

High five: The local, the global, the American and the Israeli sport on Television

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on a process by which Israeli society has transformed, almost overnight, from a single to a multi-channel media society. While this process has significantly changed Israelis' consumption of television and their feelings towards the medium, in the social context of viewing, and in related aspects of leisure activities, it has also brought images and portrayals of global, for the most part American, sports to Israeli audiences and has therefore changed the sport viewing experience. It is argued that the way in which communication systems, particularly television, developed in Israel facilitated the penetration of transnational media agencies (CNN, Sky), as well as of sports organizations such as the NBA and NFL.

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As distances between cultures shrink and the political boundaries between them disappear, it is inescapable that cultures will increasingly influence each other. From the beginning of time, intercultural contacts have led to an exchange of values, know-how, thought, and performance patterns. In our time, advanced technology further accelerates interaction between cultures in all spheres, including the areas of politics and communications (Caspi, 1996:174).

According to Caspi, the phenomenon of reciprocal relations, the trend toward unification of lifestyles and the creation of uniform organizational patterns is especially prominent in this era of “open boundaries” between peoples and cultures all over the globe.

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on a process by which Israeli society has transformed, almost overnight, from a single to a multi-channel media society. While this process has significantly changed Israelis’ consumption of television and their feelings towards the medium, in the social context of viewing, and in related aspects of leisure activities (Weimann, 1996; Katz *et al.*, 1997), it has also influenced sport in general and basketball in particular. It is argued that the way in which communication systems, particularly television, developed in Israel facilitated the penetration of transnational media agencies (such as CNN, Sky), as well as of sports organizations such as the NBA and NFL.

Early development

Television was a single-station medium in Israel from 1968, when the Israeli Broadcasting Authority started airing television programs, and for almost 25 years, Israel had only one channel (Weimann, 1996). Israeli TV, according to Katz *et al.* had excelled in the coverage of news and public affairs, although this achievement was sometimes impeded by the overly politicized appointments of the governing board

and the director general. As good as it was at public affairs, it was poor, at best, in original drama and light entertainment (Katz *et al.*, 1997:5).

The fact that most neighboring countries broadcast only in Arabic further limited the options open to Hebrew-speaking Israelis, whose only choices were the relatively popular use of VCRs for watching rental videos and the 'no-other-option' but to watch the only existing channel in Israel (Weimann, 1984;1996). However, the 1990s brought dramatic changes. The Israeli parliament approved two significant changes that altered the media environment: the introduction of cable television; and the establishment of a second national channel, Channel 2, which unlike the first one would be a commercial channel (Weimann, 1996:244). These significant changes also altered the way sport was viewed and presented in Israel. The process by which Israeli society transformed, almost overnight, from a single to a multi-channel media society, influenced sport in general, and basketball in particular. The 'key' player in the process was the new cable television network, Channel 5 – the sport channel. However, in order to understand the importance of Channel 5's role in altering the way sport was viewed, one must initially be aware of the broader social context of the establishment of cable television in Israel.

A new era

Cable television, by subscription, was introduced in the early 1990's and is privately owned and operated. According to regulations, Israel was divided into 31 concession areas and the operator in each such area was determined by open tender. During 1992, most of the concessionaires began operations, with a penetration rate that averaged 40% of all Israeli households within the "cabled" areas. By the end of 1992, out of a total Israeli population of 1,290,000 households (a third of which were areas without access to cable as of yet) 400,000 households had subscribed to cable with a total of 1.6 million viewers. By the end of 1994, 800,000 households (out of 1,200,000 households with access to cable) had subscribed to cable, bringing the penetration rate to 67%. Cable services offered subscribers approximately 40 channels, mainly foreign stations, received through satellite dishes in the cable station and transmitted through the cables to subscribers (Weimann, 1995). Cable channels included Sky News, Sky One, and Super Channel from Britain; CNN International; MTV Europe and MTV Asia; the German SAT1 and SAT3; RTL from Luxembourg; BBC Asia; 3 Turkish

channels; 2 Russian channels; the Spanish channel TVE; an Italian channel; Eurosport; French TV5; Star TV and Star One from Hong Kong; Arab channels from Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt; and two Israeli stations. The Israelis were also exposed to the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) through the Middle East Network, located in Southern Lebanon. The cable services also provided five subject specific channels: a movie channel, a sports channel, a children's channel, a family channel, and a nature/documentary channel. Another relevant aspect of cable television's development in Israel is the process of internationalization of the television environment in Israel. Out of the over 40 channels offered by the standard cable service, only 3 were Israeli channels. The increased exposure to foreign stations may have had a cultural impact, especially in terms of a "cultural invasion". Furthermore, despite the multiplicity of stations and languages, American cultural influence predominates. Local television stations carry most of the same programs one sees in America, albeit with Hebrew subtitles. These include everything from "Seinfeld" and "The Sopranos" to "Friends" and "The Young and the Restless". Moreover, even when the language of a show is Hebrew, the format is likely to be derived from an American original (Weimann, 1995;1996; Meyer, 2000).

What Weimann and Meyers mean is that Israel "wastes" its cultural talents by reconstructing American TV game shows, "Wheel of Fortune" and "Jeopardy" to name but two, rather than developing its own independent, "high culture" programming. By law, 40 percent of the programs broadcast in Israel are supposed to be made in the country. This statute is largely ignored, however. It is much cheaper to buy imported shows. Local scriptwriters, actors, and filmmakers continually protest the situation but without visible effect. Even when there are original productions they often seem to be little more than American programs in Hebrew, like Ilana Dayan's "Fact," the local version of "Meet the Press." These programs preserve the American format, but seem to lean toward the sensational, if not the confrontational (Kravitz, 1997).

According to Weimann (1996), there might also be political consequences to the internationalization process, especially when one considers Israel's security problems and the ability of Israeli authorities to regulate the media during crisis and war in the past. In the cabled, global village to which Israelis have become hooked, the

possibilities to regulate and censor satellite news and information are almost non-existent.

The rise of five

The rise of Channel 5, the sport channel, in the beginning of the 1990s was a turning point for basketball in Israel. To adapt Goldlust's (1987) words, the bond between basketball in Israel and Channel 5 was "a match made in heaven". For Israeli basketball, the most important change Channel 5 brought was the exposure of many more Israelis to the game. Almost immediately after signing the contract that gave the broadcasting rights of the Israeli basketball league to Channel 5, live basketball games of the Israeli league started to be televised. At the same time, Channel 5 acquired part of the rights of the American NBA league and presented them side by side with the Israeli league. For the new channel, which was struggling for its existence, the basketball league and the NBA games from America provided a perfect solution for filling air-time in their initial broadcasts. The growing exposure to the game boosted other processes that gathered momentum at the same time. The commercialization process, which was first witnessed in the late 1970s, grew at an increasing pace as sponsors renewed their interest in the league game. For the first time the IBA could sell the rights to bear the league name to a big sponsor and, most importantly, it was the first time the teams enjoyed fixed and equally shared revenues, which the IBA received from the broadcasting rights.

The agreement between Channel 5 and the IBA promised the basketball league that every week at least one game would be televised live. Another aspect, which should be considered, is the level and quality of coverage that Channel 5 provided and its contribution to the growing popularity of the game in Israel. Channel 5, as a narrow broadcaster¹ concentrating only on the production of the basketball league and editing imported games from the US, raised the standards of broadcasting to levels never previously seen on Israeli television. According to American-born Myelin Tenzer², CEO of Channel 5, the production of the Israeli basketball league coverage was defiantly trying to reach American standards of televised sports. Such standards involved a shift in the perception of sport coverage in Israel. Channel 5, like many of the Australian television stations studied by Goldlust (1987) and, indeed like many

other broadcasters throughout the world, shifted towards an American style of coverage stressing entertainment rather than traditional journalistic reportage. As Goldlust explains:

... As professional sport has become increasingly international over the past decades, so have examples of sports television produced by the wealthier and technologically more sophisticated services – those of the North American commercial networks, Western Europe and to a lesser extent Australia – become the leading models of media professionalism throughout the world-wide industry. Their styles and techniques are perceived within the industry as ‘state of the art’. As technical and on-air personnel from various countries are often involved in covering major international sporting events there are numerous opportunities for observing, interacting with and learning from the production techniques of the large American and British networks.

Also, local television services and stations in most countries import sport programs produced by the Americans and/or British and the styles and techniques used in these countries are seen by their regular viewing audience. If such telecasts become popular, there are professional pressures for local production to imitate and incorporate such structure and techniques – particularly where there is commercial competition for the domestic audiences (Goldlust, 1987:114).

One should bear in mind, that, up to this point, the only basketball games on television were European games in which Maccabi Tel Aviv participated (Galily & Sheard, 2002). The television revolution and the map of broadcasting in Israel led Gabriel Weimann to examine the changes on the behavioral, cognitive, and even affective dimensions of the media revolution. According to Weimann, it appears that within a year of the introduction of cable, Israelis experienced a significant change in their consumption of television, in their feelings towards the medium, in the social context of viewing, and in related aspects of leisure activities. Though some of the early, dramatic changes were clearly the result of the rapid transition that caused a temporary "culture shock", the change in certain patterns of viewing and attitudes remained stable even after a year. With relation to sport in general, but basketball in

particular, there is no doubt that the change played a key role in the development of spectatorship of Israeli basketball and of basketball from around the world. The level and the quality of coverage led to the growing popularity of the game and the demand for basketball reached a peak in 1992. The growing coverage of sport events both locally (men and women) and internationally led to a situation where sports became increasingly 'legitimate' subjects in everyday conversations and in newspapers. Therefore, it is no surprise that the demand for basketball, and mainly for quality basketball from the NBA, led three broadcasters in Israel to try to win the fourth sport concession as far as Israeli sport was concerned: the right to broadcast the NBA league and playoff games. Each one of the three contestants, Channel 1, Channel 2 and Channel 5, held one of the concessions, and gaining rights to the NBA would have given one of them an enormous advantage. The oldest and most established channel, Channel 1, held the rights for Maccabi Tel Aviv games in Europe and had the advantage of increased access since the vast majority of the population could tune in to its broadcasts. The second, Channel 2, was just emerging and as the first commercial station, it could offer financial incentives unavailable to the other contestants. The third, Channel 5, had experience with local Israeli basketball and high standard sport coverage. At this point it might be worth mentioning that unlike news, where government regulation prevents monopolistic coverage, getting the exclusive rights to a sport event prevents other networks from telecasting the same event. Therefore, one can appreciate how important it was for all three networks to get the exclusive rights to the popular American basketball league. At the same time, the representatives of the NBA in the Middle East had to learn the broadcasting map in Israel in order to reach an agreement with the network that would most benefit the NBA. Channel 1 could provide the best viewer ratings by reaching greater numbers of the population but it did not have enough money for the rights. The second channel had the money but because of its internal structure³ could not broadcast all the games. The sport channel could show all the games but lacked funds and desirable ratings. Therefore, while seeking money, rating and maximum coverage of the game, NBA representatives decided to share the rights among all three broadcasters and thus gain maximum coverage of the American league.

According to Maguire, people in different countries do not freely choose which cultural products they consume:

While it is important to probe the existence of relatively autonomous transnational practices, the researcher should not be unaware that national and transnational media and marketing agencies, as well as sports organizations such as the NBA and the NFL, will attempt to manipulate and control such processes. It is also legitimate to note, though more particularly concerning specific sports, such as European basketball, that a combined process of commodification/Americanization has occurred, but has done so within the context of broader globalization processes. This can take several forms: the global migration of American sports personnel, the global spread of American sport forms and the global adoption of the marketing of sports along American lines. This is accelerated in both intended and unintended ways by the media-sport production complex. Though these forms have developed to varying degrees in different countries and continents, more usually they interweave in a mutually reinforcing manner (Maguire, 1999:171-2).

Notwithstanding, Maguire claims that people do not freely choose which cultural products are consumed:

The sport industries do provide a staple diet of western products, and the cult of consumerism is spreading around the globe. In some respects, the sport-media production complex also ensures that the marketing of the *same* (Italics in original) sport forms, products and images does occur. 'Local' people do not freely choose which cultural products are consumed. There is political economy at work regulating global flows (Maguire,1999:213).

In Israel, this process influenced sport in general, and basketball in particular. The way in which communication systems developed in Israel, particularly television, helped in allowing the penetration of transnational media agencies (CNN, Sky), as well as of sports organizations such as the NBA and NFL. According to Andrews (1997), a key factor in the NBA's rapid emergence in Europe during the mid- to late 1980s (and as argued, in Israel in the 1990s) was the changing structure and scope of

television in the reciprocally changing European geopolitical formation. Yet, the global dissemination of American sport forms, which developed to varying degrees in different countries and continents, was controlled and manipulated by transnational media and marketing agencies as well as by sports' organizations.

The global and the village

Nevertheless, American basketball is not the only American sport product that was embraced in Israel. American football has reached Israel as well. As part of the US National Football League's (NFL) attempts to export the game world wide, some 60,000 Israeli high school students learned to play American Football in Israel. The NFL has targeted Israel as part of its plan to invest in the development of the game throughout Europe, the Far East, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand. The NFL also hoped for a future Israeli professional team to compete in the League's world championship.

NFL Israel, a local branch of the American NFL company, has worked out a ten-year game plan which is as strategically meticulous as a successful strike in American football. In the first phase, sponsorship, promotional and broadcasting deals are being put in place. At the same time, 60,000 high-school students learned to play the game: the Amal vocational training high school network gave American football classes to 40,000 of its students, and Israel Radio's Reshet Gimmel, together with the McDonald's hamburger franchise, has recruited some 20,000 youngsters for American football courses around the country.

In the second phase, one of the NFL's leading teams - the New England Patriots – has committed itself to playing an exhibition match against another major US team at Israel's national soccer stadium in Ramat Gan within the two years following the first phase⁴. Furthermore, Israeli interest in American football will be stimulated, according to NFL Israel, by live weekly broadcasts of a big NFL match with Hebrew commentary on a local television station (Griver, 1998:5).

Simon Phillips, a British-born Israeli who heads the NFL office in Israel, is confident that football will catch on in Israel:

The people in the country are very much in synergy with what happens in America. We are very much influenced by American habits. The -- with cable television penetration at over 90.1 percent, the -- the influences that come over from America dictate very strongly the -- the way that Israeli kids grow up⁵.

In addition, side by side with American sports, British football is another popular trend in Israel these days. Findings of a recent study (Ben-Porat, 2000) which investigated the basic profiles of the committed Israeli fan of English football reveal that committed Israeli fans of British football are special people: they are highly committed to "their" British club, much more than to their local, Israeli, club. According to Ben-Porat, for these fans, the club is an "overseas sweetheart," far away but close to the heart:

The Israeli fan of an English club watches almost every transmission of the games of his team. About 90% do not miss a live transmission. Usually, he watches with friends who are also supporters of that club, and almost every fan has such co-enthusiasts. He believes that the English league is the best in the world. He also supports the English national team and has a local, that is, an Israeli team, with which he sympathizes. The Israeli fan of the English club is an active devotee. He is constantly seeking more information on his club by means of foreign television channels (such as the European branch of "Sky"), newspapers, the Internet, radio (the BBC World Service), and correspondence with the club in England and with the players (Ben-Porat, 2000:350).

Conclusion

These last two examples might explain why David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister tried to prevent the introduction of television to the new emerging state. Ben-Gurion's fear was that the new medium would undermine his attempt to create a

unique Israeli culture (Katz *et al.*, 1997; Meyers, 2000). Israel's former Foreign (and Prime) Minister Shimon Peres, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December 1994, voiced his concern as well: "Jewish culture has lived over many centuries; now it has taken root again on its own soil. For the first time in our history, some 5 million people speak Hebrew as their native language". "This," he noted, "is both a lot and a little: a lot, because there have never been so many Hebrew speakers; but a little, because a culture based on 5 million people can hardly withstand the pervasive, corrosive effect of the global television culture". Peres has long been concerned that Israel could lose what is unique about its culture. "We have a very special culture based on religion, history, tradition, literature - all the things that brought us to Israel in the first place," he said. If Israelis were to lose this sense of uniqueness, Peres adds, "they might not feel the same dedication to the goals we have traditionally striven for in Israel" (Chabin, 1995).

In order to have a better perspective on Ben-Gurion's and Peres' views, one should bear in mind the history of the state of Israel as part of the broader Zionist idea. The process of the establishment of the state of Israel can assist in providing such a perspective. Throughout the years the Zionist vision has moved between two opposing desires: the desire to establish a model society, "a light unto the nations," on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for the normalization of Jewish life (Azaryahu, 1999:39). The Zionist ambition has always comprised two objectives: to forge a new relationship between the Jewish people and the Gentile world, and to create a new Jewish people in the process. Through this process, the Diaspora would eventually disappear. Americanization therefore causes problems for Israeli Zionists when it undermines, or seems to distort, their goals (Garfinkle, 1996:561). As this paper demonstrates, American cultural influence is so widespread that many places in Israel sometimes seem like a transliterated America. That bothers many Israelis because, as far as Israel and Zionism are concerned, America has made imitating and envying the Gentiles fashionable again. For religious Jews, it has led to the additional worry that in a generation or two most secular Israelis will be *de facto* Gentiles who just happen¹ to speak Hebrew (Garfinkle, 1996:565).

Thus, the Americanization process seems to 'threaten' Israel's 'authentic' culture. The American liberal democratic doctrine⁶ is non-national and, to a large extent, is anti-national and individualistic in the extreme. Zionism, in contrast, grew as a national democratic movement, which, as mentioned earlier, developed against the backdrop and under the patronage of the national democratic philosophy of Western Europe. Schweid (1999), for example, explains that Israel was able to impede the effects of post-modernism which America represents until the Six-Day War, by applying social and economic policies dictated by the need to absorb masses of immigrants. According to Schweid, these barriers fell after the Six-Day War, and the influence of the political, social and cultural conceptions of post-World War II American liberalism penetrated Israeli society with great momentum. To Schweid then, the issue is:

The assimilation of the basic concepts of American liberal democracy and, foremost, the adoption of the social concepts of this democracy; the free-market economic ethos; the abandonment of the socialist social-policy parameters that had guided Israel as an immigrant-absorbing country until the Six-Day War; and the forfeit of integrationist social aspects in education and in the army, all for the sake of an ideology of unrestrained competition - all of these, after the fact, turned post-Zionism into a form of social behaviour and socio-economic policy (Schweid,1999:5).

Furthermore, he argues that the process, in which post-Zionism absorbed American concepts, led to

...contemporary culture acquired through the media directly from American culture. Anyone who so desires can stroll at leisure through foreign cultural landscapes in Israel and can find assimilation in a gamut of values and symbols: political, ethical, social, creative, spiritual and even linguistic (Schweid,1999:6).

This ethos of individualism and competitiveness that permeates Israel's society has coincided, according to those who are concerned for Israel's 'indigenous' culture,

with the gradual dismantling of the Israeli welfare system and, some would say, the social cohesion that made Israel feel in many ways like one large family.

As Caspi (1996), among others, observed it would seem that, from the very beginning, Americanization was to a great extent a communication process which was imported to Israel, much like other social and cultural fads and fashions. However, a number of changes within Israeli society “contributed to the lowering of cultural barriers and to softening the ground which then appeared to absorb thirstily the principles of the American... style” (Caspi,1996:179). One of the barriers lowered was closely connected with a process which has transformed Israeli society, almost overnight, from a single television channel society to a multi-channel media society. This process influenced sport in general, and basketball in particular. The way in which communication systems developed in Israel, particularly television, facilitated the penetration of transnational media agencies.

While recognizing that the Americanization process involves a blend of intended and unintended practices, it is argued here that monocausal analysis of such a process might not reveal the whole picture. This process of Americanization is not simply about interdependent relations. Rather, it is concerned with the inter-relatedness of multi-faceted configurations. Other processes such as ‘professionalization’, ‘commodification’, ‘secularization’, ‘urbanization’, and ‘militarization’, which were not discussed here (see for example, Galily & Sheard, 2002), are also part of a very complex society and should also be considered. While this study focused on one dimension of Israeli society, Israeli media, which according to this paper underwent a significant shift toward Americanization, it is also argued that this shift is not entirely different in dimension and scope from similar processes in other areas in Israel such as economics or politics. Although other, yet smaller-scale, processes of Japanization, Africanization and Russianization are also gathering momentum, it seems that as far as Israel is concerned, ‘the long rise of the west’ is continuing.

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Notes

¹ A narrow broadcaster means that the channel broadcasts only for a fixed number of hours a day and on a specific topic. The sport channel (5) broadcasted during the 1990's from 4pm to 11pm every day.

² Interview with Myelin Tenzer – Channel 5 CEO (Oct. 1998).

³ Instead of awarding the right to run the second channel to one operating company, it was granted to three groups, each in turn allying with a number of economic interests. The successful applicants were selected by a public tender. Each of the three, broadcasts two days a week, while the seventh day is rotated among them on an annual basis. See also Doron (1998)

⁴ The game was postponed due to the geo-political climate in the area.

⁵ Radio interview by Linda Gradstein, Linda Wertheimer, Derek McGinty, Football in Jerusalem. , All Things Considered (NPR), 08-15-1997.

⁶ In its basic model, it views the state as belonging to its citizens, in contrast to a nation-state that belongs to the nation as a historical being. Thus, it views the state as responsible for the well-being and happiness of its citizens as individuals, not the nation's survival as an autonomous entity.