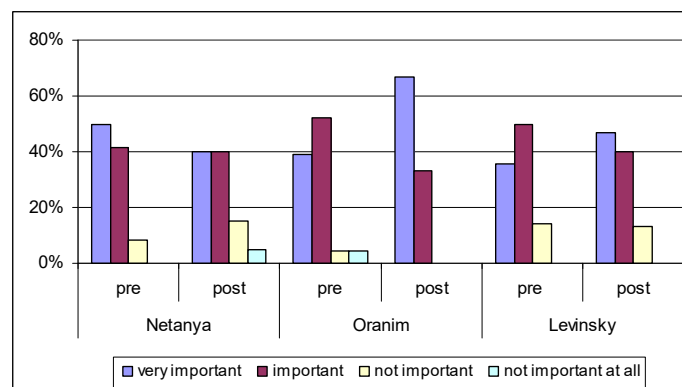
Pictures of children, women, and the elderly tending to arouse strong feelings, they can change perspectives and attitudes and bring about new understandings (Jay 2002). Images can "wound" (Barthes 1981) – i.e., surprise audiences by invoking emotions that may raise doubts or even subvert preexisting perceptions: "The impact of the image therefore lies in the creation of dissonance between the cognitive perception of the conflict and the empathy felt as a result of exposure to tangible suffering" (Liebes & Kampf 2009: 449).

Considering the shift and transformation in the climate of media values in Israel and in line with the critical approach of the program intervention, more students (52%) felt that it was important "to know the Other" (Fig. 4.1), fewer students perceiving this aspect as "not important(19%) or of "no importance at all" (5%).

Total sample: t = 0.490, df = 112, p > 0.05

Figure 4.1: To what extent is it important for you to know "the other"?

Netanya: t = -1.156, df = 42, p > 0.05
Oranim: t = 1.986, df = 39, p > 0.05
Levinsky: t = 0.450, df = 27, p > 0.05

Figure 4.2: To what extent is it important for you to know "the other"?

From a comparative perspective (Fig. 4.2), much greater importance was attributed to knowing the Other amongst the Oranim and Levinsky students (Oranim: rising from 39% to 66%; Levinsky: rising from 35% to 46%). This is consistent with the decline in the "not important" response (4% to 0% and 14% to 13%) respectively. The Netanya students' "very important" response declined from 50% to 40%, and a slight rise (8% to 15%) occurring in regard to "not important "of knowing the Other.[6]

The prominent rise in Oranim students can be explained by their engagement with media productions (see, 4) tended towards a de-escalation media orientation. This more balanced and proactive view made them more open

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[6] Once again, the mean differences between pre- and post test are not significant, however.

to regarding the Palestinians as the victims of occupation. Recognizing both sides of the conflict also lay at the heart of the program. Although this view was implied in various levels across the colleges, we assume it also affected the Levinsky students. We also hypothesized that the Oranim findings reflect the students' association with the center-left of the Israeli social-political map in line with this college's more prominent political-culture orientation.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Overall, the study's findings evince a change in the students' perceptions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a result of the program. Most demonstrated greater awareness of media frame biases, acceptance of the Other, and sensitivity to both sides. The results support the positive effect exerted by the CMLE program supported by previous studies, which evince that critical pedagogy promotes CT and knowledge regarding diverse topics (Pinkleton et al. 2007; Austin et al. 2007; Feuerstein 1999/

2010). We assumed that encouraging student CT towards the media and deepening their knowledge about the narratives of both sides would help them approach the conflict coverage from a broader frame of reference, and question the media framing of weekly reported events of the conflict. Thereby challenging them to re-examine and re-evaluate their personal frames and attitudes.

As Kempf & Thiel (2012) note, the effect of media framing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict depends on: a) the recipients' previous knowledge of the conflict; b) the way in which they position themselves with regard to it; and c) their willingness to acknowledge various shades of gray rather than perceiving war and peace in terms of black and white. Our study also reinforces the importance of these three factors, highlighted by the CMLE program. In our case, the latter focused on the multifaceted nature of the conflict and the human face and suffering of the Other (the Palestinians), thereby creating various levels and intensities of dissonance.

Like all good project-based learning, most learning occurs in the framework of creating a product. Numerous scholars (e.g., Dewey 1963; Piaget 1974; Vygotsky 1978) maintain that students learn best by doing and exploiting their creative potential to construct meaning while analyzing and critically reflecting on the messages they read and create.

At the same time, however, it was limited to reinforcing preexisting views on the basis of the "preaching to the converted" principle." The "spiral of silence" theory positing that individuals are more likely to express their opinions when they believe these to be popular (Noelle-Neumann 1984), the program proved to some students that they were not alone in holding their particular views. Although the sample was small, it enabled the expression of diverse voices and identities, through an open and intercultural dialogue between traditional, religious, and secular, Jews and Arabs, male and female. In creating representations and engaging in various forms of expression and communication, the students gained confidence in using their voices.

In this context and in line with other studies (e.g., Annabring et al. 2005; Liebes & Kampf 2009; Thiel & Kempf 2014), our findings also corroborate the importance of previous interpretive frameworks – ideologies and beliefs – regarding the conflict. All these factors play a role in the specific ways the students responded to the conflict, their frames of the ongoing threat, Israel's fluid sociopolitical climate, and the mainstream media cultivation of a "security culture" (Elbaz 2015). As Bläsi (2009) posits, societies accept the ideas and practices of peace journalism much more easily in non-violent conflict than during wartime. Enhancing knowledge of the conflict and media frame effects and promoting a critical approach thus accounted for some of the changes in the students' perceptions.

Like the public at large, students feel the need to stay up to date and aware sociopolitically. Our findings support the fact that students rely heavily on mainstream news channels – TV and online media – which tend to use war frames that probably impact their perceptions regarding trust in media, the Other, and conflict representation. As earlier studies evince, however, devoting attention to a topic may bring about an (at least short-term) change in attitude (Jackson 2006; Nerad 2009). This assertion is particular true in this case, the conflict's relevance to the students' everyday lives prompting them to participate in the program and encouraging many to actively reflect in the multi-perspective group discussion and production. As Druckman & Nelson (2003: 731) note, "Conversations that include a wider variety of views will provide individuals with an understanding of alternative frames resulting in a vitiation of the initial frames, rendering them ineffectual". Our findings are consistent also with Ediger's (2001) claim that opening up discussion allows people to air their views, opinions, and experiences, thereby fostering CT with regard to their original frames and perceptions. As one of the students observed at the end of the program: "The course provided another viewpoint that caused me internal doubts and dilemmas about the role the media plays in my life."

In light of the ubiquity of the conflict in Israeli life, students must deal with a tradition of hatred and misunderstanding and the fact that many Israelis have already made up their minds about the "goodies and

baddies." This making it harder for them to be critical of their own attitudes and dispositions, it may partly explain why only 52% of the students (Jewish and Arab) reported that knowing the "Other" was "very important."

From an intercollegiate perspective, the Netanya and Oranim students exhibited more prominent changes toward the media coverage than the Levinsky students. These divergences may be a function of the orientations and emphases of the curriculum in each college. While the Oranim and Netanya students were generally quite knowledgeable about the media, the Levinsky group – many of whom came from Education and other departments – were far less well-informed. The Oranim and Netanya students had greater experience with an active approach that engaged them in meaning-making processes and the creation of alternative media messages about the conflict. The Oranim students in particular took part in group activities – producing radio programs, news articles, and multimedia presentations – and online dialogues with a wide spectrum of opinions (teachers and students), thus being exposed to more balanced views. As Kellner & Share (2007) suggests, this frequently constitutes an empowering experience, students addressing the problems they encounter and deepening their understanding of the relationship between the media, ideology, information, and power. In a broader sense the students begin to question hegemonic and dominant frames of thought, offering counter-narratives as a form of praxis. Their proactive approach may well thus have helped reshape their convictions.

The study's findings point to a moderate tendency towards change in students' perceptions of the media coverage the conflict and the "Other," providing substantial evidence of the complex interaction between media frames and recipients' frames in the Israeli political environment. They also shed light on the strength of the CMLE program and its effects upon the three student groups. In the short term, two primary tendencies were evident – increased student awareness of escalation-oriented media frames fostering a violent and hostile atmosphere and the importance of recognizing the narrative of both sides (the Other) and using the media intelligently for gaining a deeper understanding of the conflict.

The study's limitations include the fact that it was confined to general trends and the short-term effects of a brief program, the small size of the sample, and its non-random nature. All these factors restricted its scope and representation. If such programs can effectively challenge media framing of the conflict and encourage a more peaceful and/or reconciliatory approach to conflict amongst young people, however, they deserve a place in the curriculum.

In light of the program's potential contribution to young Jewish and Arab Israelis' civic engagement in the country's complex reality, the challenge may lie in implementing larger/broader programs on a larger sample size and assessing the long-term effects. Participation in the media literacy program was found exhibiting a positive correlation with information-seeking motives, media knowledge, and news-analysis skills (Martens & Hobbs 2013). Such programs involve students in a meaningful study of multicultural education, thereby creating a citizenry that embraces multiple perspectives (Kellner & Share 2007: 3).

The findings thus suggest the need for a broader quantitative and qualitative follow-up study focusing on different students' readings and interpretations in order to gain deeper insights into the cognitive processes they employ. A more extensive program should be implemented in diverse sociocultural and political contexts in relation to student media usage in today's twenty-first century digital social network.

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The authors: Dr. Mira Feuerstein, served as the Head of communications department in Oranim Academic Educational College in Israel, and now she is the Chairman of the Committee for digital media literacy education in Israel. As a senior lecturer in Oranim College, she is responsible for teaching staff development and has conducted a number of research studies about students' college critical media thinking, teaching-learning the new digital literacy, news literacy and the digital citizenship. In the last three years she was also involved in a unique European project in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ("Pet-Med") "Peace Journalism – Media and conflicts". Recently, she contributed an entry – Israel media literacy programs – for "The Praeger Handbook of Media Literacy" ("DIMLE Project"), and conducted a cross-national research (Israel, Norway, UK) about "students' news media uses and perceptions in the age of social networks".

eMail: mirafo@netvision.net.il

Dr. Lea Mandelzis**,** is the Head, of Communications department in Kinneret Academic College in Israel**.** Her fields of research include media discourse in war and peace, peace journalism, media and national identity, critical media consumption. She has presented and published a number of articles and book chapters. Lea developed a teaching course on critical media consumption: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict together with Dr. M. Feurstein, and edited it's Instructor's Manual. Her work contributes to Keshev, the organization for media monitoring and the protection of democracy in Israel. She is a member of the international Peace Journalism Group at Toda Institute of Global Peace and Policy Research.

eMail: lmandelzis@gmail.com