

MEDIA INFLUENCE MATRIX: ISRAEL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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About CMDS

The Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) is a research center for the study of media, communication, and information policy and its impact on society and practice. Founded in 2004 as the Center for Media and Communication Studies, CMDS is part of Central European University's (CEU) Democracy Institute and serves as a focal point for an international network of acclaimed scholars, research institutions and activists.

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Roni Dorot is a researcher for the Center for Media, Data and Society. She received her PhD in Social and Political Sciences from the European University Institute, Florence, and holds a MA in Public Policy from Tel-Aviv University. She was a postdoctoral fellow at the Center of Conflict, Negotiation and Recovery, at the School of Public Policy, CEU. Her dissertation, "Dead End: Israeli Militarism and the Dynamics of State Retribution", examines the history of political revenge and the genealogy of retaliation discourses in the Jewish press within the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Her previous research analyzed the governmental outcomes of Israeli municipalities from a comparative perspective. She is a recipient of the Sapir Price for municipal studies (in Israel), the Istituto Italiano di Cultura scholarship and the EUI excellence fellowship. She currently writes for Haaretz newspaper her blog 'Documania' where she critically analyses documentaries from a cultural and sociological perspective.

Marius Dragomir is the Director of Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS), and Senior Manager at CEU Democracy Institute. He previously worked for the Open Society Foundations (OSF) for over a decade: he has managed the research and policy portfolio of the Program on Independent Journalism (PIJ), formerly the Network Media Program (NMP), in London. He has also been one of the main editors for PIJ's flagship research and advocacy project, Mapping Digital Media, which became the largest policy research project ever. He was the main writer and editor of OSF's Television Across Europe, a comparative study of broadcast policies in 20 European countries. He has been advising international organizations including Council of Europe where he serves as a member of the Committee of Experts on Media Environment and Reform, and UNESCO, where he has been sitting on the advisory board of the World Trends in Media Freedom Project.



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The Media Influence Matrix Project is run collaboratively by the Media & Power Research Consortium, which consists of local as well as regional and international organizations. The consortium members are academic institutions (universities and research centers), NGOs, journalism networks and private foundations.

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KEY FINDINGS

Israel has a media law framework that is not yet fully compatible with established democratic regimes. Many legal and media experts argue that the state's communication regulations are either anachronistic or lack precision. The Israeli media system is characterized by a multiplicity of regulatory authorities mandated by specific laws. Yet, there is no Press Law per se. A British Mandate Press Ordinance from 1933 was finally revoked in 2017, making it possible, for the first time in Israel's history, to publish a newspaper without a government-issued license.

The written press and online content are an unregulated field, but they are subject to a series of ad hoc regulations enshrined in the penal and civil codes. Censorship is alive and kicking, and courts commonly resort to Publication Bans, mostly regarding security and privacy issues. A 2017 law allows the police and prosecutors to obtain court orders to block websites found to have published criminal or offensive content.

In addition, enforcement of rules that protect Freedom of Information (FOI) is far from satisfactory. Court ruling does not always endorse the principle of the "Public's Right to Know" or the FOI Act, especially regarding issues of security or foreign affairs. Moreover, the Reporter's Privilege (RP) is not enshrined in law but is mandated by court ruling alone, rendering source protection and journalist defense far from absolute.

Most Israeli media enterprises are controlled by a small group of owners. Most of them are not standalone businesses but take part in larger conglomerates with businesses in industrial and other non-media sectors. Nearly all of them are privately controlled. As such, they are not required, under Israeli law, to publish or reveal financial disclosures to the government, fiscal or media regulators. Based on information leaks and rough financial estimates, most media companies in Israel are loss-incurring operations. Research shows that they are not run primarily like for-profit businesses but are used as a means to promote the interests of various powerful players.

The funding sources in the Israeli media market follow international trends. While these sources are somewhat diverse, the largest chunk of revenue comes from commercial funding, state funding, and donations. There is an ongoing crisis of the print media as it struggles to move online. Digital media see their advertising revenue growing sharply while print advertising continues its dramatic decline.

In terms of technology, the justification for Israel's "high tech nation" self-image is somewhat outdated. In recent years corporate losses deepened, cash flows were negative, competition intensified, and the industry's regulator - the Ministry of Communications (MOC) had made Israel lag behind global infrastructure innovations.

Thus, although Internet penetration rate among the Israeli population stands at 88%, the deployment of fiber-optics infrastructure was not properly regulated until December 2020. Moreover, frequencies for 5G network have been allocated only in August 2020, quite in delay compared to technologically advanced countries. Consequently, Israel's internet speed was in decline in comparison to OECD countries.

Following global trends, Israelis utilize different technological means for various uses of the internet. While fixed telephony demand is in decline, smartphones took over the market with 88% smartphone ownership. Yet, Israel records a specific digital divide among groups like the Arab population and Orthodox Jews. Together with the 65+ age group, these three main segments are easily affected by digital illiteracy.

The four main Israeli groups operating in the communications market are: Bezeq, HOT, Cellcom and Partner. For a little country this is a highly saturated and competitive market which has damaged the revenues and future incentives of these companies to invest in future infrastructure. The international technology conglomerates that control the Israeli market are Facebook (and WhatsApp), with messaging applications and social media, and Google Chrome browser, while the operating system (OS) market is ruled by Microsoft (on desktop) and Google (Android on mobile).

Israelis get most of their information on political issues from online news sites. The leading social media platforms are YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which form a central source of political information and have significant power in shaping public opinion. Nevertheless, “fake news” is also circulating fast on these platforms, making disinformation a troubling phenomenon for Israeli society.

The involvement of high-placed political figures in the inner workings of media raises fundamental questions about the legitimacy and integrity of professional journalism in Israel today. Police investigations into these forms of interference prompted Israel’s Attorney General to recommend charges of fraud and bribery against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in three criminal corruption investigations. Netanyahu’s trial has begun and is underway these days. Coupled with the complicated and unstable political situation, two transitional governments and five different ministers who served in the communications ministry within four years, this trend makes Israeli media a fragile and vulnerable field.



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