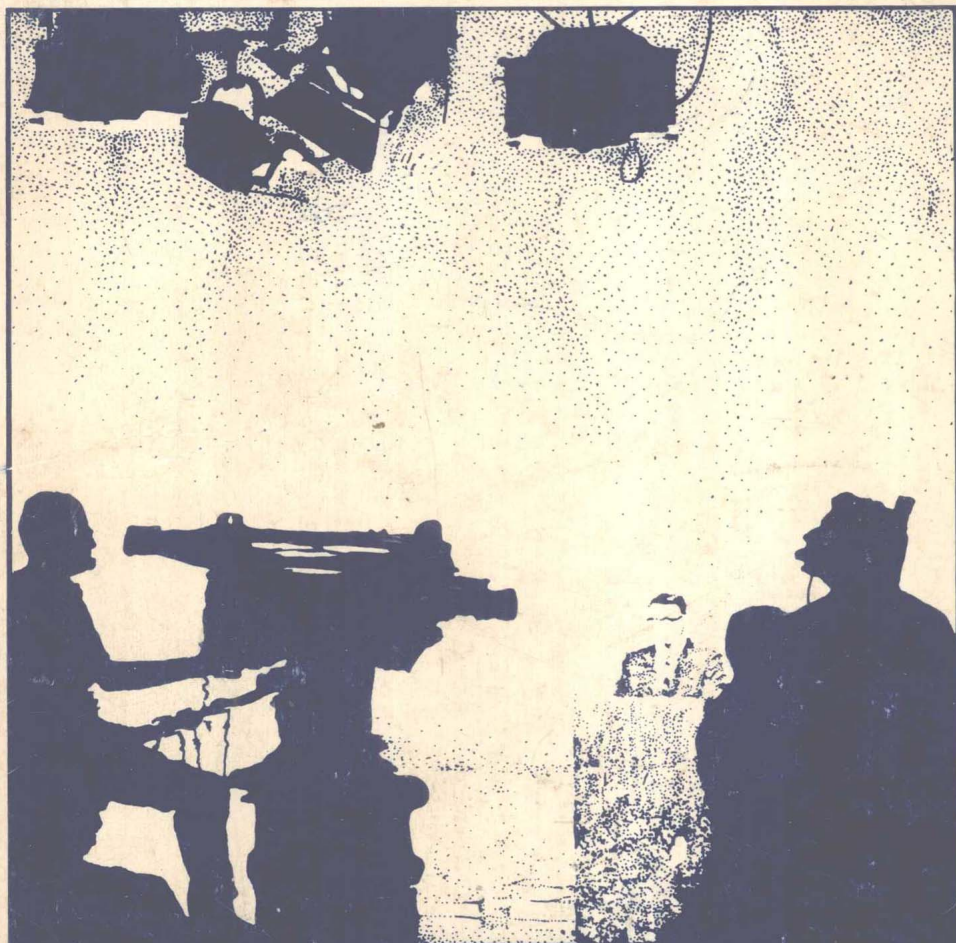


Itzhak Roeh
Akiba A. Cohen

Elihu Katz
Barbie Zelizer



ALMOST MIDNIGHT

Reforming the Late-Night News

ALMOST MIDNIGHT

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But our deepest thanks are reserved for Shosh Silberberg, administrative assistant at the Hebrew University's Communications Institute, for always finding solutions to a seemingly endless list of insurmountable problems.

Series Editor's Foreword

This cross between diary and monograph relates adventures from blending academics with media producers. The setting is an innovative news program in Israel. The participants: journalists, television executives, technicians and professors. How tasty is this brew? The reader will come to his or her own conclusion.

The story that Roeh, Katz, Cohen, and Zelizer have crafted adds to a growing literature about the interplay between making communications and testing their outcomes. Another volume being prepared for the People and Communication Series tells about the battles and coalitions formed during production of a public television series for children, and links formative decisions to their consequences in program effects (Johnston and Ettema, forthcoming).

These collaborations provoke questions about culture and ideology. Do the tools of social inquiry match the recognized intentions of media producers? Our four Israeli authors express their doubts:

Much—if not most—[of our] research has only touched upon whether or not the viewer *genuinely* understands broadcast news. But the measures typically used and easily operationalized—such as recall of news items (both aided and unaided), and the respondents' ability to identify pictures, faces, and places in the news—are not germane to the deep comprehension of what news is all about. Do people understand the context of the news? Do they

believe that news affects their perception and construction of social reality? Do they feel that knowing what is happening helps them in their daily lives? It is one of the shortcomings of our research that we cannot answer these questions.

Beneath this observation we glimpse the gulf in temperament and ideology separating many artists from scholars. The writer or photographer's approach seeks pattern, gestalt—a tapestry of symbols whose most important properties are relational. The second mind, the scholarly, social-scientific approach, celebrates analysis that disentangles elements and examines individual threads called “variables.”

Consider these differences. A piece of investigative journalism is judged according to whether allegations are supported by quotes or documented evidence, and whether the lead propels people into the story, and whether pictures show main figures in emotional poses consistent with the text. The unique combination of these features either satisfies or proves wanting, but it is the whole that rivets one's attention, more than the parts.

A piece of social analysis, by contrast, commands respect when multivariate techniques (not always numerical) have isolated individual chunks of explained variance. True, some social researchers with artistic flair temper their disintegrative methods by weaving synthetic prose around findings. But they are a minority who swim against currents in the trade of empirical analysis.

In sum, media producers are used to putting things together, while communication researchers enjoy taking things apart. The two work together in uneasy alliance, at best. In addition, each party has its own fights to pick with media managers whose career drives answer to a different drummer.

The authors' lament about friction between journalism and social science finds echoes in America. Here we see news-people and empirical research tied by loose harness in such widely separated places as the *New York Times*/CBS surveys

and the use of "quality of life" studies by the Minneapolis newspapers. These and similar media innovations have proven successful enough to continue, but they do not always display cheerful or natural teamwork.

The present volume illuminates how these teams can operate more successfully by studying the successes and reverses of one's efforts. The authors' clear writing and uninhibited and candid style are important assets for readers interested in the collaboration of media and scholarship so increasingly being tried in Western Europe and North America.

—*Peter Clarke*

This book is the product of equal effort made by four unequal people: listed hierarchically, they might be lined up as follows: Elihu Katz, professor, for years head of the Communication Institute of the Hebrew University (years ago, head of the Israel Television) now also affiliated with the Annenberg School at USC; Akiba Cohen, senior lecturer at the Institute; Itzhak Roeh, part-time lecturer and full-time radio and television broadcaster; and Barbie Zelizer, full-time graduate student in the Institute, without whom not only Chapter 3, but the existence of this whole composition seems dubious.

While we all exchanged ideas about every chapter in the book, and each is, to some extent, a coproduction, Katz is responsible for chapters 1 and 7, Roeh for 2 and 4, Cohen for 5, and Zelizer for 3. As for Chapter 6, it is difficult to say who really did the work. In essence, we all sat together, lists in hand, trying to work it out, and Katz wove them together. Katz begins.

1

INTRODUCTION:

Better News?

This is the story of the shaping of a nightly news show on Israel Television. It is of interest, we think, because it represents an explicit effort to depart from the standard format of the main evening news, and thus reconsider the calculus of professional norms, organizational constraints and audience expectations relevant to the making (and unmaking) of news programs. As researchers, we accompanied the new program's emergence and institutionalization from its very conception. Inspired by the Sesame Street model, we did this collaboratively, attempting to work in very close contact with the broadcasters. Indeed, in our case, the originator and presenter of the program is himself a card-carrying member of the

communications research fraternity. Thus, the story reported here is, in part, "participant" as it is based on the diary and experiences of Itzhak Roeh, and his retrospective analysis of content and style. It is partly "observational" in that one of us followed the action at editorial meetings, in the newsroom and corridors of Television House. It is partly "formative" in that the research team attempted to feed its findings back to the producers, in order to funnel audience influence (and its own) into the program's formation. And it is partly "summative" in the sense that it attempts to evaluate the program in its entirety through broadcasters, audience, and researchers.

THE NEWS IN ISRAEL: THE ELEPHANT AND THE JEWISH PROBLEM

The less than 30,000 square kilometers of the State of Israel, including its occupied territories, must surely be the center of the world, judging, on the one hand, from the amount of coverage it receives in the world press and, on the other, from the ease with which events taking place elsewhere are seen as relevant to Israel. Israelis are not only producers of news—they are avid consumers as well. "The people of the newspaper," someone once said, would be a better description of the Jews in Israel.¹ Radio news is heard continuously, and the hourly news broadcast immediately becomes a social rallying point in moments of tension (Peled and Katz, 1974). *Mabat* ("Look"), the main evening news at 9 p.m., is the most popular program on Israel TV, with 89% of the population viewing it "regularly" and well over half the population watching on any particular night.

There is one television channel in Israel which, together with radio, operates under the aegis of a BBC-like public Broadcasting Authority. While the organizational structure of the authority allows for greater political influence than that of the BBC, it has on the whole resisted such pressure so far.² The news editors on radio and television report to the direc-

tors of their respective media, as well as to the Director-General, who also carries the designation editor-in-Chief and—as in the BBC—takes particular interest in news policy.

From its outset eleven years ago—when TV was established in Israel—*Mabat* sought to break away from BBC orthodoxy, which requires strict separation of news and current affairs. Seeking to give some background to the news, through expert commentary, interviews and mini-features, it often adds the dimensions of “past” (why?) and “future” (possible implications) to the ascetic insistence on “present.” Incorporating the “past” or “future” into the story of today’s protest or strike, however, provides greater leeway for possible bias, and the news department has been reprimanded for this at times.

The program draws on the international newsfilm services, on its network of domestic and foreign correspondents, specialized in subjects and places, and on a team of presenters, some of whom have, of course, become national idols. But the program is *not* styled after the personality of its presenters, as are the main evening news programs in the United States. In this sense, *Mabat* is rather more like the British than American model (Williams, 1974).

Despite its analytical efforts and its occasional investigative forays, *Mabat* is nevertheless a conservative program. Its presenters are dignified and well dressed (though often younger than elsewhere); its tone authoritative; its pacing staccato, moving quickly and often abruptly from bulletin to bulletin; it gives heavy priority to political and economic affairs; and, above all, its emphasis is domestic, preferring foreign news which has obvious bearing on domestic problems. In short, while it competes very favorably with the best of European news programs, it also shares the attributes for which they have been so much criticized: too much show (the pacing, the pictures, the superficiality, the disjointedness); too much establishment (giving undue attention to proclamations of elites); and too middle class (in tone, language, dress).

In addition to Mabat, the news department produces an hour-long weekly news magazine and review, which is broadcast on Friday evenings. This goes deeper than Mabat, and instead of some twenty items (verbal and visual) in the weekday news, consists of five or six longer stories. It also produces a weekly semidocumentary treatment of a major subject in the news (*Mabat Sheni: "Second Look"*), and a weekly interview show on current affairs (*Moked*). Its most spectacular achievements, however, are surely the live broadcasts of world-renowned events—such as Sadat's visit to Jerusalem.

Over the years, half-hearted attempts have been made to add a news bulletin to the close of the evening schedule. Although this is commonly practiced by most television stations, the need was not keenly felt by the news department, given the great investment of manpower and money which goes into the production of Mabat, its vast viewership, and its relatively late hour (9 p.m.). The high salience and availability of radio news, and the coexistence of the two media within the same authority, made the need even less urgent. The late night news, therefore, consisted of nothing more than a few brief items, a talking head, and very few pictures: in short, an acknowledgment of obligation but no real interest.

Radio had developed the art of the newsmagazine before television, and to this day, the morning, noontime, and late afternoon news magazines of Radio 2 (the equivalent of England's Radio 4) and *Galei Zahal* (the Army's radio station) are highly regarded. Not only do these programs successfully cope with the news and its background, but they have also developed an authentic style of presentation and innovative usage of language. These programs have also bred stars, and Itzhak Roeh was one of the most acknowledged of them. While reconsidering the place of the late night news on television, the director of news, Haim Yavin, asked Roeh to propose a format which he would both produce and present.