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Voluntary silence: Israeli media self-censorship during the Second Lebanon War

Kurzfassung: Dieser Artikel beschreibt die Charakteristika der Selbstzensur im Allgemeinen, und insbesondere in den Massenmedien, im Hinblick auf Erzählungen von politischer Gewalt, einschließlich Motivation und Auswirkungen von Selbstzensur. Es präsentiert zunächst eine breite theoretische Konzeptualisierung der Selbstzensur und konzentriert sich dann auf seine mediale Praxis. Als Fallstudie wurde die Darstellung des Zweiten Libanonkrieges in den israelischen Medien untersucht. Um Selbstzensur als einen der Gründe für die Dominanz hegemonialer Erzählungen in den Medien zu untersuchen, führten die Autoren Inhaltsanalysen und Tiefeninterviews mit ehemaligen und aktuellen Journalisten durch. Die Ergebnisse der Analysen zeigen, dass israelische Journalisten die Selbstzensur weitverbreitet einsetzen, ihre Motivation, sie zu praktizieren, und die Auswirkungen ihrer Anwendung auf die Gesellschaft.

Abstract: This article describes the characteristics of self-censorship in general, specifically in mass media, with regard to narratives of political violence, including motivations for and effects of practicing self-censorship. It first presents a broad theoretical conceptualization of self-censorship, and then focuses on its practice in media. The case study examined the representation of The Second Lebanon War in the Israeli national media. The authors carried out content analysis and in-depth interviews with former and current journalists in order to investigate one of the reasons for the dominance of the hegemonic narrative in the media – namely, self-censorship. Indeed, the analysis revealed widespread use of self-censorship by Israeli journalists, their motivations for practicing it, and the effects of its use on the society.

1. Introduction

Through the years, scholars have described formal censorship of the mass media by a state (Liebes, 1997; Tehranian, 2002) as well as censorship carried out by private owners of media outlets (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999). However, relatively little conceptual work has been developed on self-censorship practices, in spite of the fact that this phenomenon has been observed and noted as being prevalent in mass media and other societal-cultural institutions (Antilla, 2010; Bar-Tal, Nets-Zehngut & Sharvit, 2017; Kenny & Gross, 2008; Lee & Chan, 2009). In view of this state of affairs, the major objective of the present study is to develop a more comprehensive framework for understanding the general phenomenon of self-censorship with its wide ramifications, especially in the media, and to illustrate it with one study. Specifically, the case study focuses on the use of self-censorship by the Israeli mass media in The Second Lebanon War, in 2006. This line of research enables analysis of damaging media practices in general, and specifically of media representations of violent conflicts in Israel and other states.

This premise is based on research literature suggesting that under conditions of violent conflict, the news media often take an active part in mobilization of the public with ethnocentric-national content (Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Carruthers, 2000; Gans, 1979; Hameiri, Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2017), by encouraging patriotic behavior (Wolfsfeld, 1997), and by presenting the in-group as the victim of the violence (Wolfsfeld, Frosh & Awabdy, 2008).

It is well known that the mass media play a central role in the construction of social reality and thus in shaping the societal beliefs of a community (Carey, 1989; Johnson-Cartee, 2005). Moreover, in recent years it has become a common belief that the media are gradually going through a process of "mediatization"; they are no longer passive channels for blind political agreement, but rather organizations with goals and rules of their own, which do not necessarily match those of the politicians, and occasionally even collide with them (Mazzoleni & Schultz, 1999). According to other approaches, the media are no longer satisfied with reporting on politics from the outside, and have now become active participants that influence political processes from the inside (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). However, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) claimed that the political information environment led to a new era of minimal media effects. They based their assumption mainly on channel proliferation, audience fragmentation, and partisan selective exposure. The rise of social media also led to concern that people in the US and other states incur greater isolation from diverse perspectives through filter bubbles (Beam, 2018).

Early seminal studies on the social roles of the media have focused on three major functions (Lasswell, 1975): *covering reality* by providing newsworthy information (news) to the public about reality as seen by journalists (Fishman, 1997); *expressing opinions* (views) by placing a covered issue in a broader context and taking a position in relation to it; and *transfer of heritage* by consciously or inadvertently serving as agents of socialization, imparting cultural content to the new generation. Charles Wright (1960) added a fourth function, *entertainment*, and Denis McQuail (2000) suggested a fifth one, *mobilization to promote national interests*, especially in times of security, economic, or ecological crisis.

However, at least some of these functions may be poorly performed. For example, media coverage may be vague, selective, and incomplete; interpretation by media may be selective, biased, and even distortive (Laplante & Phenicie, 2009); and sometimes even significant points and alternative information may be omitted. There are many explanations for these failings. Some are the result of external pressures - from the political and economic elite - toward the media (Bagdikian, 1997; McChesney, 2004; Mosco, 2009), and some are related to internal journalistic culture (Schudson, 2002; Zelizer, 1993).

We would like to suggest that one of the most important explanations for malfunctions of the mass media in many cases is the practice of self-censorship. Self-censorship is defined as *the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information (news or editorial) from others in the absence of formal obstacles* (Bar-Tal, 2017)**.** It prevents free access to information, and obstructs the free flow of information and free expression. In essence, it is one of the obstacles to the proper functioning of democracy, of which freedom of expression and pluralism are its major pillars (Dahl, 2000).

Self-censorship can be differentiated according to its scope, which can include moderating criticism, embellishing or changing the frame of an issue, outright avoiding and silencing disagreement, or providing misinformation and even lies (Elbaz, Magal, Nets-Zehngut, & Abutbul, 2017). Nevertheless, it seems to us that when the military and the political leadership consensually decide to go to war, and the public need to be mobilized to support it, then the media often practice self-censorship in its full scope to back the step, in order not to disrupt the public mobilization. By the same token, the media may avoid presenting information and opinions that negate the decision to begin a war. This premise is based on the following assumption: There is a direct relationship between political consensus on the necessity of a particular war and the media's tendency to practice self-censorship; that is, when the political elite is united in launching a war, the mass media tend to support it and to practice self-censorship. This general tendency is based on the strong relationship between political elites and the media, on the one hand (for an example see Lewis, 2001), and on the influence of the public's views on information and opinions presented by the media, on the other hand (for example, McCombs, 2004). However, when a disagreement develops among the political elite over continued fighting, the tendency of journalists to practice self-censorship decreases because they feel liberated from the consensual view of the elite. This particular observation will be examined in the present study too.

The first part of this paper presents a brief overview of journalistic procedures and the culture of journalism. Later we will focus on self-censorship and introduce a new theoretical framework for its study. Then we will examine its nature, motivations for practicing it, and its effects with regard to the Israeli Second Lebanon War. The next part describes the methodology of the study, which consists of content analysis of the news that appeared in the press (*Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Haaretz*) and on television (Channels 1 and 2), as well as in-depth analysis of interviews with Israeli senior journalists and the members of the political elite who were formerly journalists. The final parts present the findings and the conclusions of this study.

2. Journalistic practices and the culture of journalism

The question of how journalists work and make professional decisions, including when they decide to use self-censorship, is situated within broader research literature addressing factors that influence publication of information in the mass media. As demonstrated in previous studies on journalism, during violent conflict, journalists usually support conflict narratives, especially if the confrontation is backed by leaders and is consensual in a society.[1] In times of crisis, especially during wars and even routine conflicts, the independent power of journalism is limited, because support for the official narrative as presented by the military and political establishment is widely accepted during such periods (Hallin, 1986; Macarthur, 2004; Tumber & Palmer, 2004). In fact, many journalists tend to favor their national identity over their professional loyalty during violent conflicts, when they perceive threats to national security and interests (Zandberg &Neiger, 2005).

It is thus not surprising that some Israeli media outlets also tend to construct news stories wherein journalists express and reinforce official narratives about the conflict (Wolfsfeld, Frosh & Awabdy, 2008; Wolfsfeld, 2011). To this end, they tend to frame their own society positively in glorifying terms and as a perpetual victim of violence. In contrast, they usually negatively label and even delegitimize the enemy by denying its humanity and depicting it as deserving violent treatment (Dor, 2004; Elbaz, 2017). These themes correspond to the master conflict supporting narrative propagated by societies engaged in violent conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2013). In this way, the news content tends to be one-sided in depicting the conflict reality (Auerbach, 2010; Dor, 2004), often as a result of reliance on official sources (Liebes, 2000; Wolfsfeld, 2001).

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[1] Conflict-supportive collective narratives fulfill a number of functions: They justify goals of the conflict; stress the importance of personal safety and national survival and outline the conditions for their achievement; present and maintain a positive collective self-image and collective sense of being the victim in the conflict; delegitimize the rival; and propagate patriotism and unity (Bar-Tal, 2013).

Studies show that elites are the most cited sources and major suppliers of news, leading to particular and biased presentations of the information (Bennett, 1990, 2003; Davis, 2003; Reich, 2008; Sigal, 1986). Reciprocal relations between the political elite and media organizations have far-reaching consequences on the substance of the presented text: if the media focus on fewer (elite) news sources and fewer subjects, then the diversity of ideas decreases (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In sum, inasmuch as elite sources dominate news production (Davis, 2003), determine the facts and their interpretation in news coverage (Bennett, 2003), there is little room for alternative information that could potentially undermine the establishment's views. This state of affairs serves as fertile ground for practicing self-censorship.

3. Self-censorship in the media

Censorship occurs when an individual or group or an authority formally prevents individuals or groups from expressing thoughts, feelings or beliefs that the former do not want exposed (De Baets, 2002; Peleg, 1993). The focus of the present paper is on *self-censorship.* Indeed it has been observed that individuals, including journalists, withhold verified information voluntarily without being specifically and formally told or ordered to do so officially by an external censor (Simons & Strovsky, 2006: 191). They do this in order to avoid harming, annoying or offending a person, group or nation, or even contradicting an idea – and thus avoid possible negative social sanctions, punishments, or even personal guilt.

It has been argued that the media in Israel are themselves hesitant to take on the responsibility that comes with eliminating censorship (Nossek & Limor, 2001). Newspaper editors and television & radio news editors have internalized the burden of military censorship, even when such censorship has not been called for (Liebes, 1997), because they did not want to be held responsible for publishing something that might damage Israel's security interests (Caspi & Rubinstein, 2013; Segal, 1996). In very simple terms, as noted, self-censoring of news information indicates that individuals informally control and regulate the flow of information (Bar-Tal, 2017). Self-censorship in the media is of special interest because it involves gatekeepers – journalists – whose role requires by definition transmitting and disseminating valid information to the public. In fulfilling this role, they determine what will be known to the public and what information will be withheld (Fishman, 1997).

Most of the literature on self-censorship describes the phenomenon, but does not provide a comprehensive conceptual basis for it. We find only a few examples in the literature that include a conceptual development that distinguishes between public self-censorship and private self-censorship (Cook & Heilmann, 2013), or that explores how the self-censor is largely viewed as an originator, on the one hand, and as an instrument, on the other, of the censorship (Horton, 2011). In contrast, our study provides a broad conceptualization which illuminates important additional aspects of self-censorship.

4. Conceptual framework to self-censorship

Deconstruction of the above presented definition of self-censorship suggests that it has a number of components (Bar-Tal, 2017). First is the *nature of the practice:* For an act to be seen as self-censorship, a journalist must have the information, be aware that he/she has the information, and believe that the information has implications for the society as a whole and/or for various society members; thus a reporter or editor consciously decides to withhold this information. Second, the *intentional and voluntary aspects of the act:* Intentionally and voluntarily withholding information means that it is not accidental, but carried out as a result of free will and self-motivation. Third, the *nature of withheld information:* Withheld information often touches on subjects that shed light on undesirable behaviors as seen by the authorities, such as immoral acts – including corruption and atrocities, and suppressing such information might even be a good deed. As an example of the latter, in Israel the media do not expose the precise location of hostile missile hits within Jewish settlements for security reasons. Fourth, the act of self-censorship is carried out *in the absence of formal obstacles.* The present definition of self-censorship excludes cases in which there is a formal institutionally established external obstacle that prevents sharing information, such as official censorship, orders, or laws (e.g., De Baets, 2002; Jansen, 1988; Tribe, 1973). In these cases, self-censorship is in line with the formal directives. The scope of self-censorship excludes cases in which an individual thinks that there are formal obstacles to sharing information, while in reality there are none. Individuals may imagine the existence of various types of formal censorship, but to include these cases in the definition would broaden its scope extensively without clear boundaries. However, the proposed definition includes cases in which there may be social sanctions against sharing information, without the existence of formal obstacles.

At least two primary motives underlie self-censorship as practiced by journalists: loyalty to the state and/or to the leadership, and attempting to avoid personal sanctions. With regard to rewards, not revealing information may lead to receiving positive reinforcement such as social approval, awards or concrete rewards (such as exclusive information), and even self-satisfaction. The occurrence of self-censorship depends on several factors, such as characteristics of the journalists, the type of information involved, circumstantial factors, characteristics of the

culture in which the phenomenon of self-censorship takes place, and the context (Bar-Tal, 2017). We are interested in the context of protracted and violent intractable conflict that is very powerful[2] and conducive to the development of wide-scope self-censorship, even in democratic societies. In this context, self-censorship is often viewed by authorities and segments of a society as a necessary socio-psychological mechanism that protects the in-group by blocking the dissemination of information that is perceived as detrimental to the society's goals and interests (Bar-Tal, 2013, 2017). Its practice enables the maintenance of the society's collective conflict-supporting narratives and prevents the disclosure and dissemination of alternative information that may present the society in a negative light. Many believe that if such information is exposed, it might jeopardize the mobilization of society members to participate in the conflict, and reduce support from the international community (Hameiri, Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2017).

By blocking alternative information and allowing the maintenance of conflict-supporting narratives, self-censorship contributes directly to the continuation of intractable conflicts. In this context, self-censorship takes place typically when journalists intentionally and voluntarily withhold conflict-related information that may present the in-group and/or its political and military elites negatively and/or challenge their dominant official narratives. Frequently, this practice results in hiding information that refers to misdeeds carried out by the armed forces, narratives that contradict the goals of the conflict, and sometimes in even withholding information that indicates a possibility of resolving the conflict peacefully (see also Bar-Tal, Oren & Nets-Zehngut, 2014; Nets-Zehngut, Pliskin & Bar-Tal, 2015).

5. The Second Lebanon War as a case study

The present study investigates self-censorship in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, which is a prototypical case of intractable conflict. This conflict is not only territorial and political, but also concerns economic aspects of control over resources; it relates to basic needs such as security and identity, as well as to deep contradictions in religious and cultural goals (Morris, 2001).

As the case study for examining the phenomenon of self-censorship during military encounters, we selected The Second Lebanon War, which is typical of recent violent encounters that took place within the framework of the Israeli-Arab conflict. This war erupted on July 12th, 2006 when the Lebanese Shiite organization Hezbollah opened artillery fire along the Israel's northern border, aimed at IDF troops near the border security fence. In addition, Hezbollah prepared an ambush, and its fighters killed three IDF soldiers and abducted two more. This action led to Israeli retaliation, and eventually to a war that lasted 34 days. Similar to The First Lebanon War, Israel engaged in this war without proper military preparations (Harel & Issacharoff, 2008; Shelah & Limor, 2007

The Government convened about 11 hours after the ambush and decided to initiate military operations. At first, the IDF delivered a massive air strike against many targets in Lebanon. In response, Hezbollah fired rockets and missiles at many Northern Israeli cities and settlements. The IDF recruited reservists and gradually engaged its infantry in armed force battles with members of Hezbollah. In the final stages of the war – from August 9th until its official end on August 14th – the ground offensive was extended, claiming the lives of dozens of Israeli soldiers (33 were killed in the last two days of fighting).

In the first days of the war, the Israeli government led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert enjoyed broad public support, but as the fighting continued and the number of victims increased, the support declined. The results of the war were: 163 Israelis killed – 119 soldiers and 44 citizens, thousands injured, and close to 4,000 enemy rockets landing in Israel, causing significant property damage. According to the Amnesty report, the human toll on the Lebanese side was an estimated 1,183 dead, about one-third of whom were children, 4,054 people injured, and 970,000 Lebanese people displaced. In addition, the civilian infrastructure was severely damaged due to a massive ground and aerial bombardment of Lebanon by the Israeli armed forces.[3]

The losses and the heavy cost of the war signaled a wave of protest in Israel and calls for the resignation of political and military leaders, and for the establishment of an inquiry committee to investigate military failures in Lebanon. In the end, the government decided to establish a Governmental Inquiry Committee led by Judge Eliyahu Winograd. In his testimony on February 1st, 2007 in front of a panel of judges, Olmert told the Winograd Commission that he asked to see military plans as early as in March, four months before the war started, claiming he wanted to be prepared in advance for war if Hezbollah were to initiate a kidnapping of IDF soldiers.[4] It is

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[2] Intractable conflicts are fought over goals viewed as existential, are violent, are perceived as being of a zero sum nature and unsolvable, occupy a central position in the lives of the involved societies, require immense investments of material and psychological resources, and last for at least 25 years (Bar-Tal, 2007, 2013; Kriesberg, 1993).
[3] The Amnesty Website: https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/76000/mde180072006en.pdf
[4] For Olmert's testimony, see here (p. 3, in Hebrew):
http://www.vaadatwino.gov.il/pdf/%D7%AA%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%9C%20%D7%90%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%9E%D7%A8%D7%98.pdf

assumed that the event of the ambush allowed the two civilian leaders (the prime minister and the defense minister) to show that they could manage a war in spite of their limited military experience.

However, the Committee strongly criticized the conduct of the government and the IDF during the war, and attributed responsibility for its results to the Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defense Minister Amir Peretz, and Chief of Staff Dan Halutz; but it refrained from making personal recommendations about these three officials.[5]

There are two main reasons for choosing The Second Lebanon War as a case study. First, this war is formally regarded in Israel as its most recent war, as of now (three military events that took place in Gaza after the Second Lebanon War are defined by Israel as military operations, not wars). Therefore, Israeli journalists were still able to reconstruct their practices during the war a few years after its end. Second, the last war in Lebanon reflected the political polarization in Israel between doves and hawks, as the war was viewed by the former group as an "unnecessary war" – that is, Israel could have avoided it, since its national security and existence were not in danger (Shelah & Limor, 2007).

Indeed, The Second Lebanon War has already been used as a case study by Israeli researchers (see, for example, Neiger, Zandberg & Meyers, 2010). However, they focused on the concept of journalistic criticism, omitting the analysis of the phenomenon of self-censorship. In contrast, this study focuses on the scope of self-censorship practiced by journalists, the motivations for withholding information, and the effects of using it within the presented conceptual framework. We assume that journalists practiced self-censorship because we have observed that the Israeli media during The Second Lebanese War presented mainly the official narrative of the government and the army (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, 2016). In this study we analyze the contents of the two leading types of national media: newspapers (*Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Haaretz*), and public/commercial television (Channels 1 and 2).

The reason why the new social media are outside of the scope of this study is that during the period under review (July-August 2006), these media had no significant impact on the Israeli mainstream media agenda. The power of the leading social networks such as Facebook and Twitter emerged a few years after The Second Lebanon War was over. Also, bloggers were not aiming at a wider target audience. The most popular Israeli online outlets at the time, such as *Ynet*, *Walla News*, and *Mako*, reflected the patriotic mood of newspapers and broadcast outlets, and they did not undermine the authority of mainstream media in keeping information out of the public eye during a war (Elbaz, 2017).

6. Research methods

6.1 Content analysis

In total, 1,149 items from newspapers and 585 items from TV Channels – 1,734 items altogether – about The Second Lebanon War were content analyzed. A coding system was developed to assess a few variables that provide information about the effects of self-censorship. Coders had to assign news reports and articles to the following categories: scope of the debate (for example, support for or resistance to the ceasefire); omission of knowledge (for example, background regarding IDF's lack of preparedness for war); reproduction of dogmas (adherence to or undermining of military elite thinking by journalists); gaps in knowledge between rivals in the conflict (a comparison between representations of "us" [IDF] and "them" [Lebanese civilians] during the tragic event in Qana village); and warning against immoral behaviors (criticism of causing innocent civilian casualties).

The analysis included categorization of the self-censorship's consequences that were found in the units of analysis, according to the described coding framework of the five consequences. Five dichotomous variables of consequences were developed and their occurrences were calculated: 1 = positive consequence (for example, support for the ceasefire and warnings against immoral behaviors), 2 = negative consequence (for example, omission of knowledge, reproduction of dogma, gaps in knowledge). It is noteworthy that the inter-coder reliability was 90 percent.[6] The dichotomous categorization was possible because the journalists tended to fall unequivocally into one of the two categories.

6.2 In-depth interviews

In addition, 30 in-depth interviews with current and former prominent Israeli journalists were conducted. The journalists' role as news providers allowed us to illuminate the manner in which self-censorship occurred among editors and reporters. All the interviewees were directly involved in covering the military and political domains of Israel during the wars in Lebanon (the majority of them in The Second Lebanon War), filling primary roles in this

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[5] For further details, see: "The Final Report: The commission of inquiry into the events of military engagement in Lebanon 2006," Jerusalem, 2008 (in Hebrew).
[6] Two judges, graduates of a master's degree program in communication, were selected for this task. They determined the rate of agreement.

mission. One of the main purposes of the interviews was to learn to what extent, if indeed at all, the journalists practiced self-censorship during The Second Lebanon War and if so, why.[7]

The selection of interviewees was based on a representative approach (see Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), that is, on accurately representing the major news organizations and various types of journalists who covered the war. The interviewees worked for eight leading Israeli news organizations, representing the most influential and/or popular news outlets among different types of media. The eight news organizations were: three leading print-digital news outlets (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Haaretz* and *Maariv*); three broadcast outlets in Israel (two commercial ones, Channels 2 and 10, and one public outlet, Channel 1); and the two most popular Israeli news radio stations (Kol Israel and IDF radio). The interviewed journalists represented various journalistic positions: senior editors, mid-level editors, senior reporters, commentators, and hybrid positions. Some of the interviewees had already retired from their media positions and therefore were not afraid to be exposed and to speak openly. Other interviewees talked mostly about the media in general, and thus made a valuable contribution in discussing the self-censorship phenomenon in a balanced manner. The majority of the interviewees did not ask to remain anonymous and provided their full names and positions. The locations of the interviews – mostly the interviewees' workplaces and occasionally their homes or cafés – were selected by the interviewees. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author.

Semi-structured questionnaires were employed for the interviews, allowing the interviewees to raise additional issues for discussion. The journalists were asked to answer the following questions: Have you decided not to publish information for security reasons? What are the factors that you face as a journalist when you decide to withhold information from the public? How are your journalistic practices affected by the climate of violent conflict? As a reporter, what types of information are you expected to produce? Does the ideological position of the media organization for which you work have an impact on the information you disclose? Are the media outlets more critical than ever in times of conflict? To what extent are the media ideologically biased during military confrontations?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Inductive qualitative analysis of the interviews was carried out. Analysis of the findings proceeded in two stages: The first stage consisted of identifying the main practices by the media that the interviewees reported as influencing their coverage of the war, as well as motivations for such practices. The second stage focused on the self-censorship practices during the war as interpreted by the journalists. This analysis of the interviews, therefore, aimed to explain the customs, motivations and practices of journalists (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000), particularly when covering violent confrontations.

We used a line-by-line analysis of the interviews, developing each concept in terms of its properties and dimensions, based on the Strauss and Corbin (1998) approach to the analysis of qualitative data. In the present study, our focal concept is self-censorship; its five main manifestations (i.e., properties) are silence, avoiding criticism, justifying/minimizing wrongdoings, denying responsibility, and euphemism (the latter term addresses the usage of vague and softer words in relation to sensitive topics). The dimensions are the range of properties, meaning that we needed to determine the most prominent manifestation of self-censorship.

It is clear that the qualitative analysis can explain practices used by the media when covering violent conflicts and wars. The interviews conducted for this study added more information that showed mainly qualitatively, but also quantitatively, how journalists covered issues related to the war, the scope of the practice of self-censorship, as well as motivations for using it and the consequences of its use.

7. Results

The content analysis of the mass media revealed the existence of an all-inclusive framework for media support of the political and military elites. From the very beginning, even before the IDF entered Lebanon, journalists urged the government to initiate a military operation that would restore quietness to the regions of the northern border (Elbaz, 2015). The media ignored essential and important questions such as: Do all aspects of the attack by Hezbollah require a war? Might it be desirable first to analyze the situation in depth before giving way to the emotional reaction of initiating a war? Is a war desirable and necessary for Israel at this particular time? Is the army prepared for combat with Lebanese armed militia? Is the home front sufficiently protected from missile attacks? What could be the outcomes of such a war? These questions were absent from press and television reports during the early stages of the fighting. Harsh criticism of the government, which failed to stimulate public debate, was found only at the margins of media coverage (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, 2016). We will return to the content analysis findings later, but first will report on the major findings based on the interviews, in order to describe the journalists practicing self-censorship – especially their motivations for doing so.

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[7] The interviews were part of a larger scope study carried out by the first author. For the present study only the parts of the interviews that referred to the self-censorship phenomenon were selected.

The interviewed military correspondents and other journalists referred explicitly to the complete "mobilization" of the journalists on behalf of the military campaign, and talked about widespread self-censorship and unquestioning acceptance of the official narrative from governmental and military sources of information. For example, they downplayed military failures (as in the case of the ground operation in Maroun al-Ras), internalized the IDF's narrative despite conflicting evidence (as in the case of the killing of civilians in Qana village), and decided to withhold information (as in the case of reservists' antiquated equipment).

Quantitatively, of the 30 interviewees, 18 talked explicitly about practicing self-censorship. Twelve other interviewees referred to this practice indirectly, not calling it by name but describing journalistic practices such as providing misinformation or publication of misleading information as a result of personal relationships between journalists and politicians. Thus we can say that throughout the war, Israeli editors and reporters internalized the formal military censorship, even when there was no formal instruction to do so. The media outlets practiced self-censorship intentionally and voluntarily, and by doing so journalists distorted the reality of the war. In this way, according to the interviewees, media organizations were mobilized to support the cause being fought for. In fact, this is an interesting finding which indicates that journalists assumed it was the norm to use self-censorship, and therefore easily admitted to its use. Now we will go into the details. First, there is a need to describe the motivations that underlined the practice of self-censorship by journalists, as detected by the content analysis of the interviews.

7.1 Motivations for self-censorship by Israeli journalists

Five dominant motives were identified: (1) maintaining national consensus; (2) mobilizing the citizens to support the war; (3) fear of undermining the motivation of the soldiers; (4) fear of personal sanctions; and (5) fear of harming relationship with the information sources. The first three motives are socio-political, as they refer to considerations that concern the collective, while the last two motives concern self-interest.

The first motive, *maintaining national consensus*, relates to actively sustaining the Israeli government's official position regarding the purposes of the war in Lebanon. At first, as long as political support during the war was almost unanimous, the media refrained from presenting a narrative that opposed the purpose of the war. The former Labor Party leader, Shelly Yachimovich, who had previously been a prominent journalist, explained how the media avoid criticizing the government and the military during wars in general and The Second Lebanon War in particular:

> "The media are more patriotic today and play one tune because of the collective wish to be part of the consensus, especially in time of war when everyone is very militant. Under these circumstances, anti-war expressions are almost seen as betrayals of the nation." (See Appendix, Interviewee 30).

This position is consistent with the argument that in times of tension and crisis, let alone war, the independence of the media is undermined, and it tends to support the military and political establishment to form a public consensus (Nir & Roeh, 1992), ceasing to be the "watchdog of democracy." The common assumption, supported by political and military elites, is that presenting a broad spectrum of public opinion would severely harm national morale (Barzilai, 1992: 225).

Alon Ben David, military commentator for Channel 10, and the late Yossi Sarid, a former news commentator for *Haaretz*, emphasized the complete support of the media for the government's decision to go to war in Lebanon. According to Ben David:

> "On Wednesday, July 12 at noon, the IDF spokeswoman told me that the Chief of Staff wants to set Lebanon back by 20 years. I replied that there would be a cabinet meeting at 19:00 pm and asked whether he would wait for the government decision. 'No' was the answer, 'This is what he said.' Then in the evening, reports started coming out of the cabinet meeting, which clarified how the decision was made. Minister Peres was the only one who asked questions, and the Chief of Staff replied arrogantly. *Other communication channels applauded him* (i.e., the Chief of Staff) *at this point*." (Interviewee 4).

In this context, Sarid said:

> "There was an eclipse in Haaretz newspaper during The Second Lebanon War. When I opened the newspaper, I could hardly believe my eyes – there was a call on the first page by a prominent columnist (Ari Shavit) to open a ground operation." (Interviewee 25).

The second motive, *mobilizing the citizens*, concerns attempts by political and military elites to harness the media to mobilize the Israeli public for war in Lebanon, and even to silence criticism. An illustration of this intention was found two weeks after the fighting began, in the attitude of Yossi Peled, a military commentator for Channel 1 during the war and former Major General of the Northern Command in the Israel Defense Forces:

"I would like to say: When I was asked to join Channel 1 for as long as the war continued, I went to strengthen hands and not to let go of hands. So my current thoughts and impressions are not relevant."[8]

Although Peled was not a professional journalist, his military analyses were seen by television viewers as comprehensive and persuasive. The fact that the anchor did not ask him to analyze the military failures critically and openly is quite problematic.

Eitan Haber, a former military correspondent and a prominent columnist in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, clarified why silence, as a blatant manifestation of self-censorship by journalists, is more pronounced in times of war:

"Once the war begins, all feel an obligation to be united. Suddenly all party barriers fall away, and people want to be together. A manifestation of this is the well-known expression: 'be quiet, now shooting'." (Interviewee 15).

The third motive is more specific, *fear of undermining the motivation of the soldiers*, and is part of the more general approach of securitism, which means that an Israeli-Jewish journalist does not provide information that may harm the Israeli security organs and/or Israeli security (Bar-Tal & Jacobson, 1998). For example, many of the journalists knew about the lack of proper equipment for the reservists, but delayed revealing this information until Nahum Barnea, one of the most respected journalists in Israel, released this story towards the end of the war. Nir Dvori, the military correspondent for Channel 2, explains his act of intentionally withholding information from the audience:

"I had information about neglect of the equipment that belonged to the reserve soldiers before Nahum Barnea did, but we debated whether to broadcast it during the war due to the potentially negative consequences on the soldiers themselves following exposure of the story. While we were debating, Nahum Barnea published everything in *Yedioth Ahronoth* two days later; once the story was published, it broke the dam, and from then on all the journalists competed to publish this information." (Interviewee 9).

The fourth motive, *fear of personal sanctions*, reflected concern that providing information that presented either the state, the government, or the security forces in a negative light would result in sanctions such as being reprimanded, negatively labeled or even punished.

Yael Gvirtz, one of the editorial writers in *Yedioth Ahronoth* during the war, was the only journalist who sharply criticized Prime Minister Olmert and Defense Minister Peretz as the war began. However, she paid a personal price for her persistent writing. The chief editor, Rafi Ginat, dismissed her from her editorial position following a dissenting article that she wrote on August 9, 2006, entitled "Hostages at the Turret."

Whether right or wrong, Gvirtz's observations were not essential in this case. The very fact that she was dismissed just because she dared to tell a story which was not in line with the government narrative is the core point here. Silencing Gvirtz also silenced the debate over the war, at least in its early days. In other words, publications on wrongdoings in the war were minimized and even eliminated. Gvirtz said:

"It was clear that Yedioth Ahronoth wholeheartedly supported this war. Whoever wrote otherwise was 'exiled' to less prominent pages than the first pages." (Interviewee 14).

The fifth motive, *fear of harming relations with information sources within the government and military elite*, is particularly significant. The military authorities regularly provide information to the media that is "bread and butter" for the journalists. Decisions regarding what to expose or withhold is in the hands of the journalists, as news manufacturers. But a journalist who decides to inform the public about an issue that the army wants to silence or at least to conceal may lose his/her primary source of information, as one of the interviewees admits:

"Most of the media information sources come from the government and the army. Once the media are not attentive to the establishment, it will block the oxygen of its information. Of course, the media cannot afford this situation." (Interview with Yaron Dekel, a former IDF Radio Commander).

Therefore, journalists take into account all professional considerations, including maintaining working relationships with the military leadership. Journalists who were interviewed described the IDF spokesperson's ability to dictate the military discourse without practicing official censorship, thus preventing any critical coverage, as a voluntary act:

"It is absolutely clear that a military affairs correspondent who confronts the military leadership will not receive official news updates." (Interview with Shelly Yachimovich, a former prominent journalist).

"In order to get the most interesting materials, the military correspondent must maintain good relations with the IDF spokesperson. The reporter could not criticize the army and assume that the IDF spokesperson would continue to cooperate with him as if nothing had happened." (Interview with Aviram Elad, Former head of *Haaretz* news department).

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[8] Peled, Y. (2006, July 26). *Mabat* news broadcast, Channel 1.

Reporters avoided publication of information that could harm the image of the army, due to their dependence on the official sources. The view presented by Alon Ben David, military commentator for Channel 10 who disregarded this motive, is interesting. He claimed that a more varied selection of information sources reduces dependence on official sources, and as a result, decreases self-censoring among journalists:

> "The information sources are not monolithic. The military is a huge body. You have to understand that official military information is disseminated to many external entities, such as organizations that maintain a working relationship with the military, civilian sources who have connections with the army, families of soldiers and officers who come home and tell stories, and the 'other' who fights you and always has something to say. A large part of our professionalization, as journalists, is to reduce dependence on official sources and IDF spokespersons." (Interviewee 4).

7.2 How the war was covered by the Israeli media as a result of self-censorship

Through qualitative content analysis of news items, we were able to detect five main effects of practicing self-censorship. Each of them will be discussed now: Before elaborating on its influences, we must clarify that self-censorship is only one factor among many others (such as propaganda, manipulation, disinformation, deception and lies) that lead to these consequences.

(1) *Narrowed scope of societal debate.* We observed that self-censorship prevented public discussion of various sensitive topics in the media, thereby narrowing the scope of the debate in society; the media mostly or only presented consensual positions and information during the war. This consequence reminds us of Bennett's indexing approach (1990): The news content was indexed according to the pronounced political and military framing offered by the government and the military general staff. Thus, through news reports and newspaper articles, the military elite was able to incorporate into the public mind its resistance to a ceasefire, and to form a consensus on its operational plan without having to explain the rationale behind it. Evidence of this tendency was revealed in the analyses of all the headlines in the sample: Only less than 10 percent of the headlines in both press and electronic media during the war referred to diplomatic solutions or proposals for a ceasefire, while the rest of them emphasized military action, as a preferred type of action.

(2) *Omission of knowledge regarding IDF's military failures.* Self-censorship prevented the public from knowing about failures. Israeli journalists who were aware of operational failures of the IDF in real time during The Second Lebanon War decided not to report on these failures in order to continue to mobilize the public to support Israel's military activities at the time. For example, Yoav Limor, military commentator for Channel 1, admitted this omission four weeks after the beginning of the hostilities:

> "We were careful not to criticize the military over the last month. […] This (criticism) sends a message to the public that something is not going well. The political system, the international system – all these institutions allow the army to win, but the military cannot achieve a decisive victory."[9]

Of interest is the finding that during the operation the great majority of the journalists avoided critical reporting; towards the end of the war, when critical views became more normalized, such reporting did appear. Roni Daniel, who preached passionately for decisive military action, asked a little too late (on August 14th, the day the ceasefire went into effect): "Were IDF's ground troops neglected and lacking in equipment or training?"[10] It is possible that a critical investigative report before the beginning of the campaign could have changed the timing and the nature of the war in Lebanon, thereby saving human lives. Amos Harel, who, as Daniel, supported the ground operation, kept his criticism to himself until the battles faded:

> "All those things, such as the neglectful lack of training and inadequate reserves troops' equipment, are supposed to create a monumental public uproar […]. And the reservists who fought in Lebanon clearly have full bellies. The stories are starting to get out: in brief talks, in text messages sent to families, in first meetings with battalion and brigade commanders."[11]

(3) *Reproduction of dogmas.* Self-censorship promoted adherence to the dominant narrative even when it had been proven faulty. Journalists not only repeated the main manufactured dogma that the war was necessary, but also repeated the view that it was necessary to use infantry in this war. For example, the majority of the journalists supported the entry of the armed forces into Lebanon to battle Hezbollah, although the ground action showed that it was a very problematic move that would result in unnecessary losses. The uncritical reproduction of dogma may increase the proliferation of political and military mistakes. In an article published on page 2 of *Haaretz*, Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff wrote that it was wrong to expect failure based on past mistakes, due to

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[9] Limor, Y. (2006, August 9). *Mabat* news broadcast, Channel 1.
[10] Daniel, R. (2006, August 14). Channel 2 newscast.
[11] Harel, A. (2006, August 14). Far from the Litani - and from the targets. *Haaretz*, p. 2.

the General Staff's new decision to be more involved in the planning and approval of ground operations from then on:

> "The General Staff will now have tighter control in relation to the events and activities that take place within a few kilometers inside Lebanon. [...] Hezbollah can manage small battles against the IDF, cause losses and a delay, but cannot halt its progress."[12]

Most military commentators decided to criticize military elite thinking only toward the end of the war when its high costs emerged, and only following criticism within the political system regarding the way the war was being conducted.

(4) *Reinforcement and amplification of gaps in knowledge between the rivals in conflict.* Since self-censorship promotes a more positive and self-serving image of the in-group among its members, it creates or increases the differentiation between the two rival groups, the in-group (Israel) and the out-group (Hezbollah). This practice inhibits a potential ceasefire. The fourth consequence of self-censorship is best reflected in the reporting of the disaster in Qana village. In this tragic event, the Israeli Air Force attacked Hezbollah forces in the village of Qana on July 30, 2006. As a result, aircraft bombs destroyed a residential building in the village, and caused the deaths of dozens of Lebanese civilians, including 16 children. This attack was an application of Israel's Dahiya doctrine (named after the devastation of a suburb of Beirut where Hezbollah was headquartered) that involves considerable deliberate destruction of a civilian infrastructure of hostile forces and also a risk of civilian casualties (Byman, 2011).

A critical examination of the news reveals close cooperation of the television channels with the IDF leadership. The military narrative, which dominated the news coverage, downplayed the image of Lebanese civilians as victims, and more importantly relieved the soldiers of responsibility for the disaster. At first, the Air Force displayed blurred photographs with the objective of showing how Hezbollah forces had placed missile launchers close to residents' homes. Later, the Chief of Staff explained: "a terrorist organization is an organization that finds shelter within and between citizens," and then the correspondent Nir Dvori made it clear and euphemistic: "before bombing, aircraft scattered leaflets calling on residents to leave the village in order not to be hurt."[13]

(5) *Negligible warning against immoral behaviors.* The previous consequences led to a relative absence of dealing with the moral misdeeds of the IDF and their implications. Throughout the war, the Israeli army was presented by the media as acting morally. Returning back to the tragic event in Qana village, military analysts on television rejected the idea of cessation of military operations following this incident in the Lebanese village. About 10 minutes after a Channel 2 news broadcast began, Roni Daniel dismissed the following question from news anchorwoman Yonit Levy: "After such a massive strike at innocent civilians, should the army not stop to rethink the continued fighting?"[14] Contrarily, Roni Daniel expressed the military assessment, based on mere speculation that the explosion was caused by the presence of war materials in the residential building rather than by Air Force bombing – thus denying any Israeli responsibility for this strike. Similarly, Alex Fishman wrote in *Yedioth Ahronoth* on page 3: "Do not stop the campaign; we should not consider the events in Qana village as a factor which can affect it."[15]

This content analysis highlights the widespread use of self-censorship by Israeli journalists during The Second Lebanon War. Thus this study reveals in what ways content is influenced by this phenomenon, and in particular what the consequences are of journalists withholding information in their coverage.

8. Discussion

This study showed that self-censorship was prevalent among newspersons in Israel during The Second Lebanon War in 2006. The majority of the military correspondents who were interviewed admitted explicitly to the unquestioning acceptance of the official narrative presented by the government and military echelon and to the use of *self-censorship* during The Second Lebanon War. Thus, the present study shows how self-censorship affected key principles, routines, and journalistic practices of Israeli media during the coverage of this war.

Nevertheless, some differences were found among the correspondents: Journalists and commentators whose authority or background was grounded in the military, like Roni Daniel and Yossi Peled, used practices such as self-censorship and euphemism, rationalizing them, while politicians who had been prominent journalists, like Yossi Sarid and Shelly Yachimovich, were more critical of these practices, but acknowledged it was prevalent in various ways during The Second Lebanon War.

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[12] Harel, A. & Issacharoff, A. (2006, July 23). The General Staff take control. *Haaretz*, p. 2.
[13] Dvori, N. (2006, July 30). Channel 2 newscast.
[14] Levy, Y. (2006, July 30). Channel 2 newscast.
[15] Fishman, A. (2006, July 31). A puzzling decision. *Yedioth Ahronoth*, p. 3.

Through the comprehensive analysis of the concept of self-censorship and line-by-line analysis of the interviews, we revealed self-censorship properties such as silence, avoiding criticism, minimizing wrongdoings, denying responsibility, and euphemism. We were able to shed light on the nature of this phenomenon, and under what circumstances editors and reporters may increase its practice. We must also note that this practice is seen as part of the systematic societal attempts to maintain the propagated hegemonic narratives and prevent exposure to information that may contradict them (Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014).

Although self-censorship may be practiced in any context, we realize that the violent conflicts and wars in which mass media function at times are probably the determining factor of its practice. Furthermore, as the context becomes more authoritarian and totalitarian, demanding one view and voice, the more self-censorship we find, as various studies show (Hutt, 2006; Ngok, 2007). We also recognize that although context is a very powerful variable that imprints human behavior, especially in extreme conditions, personal characteristics play a part, because journalists behave differently from one another with regard to self-censorship in the same context.

The analysis of the interviews showed that the fear of being punished is an important motivating force. Journalists are aware of potential sanctions and are motivated to avoid them, because they have serious consequences for their personal and professional lives. However, we also learned that the main motivation in a democratic society in the context of bloody confrontations is often to protect the in-group. We learned that in societies plagued by a protracted conflict, its members are asked to be mobilized and they themselves demand loyalty, especially when the in-group engages in violent acts and threats are high. Mass media in these conditions function as a societal institution which cares about the fate of the society and mobilizes itself for the sake of the group. In addition, media experience both implicit and explicit pressure from the formal institutions such as government and the army to fulfill its patriotic duty. The governmental and military establishments wish to see a massive mobilization of support for military efforts, in order to achieve their designated objectives without open and free public debate. The mass media fulfill this expected role instead of acting as watchdog over the course of decisions and practices that may sometimes lead the nation in disastrous directions. This practice of the media is observed mainly in societies that are involved in protracted violent conflicts (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, 2016; Nets-Zehngut & Elbaz, 2017). But it also appeared in other societies that became involved in short term violent conflicts, such as Great Britain in Falkland (Adams, 1986; Temple, 2018) and the United States in Iraq (Dadge, 2006; Schechter, 2005). Finally, society members expect the media to be faithful. Thus, the combination of external pressures and mass media's own perception of duty yield a high level of self-censorship, reinforced, as we showed, by combinations of motives that are not mutually exclusive.

We also found that journalists are aware of the effects of practicing self-censorship. This is a troubling finding because they know the nature of the harm it causes. Self-censorship leads to a narrowed scope of debate in the society, omission of knowledge regarding IDF's military failures, reproduction of failing dogmas of the elites, reinforcement and amplification of gaps in knowledge between the rivals in a conflict, and decreased warnings against moral deterioration. Those are serious liabilities of self-censorship, which damage the society's functioning and impede achievement of its goals. But it also has positive consequences; it helps to maintain consensus and cohesiveness, in addition to protecting the society from acquiring a negative image.

The presented findings of the study confirm the assumption that there is a connection between political consensus on the necessity of the war and the media's tendency to practice self-censorship. Most journalists stopped withholding information from the public toward the end of the war. They changed their way of presenting news and opinions when critical views regarding the way the war was managed appeared among the elites. This means that mass media, at least in Israel, function in correspondence with the political and military echelons. This is not surprising in view of the fact that there is a great correspondence in Israel between the formal conflict supporting narrative of the political and military echelons and the informal narrative held by the majority of the Jewish society (Bar-Tal & Raviv, in press). The media in this situation adapt to the narratives propagated by the political elite. Once the elite expresses discord, the media allow themselves to join this chorus, even expressing criticism that is in line with some voices.

Finally, we assume that reporters and editors could have prevented various failures and problems if they had not practiced self-censorship. Thus in general, with some exceptions, the Israeli media have betrayed their responsibility to expose and not to conceal information, to criticize and not to embrace the army, to question and not to accept the official narratives without reservation. The free flow and exposure of information, especially when there are no formal obstructions, are needed not only for maintaining the ethical aspects of the role, but also to fill the role of a watcher that stands on the observation tower to prevent failures, losses, disasters, misdeeds, immoral acts, and to keep a society moral and democratic. Societies know, when necessary, to use censorship to limit the reports of journalists in order to maintain the security of the state, the society, and society's members (Halperin & Hoffman, 1976).

In sum, the socio-psychological infrastructure of intractable conflict and the strong norms regarding its maintenance hinder the development and consideration of alternative views of the conflict. This, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of the conflict, reduces the likelihood of peaceful conflict resolution, and results in

continuation of the difficult challenges that the conflict poses (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). We assume that self-censorship in the media is a social mechanism that serves as a barrier to the free flow of information that can bring about useful public debates leading to more rational decision-making by leaders (Hameiri, Sharvit, Bar-Tal, Shahar, & Halperin, 2017). Breaking the journalistic silence could destabilize the hegemonic conflict supporting narrative, and bring not only a new view of the situation, but also enable development of a new counter-narrative to facilitate the process of peacemaking. This implication is not only relevant to the investigated case of the Israeli-Arab conflict, but also can be generalized to other contexts of violent conflicts.

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Appendix: List of interviewees

1. Alfon Dov, Former Editor-in-Chief of *Haaretz*
2. Amikam Yair, Former military correspondent for *Yedioth Ahronoth*
3. Baram Uzi, Present commentator and former Minister in Yitzhak Rabin's second government
4. Ben David Alon, Military commentator for Channel 10
5. Ben Simon Daniel, Journalist, former Knesset Member of Labor Party and a former correspondent for *Haaretz*
6. Benn Aluf, Editor-in-Chief of *Haaretz*
7. Dan Liran, Former head of National Information Directorate, former Editor-in-Chief of Channel 2 newscast
8. Dekel Yaron, Former IDF Radio Commander
9. Dvori Nir, Military correspondent for Channel 2
10. Elad Aviram, Former head of *Haaretz* news department
11. Eldar Akiva, Former chief political columnist and editorial writer for *Haaretz*
12. Fishman Alex, Military commentator of *Yedioth Ahronoth*
13. Galezer Doron, Former Chief Executive Editor of *Maariv* Newspaper and former Deputy Chief Executive Editor of *Yedioth Ahronoth*
14. Gvirtz Yael, Editorial writer in *Yedioth Ahronoth* during the Second Lebanon War
15. Haber Eitan, Former military correspondent and a prominent columnist for *Yedioth Ahronoth*
16. Kirschenbaum Moti, The first Editor of the Channel 1 newscast and former CEO of the Israel Broadcasting Authority
17. Lahav Hadas, Former deputy Editor-in-chief for *Yedioth Ahronoth*
18. Lavie Aviv, IDF Radio journalist and former prominent journalist for *Haaretz* and *Maariv*
19. Lukach Ilan, Former Editor-in-Chief of Channel 2 newscast
20. Menashe Chico, Former diplomatic commentator, Israeli National Radio
21. Peled Yossi, Former Major General of the Northern Command
22. Rapoport Meron, Former prominent journalist for *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Haaretz*
23. Raz Menashe, Former editor and presenter on *Mabat* news broadcast and former political and military reporter at the Israel Broadcasting Authority
24. Saragusti Anat, Former prominent journalist for Channel 2 news
25. Sarid Yossi, Former news commentator for *Haaretz* and former Minister in Labor's governments
26. Shai Nachman, Knesset Member of Labor party, former journalist and IDF spokesman
27. Shelah Ofer, Knesset member of Yesh Atid Party and former prominent journalist for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Maariv and Channel 10
28. Shpigelman Elisha, Former Editor of *Mabat, Channel 1* news broadcast
29. Sukenik Gadi, News anchorman for Channel 2 during the Second Lebanon War
30. Yachimovich Shelly, Former prominent journalist

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