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. 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. [2] 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) influence Israeli culture and thus identity.

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

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

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

According to Weill, a review of any country’s cultural history over the last 50 years would show enormous changes – undoubtedly a quantum leap – and certainly more changes than in any other 50-year period in history. After the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, it was a country in the throes of absorbing the remnants of decimated European Jewry – concentrating on surviving and creating a new life in the one piece of land that was prepared to accept them. Each of the decades that followed was marked by more social and political convulsions. The 1950s were the years of the mass immigration of Jews from Arab lands along with a leavening of tens of thousands of Jews from some 75 other countries; all of them brought with them their own language, national heritage and cultural baggage. The 1960s were, above all, marked by the Six-Day War of 1967, when a whole new national mythos and sense of euphoria engulfed not only the Jewish population of Israel, but indeed the entire Jewish Diaspora – only to be shattered to a large extent by the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and its aftermath, the effects of which are still very much there 30 years later. The 1970s and 1980s saw the first tentative bridges to peace with the Arab world, beginning with the epoch-making visit to Israel of President Anuwar Sadat of Egypt in 1977. Since the 1990s, the state of Israel has been involved in the continuing struggle for normalization with at least part of the Arab world. However, the assassination in November 1995 of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the change of government, and the slowing down of the peace process, are events that have had a decisive influence not only on the political life of the country, but also on its cultural 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,
and, on the other, the need for the normalization of Jewish life. [13] The Zionist ambition has always comprised two objectives: to forge a new relationship between the Jewish people and the Gentile world, and to create a new Jewish people in the process. Through this process, the Diaspora would eventually disappear. Americanization therefore causes problems for Israeli Zionists when it undermines, or seems to distort, their goals. [14] As this study demonstrates, American cultural influence is so widespread that many places in Israel sometimes seem like a transliterated America. That bothers many Israelis because, as far as Israel and Zionism are concerned, America has made imitating and envying the Gentiles fashionable again. For religious Jews, it has led to the additional worry that in a generation or two most secular Israelis will be \textit{de facto} Gentiles who just happen to speak Hebrew. [15]

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

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

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

The Americanization of electoral campaigns in Israel may provide a few important lessons to other young democracies which are inclined to idealize the experiences of the older ones. Most young democracies apparently need a model for imitation, and in some cases, the import of tried and true democratic procedures may save time. It is not easy to resist the temptation to
walk in the footsteps of an old and experienced democracy. On the other hand, imitating the ways of others can be a mistake if it fails to recognize the unique and valuable attributes of a country’s political heritage. The case of election campaigns in Israel proves the fallibility of blind imitation of a ‘big brother’. The price, as proved by the changes in the nature of electoral campaigns in Israel, may be too high for a young democracy. [18]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Early development
According to Oren, for Israelis in the early days – around its independence in 1948 – the concept of education included not only the rich intellectual history of the ‘people of the book’ but also the hopes for a unified Israeli identity in a land already splintering with ethnic and cultural clashes between the European-born Ashkenazi elite and the new immigrant Sephardim or ‘Orientals’ of Middle Eastern and North African descent. [23]
The idea of an Israeli television service at the beginning of the 1960s seemed nearly preposterous, dismissed within the government and by most public figures as the ultimate ‘idiot box’: a frivolous, materialist, diversion that would soften soldiers, corrupt the youth, distort culture and alienate the Israeli citizen from social activities and political participation. However, the growing presence of television sets in Israeli households, and the emergent popularity of Arab broadcasts in Jewish and Arab-Israeli homes, prompted many public officials to propose a service ‘of quality’ that would capture this audience and wean them away from enemy broadcasts. [24]

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

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

The significant changes of the 1990s also altered the way sport was viewed and presented in Israel. The process by which Israeli society transformed, almost overnight, from a single to a multi-channel media society, influenced sport in general, and basketball
in particular. The ‘key’ player in the process was the new cable television network, Channel 5 – the sport channel. However, in order to understand the importance of Channel 5’s role in altering the way sport was viewed, one must initially be aware of the broader social context of the establishment of cable television in Israel.

A new era

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

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

What Weimann (writing just after Channel 2 started broadcasting) and Meyers mean is that Israel ‘wastes’ its cultural talents by reconstructing American TV game shows – ‘Wheel of Fortune’ and ‘Jeopardy’ to name but two – rather than developing its own independent, ‘high culture’ programming. By law, 40 per cent of the programmes broadcast in Israel are supposed to be produced in the country. This statute is largely ignored, however. It is much cheaper to buy imported shows. Local scriptwriters, actors and filmmakers continually protest the situation but without visible effect. Even when there are original productions they often seem to be little more than American programmes in Hebrew, like Ilana Dayan’s ‘Fact’, the local version of ‘Meet the Press’. These programmes preserve the American format, but seem to lean toward the sensational, if not the confrontational. [32]
However, it is worth noting that as Israeli television, and Channel 2 in particular, matures there are even cases of Israeli formats being sold outside of Israel, most notably Erez Tal’s format ‘The Vault’, a successful Channel 2 mega-quiz show – in the vein of ‘Who wants to be a Millionaire’ – which was sold around the world including to Britain’s ITV. Indeed, in the early 2000s, local adaptations of American and British formats are slightly more sophisticated and culturally (g)localized (beyond simply ‘Hebrewsizing’).

[33] Thus, for example, the local, highly successful, Israeli version of ‘Pop-Idol’ evolved from a sing-along game show (‘Lo Nafsik La’Shir’ [We won’t stop singing]) into a ‘Pop Idol’/’American Idol’ type show, ‘Kohav Nolad’ [A star is born], but unlike in other countries it travels and looks for candidates all over the country prior to getting to the studio auditions. Additionally, although high-cost local drama series are relatively few, they do exist; lower cost local productions like documentaries actually flourish; local reality shows, talk shows and home-grown telenovelas are also produced. The case of telenovelas is particularly interesting as it shows America is not the only source of ‘adaptation’ on Israeli television. Indeed, some of the explanation to this case may be that the Israeli television industry does not have the stamina required for the production of never-ending soap operas and thus opts for telenovelas that end after 120 episodes.

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

This might be explained to some extent by the fact that many American programmes are on cable rather than on the terrestrial channels, but on the other hand the fact that the commercial channels chose not to put, on a regular basis, American programmes in their prime-time schedules means they do not consider them to be strong audience pullers. According to Weimann, there might also be political consequences to the internationalization process, especially when one considers Israel’s security problems and the ability of Israeli authorities to regulate the media during crisis and war in the past. [37] In the cabled, global village to which Israelis have become hooked, the possibilities to regulate and censor satellite news and information are almost non-existent. Several years after Weimann wrote that, events like the second Gulf war – aka ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ – in 2003 certainly support his view. In fact, for a long while Israel had been state controlled, with little or no choice available to the viewer. However, with the arrival of cable and satellite television in the 1990s, this situation was radically altered. As the amount of non-government-controlled media space expanded, Israelis, who only a few years ago depended on the government for news of domestic and external events, now had other options. One result was the growing availability of non-Israeli perspectives on daily events, both in Israel and abroad. Thus, like so many others throughout the world, Israelis have been experiencing a time/space compression that gave them immediate access to other places and other cultures. This, in turn, produced the desire for expanded cultural options. [38] Finally, before focusing on the televising of American and Israeli basketball in the context of the discussion in this study, it is important to consider the globalization of the NBA.
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.

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

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

Basketball in Israel

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

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

The rise of five

The sport channel – Channel 5 – had a relatively modest start in the early 1990s but it soon became an important player and currently owns the rights (in some cases jointly with
other bodies including Channel 1 and Channel 2) for the Israeli Football Premiership
League, various European Football leagues, the Israeli Basketball League (both women
and men), NBA, WNBA, the Athletics Golden League and more. Importantly, in the
beginning it showed more than any other programming reruns of sporting events, mainly
football and basketball matches. However, in recent years the emphasis shifted to the
transmission of live matches (again, mainly football and basketball) and to elaborate
studio programmes, some surrounding the transmission of matches and some independent
of them (such as sport related talk shows and a daily news bulletin).

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

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

As professional sport has become increasingly international over the past decades, so have
elements of sports television produced by the wealthier and technologically more
sophisticated services – those of the North American commercial networks, Western
Europe and to a lesser extent Australia – become the leading models of media professionalism
throughout the world-wide industry. Their styles and techniques are perceived within the
industry as ‘state of the art’. As technical and on-air personnel from various countries are
often involved in covering major international sporting events there are numerous
opportunities for observing, interacting with and learning from the production techniques
of the large American and British networks.
Also, local television services and stations in most countries import sport programs produced by the Americans and/or British and the styles and techniques used in these countries are seen by their regular viewing audience. If such telecasts become popular, there are professional pressures for local production to imitate and incorporate such structure and techniques – particularly where there is commercial competition for the domestic audiences. [54]

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

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

[4] Although see, for example, A. Ben Porat and G. Ben Porat, ‘(Un)Bounded Soccer’
Partly adapted from Maguire, *Global Sport*.


Azaryahu, ‘McIsrael? On the “Americanization of Israel”’.

Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates*.

Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, ‘20 years of television in Israel’; Meyers, ‘Was Ben Gurion right?’

Chabin, ‘The Americanization of Israel’.

Azaryahu, ‘The Jewish State: the next fifty years’.

Garfinkle, ‘U.S.-Israeli relations after the Cold War’.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Avraham and First, “I Buy American”.


[18] Ibid., 188.

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


[24] Ibid.


[28] Ibid., 244.


[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.; Meyers, ‘Was Ben Gurion right?’.


[33] May better put ‘glocolized’. According to Robertson who is credited with popularizing the term glocalization, the term describes the tempering effects of local conditions on global pressures. To Robertson glocalization ‘means the simultaneity the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies.

[34] Cohen, ‘Television viewing preferences’.

[35] Ibid., 218.

[36] See also Avraham and First, “I Buy American”.

[37] Weimann, ‘Cable comes to the Holy Land’.

[38] Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates*.


[40] Pierce, ‘The goodwill games’.


[43] Again, the process of glocalization (coined by Robertson) might be suitable to describe the NBA global expansion and the local mix to create something unique in different locations.


[45] Ibid., 8.

[46] For a discussion of the globalization and localization of the game in Israel see Ben Porat and Ben Porat, ‘(Un)Bounded Soccer’.


[52] A narrow broadcaster means that the channel broadcasts only for a fixed number of hours a day and on a specific topic. The sport channel (5) broadcasted during the 1990s from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m. every day. Since April 2005 it runs 24 hours a day.
References


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16  Y. Galily and A. Bernstein


