

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

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The aim of this study 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, a process that 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). Rooted in discussions of globalization, Americanization, Israeli identity and the development of Israeli television, this study focuses on the ways in which this process influenced televised sport in general and basketball in particular as a case that shows how the penetration of transnational – read global – media agencies (such as CNN, Sky), as well as of sports organizations (such as the NBA) influences Israeli culture and thus identity.

As distances between cultures shrink and the political boundaries between them disappear, it is inescapable that cultures will increasingly influence each other. Throughout most of human history, 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. [1]

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.

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### Local, global and America

It is commonly agreed that, as Robertson asserts, globalization concerns 'the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations "at a distance" with local contextualities'. [3] By this Robertson means that globalization, similar to the concept of interdependency, is the recognition that what happens in any single society is influenced by its inter-actions with other societies on the globe. While there is much

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50 debate in the literature about the relationship between Americanization and globalization,  
 51 it is not our intention here to get embroiled in that debate. Rather, we intend to use the  
 52 example of Israeli media to suggest that, in this instance, the term Americanization is more  
 53 suitable for explaining developments in that area, mainly due to the special relations  
 54 between Israel and the United States, than the more general term ‘globalization’. [4]

55 The special relationship Israel has with its biggest (and many times, it’s only) ally, the  
 56 United States, can be seen from Israel’s early years to the present day. American-Israeli  
 57 relations are in many ways unique. Both countries are nations of immigrants, places of  
 58 refuge seen by many people as ‘promised lands’. Since the establishment of the state of  
 59 Israel, the United States has expressed its commitment to Israel’s security and well-being  
 60 and has devoted a considerable share of its worldwide economic and security assistance to  
 61 Israel. However, along with United States assistance to Israel, large parts of the grants  
 62 provided to Israel are in the form of American credit to purchase American goods and  
 63 military supplies. In addition, the free trade agreement signed in 1984 between the two  
 64 nations not only makes American products relatively cheap and therefore worthwhile  
 65 imports, but, more than ever before, it ties in the Israeli currency inextricably with the fate  
 66 of the American dollar. This special relationship, therefore, might look at first glance like  
 67 total support on the part of the United States for Israel, and total dependency on the part of  
 68 the latter. [5]

69 However, several questions regarding the Americanization thesis should be addressed  
 70 in this context: What constitutes Americanization? Is it simply a question of the presence  
 71 of a cultural product from a ‘foreign’ culture or does it involve a shift in the habitus and  
 72 conscious make-up of people? How complete does the process have to be for domination  
 73 can be said to have occurred? What abilities must people possess in order to understand,  
 74 embrace and/or resist these processes? What constitutes the ‘indigenous/authentic’ culture  
 75 that the foreign culture threatens? [6] This study attempts to answer these questions. Prior  
 76 to turning to the specific case of media (and even more specifically sport) in this context, it  
 77 is important to review, in brief, Israel’s cultural history.

78 According to Weill, a review of any country’s cultural history over the last 50 years  
 79 would show enormous changes – undoubtedly a quantum leap – and certainly more  
 80 changes than in any other 50-year period in history. After the establishment of the state of  
 81 Israel in 1948, it was a country in the throes of absorbing the remnants of decimated  
 82 European Jewry – concentrating on surviving and creating a new life in the one piece of  
 83 land that was prepared to accept them. Each of the decades that followed was marked by  
 84 more social and political convulsions. The 1950s were the years of the mass immigration  
 85 of Jews from Arab lands along with a leavening of tens of thousands of Jews from some  
 86 75 other countries; all of them brought with them their own language, national heritage  
 87 and cultural baggage. The 1960s were, above all, marked by the Six-Day War of 1967,  
 88 when a whole new national mythos and sense of euphoria engulfed not only the Jewish  
 89 population of Israel, but indeed the entire Jewish Diaspora – only to be shattered to a  
 90 large extent by the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and its aftermath, the effects of which are  
 91 still very much there 30 years later. The 1970s and 1980s saw the first tentative bridges to  
 92 peace with the Arab world, beginning with the epoch-making visit to Israel of President  
 93 Anuwar Sadat of Egypt in 1977. Since the 1990s, the state of Israel has been involved in  
 94 the continuing struggle for normalization with at least part of the Arab world. However,  
 95 the assassination in November 1995 of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the change of  
 96 government, and the slowing down of the peace process, are events that have had a  
 97 decisive influence not only on the political life of the country, but also on its cultural  
 98 development. [7]

**The 'new' Israel: from nation-building to post-Zionism**

There is no quantitative scale to determine the stage of Americanization that a given society has attained. However as Rebhun and Waxman assert,

Much as many of them would deny it, Israelis have a love-hate relationship with American society and culture. Even as they may decry it, they absorb and adopt the latest American cultural innovations even more rapidly than they are diffused within American society itself. In a host of ways, Israelis often appear to be more American than Americans. It also appears that this phenomenon is more prevalent among the more secular Israelis, who seem to have much more of a love relationship and much less of a hate relationship, and are the quickest to adopt American culture in both its material and non-material aspects. [8]

Nevertheless, according to Azaryahu, the process of Americanization of Israel is more than an expression of adoration and unreflective emulation of American values and patterns of mass culture. It is also an important aspect of the emergent 'new Israel' that represented the transition of Israel from the stage of its Zionist history, dominated by the ethos of labor Zionism, to a post-foundational phase. A multi-faceted process of economic change and cultural re-orientation, the Americanization of Israel was an important feature of the 'new Israel' that was replacing a pioneering society that apparently had become obsolete. The decline of the pioneering society was apparent in the crisis of the kibbutz and the Histadrut [Federation of Trade Unions], symbols of the new Jewish society that Labor Zionism had sought to establish. Americanization also designated the process by which the once hegemonic pioneering ethos of labor Zionism was replaced by an advanced capitalist culture. The erosion of the pioneering ethos and the rising tide of capitalist Americanization were mutually supportive procedures. The 'kibbutz crisis' – namely, the financial collapse and disintegration of the communal framework – and the break-up of the Histadrut, were the other side of mercantile development and advanced modes of consumption, American fast food, American-style talk shows, and sophisticated advertisement. [9] Furthermore, Israel – like many other societies – has experienced a rapid growth of shopping malls and the increasing presence of such American franchises as MacDonald's throughout the country. [10]

These examples might explain why David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, tried to prevent the introduction of television in the new emerging state (see further discussion below). Ben-Gurion's fear was that the new medium would undermine his attempt to create a unique Israeli culture. [11] Israel's former Foreign (and Prime) Minister Shimon Peres, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December 1994, also voiced his concern: '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'. [12]

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,

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148 and, on the other, the need for the normalization of Jewish life. [13] The Zionist ambition  
 149 has always comprised two objectives: to forge a new relationship between the Jewish  
 150 people and the Gentile world, and to create a new Jewish people in the process. Through  
 151 this process, the Diaspora would eventually disappear. Americanization therefore causes  
 152 problems for Israeli Zionists when it undermines, or seems to distort, their goals. [14] As  
 153 this study demonstrates, American cultural influence is so widespread that many places in  
 154 Israel sometimes seem like a transliterated America. That bothers many Israelis because,  
 155 as far as Israel and Zionism are concerned, America has made imitating and envying the  
 156 Gentiles fashionable again. For religious Jews, it has led to the additional worry that in a  
 157 generation or two most secular Israelis will be *de facto* Gentiles who just happen to speak  
 158 Hebrew. [15]

159 In this context it is interesting to consider Avraham and First's analysis of  
 160 advertisements in Israeli newspapers in the 1990s, which shows that American symbols  
 161 have been widely used to market an array of consumer goods in Israel. Products made in  
 162 America, Israel or other countries are marketed with some sort of American angle by  
 163 invoking America's values, symbols, landscapes or lifestyle. In fact, the authors  
 164 demonstrate how social values metamorphose, shedding their 'Israeliness' and taking on  
 165 an American veneer. In their article, Avraham and First discuss the process of  
 166 Americanization in Israeli society and provide examples related to central components of  
 167 the nation-state/national sphere: language, flag, political leaders (see also below), borders,  
 168 landscapes and sights. Thus, for instance, from its revival the Hebrew language has been  
 169 influenced by Arabic, Russian and Yiddish but in recent decades there has been a  
 170 penetration of English into Hebrew. In many cases 'product names and store names may  
 171 be in English, but their lettering is Hebrew: Best Buy, New York Best Deal, Club Market,  
 172 Super Center and Super Deal'. [16]

173 Indeed, examples of what might seem straightforward Americanization can be found  
 174 in different areas. Thus, for example, in the political context, it should be noted that many  
 175 Israeli politicians visit and spend extended stays in the United States. Moreover, perhaps it  
 176 is not coincidental that both Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Likud leader Binyamin  
 177 Netanyahu (who later succeeded Rabin in the same post), served as Israeli Ambassador to  
 178 the United States and, while in that post, undoubtedly absorbed elements of American  
 179 political culture. [17] In this context it might be worth adding that Israel's Prime Minister  
 180 Ehud Barak (1999–2001) earned his Masters degree in systems analysis from Stanford.  
 181 His coalition member, 'Meretz' leader Yossi Sarid, studied at New York's New School for  
 182 Social Research, while Supreme Court President Aharon Barak completed advanced legal  
 183 studies at Harvard University in Boston.

184 However, in his research on the political campaigns in Israel, Caspi makes a clear  
 185 distinction between the different views regarding the process. To Caspi there is a clear  
 186 difference between adopting American political standards and procedures and  
 187 Americanization per se. According to Caspi, the difference between Americanization  
 188 and standardization is not of a marginal nature. The former gives preference to the source  
 189 of innovation over the adopter of the innovation, often out of a sense of superiority. The  
 190 latter view assumes that the adopting unit controls the diffusion process; that is, the  
 191 adopter decides if, to what extent, and how the innovation should be absorbed. Caspi's  
 192 conclusions regarding the process were:

193 The Americanization of electoral campaigns in Israel may provide a few important lessons to  
 194 other young democracies which are inclined to idealize the experiences of the older ones.  
 195 Most young democracies apparently need a model for imitation, and in some cases, the import  
 196 of tried and true democratic procedures may save time. It is not easy to resist the temptation to

197 walk in the footsteps of an old and experienced democracy. On the other hand, imitating the  
198 ways of others can be a mistake if it fails to recognize the unique and valuable attributes of a  
199 country's political heritage. The case of election campaigns in Israel proves the fallibility of  
200 blind imitation of a 'big brother'. The price, as proved by the changes in the nature of electoral  
201 campaigns in Israel, may be too high for a young democracy. [18]

202 Overall, according to some, the Americanization process seems to 'threaten' Israel's  
203 'authentic' culture. The American liberal democratic doctrine is non-national and, to a  
204 large extent, is anti-national and individualistic in the extreme. [19] Zionism, in contrast,  
205 grew as a national democratic movement, which, as mentioned earlier, developed against  
206 the backdrop and under the patronage of the national democratic philosophy of Western  
207 Europe. Schweid, for example, explains that Israel was able to impede the effects of post-  
208 modernism, which America represented until the Six-Day War, by applying social and  
209 economic policies dictated by the need to absorb masses of immigrants. According to  
210 Schweid, these barriers fell after the Six-Day War, and the influence of the political, social  
211 and cultural conceptions of post-Second World War American liberalism penetrated  
212 Israeli society with great momentum. To Schweid then, the issue is:

213 The assimilation of the basic concepts of American liberal democracy and, foremost, the  
214 adoption of the social concepts of this democracy; the free-market economic ethos; the  
215 abandonment of the socialist social-policy parameters that had guided Israel as an immigrant-  
216 absorbing country until the Six-Day War; and the forfeit of integrationist social aspects in  
217 education and in the army, all for the sake of an ideology of unrestrained competition – all of  
218 these, after the fact, turned post-Zionism into a form of social behaviour and socio-economic  
219 policy. [20]

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

221 contemporary culture acquired through the media directly from American culture. Anyone  
222 who so desires can stroll at leisure through foreign cultural landscapes in Israel and can find  
223 assimilation in a gamut of values and symbols: political, ethical, social, creative, spiritual and  
224 even linguistic. [21]

225 This ethos of individualism and competitiveness which permeates Israel's society has  
226 coincided, according to those who are concerned for Israel's 'indigenous' culture, with the  
227 gradual dismantling of the Israeli welfare system and, some would say, the social cohesion  
228 that made Israel feel in many ways like one large family.

229 As Caspi, among others, observed it would seem that, from the very beginning,  
230 Americanization was to a great extent a communication process, which was imported to  
231 Israel, much like other social and cultural fads and fashions. However, a number of  
232 changes within Israeli society 'contributed to the lowering of cultural barriers and to  
233 softening the ground which then appeared to absorb thirstily the principles of the  
234 American ... style'. [22] One of the barriers lowered was closely connected with a  
235 process which has transformed Israeli society, almost overnight, from a single television  
236 channel society to a multi-channel media society.

### 239 **Early development**

241 According to Oren, for Israelis in the early days – around its independence in 1948 – the  
242 concept of education included not only the rich intellectual history of the 'people of the  
243 book' but also the hopes for a unified Israeli identity in a land already splintering with  
244 ethnic and cultural clashes between the European-born Ashkenazi elite and the new  
245 immigrant Sephardim or 'Orientals' of Middle Eastern and North African descent. [23]

246 The idea of an Israeli television service at the beginning of the 1960s seemed nearly  
247 preposterous, dismissed within the government and by most public figures as the ultimate  
248 ‘idiot box’: a frivolous, materialist, diversion that would soften soldiers, corrupt the youth,  
249 distort culture and alienate the Israeli citizen from social activities and political  
250 participation. However, the growing presence of television sets in Israeli households, and  
251 the emergent popularity of Arab broadcasts in Jewish and Arab-Israeli homes, prompted  
252 many public officials to propose a service ‘of quality’ that would capture this audience and  
253 wean them away from enemy broadcasts. [24]

254 Television became a single-station medium in 1968, when the Israeli Broadcasting  
255 Authority (IBA, better known to Israelis today as Channel 1) – a public service  
256 broadcaster – started airing television programmes, and for almost 25 years, Israel had  
257 only one channel. The first broadcast on Israeli television was a military parade on  
258 Independence Day and, in a way, that paved the way for its news and current events  
259 focused programming. During its monopoly days the channel’s broadcasts were a focal  
260 point, and large proportions of the population watched its central news programme. In  
261 1993, for example, just before Channel 2 began its transmissions (see below) it was  
262 watched by 78.9 per cent of the Jewish population. [25] By its own testament, on the Israel  
263 Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, ‘Israel Television’ (as the channel still refers to itself)  
264 has been the country’s principal and most influential channel of media communications.  
265 As a public broadcasting network, Israel Television ensures that most of its schedule – 70  
266 per cent on average – consists of original Hebrew language broadcasts: news, current  
267 affairs, *sports* (our emphasis), original entertainment productions, as well as documentary  
268 films and dramas by Israeli artists. Indeed, Israeli TV, according to Katz, Haas and  
269 Gurevitch, had excelled in the coverage of news and public affairs, although the overly  
270 politicized appointments of the governing board and the director general sometimes  
271 impeded this achievement. As good as it was at public affairs, it was poor, at best, in  
272 original drama and light entertainment. [26] The fact that most neighboring countries  
273 broadcast only in Arabic further limited the options open to Hebrew-speaking Israelis,  
274 whose only choices were the relatively popular use of VCRs for watching rental videos  
275 and the ‘no-other-option’ but to watch the only existing channel in Israel. [27]

276 However, the 1990s brought dramatic changes. The Israeli parliament approved two  
277 significant changes that altered the media environment: the introduction of cable  
278 television; and the establishment of a second national channel, Channel 2. [28] In fact, as  
279 far back as 1977 the three major political parties in Israel declared the necessity of a  
280 second Israeli channel, but it took till the early 1990s for it to materialize. Israel’s first  
281 commercial channel – a public service broadcaster funded by commercials – started  
282 broadcasting in November 1993. Until 2005 the channel was operated by three franchisees  
283 – *Tel-Ad*, *Reshet* and *Keshet Broadcasting* – who shared the days of the week, changing  
284 the days periodically. Channel 2 broadcasts 22–24 hours a day. Over 40 per cent of the  
285 hours transmitted by the channel, nearly 3,000, are locally produced programmes. Looking  
286 at the first decade of this channel, it is the biggest success of the Israeli media sphere and  
287 the most influential cultural phenomenon. It is important to mention that in 2002 a second  
288 commercial channel started broadcasting in Israel; it received a very cold welcome from  
289 both critics and audiences. However, when broadcasting sport events it reaches its highest  
290 ratings. Thus for example, the national football team’s matches against Ireland and France  
291 in April 2005 reached ratings of over 35 per cent.

292 The significant changes of the 1990s also altered the way sport was viewed and  
293 presented in Israel. The process by which Israeli society transformed, almost overnight,  
294 from a single to a multi-channel media society, influenced sport in general, and basketball

295 in particular. The 'key' player in the process was the new cable television network,  
296 Channel 5 – the sport channel. However, in order to understand the importance of Channel  
297 5's role in altering the way sport was viewed, one must initially be aware of the broader  
298 social context of the establishment of cable television in Israel.  
299

### 300 **A new era**

302 Cable television, by subscription, was introduced in the early 1990s and is privately owned  
303 and operated. According to regulations, Israel was divided into 31 concession areas and  
304 open tender determined the operator in each such area. During 1992, most of the  
305 concessionaires began operations, with a penetration rate that averaged 40 per cent of all  
306 Israeli households within the 'cabled' areas. By the end of 1992, out of a total Israeli  
307 population of 1,290,000 households (a third of which were areas without access to cable as  
308 of yet) 400,000 households had subscribed to cable with a total of 1.6 million viewers. By  
309 the end of 1994, 800,000 households (out of 1,200,000 households with access to cable)  
310 had subscribed to cable, bringing the penetration rate to 67 per cent. Cable services offered  
311 subscribers approximately 40 channels, mainly foreign stations, received through satellite  
312 dishes in the cable station and transmitted through the cables to subscribers. [29] Cable  
313 channels included Sky News, Sky One and Super Channel from Britain; CNN  
314 International; MTV Europe and MTV Asia; the German SAT1 and SAT3; RTL from  
315 Luxembourg; BBC Asia; three Turkish channels; two Russian channels; the Spanish  
316 channel TVE; an Italian channel; Eurosport; French TV5; Star TV and Star One from  
317 Hong Kong; Arab channels from Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Egypt; and two Israeli  
318 stations (Channel 1 and its 'sub-channel' 33). The Israelis were also exposed to the  
319 Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) through the Middle East Network, located in  
320 Southern Lebanon. The cable services also provided five locally produced (or at least  
321 assembled) subject specific channels: a movie channel, a sports channel, a children's  
322 channel, a family channel and a nature/documentary channel. [30]

323 Another relevant aspect of cable television's development in Israel is the process of  
324 internationalization of the television environment in Israel. Out of the over 40 channels  
325 offered by the standard cable service, only five were Israeli channels. The increased  
326 exposure to foreign stations may have had a cultural impact, especially in terms of a  
327 'cultural invasion'. Furthermore, despite the multiplicity of stations and languages,  
328 American cultural influence predominates. Local television stations carry most of the  
329 same programmes one sees in America, albeit with Hebrew subtitles. These include  
330 everything from 'Seinfeld' and 'The Sopranos' to 'Friends' and 'The Young and the  
331 Restless'. Moreover, even when the language of a show is Hebrew, the format is likely to  
332 be derived from an American original. [31]

333 What Weimann (writing just after Channel 2 started broadcasting) and Meyers mean is  
334 that Israel 'wastes' its cultural talents by reconstructing American TV game shows –  
335 'Wheel of Fortune' and 'Jeopardy' to name but two – rather than developing its own  
336 independent, 'high culture' programming. By law, 40 per cent of the programmes  
337 broadcast in Israel are supposed to be produced in the country. This statute is largely  
338 ignored, however. It is much cheaper to buy imported shows. Local scriptwriters, actors  
339 and filmmakers continually protest the situation but without visible effect. Even when  
340 there are original productions they often seem to be little more than American programmes  
341 in Hebrew, like Ilana Dayan's 'Fact', the local version of 'Meet the Press'. These  
342 programmes preserve the American format, but seem to lean toward the sensational, if not  
343 the confrontational. [32]

344 However, it is worth noting that as Israeli television, and Channel 2 in particular,  
345 matures there are even cases of Israeli formats being sold outside of Israel, most notably  
346 Erez Tal's format 'The Vault', a successful Channel 2 mega-quiz show – in the vein of  
347 'Who wants to be a Millionaire' – which was sold around the world including to Britain's  
348 ITV. Indeed, in the early 2000s, local adaptations of American and British formats are  
349 slightly more sophisticated and culturally (g)localized (beyond simply 'Hebrewsizing').  
350 [33] Thus, for example, the local, highly successful, Israeli version of 'Pop-Idol' evolved  
351 from a sing-along game show ('Lo Nafsik La'Shir' [We won't stop singing]) into a 'Pop  
352 Idol'/'American Idol' type show, 'Kohav Nolad' [A star is born], but unlike in other  
353 countries it travels and looks for candidates all over the country prior to getting to the  
354 studio auditions. Additionally, although high-cost local drama series are relatively few,  
355 they do exist; lower cost local productions like documentaries actually flourish; local  
356 reality shows, talk shows and home-grown telenovelas are also produced. The case of  
357 telenovelas is particularly interesting as it shows America is not the only source of  
358 'adaptation' on Israeli television. Indeed, some of the explanation to this case may be that  
359 the Israeli television industry does not have the stamina required for the production of  
360 never-ending soap operas and thus opts for telenovelas that end after 120 episodes.

361 Moreover, as weekly ratings figures clearly show and as academic studies also find in  
362 Israel there is a strong language loyalty (although some further discussion of language  
363 below) – an aspect of programme choice rarely looked at in spite of its importance in the  
364 globalized television market [34]: 'The Israeli case is especially instructive because  
365 language and channel are independent of each other, and thus, unlike the case of foreign  
366 language channels in the US, the importance of language is at the programme level rather  
367 than reflecting a choice of a particular channel'. [35] Put differently, it is very clear that  
368 Hebrew-speaking Israelis prefer Hebrew over English programmes. [36] Thus, although  
369 American programmes are popular in some sections of the population, American shows  
370 rarely get into the list of the 20 most watched programmes in any given week, with some  
371 notable exceptions like 'Sex and the City' and (the first season of) '24'.

372 This might be explained to some extent by the fact that many American programmes  
373 are on cable rather than on the terrestrial channels, but on the other hand the fact that the  
374 commercial channels chose not to put, on a regular basis, American programmes in their  
375 prime-time schedules means they do not consider them to be strong audience pullers.

376 According to Weimann, there might also be political consequences to the  
377 internationalization process, especially when one considers Israel's security problems  
378 and the ability of Israeli authorities to regulate the media during crisis and war in the past.  
379 [37] In the cabled, global village to which Israelis have become hooked, the possibilities to  
380 regulate and censor satellite news and information are almost non-existent. Several  
381 years after Weimann wrote that, events like the second Gulf war – aka 'Operation Iraqi  
382 Freedom' – in 2003 certainly support his view. In fact, for a long while Israel had been state  
383 controlled, with little or no choice available to the viewer. However, with the arrival of  
384 cable and satellite television in the 1990s, this situation was radically altered. As the amount  
385 of non-government-controlled media space expanded, Israelis, who only a few years ago  
386 depended on the government for news of domestic and external events, now had other  
387 options. One result was the growing availability of non-Israeli perspectives on daily events,  
388 both in Israel and abroad. Thus, like so many others throughout the world, Israelis have been  
389 experiencing a time/space compression that gave them immediate access to other places  
390 and other cultures. This, in turn, produced the desire for expanded cultural options. [38]  
391 Finally, before focusing on the televising of American and Israeli basketball in the context  
392 of the discussion in this study, it is important to consider the globalization of the NBA.

**Q3 The NBA goes global and coming to the Holy Land**

Billions of people worldwide, including Israel, are getting their impressions of America not from US economic or military might, but by watching its sports on television. Andrews, for example, claims that a key factor in the NBA's rapid emergence in Europe during the mid- to late 1980s (and in Israel in the 1990s) was the changing structure and scope of television in the reciprocally changing European geopolitical formation. [39] 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. Perhaps the classic case study in the success of selling American sports overseas is the NBA. Currently, the NBA regularly reaches 750 million households, covering 212 countries in 42 languages and providing that audience with 18,752 hours of NBA programming during the 2002/03 season. The league has 148 broadcast partners televising its games and 40 per cent of the traffic on the league's NBA.com website comes from outside the United States. [40]

Over the last two decades, in which the league has committed itself to developing a foreign audience, the NBA's global presence has grown. Until 2002 roughly 15 per cent of the NBA's \$900 million in total broadcast revenues came from foreign markets, and the NBA sold \$430 million worth of its merchandise overseas. The NBA also pioneered the development of interactive technology among sports leagues, and it attached itself to burgeoning hip-hop culture so securely that the letters-to-the-editor section of *Slam*, a popular American basketball magazine, regularly contains shout-outs to homies from places like Winnipeg and Hamburg, which are both about as far as boys can get out of the 'hood'.

Through the involvement of its professional players in the Olympic Games – dating from the regal progress of the Larry Bird-Magic Johnson 'Dream Team' across Europe in 1992 – the NBA has aided in the worldwide growth of basketball, to the point where 20 per cent of the league's players are from outside the United States. The pivot for the NBA's success was the iconic figure of Michael Jordan throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Jordan was the first athletic superstar of the global village, and, in his wake, he carried not only basketball and the NBA, but Nike and McDonald's and other lucrative manifestations of the American economic dominance of the village in question.

**Q4** According to LaFeber, what [Rupert] Murdoch and the others have done overseas, and Ted Turner was the first one to do this, was to present American sports in another country in a way that is seen as indigenous. [41] 'You get the NBA, for example, but you don't get it as CBS or as a vehicle for McDonald's. The games are presented in such a way that an international broadcast gets nationalized in the different countries. It is very shrewd.' [42]

In Israel, as in many other places around the globe, it works perfectly. [43] The way in which communication systems developed in Israel, particularly television, helped in allowing the penetration of transnational media agencies, as well as of sports organizations such as the NBA. According to Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, within the introduction of multiple channels, the heavy emphasis on news and public affairs has given way to much lighter entertainment (including sport) on the new channels. [44] In addition, and as in other countries, a high percentage of television programming is imported from abroad, especially from the United States. At the time, the new second channel in Israel promised to commission many more programmes from local producers. However, with double the hours of broadcasting, the overall ratio of domestic to imported programming has declined. If one also takes into account the dozen or more cable channels now reaching some 60 per cent of the population, the proportion of homemade programming is tiny. [45] In fact, nearly a decade since Katz, Haas and Gurevitch wrote, things have not improved

442 production wise but, as mentioned, Hebrew-speaking Israelis clearly prefer Hebrew  
443 language programmes.

444 It is worth noting that for Israeli basketball players the highest form of success is  
445 considered joining the NBA, a dream very few have come close to but none achieved to  
446 date. However, a few Israeli players did play in the NCAA (the American basketball  
447 college league) and globalization has allowed Israelis to follow closely their successful  
448 countrymen in America.

### 450 **Basketball in Israel**

451 Israel is a country in where men's football (soccer) is by far the most popular and most  
452 extensively covered sport. [46] Basketball is the second most popular, to a large extent due  
453 to the achievements of Maccabi Tel Aviv in Europe since the late 1970s. [47] However,  
454 decades of Maccabi Tel Aviv dominance have many – some would argue damaging –  
455 effects on the local league, not in the least in making it relatively boring, as all the other  
456 teams can realistically play for is the runner-up spot. This could explain, to some extent,  
457 the interest in Israel in American sport. In fact, Macabbi Tel Aviv is a particularly  
458 interesting example in the context of the discussion of Americanization. [48] In his book  
459 *Elvis in Jerusalem* Tom Segev covers many topics regarding Israeli culture including its  
460 Americanization, and in it he recalls how in 1977 Macabbi Tel Aviv defeated CSKA  
461 Moscow 91-78 to win the European Cup for the first time (it has won it since in 1988,  
462 2001, 2004 and 2005). [49] The game was actually played in Virton, Belgium as the  
463 Soviets refused to play in Israel. Tal Brody, one of the team's stars, proclaimed in the  
464 aftermath of the game: 'we're on the map, and we're staying on it, not only in sports, but in  
465 Q5 everything!' These three short sentences were firmly logged in the Israeli subconscious.  
466 Brody uttered these celebratory words in Hebrew, but with a heavy American accent as he  
467 is American-born and educated. According to Segev, Israel's victory at the European Cup  
468 represents a true 'post-Zionist' issue as this victorious Israeli team was composed, in no  
469 small part, of American talent. Moreover, Israel was, and is, to perhaps excessively stretch  
470 the metaphor, an American team, playing a very American sport in the international  
471 spotlight, while domestic politics and international relations fall apart. (The late Itzhak  
472 Rabin resigned his position as prime minister later that evening having waited until after  
473 the game so as to not distract Israelis from their moment of national pride.) The  
474 prominence of American players has grown even further over the years and while Brody is  
475 Jewish and continues to live in Israel to this day, they are very clearly here today and in  
476 another European team tomorrow.

477 All of which, according to Segev, is but one example of the changes in Israel, both  
478 superficial and subcutaneous, towards a more American culture. However, it is important  
479 to note that he is not concerned with what he sees as superficial influences (like those on  
480 language) but in the 'individualization' of Israeli society, a very American idea of the  
481 importance of the individual above the collective. Benjamin Siegel concludes his review  
482 of Segev's book by declaring, 'Segev's diagnosis is grave—and the lasting question with  
483 Q6 which he leaves his readers is whether the struggle for Israel's soul in the coming years  
484 will be fought in the Supreme Court or on the basketball court'.

### 487 **The rise of five**

488 The sport channel – Channel 5 – had a relatively modest start in the early 1990s but it  
489 soon become an important player and currently owns the rights (in some cases jointly with  
490

491 other bodies including Channel 1 and Channel 2) for the Israeli Football Premiership  
492 League, various European Football leagues, the Israeli Basketball League (both women  
493 and men), NBA, WNBA, the Athletics Golden League and more. Importantly, in the  
494 beginning it showed more than any other programming reruns of sporting events, mainly  
495 football and basketball matches. However, in recent years the emphasis shifted to the  
496 transmission of live matches (again, mainly football and basketball) and to elaborate  
497 studio programmes, some surrounding the transmission of matches and some independent  
498 of them (such as sport related talk shows and a daily news bulletin).

499 The rise of the sport channel in the beginning of the 1990s was also a turning point for  
500 basketball in Israel. To adapt Goldlust's words, the bond between basketball in Israel and  
501 Channel 5 was 'a match made in heaven'. [50] For Israeli basketball, the most important  
502 change Channel 5 brought was the exposure of many more Israelis to the game. Almost  
503 immediately after signing the contract that gave the broadcasting rights of the Israeli  
504 men's basketball league to Channel 5 (1991), live basketball games of the Israeli league  
505 started to be televised (however, it is worth noting that to begin with *women's* basketball  
506 actually paid for it to be televised). At the same time, Channel 5 acquired part of the rights  
507 of the American NBA league and presented them side by side with the Israeli league. For  
508 the new channel, which was struggling for its existence, the basketball league and the  
509 NBA games from America provided a perfect solution for filling airtime in their initial  
510 broadcasts. The growing exposure to the game at the beginning of the 1990s boosted other  
511 processes that gathered momentum at the same time. The commercialization process,  
512 which was first witnessed in Israel in the late 1970s, grew again at an increasing pace as  
513 sponsors renewed their interest in the league game. For the first time the IBA (Israel  
514 Broadcasting Authority) could sell the rights bearing the league name to a big sponsor and,  
515 most importantly, it was the first time the teams enjoyed fixed and equally shared  
516 revenues, which the IBA received from the broadcasting rights.

517 The agreement between Channel 5 and the IBA promised the basketball league that  
518 every week at least one game would be televised live. Another aspect, which should be  
519 considered, is the level and quality of coverage that Channel 5 provided and its  
520 contribution to the growing popularity of the game in Israel. [51] Channel 5, as a narrow  
521 broadcaster concentrating only on the production of the basketball league and editing  
522 imported games from the US, raised the standards of broadcasting to levels never  
523 previously seen on Israeli television. [52] According to American-born Myelin Tenzer,  
524 former CEO of Channel 5, the production of the Israeli basketball league coverage was  
525 defiantly trying to reach American standards of televised sports. [53] Such standards  
526 involved a shift in the perception of sport coverage in Israel. Channel 5, like many of the  
527 Australian television stations studied by Goldlust, over 20 years ago – and, indeed like  
528 many other broadcasters throughout the world – shifted towards an American style of  
529 coverage stressing entertainment rather than traditional journalistic reportage. As Goldlust  
530 explains:

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

540 Also, local television services and stations in most countries import sport programs produced  
541 by the Americans and/or British and the styles and techniques used in these countries are seen  
542 by their regular viewing audience. If such telecasts become popular, there are professional  
543 pressures for local production to imitate and incorporate such structure and techniques –  
544 particularly where there is commercial competition for the domestic audiences. [54]

545 One should bear in mind that, up to 1989, the only basketball games on television were  
546 European games in which Maccabi Tel Aviv participated. [55] The television revolution  
547 and the map of broadcasting in Israel led Weimann to examine the changes on the  
548 behavioural, cognitive and even affective dimensions of the media revolution. [56]  
549 According to Weimann it appears that within a year of the introduction of cable, Israelis  
550 experienced a significant change in their consumption of television, in their feelings  
551 towards the medium, in the social context of viewing, and in related aspects of leisure  
552 activities. Though some of the early, dramatic changes were clearly the result of the rapid  
553 transition that caused a temporary ‘culture shock’, the change in certain patterns of  
554 viewing and attitudes remained stable even after a year.

555 With relation to sport in general, but basketball in particular, there is no doubt that the  
556 change played a key role in the development of spectatorship of Israeli basketball and of  
557 basketball from around the world. The level and the quality of coverage led to the growing  
558 popularity of the game and the demand for basketball reached a peak in 1992. The growing  
559 coverage of sport events both locally (men and women) and internationally led to a  
560 situation where sports became increasingly ‘legitimate’ subjects in everyday conversa-  
561 tions and in newspapers. [57] Therefore, it is no surprise that the demand for basketball,  
562 and mainly for quality basketball from the NBA, led three broadcasters in Israel to try to  
563 win the fourth sport concession as far as Israeli sport was concerned: the right to broadcast  
564 the NBA league and playoff games. Each one of the three contestants, Channel 1, Channel  
565 2 and Channel 5, held one of the concessions, and gaining rights to the NBA would have  
566 given one of them an enormous advantage. The oldest and most established channel,  
567 Channel 1, held the rights for Maccabi Tel Aviv games in Europe and had the advantage of  
568 increased access since the vast majority of the population could tune in to its broadcasts.  
569 The second, Channel 2, was just emerging and as the first commercial station, it could  
570 offer financial incentives unavailable to the other contestants. The third, Channel 5, had  
571 experience with local Israeli basketball and high standard sport coverage. At this point it  
572 might be worth mentioning that unlike news, where government regulation prevents  
573 monopolistic coverage, getting the exclusive rights to a sport event prevents other  
574 networks from telecasting the same event. Therefore, one can appreciate how important it  
575 was for all three networks to get the exclusive rights to the popular American basketball  
576 league. At the same time, the representatives of the NBA in the Middle East had to learn  
577 the broadcasting map in Israel in order to reach an agreement with the network that would  
578 most benefit the NBA. Channel 1 could provide the best viewer ratings by reaching greater  
579 numbers of the population but it did not have enough money for the rights (it is worth  
580 noting that since then Channel 1’s ratings have slipped in all genres, however in an overall  
581 fading viewership, one of the channel’s most watched evenings are those in which they  
582 broadcast Maccabi Tel-Aviv’s basketball games in the European League and its sports  
583 programming more generally is one of its main assets). The second channel had the money  
584 but because of its internal structure could not broadcast all the games. [58] The sport  
585 channel could show all the games but lacked funds and desirable ratings. Therefore, while  
586 seeking money, ratings and maximum coverage of the game, NBA representatives decided  
587 to share the rights among all three broadcasters and thus gain maximum coverage of the  
588 American league.

## Conclusion

In this study we have tried to demonstrate how the shift from single-channel to multi-channel television has transformed Israeli cultural and national identities. Few Israelis would dispute that American influence has made a tremendous impact on daily life in Israel. As Israel turned 59 (May, 2007), signs of Americanization are everywhere, from the increasing infusion of English words into the Hebrew language, to the influx of American basketball players who dominate the Israeli basketball league. Moreover, this is evident in the fashions worn by Israeli children, the fast-food franchises that dot the landscape and the political mannerisms of its American-bred prime-minister(s). [59]

However, this process of Americanization is far from being complete. Some people, such as Ze'ev Chafets, an author and columnist for the *Jerusalem Report*, wishes it were. Chafets wishes that the Americanization process would go even further, toward the institutionalized separation of church and state as enshrined in the United States Constitution. 'There's only one political culture which actually works in the world and that is the Anglo-American political culture', Chafets contends. [60]

We should only be so lucky as to actually become a democracy after that model . . . We're not there primarily because this is a country which still aspires to a compromise between democracy and some sort of medieval rabbinical theocracy, and until we can get that sorted out, Israel won't be a democracy in the American sense.

Be that as it may,

as a result of far reaching demographic, economic, media and cultural changes [ . . . ] Israel has been subject to a rapidly spreading individualism, consumerism and careerism. Increasingly, young Israelis value the well-being of the individual over the collective well-being of the state. To committed Zionists, this represents an incursion into Israel cultural space of alien elements that are eroding the Zionist foundations on which the state had rested. [61]

While recognizing that the Americanization process involves a blend of intended and unintended practices, it is argued here that mono-causal 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, are also part of a very complex society and should also be considered. [62] All of which is partial, limited by local setting and does not erase local identities. [63]

While the discussion in this study focused on one dimension of Israeli society, Israeli media, which according to this study 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, politics or indeed sport. 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.

## Notes

- Q7 [1] Caspi, 'American-Style Electioneering in Israel', 174.  
 [2] Weimann, 'Cable comes to the Holy Land'; Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, '20 years of television in Israel'.  
 [3] Robertson, 'Glocalization', 26.  
 [4] Although see, for example, A. Ben Porat and G. Ben Porat, '(Un)Bounded Soccer'  
 [5] Podhoretz, 'Israel and the United States'.

- 638 [6] Partly adapted from Maguire, *Global Sport*.  
639 [7] Weill, *Fifty Years of Culture in Israel*.  
640 **Q8** [8] Rebhun and Waxman, 'The "Americanization" of Israel', 88.  
641 [9] Azaryahu, 'McIsrael? On the "Americanization of Israel"'.  
642 [10] Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates*.  
643 [11] Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, '20 years of television in Israel'; Meyers. 'Was Ben Gurion right?'  
644 **Q9** [12] Chabin, 'The Americanization of Israel'.  
645 [13] Azaryahu, 'The Jewish State: the next fifty years'.  
646 [14] Garfinkle, 'U.S.-Israeli relations after the Cold War'.  
647 [15] Ibid.  
648 **Q10** [16] Avraham and First, "'I Buy American'".  
649 [17] Caspi, 'American-Style Electioneering in Israel', 182–3.  
650 [18] Ibid., 188.  
651 [19] In its basic model, it views the state as belonging to its citizens, in contrast to a nation-state  
652 that belongs to the nation as a historical being. Thus, it views the state as responsible for the  
653 well-being and happiness of its citizens as individuals, not the nation's survival as an  
654 autonomous entity.  
655 **Q11** [20] Schewid, *The Goals of Zionism Today*, 5.  
656 [21] Ibid., 6.  
657 [22] Caspi, 'American-Style Electioneering in Israel', 179.  
658 [23] Oren, 'The Belly Dancer Strategy'; Oren, 'Living Room Levantine'.  
659 [24] Ibid.  
660 [25] *Ha'artz Daily*, 19 February 1993, B2; ratings figures in Israel do not include Arab-Israeli  
661 households.  
662 [26] Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, '20 years of television in Israel', 5.  
663 [27] Weimann, 'Images of life in America'.  
664 [28] Ibid., 244.  
665 [29] Weimann, 'Zapping in the Holy Land'.  
666 [30] Ibid.  
667 [31] Ibid.; Meyers, 'Was Ben Gurion right?'.  
668 [32] Kravitz, 'On sale now: The myths of America in Israel'.  
669 [33] May better put 'glocalized'. According to Robertson who is credited with popularizing the  
670 term glocalization, the term describes the tempering effects of local conditions on global  
671 pressures. To Robertson glocalization 'means the simultaneity the co-presence of both  
672 universalizing and particularizing tendencies'.  
673 **Q12** [34] Cohen, 'Television viewing preferences'.  
674 [35] Ibid., 218.  
675 [36] See also Avraham and First, "'I Buy American'".  
676 [37] Weimann, 'Cable comes to the Holy Land'.  
677 [38] Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates*.  
678 [39] Andrews, 'The [Trans]National Basketball Association'.  
679 [40] Pierce, 'The goodwill games'.  
680 [41] LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*.  
681 [42] Pierce, 'The goodwill games', 43.  
682 [43] Again, the process of glocalization (coined by Robertson) might be suitable to describe the  
683 NBA global expansion and the local mix to create something unique in different locations.  
684 [44] Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, '20 years of television in Israel'.  
685 [45] Ibid., 8.  
686 [46] For a discussion of the globalization and localization of the game in Israel see Ben Porat and  
687 Ben Porat, '(Un)Bounded Soccer'.  
688 [47] Galily, 'Playing Hoops in Palestine'.  
689 [48] Galily and Sheard, 'Cultural Imperialism'.  
690 [49] Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem*.  
691 **Q13** [50] Goldlust, *Playing for Keeps*.  
692 [51] Galily, 'Electronic media and sport in Israel'.  
693 [52] A narrow broadcaster means that the channel broadcasts only for a fixed number of hours a  
694 day and on a specific topic. The sport channel (5) broadcasted during the 1990s from 4 p.m. to  
695 11 p.m. every day. Since April 2005 it runs 24 hours a day.

- 687 [53] Interview with Myelin Tenzer – Channel 5 CEO.  
 688 [54] Goldlust, *Playing for Keeps*, 114.  
 689 [55] Galily and Sheard, ‘Cultural Imperialism’.  
 690 [56] Weimann, ‘Zapping in the Holy Land’.  
 691 [57] Galily, ‘Playing Hoops in Palestine’.  
 692 [58] As mentioned, it was operated for its first decade by three franchisees. Importantly, in  
 693 November 2005 the channel faced a major shake-up as two franchisees (*Reshet* and *Keshet*)  
 694 instead of three started operating the channel for the next decade. Optimists saw in that a  
 695 window of opportunity particularly for home-grown programming.  
 696 [59] However, this process is not exclusively one way: when Israel’s Prime Minister Binyamin  
 697 Netanyahu felt himself blocked in his dealings with the Clinton administration in 1996, he  
 698 proved adept at using American Jewish and Christian lobbies – as well as alternate centres of  
 699 power in America such as Congress and the media – to press Israel’s case.  
 700 Q14 [60] Chafets, ‘The \$600 Swing Set’, 24.  
 701 Q15 [61] Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates*.  
 702 [62] See, for example, Galily and Sheard, ‘Cultural Imperialism’.  
 703 [63] See Ben Porat and Ben Porat, ‘(Un)Bounded Soccer’.

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