

The Ultra-Orthodox Press

Ruth Ebenstein



AT SHLOMI'S NEWSSTAND In Jerusalem's Rehavia neighborhood, a dozen Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) newspapers and magazines decorate the outside table. Strewn about are dailies, weeklies, and monthlies, newspapers and colorful glossy magazines in Hebrew, English, and Yiddish.

Welcome to the Haredi media marketplace of the 21st century. What began in late 19th-century Europe as an instrument for separation from the secular world — an alternative to the secular press — has blossomed into a growing and diversifying industry. Yossi Elituv, Deputy Editor of the popular Haredi weekly, *Mishpacha*, discusses the development of Haredi journalism and its societal role in 2005.

RUTH EBENSTEIN: What is the function of the Haredi press?

YOSSI ELITUV: The purpose of a Haredi newspaper is twofold: to provide the Haredi reader with everything he/she needs to know—and simultaneously, to protect him from all that he/she *does not* need to know. Haredi editors and publishers do not subscribe to the Western journalistic credo of objective reporting or the “right to know.” Rather, their aim is to give the Haredi reader information on what’s happening in the world, politics, technology, somewhat through their lens, to guard him or her from having to turn to *Yediot Aharonot* or the Israeli equivalent of Peter Jennings to be kept abreast of current events. Additionally, the Haredi press aims to inculcate Haredi values.

EBENSTEIN: How has Haredi journalism changed over the years?

ELITUV: In the early decades of the state, Israeli Haredi newspapers were almost exclusively political organs that served party needs alongside Haredi values. For example, the mainstream Hebrew-language daily *Ha-mod'ia* was the mouthpiece of *Agudat Yisrael*. Many Israeli Haredim hungry for news turned to non-Haredi dailies such as *Yediot Aharonot* or *Ma'ariv* on the sly and grew to identify with secular icons — Ben Gurion, the IDF, and the kibbutz movement. Over the years, the Haredi community grew and changed, with an influx of new blood. New immigrants and the *hazara b'tshuva* movement brought their respective news-reading habits and appetite for more options. In the 1980s and 1990s, changing winds yielded weekly newspapers independent of political affiliation, featuring more photos and color. Today, a Haredi reader can get almost all of the elements of a non-Haredi newspaper — book reviews, a women's magazine,

children's supplements, etc. — in a glossy Haredi publication that celebrates Haredi values and valorizes Haredi figures. In our world, that means the *kollel avrech*, the yeshiva, and the rabbis.

EBENSTEIN: Tell us more about the right not to know. How does that manifest in the press?

ELITUV: In a Haredi newspaper, censorship is a given. Communal convention mandates that the publication be scrutinized by an individual or committee before it goes to press to ensure that it is congruous with the society's religious codes. A Haredi paper never writes about suicide, AIDS, or rape, does not run photos of women, and generally avoids strong personal attacks. Personally and professionally, I agree with this approach. Why run a centerfold on an adolescent who shot ten kids and then himself? Doesn't that just encourage others to do so, for the glory? Honestly, when I read some of the newspapers in Israel, I ask myself, is this really the Promised Land?

EBENSTEIN: With that level of censorship, what kind of investigative journalism runs in the Haredi press?

ELITUV: That really depends on the newspaper. At *Mishpacha*, we've examined problems within our community: exposes on discrimination in the school system between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, youth dropping out of school, and the treatment of emotionally disabled students.

EBENSTEIN: Is this press critical for Haredim in the Diaspora, or can they turn to their communal and national Jewish newspapers as an alternative?

ELITUV: It is true that Jewish newspapers serve their respective Jewish communities.

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But for the Haredi reader, they pose an even greater threat than the secular press. When a Haredi reader picks up a secular newspaper, he/she doesn't expect Jewish messages. He knows what to anticipate. But when he/she reads a Jewish newspaper, he/she definitely expects to find Jewish values — and is bound to find something else. We encourage our

readers to shy away from these publications, and I understand that segments of the Modern Orthodox leadership do the same. Let's face it — the Jewish world comprises many stripes, streams, and colors. You cannot put all the facets and factions into one supermarket — or into one newspaper. It just doesn't work.



Christianity and the Media in America

Quentin J. Schultze

CHRISTIANITY IS a rhetorical religion grounded in proclamation. Its first great theologian, St. Augustine, was trained as a secular rhetorician before his conversion and ascendancy to bishop. This is most evident in the United States, where the Puritans and other Christian groups came not just to avoid religious persecution but also to plant the "City on the Hill" — a biblical term recited by one of the first Pilgrim ministers and championed publicly by President Ronald Reagan.

This is why so many churches and parachurch ministries use the media to reach out to the "unsaved." They pioneered mass printing and distribution in the 1830s, operated about one out of twelve radio stations already in the 1920s, launched some of the first cable and satellite TV channels, and most recently created the most popular religious Website (www.gospelcom.net) in the world, with about twelve million "hits" daily.

Currently, Christians, primarily Evangelicals and a few Roman Catholics, run about 1,200 radio stations in the U.S. These and Christian cable television channels are available in nearly all markets across the country, urging viewers and listeners to respond financially and spiritually. Before the televangelism scandals of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart in the late 1980s, over a dozen broadcast ministries elicited tens of millions of dollars annually in donations and claimed audiences in the low millions. Even without such high-profiler personalities, Christian media continue to shape religious opinions and doctrinal emphases. Religious media thereby compete for attention with local Christian leadership and national denominational authority.

But many Catholics and more mainstream Protestants criticize seemingly deceptive broadcast messages that promise new believers complete happiness, financial rewards, and physical healing. Mass-marketed faith

tends to give audiences what they want, not necessarily what they should have. This is why well-respected broadcast ministers such as Rev. Billy Graham have avoided using daily and weekly television programs, which are quite expensive.

Beyond evangelism, Christians have used more specialized media to strengthen cross-generational and cross-geographical faith communities. These include denominational newspapers and magazines, books and other educational materials, films, DVDs, private and public Websites, e-mail lists, and online video and audio streaming.

Christians generally recognize that their faith must be passed along from generation to generation. They realize that *community* is *communication* (the two words come from the same Latin root meaning "to make common"). Together with local Christian bookstores and national publishing houses, congregations form faith communities not just through worship, but also through extensive education programs and workshops, retreats, and conferences. Such events provide opportunities to purchase materials for personal and collective spiritual growth.

But Christians also face a growing politicization of their educational media. Most Christian media advance morally and politically conservative stances on public issues from abortion to federal judicial nominees and U.S. policies in the Middle East. Moreover, some Christian broadcasters are fueling such politicization. Ironically, this is causing significant rifts within denominations and congregations.

Orthodoxy, that is, true or authentic belief, is becoming oddly fashionable in many Christian circles. The key to this development seems to be two-fold: First, the desire to learn from tradition (Christian church historian Jaroslav Pelikan says *tradition* is the

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