Past Continuous: Newsworthiness and the Shaping of Collective Memory
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This study explores the multi-layered interrelations between the production of news and collective remembering. We investigate this phenomenon by analyzing television newscasts aired on Israel’s Memorial Day for the Holocaust and Heroism (MDHH), 1994–2007. These newscasts provide a rich research corpus because they stand at the intersection between two types of rituals: the everyday ritual of newsmaking, and the national commemorative ritual, for which the media serves as a main site of articulation.

The article implements a “zoom in” perspective: first, we examine the broadcasting schedules, exploring the role of newscasts in the process of leading the audiences in and out of the commemorative ritual. Next, we suggest a typology distinguishing between (a) items dealing with current events, (b) commemorative items focusing on Holocaust remembrance, and (c) dog whistle items that are “attuned” to the specific cultural ear and thus enable mundane news items to be interpreted as related to Holocaust commemoration.

We argue that the dual aim of the items featured in MDHH newscasts—to provide both news values and commemorative values—leads to the construction of “reversed memory,” a narrative that commemorates past events (the “there and then”) by narrating present events (the “here and now”). Reversed memory commemorates the difficult past through

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the achievements of the present, and thus not only eases the collective confrontation with painful traumas, but rather avoids this encounter altogether.

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On the eve of Israel’s 2004 Memorial Day for the Holocaust and Heroism (hereafter MDHH) Channel 2’s evening newscast covered the killing of one of the leaders of the Hamas movement by the Israeli army. Among other comments, the reporter presented the official response of Israel’s Chief of Staff, who had said, during his visit to Yad Vashem (Israel’s national Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, located in Jerusalem) on that same day, that “this will be the fate of anyone who tries to attack Israel.” Although the General did not address the Holocaust directly, the conjunction between commemorative time (the national commemorative ritual) and commemorative space (Yad Vashem), along with the broad nature of his comment, forged the link between the current news event and collective recollection. Following this line, this article explores the interrelationships between newsmaking and the construction of collective memories. In doing so, the study probes the socially constructed nature of both news values and collective recollecting.

We argue that, because of the integration of the processes of news production and the shaping of collective recollections, news items, such as the one mentioned above, have to gain both news value and commemorative value. As a result, they produce what we define as reversed memory, which commemorates the traumatic past by narrating the triumphal present and thus cultivates the understanding of past events as continuous ones, constantly extending into the present.

The process of shaping collective memory is ongoing and involves political, cultural, and sociological dimensions, as different interpretations compete for their place in history (Sturken, 1997). The media, and in particular the news media, play a distinctive role in this competition: they present themselves, and are seen by members of society, as a platform for the socio-cultural struggle over the interpretation of the past; at the same time, the media are actors in this competition and perceive themselves as authoritative social storytellers of the past. This article underscores the interconnections between these two roles played by the media.

The focus on the news genre draws attention to the construction of two different sets of values: on the one hand, professional journalistic values and norms such as neutrality, objectivity, and newsworthiness (Zandberg & Neiger, 2005) and on the other hand, the values that lie at the heart of collective memory construction processes, such as ethnocentrism and national solidarity (Hobsbawm, 1983; Zerubavel, 1995). Within this context, media research acknowledges the similarity between the processes of shaping collective memory and producing journalistic content. Journalists, reporters, editors, and others media-content producers decide which materials are important; they select facts, insert them into cultural-interpretive frames, and bestow meaning upon them. That is, journalists “lean on” the past in order to infuse meaning into present events (Meyers, 2007; Meyers, Neiger &
Zandberg, 2011) or even future, expected occurrences (Neiger, 2007). Thus, journalistic work, and social memory are both closely embedded within processes of narration. Based on Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) seminal work of the factors influencing the selection and construction of news items, Teer-Tomaselli (2006) explores the ways in which factors such as negativity, cultural proximity, and the reference to elite persons shape collective recollections as well.

The significant interrelationships between newsworthiness and remembrance, and the norms and values that shape both newsmaking and remembering, are explored here in order to demonstrate how each assist in shaping the other. Furthermore, in this study we explore how professional norms and values serve national rituals and ideologies and explain how newscasts aired on Israel’s MDHH construct Holocaust memory as an Israeli victorious tale.

Our study looks at newscasts aired during the annual commemorative ritual of MDHH. Established by Israeli law in 1959, MDHH commences at sunset on the twenty-seventh day of the Jewish month of Nissan (which usually falls between mid-April and mid-May) and lasts until the following evening. This form of time delineation follows the Jewish tradition of marking holy days from sunset to sunset, and thus makes the calendar itself a powerful mnemonic device (Zerubavel, 2003). In practice, the beginning of MDHH is marked by an official ceremony held at 8:00 PM. at Yad Vashem to fit the timeframe, the main daily newscasts in the commercial channels (2, 10) are usually shifted from their regular 8:00 P.M. timeslot and aired at 7:30 PM. Channel 1 central newscast is aired immediately after the ceremony, which means it starts at 9:15 PM rather than at 9:00 PM as usual.

We argue that MDHH newscasts follow a consistent pattern and have a unique structure that differentiate them from routine newscasts and that these newscasts have thus become a ritual in their own right. We suggest that MDHH newscasts stand at the crossroads between several distinct—national, commemorative, and media—rituals (Couldry, 2003), making them a rich and nuanced research corpus. The complexity of these newscasts is due to their unique uses and contents: they aim to distinguish between different social time periods and, at the same time, to bridge between them and to manage the mood and behavior of their audiences during the movement from one to the other.

MDHH newscasts present something of a paradox: on the one hand, they belong to (and constitute a fundamental ritual within) the news genre, which is characterized by its focus on the “here and now,” that is current events in Israel; on the other hand, the newscasts direct the public toward the commemorative ritual, whose focus is on the “there and then” (in this case, Europe between 1939–1945). And so the genre most connected with routine is the very genre that leads the audience into one of the holiest rituals of the nation’s civil religion. Moreover, since the newscasts first aired on the following evening, again in the usual 8:00 P.M. timeslot, mark the end of MDHH, the combination of the opening and closing newscasts functions as a frame demarcating the commemorative ritual, and so it takes on the socio-cultural role of leading the audience both in and out of the national-commemorative ritual, i.e. we
stress the cultural meaning of the media scheduling that determines the news on all TV outlets as the marker of entrance to and exit from the social ritual.

This study is composed of three sections. The first discusses the article’s conceptual framework, which integrates observations developed through the study of social rituals, collective memory, and processes of newsmaking. Here we argue that the unique case study of MDHH offers a connecting point among these three research fields. In the second section, we present and discuss the study’s main findings, focusing on two levels of analysis: the newscasts within MDHH broadcasting schedule and the news items within the newscasts. In the final section of the article, we contextualize our findings within the socio-cultural environment in which the newscasts are created and consumed, enabling us to isolate the commemorative narrative and morals that are inherent within the items, and to offer a critical reading of the ideological significance of MDHH newscasts.

Collective recollecting, newsmaking, and the construction of social rituals

Collective memory studies postulate that every community develops its own memories of the past, and these memories mark its boundaries. As suggested by Halbwachs (1950/1992), collective memory defines the relationships between the individual and society and enables the community to preserve its self-image and transfer it over time. Later research (e.g. Olick & Robbins, 1998; Young, 1993; Zelizer, 1995) advanced Halbwachs’s work in various ways, theorizing the fundamental features of social memory.

Among the many mnemonic signifiers in modern national societies, the media constitute the most prevalent site of collective recollection (Huyssen, 2000; Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg, 2011). The rise of mass culture and mass politics have all led to a situation in which the right to narrate the past is no longer reserved for academic and political elites. Contemporarily, major historical events gain their public meanings not only through academic and state-sponsored interpretations, but also through television, films, and the press (Edgerton & Rollins, 2001; Zelizer, 1992).

Despite the omnipresence and influence of the news media, and the growing role of journalists in the shaping of our understanding of collective pasts (Zelizer, 1993) the operation of journalists as memory agents has been marginalized within the larger field of collective memory research (Zelizer, 2008).

The significance and effectiveness of news journalists as memory agents may be best explained by means of observations made by journalism scholars who have probed day-to-day journalistic practices, routines, and norms (Meyers, 2007). Their findings point to fundamental similarities between journalistic professionalism and memory work: they emphasize that the main task of journalists is to select socially “marked” events out of the never-ending flow of occurrences, to place those events within a context, and to construct around them a meaningful continuum (Harcup & O’Neill, 2001; Molotch & Lester, 1974). Another dimension of journalistic practice that situates journalists as qualified memory agents is their heavy reliance on the past as a guiding context. The volume of journalists’ work, their fear of being sued, and
their trust in the credibility of former journalistic work all lead them to frame the new within the context of the old (Tuchman, 1973). Moreover, good journalism is defined as a story that incorporates a new development into a familiar (and thus consumer-friendly) framework.

While most collective memory studies still imply that journalism serves chiefly as a mediating factor in constructing collective memory, several scholars have looked at the specific role of journalists as memory agents: Lang and Lang (1989) examined the use of collective memory in the interpretation of current events, and Edy (1999) expanded this initial conceptualization by suggesting that journalists use collective memory in the news in order to commemorate, to produce historical analogies, and for placing current events within a longitudinal context. The following study continues this line of research as it embraces Kitch’s view of journalism as a process rather than a product (Kitch, 2008, p. 318); thus, it looks at news practices as means of shaping collective memory.

Within the field of mediated collective memory, one of the most researched past events is the Holocaust. Although the construction of the Israeli memory of the Holocaust has been researched through its representation in various cultural arenas, such as the theater, literature, and film, relatively few studies have focused on the ways in which the Holocaust is commemorated in Israeli news coverage (Cohen, Zemach-Marom, Wilke, & Schenk, 2002; Nossek, 1994), and fewer still have focused on the memory narratives offered by the mass media on MDHH (Meyers, Zandberg, & Neiger, 2009; Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg, 2011b; Zandberg, 2008, 2010). Therefore, this article complements existing scholarship by probing the ways by which the commemorative ritual shapes news items on MDHH and the ways by which the news items shape the Israeli commemoration of the Holocaust.

Like other rituals, MDHH newscasts are saturated with symbols, but unique in originating from two distinctive fields: both the news broadcasts and the commemoration rituals. This richness enables us to study the two rituals/fields simultaneously—to explore the social construction of commemoration by using the news, and to investigate the construction of news by implementing the insights gained through collective memory research. In their distinctive role in marking the opening and closing of the commemorative ritual, the newscasts analyzed here are part of the national commemorative ritual of MDHH; on another level, these newscasts are also part of the media ritual—that is, of the televised commemoration of MDHH. Finally, the newscasts are part of the everyday ritual of the production and dissemination of news.

**Research Corpus and Methodology**

This article offers a qualitative interpretation based on close analysis of 33 MDHH newscasts, which constitute more than 50% of the total 62 newscasts aired on MDHH between 1994–2007. The newscasts were aired by Israel’s three television broadcast channels: Channel 1, Israel’s public channel founded in 1968 and the only television broadcast channel in Israel until 1993; Channel 2, which began broadcasting in 1993
as Israel’s first commercial broadcast channel and is by far the most popular media outlet in Israel; and Channel 10, operating since 2002 as a second commercial broadcast channel.

Our research corpus includes the newscasts aired on the eve of MDHH, just before the opening of the official ceremony, and the newscasts aired on the following evening that effectively end MDHH. We also explored news programs aired during MDHH, such as the afternoon news program *Erev Hadash* (New Evening) and the political talk show *Popolitica*.

Our discussion of MDHH newscasts follows a “zoom in” perspective. First, we look at the role of newscasts within the context of the broadcasting schedule, analyzing their overall structure and demonstrating how this structure leads audiences in and out of the commemorative ritual. Then we look at different items within the newscasts in order to offer an initial typology of how news items operate as mnemonic signifiers; finally, we underline the interrelationships between professional journalistic norms and values and the norms and values that characterize national commemoration. This enables us to study the central storytelling strategies employed in specific news items, to better understand the commemorative narratives developed by the newscasts and to explore the morals they offer to audiences.

**Analyzing MDHH Newscasts: Newsworthiness and Remembrance**

(1) *Structure: Guiding the Audience In and Out of the Commemorative Ritual*

The MDHH newscasts might be seen as not only marking an intersection between the news ritual and the commemorative ritual, but, more importantly, as constituting the intersection itself: they are constructed as a liminal threshold, at the point of transformation from daily routine to sacred ritual (Neiger & Roeh, 2003).

Thus MDHH newscasts are a unique phenomenon in that they are part of the media ritual of the news, they serve as a framework for the commemorative ritual, and they are at the same time a part of this mnemonic ritual. MDHH newscasts signal the transition to a different time, a different mood, and different practices, but at the same time, they aim to maintain the viewership of audiences who watched subsequent broadcasts. Hence these unique newscasts help illuminate the construction of themes such as “profane” and “mundane” routine news, as well as “holy” or “commemorative” events.

Detailed analysis of the content and lineup of the news items aired on the eve of MDHH reveals a consistent pattern, especially in the commercial channels. The first part of the newscast deals predominantly with topics that are not Holocaust-related. After the return from the final commercial break however, almost all news items focus on the Holocaust and its commemoration (Meyers et al., 2009).

It is important to note that, although we did not find significant new trends or changes in the structure of newscasts over the period examined, we did notice differences between the channels. The newscasts aired by the public channel show flexibility in their structures, while all of the commercial channels consistently adhere
to the abovementioned structure. It appears that the need of the commercial channels for a final commercial break preceding the ritual creates a clearer distinction between the different parts of the newscasts within the repetitive structure. Since Israeli law prohibits the airing of commercials during MDHH, the final commercial break on the newscast identifies the last news items and the commercials as the end of “routine time” and the beginning of “ritualistic-commemorative time.” These items embody the meeting point, or rather the clash, between secular news reporting routines and the characteristics of televised commemorative rituals.

The abovementioned structure performs a double function: first it delimits the “regular” news inside a commemorative frame (thus highlighting Holocaust remembrance as the main story of the day); second, it positions the newscast as a prologue to the official ceremony that marks the beginning of the ritual. Hence, within the newscasts, current events lie within the frame of commemoration, and, in the larger perspective, the commemorative ritual is placed within the boundaries of the two MDHH newscasts. As part of the mass-mediated ritual process, the final news items provide a “separation from the everyday flow of activities, involving a passage through a threshold state or limen into a ritual world removed from everyday notions of time and space” (Abrahams, 1997, p. ix).

The newscasts open with the anchors referring to the uniqueness of the day and declaring that in approximately half an hour they will proceed to a live broadcast of the national Yad Vashem ceremony that opens the official commemorative ritual. The thematic structure of MDHH broadcasts creates a liminal sphere that connects the newscasts with the official Yad Vashem ceremony and marks the beginning of the commemorative ritual. We suggest that this unique structure blurs the distinction between the newscasts and the official ceremony. In a sense, on MDHH the ceremony “replaces” the news: it takes place during the timeslot of the regular news, and thematically it is the main story of the day.

The distinctions between the news and the ceremony are obscured in other ways as well. Often, on the eve of MDHH, the weather report routinely closing the newscast is omitted, and the newscast never ends with the usual upbeat musical sign-off. In addition, when the anchorperson in the studio concludes the broadcast she “transfers” the broadcast directly to a fellow news correspondent who covers the ceremony and who is already physically positioned at Yad Vashem. Hence, thematically as well as structurally, the last part of the newscast and the official ceremony are integrated into one, cohesive unit. This distinctive structure illuminates the uniqueness of MDHH newscasts: whereas routine newscasts are, for the most part, thematically and structurally isolated from other televised contents the MDHH newscast blends into the next broadcast with no clear ending and, in fact, willingly and explicitly concedes the storytelling authority of the newscast to the official authorities who constitute and shape the national ritual. It is this structure that eases the act of shifting the audience from routine to ritual time and mood (Kaplan, 2009). This integration bestows upon each of the components social commemorative authority: the newscast gains authority as part of the national bereavement ritual, and
the ceremony gains authority by its conjunction to the newscast that routinely sets
the public agenda.

The newscasts aired at the conclusion of MDHH have an opposite or, rather,
complementary function: they mark the end of the ritual and the return to routine
broadcasting and routine life. Thus, for example, the newcast aired on the eve of
MDHH is characterized by a melancholic tone: the sports segment is usually omitted,
and the news anchors avoid the traditional banter with the weathercaster. On the
following evening, the commemorative ceremonies and activities are covered by
reporters in ways similar to those used for other current event items, and the
newscast signs off with its signature upbeat music, thus symbolizing the return to
everyday routine. The two newscasts are similar in structure: both begin with a
reference to MDHH. However, the closing newscast usually adds recorded footage
of ordinary Israelis in various locations across the country at 10:00 A.M., observing the
two-minute silence during the ritual wailing of the sirens; the clip stresses the idea of
MDHH as a widely-observed social ritual. Coverage of current events follows this
brief opening, including, near the closing, fuller coverage of the commemorative
ceremonies and activities that have taken place during the day.

(2) Coverage and/as Commemoration: A Typology

As an integral component of the Israeli public discourse, Israeli media discourse is
pervaded by the memory of the Holocaust. Thus, for example, Zuckermann (1993)
demonstrated how Holocaust memory infiltrated media coverage during the first
Gulf War; Zandberg (2006) explored the construction of Holocaust memory in a
satirical television show and Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2008) explored the use of the
trauma of the Holocaust in the coverage of the disengagement from the Gaza Strip.

To understand this phenomenon, we begin with Schudson’s seminal study (1997)
that distinguishes between the concepts of commemorative and non-commemorative
memory. The first pertains to the explicit and conscious commemoration of past
events from a point of view located temporally in the present; the second, is related to
the ways in which the past unconsciously “infiltrates” the present through the use of
culturally loaded phrases, or allusion to public personas associated with particular
past events.

This distinction provides the basis for our suggested typology. MDHH newscast
items dealing with current affairs focus on events that may occur on any given day,
like political debates and military operations; in contrast, commemorative items can
be aired almost exclusively on MDHH (or other social rituals). Current affairs items
deal with events or comments about events that take place at present time;
commemorative events deal with past events, most often focusing not on the events
themselves, but rather on their commemoration and remembrance in the present.
Items of current affairs tend to deal with unscheduled events whose dissemination
cannot be postponed, while commemorative events allow control over scheduling
(Tuchman, 1973). And, finally, while current events items focus on personas in
various social fields (politics, the military, and economics) extending beyond the
media themselves, commemorative items tend to be self-reflexive, focusing on and promoting their own media representations of remembrance practices, or those of other media.

For the purposes of our analyses, however, we wish to modify Schudson’s concepts. Since MDHH newscasts constitute liminal time, distinguishing and bridging between routine and commemorative rituals, they illuminate the interrelations between covering the present and commemorating the past that are mostly blurred in routine news coverage at routine times (Meyers et al., 2011). We suggest considering Schudson’s concepts not as contradictory, exclusive phenomena, but rather as two ends of a continuum. At the one end, are those news items that have no connection to the Holocaust, and could be aired as part of any other newscast on any given day; at the other end, are those items that are explicitly presented as part of the commemorative ritual. Located between these two poles are items that are not explicitly commemorative, but take on commemorative value due to their presentation as part of MDHH newscasts:

(a) Items Dealing With Events That Occurred During the Commemorative Ritual. During sacred days such as national commemorative rituals, the airing of items of current events requires justification. On MDHH there is often an attempt to integrate news values with commemorative values, especially in times of crisis. In such cases, special techniques may be used to blur the distinction between the “here and now” features of newsworthiness and the “there and then” features of commemoration. For example, during MDHH on April 6, 1994, Palestinian suicide-bombers attacked citizens in the cities of Afula and Ashdod. That evening Channel 2 newscasts opened with the sound of the morning memorial siren juxtaposed with footage from the sites of both the terror attacks and that morning’s commemorative ceremonies held at Yad Vashem. The same technique was used on the eve of 1996 MDHH, during a large-scale military operation on Israel’s northern border. The evening newscasts opened with the sound of the MDHH siren accompanied by footage taken during that morning’s observance of silence—of Israeli soldiers standing in army bases in the north, Israeli citizens standing in their shelters in the northern town of Kiryat Shmona, and civilians standing by their cars in the heart of Tel Aviv. Such combinations of sound and visual representations construct an image of national solidarity and cohesiveness by emphasizing synchronization: all of society is acting in the same way, at the same time.

The ability to construct the coverage of current events, such as terror attacks and military operations as related to the memory of the Holocaust relies on two, complementary, interpretive frameworks. The immediate and concrete interpretive framework is anchored within the journalistic decision-making process that deems these items relevant to be aired on MDHH newscasts, and edits them in specific ways.

The more distant and abstract interpretive framework is the ideological lens that enables journalists and audiences to “activate” the cues that direct the reading of such events as part of a larger mythical continuum, one that defies the constraints of the realism and immediacy and suggests that history repeats itself, and that Israelis
(today) just like Diaspora Jews (in the past) are victims whose very existence is being constantly threatened.

(b) **Commemorative Items.** The last part of the MDHH newscasts is dedicated to commemorative items, which do not focus on current events but rather on the Holocaust and its remembrance. Because these items differ from regular news items, the news anchors must underscore their news value explicitly. To do so, they employ a rhetoric stressing newsworthiness, including the frequent use of words and phrases that specify uniqueness and news value, such as “new” or “for the first time.” For example, on April 19, 2004, the newscast opening MDHH told the story of two sisters who had *now* met *for the first time* since 1939; and the April 16, 1996 newscast opening MDHH included one item about a *new* book and *new* film on Hungarian Jewry during the Holocaust and another item on a *new* exhibition of photographs taken during the World War II occupation of France and on current exhibition visitors who were able to identify members of their families.

Similarly, the main commemorative item in the newscast opening MDHH aired on April 12, 1999, focused on five Holocaust survivors watching film footage from the Lodz ghetto. The accompanying narration demonstrates the effort to justify this item as newsworthy, as well as its complex construction of time: the anchorman explained that while everyday life in the ghetto is fixed in our memory in black and white, new color footage of the Lodz ghetto had recently been discovered. He went on to describe the Nazi photographer who had taken this footage and then presented reactions of ghetto survivors to the film. The item thus contained several different time frames: the actual images were of a historic event and were taken during the Holocaust. The footage was deemed newsworthy because it was the *first* color representation of the Lodz ghetto to be discovered, and it had *only recently* been discovered.

Additional newsworthiness was achieved through the focus on Israeli Holocaust survivors watching the footage *at the present time* and *for the first time.*

The above example suggests a further characteristic of the commemorative items—the role of Holocaust survivors as their dominant protagonists as they also dominate all of prime time on MDHH (Meyers et al., 2009) and the MDHH issues of Israeli daily newspapers (Zandberg, 2010). The central strategy used in the segments featuring Holocaust survivors is the construction of narratives of victory. Typically, MDHH newscasts present short interviews with Holocaust survivors and their families in which survivors are portrayed as having succeeded in both surviving the Holocaust and, in a complementary mission, of raising families in Israel. Almost all newscasts presented variations of short interviews with Holocaust survivors who described their families as a triumph over the Nazis and the Holocaust.

In sum, we suggest that by stressing the constructed news value of commemorative items—which in most cases means highlighting present time and current events—Holocaust storytelling shifts the focus from the events of the Holocaust to their commemoration, from the historic event to its cultural representation.

(c) **“Dog Whistle” Items.** Certain items aired on MDHH stretch the concept of news as an interpretive extension of society and illuminate the ways in which collective
memory is used to interpret current events, and vice versa: that is, how current events are used in order to shape society’s collective memory. We propose to term this category dog whistle news items: just as dog whistles produce sounds at frequencies that only dogs can hear, so these news items are “attuned” to the specific cultural ears of the consumer community. Thus, although the Holocaust is not explicitly mentioned, both newsmakers and audience, who are members of a specific national community of interpreters, can “hear” the embedded Holocaust references.

As explained and demonstrated by Carey (1989), Schudson (1997), and Roeh (1989), news reporting is always anchored within a wider cultural context, and the journalists reporting on current events always operate as cultural interpreters: this ongoing process of bestowing meaning upon events lies at the heart of newsmaking. What distinguishes “dog whistle” items is the unique way in which they expose the intrinsic cultural context of reporting. Most news items reported upon during most days possess seemingly-inherent and seemingly-objective news values (negativity, threshold, etc.) and later gain “added” specific cultural meaning through contextualization and interpretation. In contrast, dog whistle items represent an extreme case in which the cultural context is brought to the forefront of the process of newsmaking: the newsworthiness of “dog whistle” items relies almost solely on the ability of audiences to decipher the cultural context which makes these items meaningful on this particular day.

Channel 10’s evening newscast on April 15, 2007, presents an illuminating example: one item focused on a short television clip previously aired on German television, showing current German soldiers shouting racist slurs against African Americans during shooting exercises; their commander had told them to imagine that they were shooting at “Black people from the Bronx.” Responses by African Americans in the Bronx were also featured. Later in the item, the reporter contextualized the events by referring to racism in Nazi Germany, against a background of footage of Jesse Owens from the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. From a traditional journalistic standpoint, this item would seem to have very little news value: the event took place months earlier and had no direct relation to Jews, Israel, or Israelis. However, the event received extended coverage in this specific newscast because Israeli cultural context constructs this kind of items as Holocaust related.

Finally, the positioning of this specific item within the newscast sequence itself was made meaningful. The preceding item had documented anti-Semitic acts and remarks around the world over the past year, and the subsequent item focused on comments made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressing her objection to an Anti-Israeli speech made by the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Not one of these three items was directly related to the Holocaust, and not one would ordinarily receive wide-scale coverage; but through their airing in succession on the eve of MDHH, such items become emblematic of the Israeli-Zionist master commemorative narrative, utilizing society’s collective memory in order to interpret current events, and using these same events in order to shape communal collective memory.
The opening item of Channel’s 10 newscast aired on the eve of MDHH 2006 provides a further example. The newscaster reported a speech delivered “on this day” by Iranian President Ahmadinejad as “a series of anti-Semitic expressions . . . together with threatening terminology that positions him as one of the West’s foremost enemies.” The newscaster continued, “He is not afraid . . . and he repeats his direct threat on Israel’s very existence. He, of course does not miss the opportunity to address—even on this day—the Holocaust.” In principle, this item could have been aired on any other day. However, the combination of the man imaged in Israel as the “new Hitler” (Ravid, 2008), together with his threatening comments regarding the demise of Israel, made it both newsworthy and the logical choice as the opening item of the newscast. While on any other day this same item might have been aired as part of the foreign news segment within the newscast, on this specific evening its news value was heightened by the cultural import of the commemorative ritual. Items of this type integrate the two sets of values that are explored in this article: commemorative values and journalistic values. On MDHH, Israeli journalists seem to be hearing different, perhaps more familiar, voices from the past.

Conclusions: Reversed Memory and the Nation-state as a Main Protagonist

The study illuminates the use of the news as a symbolic marker for the audience with regard to expected changes in the general mood, the public agenda, and social behavior. MDHH newscasts represent and amplify the hegemonic national-Zionist commemorative narrative and impose a national moral: the “hero” at the heart of the broadcast items is, in fact, the State of Israel. On the first structural level MDHH newscasts blur the distinction between the supposedly independent newscast, which might be critical of the establishment, and the national commemorative ceremony that is dominated by the establishment. On the second level, addressing the typology of the items, the analyzed items construct a connection between “there and then” and “here and now.” Here, too, the State of Israel appears as a central component: many items focusing on national symbols reappear ritually, every year, such as the visits by members of the IDF’s General Staff at Yad Vashem and the reading of the names of perished Holocaust victims by members of the Israeli Parliament.

The centrality of the State is best illustrated in MDHH news items that are aired during times of crisis, when the connection between the Holocaust and Israel’s present-day circumstances is intensified. In this way, MDHH newscasts “stretch” temporal perceptions and produce a “past continuous” timeframe, in which the Holocaust is ongoing. The narratives of Holocaust survivors also play a central role in this construction, focusing almost exclusively on Holocaust survivors who live in Israel and through their emphasis on the establishment of a family in Israel as a victory over the Nazis. We suggest that the emphasis on the State of Israel gives the individual stories a collective-national meaning.

MDHH news items construct a prism that represents the dominant Israeli-Zionist master commemorative narrative, which positions the State of Israel as the appropriate “moral” to be learned from the Holocaust. Thus, the news offers a
commemoration by contrast: it commemorates the Holocaust by celebrating the existence of the State of Israel; the combination in MDHH news items of both commemorative values and news values represents a “reversed memory”—the focus of commemoration is on events that followed the Holocaust—the establishment of the State of Israel and the revival of the survivors in their new homeland. This process may be understood as a form of “post memory” (Hirsch, 2001). Unlike the well-established argument that narratives of the past ‘[adapt] the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present’ (Halbwachs, 1941, p. 7) and the current ideology or politics (Young, 1993), in the case of MDHH newscasts the past is not merely narrated in the service of current objectives. Rather, the past is commemorated by means of the narration of the present. Hence, typical MDHH news items feature tales of intertwined personal and national revival and renewal, such as stories about the families that survivors raise in Israel, or stories of current youth “pilgrimages” to concentration camps in Poland. These stories are constructed as a kind of victory and act of redress.

Such accounts tell the past through the present, and thus in fact reverse memory, cultivating the understanding of past events as continuous ones, constantly extending into the present. We introduce reversed memory as a conceptual tool that facilitates the study of the mass communication of traumatic pasts. The concept helps to decipher instances in which collective traumatic events are commemorated through the narration of current mass-mediated accounts of victory. Reversed memory commemorates the difficult past through the achievements of the present and thus eases collective confrontation with painful traumas, or avoids this encounter altogether. Hence, such a reversed mediated narrative of the past supports Faulkner’s (1951 Act 1, Scene 3) famous assertion that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

References


