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A Tug of War

The Israeli Sports Media During the Second Lebanon War

SIMON M. PACK, YAIR GALILY, MORAN YARCHI, AND ILAN TAMIR

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In times of conflict or crisis, the media tends to “rally round the flag” and express mostly patriotic views in its news coverage. The current study aims to examine whether this phenomenon is also true for other covered topics that are not hard news related—while focusing on the coverage of the sports section. Examining the coverage of the sports sections in three leading Israeli newspapers during the Second Lebanon War (July–August 2006), the findings show that the rally effect was salient in sports coverage in the initial stages of the war. Three central themes were identified: (a) expressions of patriotism, (b) discussions about the foreign players, and (c) minimal criticism. In accordance with previous literature, the evidence suggests that the rally-round-the-flag concept has an effect on coverage of sports news not directly related to the conflict. Here, too, it is shown that sport plays a significant component in the formation and strengthening of the national spirit.

Keywords: Israel, sports media, Second Lebanon War, nationalism, conflict

Introduction

The rally-round-the-flag phenomenon that refers to the media’s tendency to “mobilize” in wartime is well known and well documented in the literature (Baum & Potter, 2008; Liebes & Kampf, 2007). Journalists, sports journalists among them, are not detached from the nationalist settings and the emotions closely associated with a nationalist mood and thus tend to adopt the local narrative, at least during the initial stage of a conflict. The Israeli media’s tendency to support the establishment during the Second Lebanon War (July–August 2006) was reflected in Liebes and Kampf’s (2007) study. Nevertheless, the study, much like other studies (e.g., Hallin, 1989), also pointed to the weakening of support over time and, beginning in the third week of the war, the development of a critical discourse.

Sport, a significant component in the formation and strengthening of the

national spirit (Tamir et al., 2015), is often suspended during times of conflict. Despite this, the sports press continues to report and also expresses its position with regard to the current situational reality in these reports. In this study, we examine the discourse in the sports sections of three daily newspapers in Israel at the beginning of the Second Lebanon War. The purpose of the study was to examine if and to what extent the patriotic discourse trickles into sports coverage during the conflict. The study's findings will be able to assess and suggest a different perspective on the national and political role of the sports media and perhaps primarily, at times when there is almost no sports activity.

Literature Review

Media Coverage During Periods of Conflict

Wars and conflicts are newsworthy events, and journalists and editors seek out stories of this kind to generate news. The criteria of immediacy, drama, and simplicity guide the journalists in the process of building the news story, in their interpretation and analysis of the events (Altheide, 1997; Ayalon et al., 2016; Wolfsfeld, 2011; Yarchi, 2015). News primarily deals with situations of disorder and conflict: protests, violence, crime and disasters are the most natural fodder for news reporting (Wolfsfeld, 2004; Yarchi, 2014). During periods of conflict and war, the media defines the various actors and the relationships between them through narratological analysis and framing (Neiger et al., 2008).

From the coverage in the local or national media, it appears that in times of crisis (at least at their beginning), the media tends to support the government's position (Knightley, 2004). Under normal circumstances journalists tend to cover the news professionally and without softening the items in their reports; during fighting, however, the media abandons its role as the watchdog of democracy and mobilizes in support of the government and the military in order to uphold national morale (Schudson, 2002).

This mobilization of the media during times of war, combined with public opinion, is known as the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon (Baum & Potter, 2008). A prominent tenet of this phenomenon is how the media tends to cover conflicts in an emotional and patriotic manner. Various studies have found that during war or in times of acute crisis, the media is inclined toward consensus and what is considered to be the good of the nation. This is why the media is more inclined to avoid criticism of state institutions and emphasize social solidarity by highlighting the positive and common characteristics of society. Further characteristics of this process include

portraying the enemy stereotypically and emphasizing the threat it poses (Neiger et al., 2008). According to Liebes and Kampf (2007), journalists consider themselves citizens first of all and journalists only afterward. Thus, in times of war, they have an opportunity to gain popularity with the public and may tend to color the events of the battlefields in black and white, almost regardless of the moral context. However, as the conflict or war continues, other voices begin to be heard in the media, voices that criticize the government's position and actions, probably as a result of the bountiful information the press has and diverse positions among the political elite that are expressed in the media coverage (Hallin, 1989). This study focused on the media coverage at the beginning of the Second Lebanon War, during this initial period of consensus, with a particular focus on the sports media.

Nationalism and Sport

Nationalism, which is affected by economical-political relations and supported by a joint ethnic tradition, is ratified by a long line of social agents (Neiger & Rimmer-Tsory, 2013). Billig (1995) claimed that these social agents forge a banal nationalism by means of numerous mentions of the nation in political discourse, cultural products, and newspapers, reminding the citizens of their national place in a world of nations. The rhetoric that constantly reminds us of our nationhood ranks a specific nation higher than other nations. Billig distinguished between “our patriotism” and “their nationalism,” where “‘our’ nationalism appears as ‘patriotism’—a beneficial, necessary . . . force,” while the nationalism of other nations is associated with negative characteristics (p. 55).

One of the central factors changing and shaping nationalism are media systems. Anderson (1991) wrote that books are part of the system for forming nations, and “in this perspective, the newspaper is merely an ‘extreme form’ of the book” (p. 34). The daily reading of the newspaper confirms the supposition “that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (p. 35).

Sports also fill an important role in creating nationalism in the modern era (Tamir, Galily, & Yarchi, 2016). Sports events create exciting moments and unexpected drama and have the potential to bring together the masses, regardless of their social origin, race, gender, and religion. People have a need for “psychological security” for the sake of emotional stability and mental well-being, and just as individuals need this security, the public also finds in representative sports a means for strengthening the nationalist

emotion (Harif, 2009). From the beginning of the 20th century, the resources allocated to organized physical activities have increased in many places in the world. At the same time, there has been an increase in the financing of sports activities, and the government's involvement in everything related to supervision and control of these activities has deepened. According to Galily, Lidor, and Ben-Porat (2009), the goal of government involvement in sport is, among other things, to increase the sense of belonging, unity, and the national identification of the citizens.

Sports serve the government not only for purposes of forging a national team spirit but for other meaningful motives. According to Rein (2011), sports and their immense popularity can also affect the development of imagery in society. By means of sports, the distinction between *us* and *other* is effectively employed (Hargreaves, 1986). The use of flags and national anthems in the framework of the contests between various countries in international competitions results in clarification and intensification of the identification with the state. The distinction exists not only on the national level but also in the political, economic, and social spheres (Tamir, Limor, & Galily, 2015). The media, and in particular the sports sections, are a central factor in strengthening imagery and community distinctions. Sports media frequently refer to national history and deal extensively not only with the history of sports conflicts but also with military conflicts. The football match and the battle for the nation's honor are linked through the use of war imagery (Hagay & Meyers, 2015; O'Donnell, 1994).

To understand sport's sociocultural context with nationalism and the state, one has to understand the role of sport as an integrating power on the one hand and as a tool for protest on the other hand (Sorek, 2003). The creation of integration is manifested in the showcasing of the national teams with the national flag and the singing of the anthem as the embodiment of the entire nation. In relation to this, Hagay and Meyers (2015) point out that there is an additional integrative role of sports: the ability to communicate a message of reconciliation through which spectators can unite and rise above their various disagreements. Kaufman and Galily (2009) noted that in the case of Israel, sports are almost the only arena in which the state can be perceived as a nation of all its citizens, since Israeli society is made up of a complex split in which Jewish, naturalized, and Arab Israeli players are all active on national teams and enable sectors of the population to identify with the Israeli civilian collective. Protest in sport is reflected in the fact that sports competitions sometimes mediate between social protest and the desire for a change in the existing order (Galily, Lidor, & Ben-Porat, 2009). The attitude of the Jewish football fans in Israel toward the minority of Arab players on

the national team in recent years can be perceived as an expression of that protest (Tamir & Bernstein, 2015).

Sports influence all layers of the population, and in many societies in the world, sport takes center stage in cultural existence. Therefore, decisions to hold or to ban sports events in combat zones have wide-reaching significance and constitute a political statement. Banning a match indicates the ability, or inability, to conduct life normally in that country (Galily, Tamir, & Levy, 2012).

Nationalism, Sport, and Media: The Israeli Case

The manner in which the news is presented contributes to the formation of reality and a “new” nationalism (Weimann, 2000). Don-Yehiya and Liebman (1984) offered the example of the representation of the Jewish holiday of Passover in the Israeli media, using national-Zionist motifs of liberation. This approach puts the emphasis on symbols and myths in Jewish history and culture and on the religious tradition as the source of feelings of national loyalty and solidarity.

Barak and Sheffer (2007) believe that security factors influence politics, the economy, and public discourse in Israel. There is no dispute over the centrality of the Israeli Defense Forces in Israeli society. The media mirrors the positions of the security factors, and at times, some of the media channels function as “unofficial spokespersons” (p. 24). Many Israeli citizens serve in active reserve duty, a component of the spirit of “a nation in uniform,” creating a culture of militarism in which the nation is enlisted to support wars and there is justification for using military solutions for political problems (Ben-Eliezer, 1994).

Up until the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the media did not criticize the military and political establishment and was obedient. It preferred accepting the government’s word without question, providing security policy makers and the army with support (Peri, 2001; Weimann, 2007). According to Pedatzur (2007), in 1982, after the First Lebanon War, the security consensus weakened, but it awakens and receives prominent expression in times of severe security crises. In their study on the Second Lebanon War, Liebes and Kampf (2007) reinforce this perception and add that at the beginning of the war a pattern of enlisted and patriotic discourse was discernable. However, by the war’s third week, the imagery of the “strong rear” began to fade, and a critical discourse developed that emphasized the rear’s distress during the fighting.

Neiger and Rimmer-Tsory (2013) believed that in Israel, during fighting, the discourse of *us* and *other* spills over into the journalistic coverage, positioning the Israeli reader in the stance of a “patriotic member of a national collective” (p. 99). Several factors can influence the shaping of the national sentiment, and sport is one of them. In Israel the Football Association, for example, is run by representatives of party institutions that are mostly in the Jewish-Zionist consensus. This situation makes it possible to maintain the relationship between sports, nation, and state (Ben-Porat, 2003). The fact that the sports media’s coverage leans toward “exaggeration, smearing colorful headlines that aim to incite, and shallow commentary” (Ben-Porat, 2003, p. 163) might enhance the already-existing tensions between different groups and nations.

Research that examined the coverage in culture supplements of three Israeli newspapers (*Haaretz*, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, and *Maariv*) during the Second Lebanon War found that Israeli arguments in favor of routine cultural activity were emphasized, alongside emphasis of nationalism (“safeguarding your home”). *Yedioth Ahronoth* was the most dramatic, also using prominent visual motifs such as red headlines. Furthermore, during the Second Lebanon War there was extensive public criticism of journalists who didn’t rally to justify the war and who questioned the common perception in support of the Israeli side (Weimann, 2007). Critical voices were seldom heard, particularly in *Haaretz* supplements (Neiger & Rimmer-Tsory, 2013). It is interesting to examine various aspects of topics that do not focus on news, such as coverage of sports, and how they are covered in the press in times of crisis or war.

Based on the existing information regarding the media’s rallying round the flag in times of war (Baum & Potter, 2008), it is fair to assume that there would be a conceivable effect at the beginning of the war and that it would be discernable also in the coverage of sports news. Regarding the role of sports and its media representation in creating a sense of nationalism (Galily, 2007), it must be understood that the political-security discourse tends to filter through to other areas in the Israeli media, such as sport (Barak & Sheffer, 2007).

Methodology

In order to assess how the fighting was covered in the sports media during the war, we conducted an analysis of all the articles, columns, and op-eds in the sports supplements of the three central daily newspapers in Israel—*Maariv*, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, and *Haaretz* ($N = 357$).

Maariv was founded in 1948 by former *Yediot Aharonot* journalists, and it was the most widely read newspaper in Israel in its first 20 years. The paper has long been associated with Israel's political center and has been critical of previous governments that leaned further to the right (Kershner, 2012). *Yedioth Ahronoth* was first established in 1939 and was the leading tabloid paper in Israel during the period of the Second Lebanon War, having the largest readership among Hebrew newspapers. It is considered to cater to the mainstream of the Israeli public and, as a tabloid, has a relatively high number of images to illustrate its stories (Pizmony-Levy, 2018). Furthermore, *Yedioth Ahronoth* tends to be conservative on military and security issues but more open than other tabloids when it comes to dealing with civil rights issues. Recently, Pizmony-Levy (2018) described the paper as "favoring simplistic, dramatic coverage" (p. 532). *Haaretz* was founded in 1918 and is Israel's oldest newspaper. It is known for its liberal stance on domestic and foreign issues. While its editorial pages are considered influential among government leaders, the paper is quite often critical of the military. Glain (2007) described *Haaretz* as "Israel's liberal beacon" and pointed out that the paper was opposed to the Second Lebanon War.

In an attempt to learn about the extent to which the sports sections of the aforementioned newspapers rallied on the side of the state and how this was expressed, the analysis focused on their coverage during the first week of the Second Lebanon War (July 13–20, 2006). At this time, the coverage was expected to rally in support of the state (Baum & Potter, 2008; Hallin, 1989).

The study employed a qualitative analysis of the articles based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In accordance with the approach of additional studies that employed qualitative content analysis (Tamir, Galily, & Yarchi, 2016; Yarchi, Galily, & Tamir, 2015), first, recurring patterns in the sports-media discourse during the initial days of the Second Lebanon War were identified. The following main categories were found: (a) expressions of patriotism, (b) references to foreign players, and (c) criticism. After identifying these categories, discourse analysis was conducted, and subcategories were identified in order to understand more deeply the nature of the coverage. The content analysis was conducted by three students who were trained and coached on how to conduct the coding task.

Results

Coverage of three major themes regarding the fighting was identified in the discourse analysis of the sports media at the beginning of the Second Lebanon War: (a) expressions of patriotism, (b) references to foreign players,

and (c) criticism. The subsequent sections outline the aforementioned themes that emerged from the content analysis.

Expressions of Patriotism in Sports Newspapers

A common claim in research is that in times of crisis such as war, journalists tend to rally in favor of the local political and military interests (Baum & Potter, 2008). During the Second Lebanon War this discourse dominated the general media at the beginning of the fighting, up until the third week of the war (Liebes & Kampf, 2007). Our analysis revealed that there were expressions of patriotism also in the sports sections, mainly expressions strengthening the national unity and boosting the national morale.

Brothers in Arms: Expressions of Solidarity in Sports

On August 12, 2006, the first day of the conflict, an event to mark the 70th anniversary of a prominent professional football club (Beitar Jerusalem) was scheduled to take place. The club's owner decided to postpone the festivities, and *Haaretz* noted the cancellation of the celebrations and their postponement to the summer (Boker & Hakon, 2006). The other outlets, such as *Maariv*, utilized more emotional coverage emphasizing the aspect of national unity. In *Maariv* it was written that the team's owner decided to cancel the celebrations and donate the food to soldiers. The club's owner was quoted as saying that "it is impossible to celebrate on a day like today. The state of Israel is one big family and today we are all with the soldiers." (Tabak, 2006b). In the third outlet, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, coverage was already very detailed, mentioning how the food was transferred to the soldiers in the North of Israel, and reports were included about the many fans who called to congratulate the club's owner for his decision. A quote was included that was nearly identical to the one in *Maariv*, though more detailed with particulars that provided the reader with more emotion by attempting to strengthen and support the families of the soldiers.

Another theme was the hosting of the teams that were supposed to be practicing in the North (the area most impacted by the conflict) at training facilities in the center of the country, which was less impacted by the conflict. In *Haaretz* it was reported that the teams were hosted in the center of Israel, but there was no mention of the invitations from teams from the center (Livnat & Boker, 2006). In *Maariv* the theme of hosting was mentioned and placed prominently and immediately after the front page. Under

the subheading “And Thank You to Hapoel and Bnei Yehuda” (Pshehatzki, 2006), it was reported that the heads of Maccabi Haifa “will remember this deed for many years to come.” Further down, it also mentioned that other teams from less impacted regions had offered those teams directly impacted by the conflict to play in their stadiums, mentioning that they would receive meals at the expense of the local team. Here, too, the northern team’s great appreciation and excitement by the offer were noted. The reports in *Yedioth Ahronoth* about the hosting of the various teams were not particularly extensive (Lipkin, 2006) and were similar to those in *Haaretz*.

Sports and National Morale

Sports have the power to dispel national discomfort. They charge the patriotic batteries and bring excitement into the citizens’ lives. Sports have a unique contribution to the collective Israeli experience (Harif, 2009). Schudson (2002) claimed that during fighting, the journalist rallies to keep up national morale. Therefore, our claim is that a sports journalist plays a role in the national mood. There is an expectation that the media rally during periods of fighting in order to enhance national morale. During such periods success in sports can act as a substitute to failures on the battlefield or, alternatively, serve to strengthen success. Though there were only a few sports events in the time period in question, the sports media linked those events that did take place to the security events and attempted to leverage the sporting achievements to boost the national morale.

During the time of the Second Lebanon War, Doron Shaziri, who was wounded by a land mine in Lebanon in 1987, won the World Shooting Para Sport Championships. In *Maariv* the item about his victory was referenced in the supplement’s headline. The item itself was emotional and linked the success directly to the fighting. Under the headline “We Could Use Some Good News,” Shuali (2006) wrote about the win, which he claimed was a moving victory, especially while the conflict persisted. Shuali also wrote about how even in the midst of such an important competition, Sharazi, the athlete, was glued to the news and spoke often with his sister who lived near the conflict zone.

The Israeli reserve basketball team played in an international competition, in the European Championship, but lost. *Maariv* quoted the team coach, Yaakov Gino, who linked one of the team’s victories to the situation in Israel: “We are aware of the situation in the country, and we hoped to bring some good news” (Ornan, 2006). A similar quote appeared in *Yedioth Ahronoth*:

“The delegation heads and the players dedicated the victories to residents of the north” (Nelkin, 2006). The next day, when the team was ousted, Yaakov Gino was quoted, this time without linking the game and the war. It is possible that the newspaper saw fit to make the connection between sports and the national arena only with success. *Haaretz* reported the victories and the loss without any such links to the war. In some cases, the newspaper chose to include the exact same quotes, omitting the connection the speaker made to the war.

Foreign Players and the Attitude Toward Israel

In all three newspapers there was prominent coverage of how the war affected foreign players, which for the purpose of this study refers to foreign nationals living in Israel and playing for Israeli teams. The newspapers focused on their conduct and statements while the fighting was taking place in areas both near and far from them. The reports began on the first day of the war coverage and increased as the war developed. Observing and examining the conduct of the foreign nationals in Israel during the Second Lebanon War relates to the fact that they are perceived as representing other nationalities (Ben-Porat, 2003), and their attitudes are therefore considered to be representative of foreign perceptions of the war. The sports sections generally highlighted these foreign players’ support for Israel using three key techniques: (a) the foreigner players’ absolute identification with state symbols, (b) an emphasis on routine and creating an appearance of normalcy, and (c) criticism of foreigners or teams that canceled their travel to compete in Israel.

“Our” Army Is the Best: Support for Israel

The foreign players’ support for Israel was one of the prominent motifs in the sports sections of the three newspapers during the first week of the war. Displays of support, as reflected in the sports sections, were direct and explicit and included demonstration of national confidence and real identification with state symbols.

Maariv chose to print the most patriotic report of foreign players’ statements. In the article that reported on Maccabi Tel Aviv’s training, two Croatian players with the team were quoted as saying that “Israel has the best army in the world and they’ll take the Hezbollah apart very soon” (Tochman, 2006b).

Yedioth Ahronoth also emphasized the display of support when they ran a story quoting a Brazilian player from a football club on the front page: “My mother blessed me and the soldiers who are protecting me” (Barzilay, 2006). In the article itself the quote appears in large font in the main headline. Under a large photograph that appears in the article, there is an insight that corresponds with the Israeli mood: “You only have to be here a few days to understand that there is plenty of quiet and security, the exact opposite of how Israel is described outside.” According to the player, the situation is just fine and the media choose to show only the negative things. The player’s “Israeliness” continues also in his attitude toward the soldiers and his concern for them.

In *Haaretz*, the front page displayed players’ responses to the fighting, noting that they are outwardly conveying calm. The coverage was more balanced in terms of the opinions heard in the other newspapers, but support for Israel was explicit. One of the headlines quoted an American basketball player who said, “You won’t get rid of me easily.” He promised that he would be returning to Israel after the summer break regardless of the situation.

Home-Team Players: Willingness to Stay in Israel

Shortly before the fighting began, teams started to train for the coming season, but the fighting made it difficult to maintain the training schedule and preparations. On the one hand, the teams wanted to try to maintain their routine and the preparations for the upcoming season. On the other hand, there was an understanding that under the circumstances, it would be difficult to concentrate on practice and the teams should therefore suspend their routines and transfer from the training field to safer places, for the safety of both foreign and Israeli players. Reports on this topic were the main reference to the war in the sports media. The sports sections reported about the foreign players’ concerns and uncertainty caused by the security situation. At first the reports related to the players’ concern for their families, but as the war continued, reports focused more on the concern that players would leave or not come to Israel. One way or another, it seems that the Israeli sports sections attempted to emphasize the importance of maintaining the routine. Alongside the prevalence given to interviews with foreign players that belittled the security events and had decided, as a result, to stay in Israel, it was possible to identify a geographic distinction in the newspapers, emphasizing the significant difference between the danger in the North of the country and in its center. In this fashion, the sports media

itself in effect alluded to the fact that it was possible to maintain a routine and that not all the rules of the game had been broken.

Maariv's sports section placed a large headline on its front page, "Fighting for Home," as an expression of the Israeli struggle to maintain routine life in the country. The newspaper quoted a foreign footballer from Brazil who had been playing in Israel for 5 years. The main headline read, "I've Had Wonderful Times, I'm Not Leaving So Quickly" (Pshehatzki, 2006). The player was quoted positively, as a loyal player who fondly remembers the good years he spent in Israel. Another headline presented a broader perception that corresponded with the Israeli point of view: "In Croatia the Tanks Were in the Streets" (Tochman, 2006b). This implied that despite everything, the situation was not so terrible, and therefore the Croatian player "clarified that he has no intention of leaving because of the situation" (Tochman, 2006b). There were similar reports of foreign players who were maintaining the routine: "Omar Saani isn't afraid of katyusha rockets: I lived in Kiryat Shmona, I'm used to it" (Ghalia, 2006). In the article itself it said that the fact that he remained in the North didn't "mean [he's] not scared when there are rockets" (Ghalia, 2006). In contrast to their expressions of support, the players' criticism was not emphasized. The article mentioned that in an interview for foreign media, a foreign player said that what was going on in the North was not acceptable to him and that he had a bad feeling about the situation (Tochman, 2006a).

Haaretz ran an extensive article on the front page with players' responses to the fighting. Most of the players said that they believed this was a temporary situation and that overall the situation in Israel was no worse than other places around the world. However, the paper went on to publish an opposing opinion voiced by a local football agent who felt that Israel should not blame those who "don't want to be here," arguing, "We should let those who don't want to be here go as we would ask for the same if there was fighting in another country" (Boker, 2006c). *Haaretz* also referred forgivingly to groups that were considerate of foreign players who didn't come to training. For example, the newspaper reported that one team in the area impacted directly by the conflict did not require any of their players to come to training (Harush, 2006).

In *Yedioth Ahronoth* it seemed that the players were less accepting of the situation. A Brazilian national was quoted as saying, "I don't know where it is worse, in Brazil or here" (Lipkin & Sheinman, 2006). Ben-Shimol and Cooper (2006) further reported that one Ghanaian footballer chose not to play for an Israeli team despite having signed with them, due to the security situation. The statement was, however, not as definitive as it was reported in

other newspapers. A large headline noted, “Escaping From the Rockets,” in reference to the fact that a team in the area of the conflict moved its training to the center of the country. The article mentioned that foreign players from other teams in the central part of Israel were not afraid and were not thinking about leaving (Lipkin, 2006).

Cowards: Teams and Players That Do Not Want to Come

Due to the timing of the war, during the critical signing period in football and at the time when the teams began training, there was certainly more attention on players’ relocation and their decisions. From the start of the war, the newspapers reported on players who were afraid to come to Israel, alongside reports of players who decided to come despite the security situation. Some of the newspapers reported the cancellations of players and teams somewhat dramatically, mainly by means of large headlines.

In its first report about a foreign player who chose not to come to Israel, the tone of *Haaretz*’s headline was critical of the player, stating that the player was “Scared and Stayed in Uruguay” (Boker, 2006c). The news item itself stated that the player was afraid to come to Israel but that he might change his decision at a later time. *Maariv* chose to place a large headline on the second page: “Due to the Security Situation: Two Foreign Players Chose Not to Come to Maccabi Tel Aviv” (Tochman, 2006a). Reading deeper into the particular situation, it became apparent that the players were also considering offers from other clubs, and their decision may have been unrelated to the fighting. This, however, did not stop the media from running an unequivocal headline that allegedly portrays a certain mood. *Yedioth Ahronoth* chose to play down news items about players who were considering leaving due to the security situation (Lipkin, 2006).

From the first day of coverage of the fighting, the media dealt with the question of the Union of European Football Association’s (UEFA) decision regarding Israel hosting European club matches. Many countries perceive hosting matches to be of great importance, as it offers proof of the nation’s stability and presents it as legitimate in the international community (Galily, Lidor, & Ben-Porat, 2009). Several days later, when there were rumors on the matter (as described in *Yedioth Ahronoth*), *Haaretz* ran a piece on its front page stating that the UEFA will not take any hasty steps regarding a ban on hosting matches in Israel, but all options are still open (Dann & Boker, 2006). The article also quoted the Israel Football Association general manager, who said that reports about banning the option of hosting matches anywhere in Israel are the media’s invention and that these reports are unsubstantiated.

Yedioth Ahronoth was more extreme in its statements, objecting to reports in the other newspapers or perhaps to its own reporting. The headline on page 2 of the newspaper quoted the Israel Football Association chairman as saying, “Why All the Chatter about the Security Situation?” (Sheinman, 2006b). The article stated that officials in Israeli football demanded not to report about Israeli teams already looking for football stadiums in which to host games (even before UEFA’s decision on the matter). According to the Israel Football Association, such reports could ultimately lead to a ban on matches in Israel, since UEFA officials also hear these reports. In other words, the Israeli Football Association was making an open request to the Israeli media not to fulfill its mission by reporting in an unbiased fashion but instead rally in support of the Israeli football officials’ narrative. However, there were those who also claimed that the intention behind the request was to remove populist and unsubstantiated reports. This was an illogical claim, seeing as the request stemmed from a fear that if the reports reach UEFA representatives, their response may impact Israel as a host of future UEFA matches. The discussion in the sports sections corresponded closely with the general mood in Israel at the time. The Israeli public accused the media of sharing too much information during the fighting, ultimately harming the Israeli side (Neiger et al., 2008).

In *Maariv* the initial report on the theme of hosting games appeared in a news item that was disconnected from the existing reality and the security situation. Tabak (2006b) wrote that every team that is “supposed to come here will attempt to move the game out of Israel under the false pretense that there is concern in playing here.”

The Other Side of the Coin—Criticism

During this period of conflict, we found expressions of nationalism in Israeli sports media overwhelming, with almost no criticism. An exception was *Haaretz*, which also presented, in addition to expressions of support for Israel, the other side of the coin. In a similar vein, Neiger et al. (2008) state that media that is not critical is considered a propaganda arm of the regime and that criticism is an inseparable element of free press. In this respect, the sports section of *Haaretz* also taught its readers about the cultural implications of the war outside of Israel, including coverage that can at times be perceived as criticism. Katzav (2006) wrote that Israelis found a way to deal with the situation within their psyche, since, unlike for the foreign players, this war was for Israeli athletes a fight for the homeland.

While *Maariv* and *Yedioth Ahronoth* reported in detail, and for several days, about the hosting of northern groups in the center and about the solidarity between the groups during the war, *Haaretz* chose to present a different angle. The main headline that *Haaretz* dealt with was the claim of one Israeli football club that represents the Israeli Arab sector that no team invited them to relocate their training (Ghaly, 2006). The article emphasized the team's difficulty in training far away from the firing line. The article claimed that the team was discriminated against in terms of the willingness to assist them, because the club was associated with the Arab sector.

An additional report, introducing a different type of coverage (which can be read as criticism of the focus on the situation in Israel), dealt with the difficulties of the Lebanese basketball team. The report stated that "the Lebanese didn't go to one of the Basketball World Cup tournaments, because they didn't have means to go" (Dann, 2006). The reason for this was that the Israel Defense Forces bombed Beirut airport and the city's main road, thus closing off routes out of the country. This was an unusual reference (even in the period examined) to the implications of the fighting on the other side that was also harmed, apparently more severely than the Israeli teams.

Conclusion

The academic discourse regarding the relationship between sports journalism and national identity has flourished in the last decade. A majority of these studies underline the ways in which sports journalism helps to structure national communities. However, recent research suggests that sports media outlets are not in a state of stagnant discourse and that new subversive voices threaten hegemonic nationality. This is why the exploration of the sports pages during wartime, when journalists tend to rally around the flag, provides an interesting case study and has the potential to offer a good contribution to our understanding of this relationship.

Our study aimed to examine the coverage of sports during a war, based on an understanding that in times of crisis the media tends to rally round the flag and present patriotic points of view (Baum & Potter, 2008). At the beginning of the Second Lebanon War, the rallied coverage was apparent also in the sports media. This study identified three central themes covered by the sports media in relation to the war: (a) expressions of patriotism; (b) the foreign players; and (c) a lack of criticism, or minimal criticism, in the case of *Haaretz*.

Most of the coverage in Israeli sports media dealt with the manner in which the foreign players received, understood, and analyzed the events.

The various newspapers expanded the items related to the foreign players. This theme ascribed great importance to looking at war through the eyes of foreign players (Ben-Porat, 2003). The foreign players can loosely and unofficially represent their foreign countries, and through their analysis, we can also see how Israel and the war might be perceived abroad. However, an ideological passion was apparent during the fighting.

According to Weimann (2007), many of Israel's citizens held the media responsible for damaging the nation's morale during the Second Lebanon War. The media, many claimed, were perceived as responsible for the public's misconceptions regarding the outcomes of the war and the general pessimism that took hold in the Israeli public. The sports sections, particularly those in popular newspapers, took a stand and presented a united, rallied front during the first days of the fighting. For example, the main outlets increasingly reported and framed prominently the expressions of solidarity from southern groups in hosting northern groups that were in areas directly impacted by the conflict. The only newspaper that did not reflect the invitations for hosting in the center as an act of solidarity was *Haaretz*, which even offered an opposing, alternative, and critical approach against the hosting of all teams while ignoring, allegedly because of racist motives, a team that includes Arab players.

Reporting such as that in *Haaretz* usually gives rise to responses against the newspaper, as it does not tow the patriotic line, certainly during a period of fighting. Even in times of calm, let alone in times of crisis, there is an expectation of the newspaper that it not publish reports that can harm national solidarity. The importance of keeping up the morale, it would seem, surpasses the need for critique of what seems to be a severe blow to fundamental democratic values. The desire to maintain the sporting routine was perceived as not giving in to terrorism, as well as keeping up an appearance that life continued as usual and that it was possible to maintain a sports routine in the country (Galily, Tamir, & Levy, 2012). Using diverse techniques, the Israeli newspapers emphasized the ability to maintain a sports routine in Israel and, at the same time, mentioned practice matches that were held under fire, with shells falling in the background. While these circumstances are unique to the particular situation in Israel at the time of the Second Lebanon War, it is also relevant and critical to further understand this phenomenon as exhibited in other regions. Comparative research from around the world in this area of sports-media coverage during times of war and conflict is of value to gauge the impact on national identity and nation building.

In summary, based on the findings, we can say that the sports media played an active role during the war and rallied, as did the general media, for Israeli positions and interests. There are vast differences in the nature of the coverage between popular press and quality press, similar to the differences recognizable in routine times, with the popular press displaying broader patterns of rallying, while in the quality press we can hear a critical tone even during the first days of fighting.

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