***The* *Mizrahi Pillar of Fire*:**

**Actors’ perceptions of the role of media and memory in a memory debate**

Memory and questions about its formation are the subject of considerable socio-political and scholarly attention (Olick et al., 2011). Nevertheless, those who devote their lives to promoting narratives about the past within the collective historical consciousness (referred to in this paper as “memory actors”) are often sidelined and ignored (Gutman, 2017; Holc, 2011). Indeed, while memory is an abstract idea, real, “concrete” actors are involved in the process of shaping what we consider to be our shared past (Gutman, 2017; Kubic and Bernhard, 2014; Lee and Cahn, 2016; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2009). Moreover, even those studies that have sought to theorize about these actors’ work, rarely raise questions regarding the relationships between memory actors and available media and communication technologies. This disregard is even more striking given that media today are the most important realms of memory(Hoskins, 2018; Neiger et al., 2011; Olick et al., 2011). This study attempts to fill this theoretical gap by analyzing a unique case study from Israel. More specifically, it describes a specific group of memory actors and the way they perceived the role media and memory play as in an effort to change how Israeli society remembers.

This case study focuses on the work of memory actors on a governmental expert committee appointed in February 2016 and headed by the poet Erez Biton (Biton, 2016). The committee joined a long line of institutional responses developed since the early days of the state, responding to what had been perceived as long-standing exclusion, primarily educational and cultural, of communities of MizrahiJews,i.e.,Israeli Jews originating from the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East. The ethnic divisions among Jews of different origins have plagued Israeli society since its inception (Peled, 2014; Smooha, 1993), The resulting tensions reflect deep-seated differences between Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of Western/European origin) and MizrahiJews, and are fueled by the latter’s claims of institutionalized discrimination by the former.

The Biton Committee made various recommendations for empowering the marginalized Mizrahicommunities in Israel, including some related to media and memory. Perhaps most notable was the recommendation to produce a new documentary series, *The* *Mizrahi* *Pillar of Fire.,* The recommendation aimed at “balancing” a 1980s television series produced by what was then the only television service in Israel, the quasi-governmental Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA). That series, *The Pillar of Fire,* presented the history of Zionism while purportedly ignoring the role of MizrahiJewsas part of the Jewish national renaissance (Schejter, 2007). The new series, the committee members hoped, would counter the ongoing marginalization of the Mizrahi narrative in the Israeli public sphere. This unique recommendation raises an intriguing question of how committee members perceived the role of different media in creating, portraying and disseminating memory.

I begin with a brief exploration of the relationships between memory actors and the media, followed by a focus on the work of the Biton Committee, connecting it with the ongoing marginalization of MizrahiJews in Israel. After presenting the methodology used in this study, which includes both in-depth interviews with committee members and a close analysis of the final committee report and related official documents, I demonstrate how actors’ perceptions about media and memory influenced their work and shaped the recommendation to produce a new documentary series. This analysis should prove useful to scholars interested in understanding the relationship between memory actors, media, and how a society’s memory is constructed.

**Memory actors and media**

Memory is a highly sensitive construction of a “sense of the past” (Confino, 1997) within the present, and is considerably influenced by political and cultural processes (Olick and Robbins, 1998). In this study, I use the accepted framework of “cultural memory” to describe an institutionalized, formalized, objectified, and crystallized form of society’s past (Assman and Czaplicka, 1995). Indeed, in order to shape the agreed-upon version of a shared past, struggles may take place over narratives about the past and how they are mediated in society (Olick and Robbins, 1998; Rowe et al., 2002). While these often very public struggles are led by memory actors seeking to promote their preferred narratives, very little scholarship has systematically analyzed the roles of such actors (Gutman, 2017; Holc, 2011).

Memory actors may be devoted individuals, ad hoc groups, or formal organizations that share the desire to “produce cultural memory and to steer future remembrance” (Rigney, 2018: 372). However, the work of memory actors is always constrained by the “political field in which they act” (Kubik and Bernhard, 2014: 12), and what society remembers is largely influenced by the relative power of competing actors. Indeed, the power effectively wielded by a specific memory actor “determine[s] to a significant degree the way in which (and if at all) the past will be represented” (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2009: 30). Consequently, when unequal memory actors debate the adoption and recognition of different narratives about the past, “the prevailing asymmetries in power ultimately determine the debate’s conclusion” (Gutman, 2017: 13).

Among the varied elements of influential mnemonic capital, such as the ability to publish official textbooks or the opportunity to build monuments and designate them as important cultural sites, one element of paramount importance is memory actors’ access to media and the ability to capitalize on its unique mnemonic capabilities. Indeed, because society’s memory is a mediated phenomenon (Hoskins, 2011), cultural memory and the practices involved in its construction rely on communications and discursive practices and require the involvement of communication technologies (Pentzold et al., 2016; Pogacar, 2009). The media create a tangible record of society’s cultural memory (Edy, 1999). Nevertheless, the mediated version of a society’s past is always a constructed, even instrumental version of the past, which serves the needs of specific groups (Edy, 2014; Kansteiner, 2002). When memory actors seek to transmit a coherent, transgenerational narrative to society, they capitalize on the different types of media available to them. Weaker memory actors representing marginalized groups, which, among numerous other injustices, typically suffer from the marginalization of their memories, may have little influence on the media establishment, as they may have different levels of access to media and vary in their abilities to capitalize on them, in contrast to majority groups (Tirosh, 2017; Tirosh, 2018a; Tirosh, 2018b).

In addition, while access to media and the ability to make good use of media instruments are indeed important when realizing memory actors’ power to shape narratives about the past, the perceptions of memory actors toward the media and their role in memory debates are also significant. Memory actors’ “technological imaginary” (Ferrari, 2020) shapes their perceptions of technology and its role “in social life and change” (Ferrari, 2020: 121). Similarly, Nagy and Neff suggested the term “imagined affordances” to describe how different actors perceive their “communication technologies, data, and media that, in effect and practice, shape how they approach them and what actions they think are suggested” (Nagy and Neff, 2015: 5). While a detailed discussion of media affordances is outside the scope of this study, it is important to note that scholars usually describe media affordances as a set of limited functions that enable (or disable) users’ pre-determined power to engage with media. However, this approach of affordances often ignores “users’ perceptions, expectations or misperceptions” that shape how they actually engage with media (Nagy and Neff, 2015: 3). Indeed, these imaginaries also shape how memory actors choose their media strategies during a memory debate. As such, imaginaries also influence memory actors’ relative power to construct agreed-upon narratives of the past.

Despite the importance of media and media perceptions for the activities of memory actors, current literature mostly overlooks these issues. In what follows I explore the relationship between memory actors and media by analyzing how the members of the Biton Committee perceived their own role as memory actors and the role of media in their memory-related activities.

**The Biton Committee and the Mizrahi Struggle in Israel**

Early in 2016, the Israeli Minister of Education established the Biton Committee. Headed by Erez Biton, a distinguished Mizrahi poet and Israel Prize laureate, the committee’s mandate was to “empower the Mizrahi identity” (in the words of the ministerial decree) within the Israeli educational system (Skop, 2016). While the literal meaning of the term *Mizrahi* (plural, *Mizrahim*) is Oriental, the term Mizrahi Jews refers to a distinct group of Jews who originate from the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East. Far more than a geographical orientation, the term Mizrahi is a cultural one, reflecting an identity of non-Ashkenazi Jews, or Jews of non-European origins, who immigrated to Israel after its establishment (Khazzoom, 1999; Kimmerling, 2001) and who follow the traditions of Sephardi Jews, which are distinct from those of their Ashkenazi counterparts.

When the State of Israel was established in 1948, the pre-state institutions were transformed overnight into Israeli government agencies. As the vast majority of Jews in the pre-state Jewish community in the British Colony of Palestine(known as the *Yishuv*) were of Western origins, it was the Ashkenazi Jews who became the political and bureaucratic elites of the new state. This group also managed the absorption of the masses of Mizrahi Jews who immigrated to Israel throughout the 1950s. Holding Orientalist perspectives, the elites of the newly established state assumed that Mizrahi immigrants would be satisfied with only minimal resources (Khazzoom, 1999). At the same time, they also pressed Mizrahi immigrants to become “Israelis” through rapid modernization and enculturation, which forced the Mizrahi Jews to shed their original ethnic identities and adopt the values and customs of their new “civilized western society” (Karniel and Lavie-Dinur, 2016: 2). This assimilation process, however, failed miserably, and mostMizrahi Jews “stayed in between: stripped off of their identity and rejected by the Ashkenazi hegemony” (Shalom-Chetrit, 2004: 47).

The Mizrahiexperience of “becoming Israelis” unfolded as one of systematic and long-lasting marginalization (Biton, 2011). Mizrahi Jews were directed by authorities to inferior and less prestigious education tracks, housing opportunities, and vocations (Kimmerling, 2001). Many studies have confirmed this marginalization. According to a study conducted by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, Jews of “Asian-African” background are less likely than Israelis of European origin to earn an academic degree (Dobrin, 2015: 37). Other studies have shown that Mizrahi Jews predominate in Israel’s development towns, located at the geographical and social periphery (Schejter, 2007), and that Mizrahi Jews earn less than their Ashkenazicounterparts (Swirski et al., 2015).

A less explored aspect of Mizrahimarginalization is the Israeli media environment. The Israeli media has always served the national Zionist narrative (Schejter, 2009), and the Ashkenazi elites who constructed this narrative have mostly ignored or misrepresented the intra-Jewish ethnic conflict (Kimmerling, 2001; Shalom-Chetrit, 2004). Mizrahi activists protesting their conditions have repeatedly been framed as criminal elements by the media (Shalom-Chetrit, 2004), in which the most represented group is still the dominant “male, Jewish, Ashkenazi group in current affairs, investigative programs, and entertainment news; talk, lifestyle, and entertainment shows; dramas and soap operas; and game and reality shows” (First, 2016: 539). In addition, although it is narrowing, there remains a “digital gap” (Hargittai, 2002) in computer and internet use between high- and low-income Jews and between individuals from Western and non-Western origins in Israel (Schejter et al., 2018). A recent study showed that Internet use differed significantly depending on the birthplace of users’ parents: more than 70% of users of Western origin used the internet as an integral part of their daily lives, compared with just 60% of Mizrahi Jews (Schejter et al., 2018). This demonstrates that even in the “new media” environment, Mizrahi Jews suffer more from the consequences of Israel’s digital divide than do their Ashkenazi counterparts.

Beginning with the earliest days of the state in 1948, the marginalization of Mizrahi Jews in Israel catalyzed the emergence of a movement representing a Mizrahi struggle (Shalom-Chetrit, 2004). Some scholars even date the emergence of such a movement to the nineteenth century, before Israel’s establishment (Poran Zion, 2019). Nevertheless, until recently, these efforts resulted in only a few scattered events, such as the 1950 “Vadi-Salib Riots” when the police clashed with Mizrahiresidents of the northern city of Haifa (Smooha, 2008); the Israeli Black Panthers movement formed by Mizrahi activists two decades later, which tackled inequalities between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews (Lubin, 2016); the first-ever election loss of Israel's ruling party in 1977 as a result of Mizrahisupport for the opposition (Filc, 2006); and the rise, since the 1980s of Shas, a religious Mizrahi political party, whose platform focused on “return[ing] the crown to its glory” (Bick, 2000: 74) The contemporary Mizrahistruggle, by creating a new “Mizrahi language” (Alush Levron, 2020), focuses primarily on cultural aspects of inequality and has led to the call for more equal education and (public) media systems (Kizel, 2014). This shift to a cultural focus has led the movement to demand equal recognition of the Mizrahi narrative and its inclusion in the hegemonic Israeli collective story. This demand, I contend, stands at the heart of the Biton Committee’s work.

The committee attempted to tackle the long-lasting memory deprivation of Mizrahicommunities in Israel (Shohat, 1999; Tal, 2019). It has been claimed that the “Zionist historiography pays little attention to the history of the Jews in the Muslim world” (Shohat, 1999: 6), a neglect that corresponds with the attempt to de-Arabize Mizrahiimmigrants (Shenhav, 2002). Indeed, the Arab past of some of the Mizrahi Jews “threatened to affect the coherence of the homogeneous Israeli nation and to blur the boundary between Jews and Arabs” (Shenhav, 2002: 28), and MizrahiJewswere asked to abandon their now deemed “illegitimate” past in order to join a non-Arab Israeli collectivity in their new homeland (Dahan Kalev, 1999).

Despite this active process of marginalizing the Mizrahi memory and depriving Mizrahi communities of the opportunity to take part in the formation of Israel’s new identity (Dahan Kalev, 1999; Poran Zion, 2019), the Mizrahi cultural memory was fertile ground for communal activity (Shalom-Chetrit, 2004), and memories of the past influenced contemporary Mizrahi identity (Alush Levron, 2020). The Mizrahi family, writes Kimmerling (2001), served as a social unit that “maintained, nourished and constructed its own collective memory” (Kimmerling, 2001: 56–57). The family context of the Mizrahi remembrance included, for example, recollections of memories from the country of origin. No less importantly, the Mizrahi family was a sphere in which memories of humiliation, discrimination, and deprivation in Israel were transmitted and shared with others (Kimmerling, 2001). Using the family as a “memory framework” in the Halbwachsian sense (Halbwachs, 1992), individual and family memories were cemented into shared collective memories that, in turn, served as the basis of the Mizrahiidentity and protests (Shalom-Chetrit, 2004): a mobilizing force that capitalized on available memories to empower the community.

If we consider at least part of the contemporary Mizrahi struggle as a memory contestation, the role of memory as an integral part of the Mizrahi movement’s actions must be examined. The Biton Committee members and the committee’s final report, which stand at the heart of this study, are important components of a unique moment in the history of the Mizrahi movement, representing a refined moment of memory work in which the demands of a once-marginalized group are slowly being recognized and approved by the government. The committee recommended that a total of 1.25 billion NIS (approximately $350 million) be spent over five years for various endeavors, along with other structural changes, such as ensuring equal representation of Mizrahimin official institutions. This study focuses on committee members’ perceptions of memory and media and how these perceptions were expressed in their official recommendations.

**Methodology**

To answer the questions at the heart of this study, I interviewed Biton Committee members and systematically analyzed the Biton Committee final report and supporting documents. The committee was comprised of a twelve-member advisory board that participated in and supervised ten subcommittees of eighty scholars, public figures, and activists. The advisory board and subcommittees convened weekly. In addition, the committee invited interested individuals to contribute to its work in four seminars, which attracted 120 participants.

          A research assistant contacted all members of the committee by email. Then, to understand how committee members perceived media and memory and how these perceptions influenced their work, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the ten committee members who agreed to participate in the study. These interviews aimed to collect data on “respondents’ opinions, values, motivations, recollections, experiences and feelings” (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011: 139). The interviews took place via Zoom during May and June 2020and lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The committee members participating in the interviews had served on different subcommittees and some on the advisory board. Biographical information will remain non-disclosed so the interviewees can remain anonymous. We recorded the interviews and then transcribed them for analysis. The interviews were analyzed using a categorization technique (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) that revealed common themes among the committee members.

           We also analyzed the Biton Committee final report and supporting documents. The final report includes Erez Biton's general introduction, the subcommittees’ reports, and contributions made by the public. I refer to the Biton Committee report, the post-report supplementary texts for implementing its recommendations, and the mediated public discourse that followed the committee's establishment and publication of the report as a single unit of analysis. The data that comprised this single unit were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Kondracki et al., 2002). First, I scrutinized the final published report to identify all references to memory, media, and communication, which led me to the supplementary texts mentioned above. Then, applying thematic categorization (Strauss and Corbin, 2014), I contextualized the data through systematic multiple readings, followed by the creation of themes. This process was informed by Marshall and Rossman's (2011) four stages of thematic inquiry: (a) organizing data; (b) generating categories, themes, and patterns; (c) testing any emergent hypotheses; and (d) searching for alternative explanations. The combination of interviews and a close analysis of the report and supplemental texts enabled me to articulate the actors' perceptions of memory and media.

The analysis revealed that committee members perceived themselves as memory actors who promoted what I will define as the “Mizrahi right to memory” in Israel. It also highlighted how committee members perceived the media and their power. Lastly, it revealed the underlying logic behind the recommendation to produce the new documentary series, *The Mizrahi Pillar of Fire*. **Findings**

The Biton Committee recommended including the Mizrahinarrative within the Israeli cultural memory by updating school curricula, building a Mizrahi Jewish heritage museum, declaring November 30 as the official day to commemorate the expulsion of Jews from Arab and Islamic countries, naming streets and public institutions after renowned Mizrahi figures, and encouraging Israeli youth whose families originated from the Balkans, Spain, and Morocco to visit these areas to deepen their affinity to their ancestry. In addition, the committee explicitly addressed the media, and the relationship between media and memory when recommending the production of *The* *Mizrahi Pillar of Fire*. In-depth interviews and a close analysis of the committee’s final report revealed the committee members’ perceptions of memory, media, and the recommended documentary series.

***Committee members as memory actors promoting the “Mizrahi right to memory”***

The Biton Committee members perceived themselves undertaking a mission of historic proportions. The committee chair, Erez Biton, wrote in the introduction to the final report that he viewed the committee’s establishment as a “unique historic moment with far-reaching meanings” (Biton Committee Report, 2016: 5). One interviewee claimed that “there was a sense of mission and we felt that we are doing something big and important […] the atmosphere in the meetings was really as if we were on an historic mission” (committee member T.). According to interviewees, the essence of such a historic mission was to reshape the Israeli cultural memory by telling the “complete Israeli story” that is not only a Western (Ashkenazi) story. “It really bothered me that we are actually telling a partial story to the Israeli society,” said one interviewee (committee member A.). Another claimed that one cannot teach “the history of the People of Israel when focusing [only] on the history of 50% of the population. In other words, exactly as it is important to write the history of minorities and the history of women, it is important to write the Mizrahi history” (committee member D.).

In perceiving their mandate, or historic mission, as rewriting Israeli history in a more complete form, Biton Committee members were actually recognizing their role as memory actors aiming to reshape the narratives of the Israeli past.

Interestingly, interviews with committee members revealed that as part of their role as memory actors, they were actually promoting what we can define as the “Mizrahi right to memory” in Israel. According to Kook*,* the right to memory is the “idea that remembrance should be made accessible and available to everyone” (Kook, 2020: 9). For Biton Committee members, the right to memory is about creating “historical justice” (committee member M.) that will “change the direction of the boat” (committee member A.). Realizing the Mizrahi right to memory “will tackle the long-lasting silencing of the Mizrahi voice” (committee member O.). When discussing the Mizrahi right to memory, committee members imagined the now-empowered Mizrahi student who, thanks to the committee’s work, will “know that he has history and roots” (committee member A.). This hypothetical student will now be able to “listen to his friends’ stories [about the past]” (committee member O.). Lastly, the interviewees were conscious of how they were enabling the Mizrahi right to memorywhen claiming that they were trying to “institutionalize forms of memory construction” (committee member K.). In essence, they were creating the infrastructure of memory, or what Halbwachs (1992) defined as the frameworks of memory, for enabling future remembering.

***The power of media***

The Biton Committee final report, while recommending media-based mnemonic activities, including the new documentary series, ignores questions about the media, their role and their perceived power. However, the committee members who were interviewed for this study were fully aware of these issues. They mentioned, for example, how Israeli media systematically misrepresented Mizrahicommunities and contributed to their stigmatization in Israeli society. The Israeli media, according to one interviewee, created the character “of a grotesque Jew who came from Islamic countries” (committee member S.). Another member claimed that this grotesque character is “shaping the Mizrahistereotype until this very day” (committee member O.). Others highlighted that the problem of the Israeli media was not only a stereotypical representation of Mizrahifigures but also the lack of diversity among Israeli media professionals. “People working in the Israeli media […] clearly people working in the media before a decade or two, were part of the small but very dominant group of [Ashkenazi] people” (committee member M.). This lack of diversity, according to the interviewees, is partly to blame for the malrepresentation of Mizrahi Jews in the Israeli media.

At the same time, while acknowledging the problems of representation and diversity in the Israeli media, the committee members were aware of the media’s power. The media are “shaping the consciousness” (committee member H.) of a large audience. In part, the media serve as a popular history teacher. “As a kid,” one interviewee claimed, “I learned history in the best possible way from the television” (committee member O.). By enabling memory professionals, such as official historians, “to be heard outside their limited crowd” (committee member K.), the media are a “central vehicle through which the Israeli public is exposed [to narratives about the past], remembers and learn” (committee member M.). In considering media as a popular history teacher, committee members were viewing media as a tool in their attempt to achieve the Mizrahi right to memory. In many ways, this perception is the context through which we should understand the most prominent recommendation of the committee: the production of a high-quality documentary series, *The Mizrahi Pillar of Fire,* to be broadcast on an official television channel during primetime.

***The Mizrahi Pillar of Fire***

The Biton Committee’s most celebrated recommendation was to produce a new documentary series: *The Mizrahi Pillar of Fire*. The original *Pillar of Fire,* produced by the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) in the early 1980s, is a well-known documentary series comprising 19 episodes that portrays the history of Zionism while ignoring the Mizrahi narrative (Schejter, 2007). This oversight has been an open wound for the Mizrahicommunity ever since, especially after the Israeli Supreme Court’s 1981 rejection of their petition to block the broadcast of the series until it was amended to reflect a “balanced” version of history (Schejter, 2007). It is important to note that when the original series was broadcast, the IBA was the only television channel available in Israel and enjoyed a massive viewership. Thus, ignoring the Mizrahinarrative in such a series meant completely omitting that unique story in the (mediated) Israeli cultural memory.

The committee recommended that the new *Mizrahi* *Pillar of Fire* be produced by the Israeli Educational Television (IETV), at the time a branch of the Ministry of Education, so as to recount the Mizrahi story on an official channel, just as the original series had been. The new series, committee members believed, would restore the missing layer to what has been regarded since the 1980s as the official audiovisual archive of the history of Zionism. “Culture is more important than politics […] it can change the perception of people” (committee member Z.). Creating a new landmark of Israeli culture, committee members hoped, would be “a game changer” (committee member K.). Importantly, the interviewees were aware of the fact that the “meaning of the committee will materialize in this series” (committee member K.) and that as long as the series was successful, the committee work would be considered successful as well.

The final committee report highlighted the conviction that an official, traditional television series resembling the original *Pillar of Fire* would reveal the “contribution of Oriental Jews to Zionism, to the establishment of the State, and the inhabitation of the land” (Biton Committee Report, 2016: 208). In a news article about the committee’s establishment, Erez Biton himself claimed that the original *Pillar of Fire* “was lacking” and that the new series would “add what was lacking and will discuss the [Mizrahi] contribution” (Trabelsi-Hadad, 2017). The committee expressed its enthusiasm for the government’s willingness to “create a prestigious and well-invested television series about the Jews of Muslim countries” and perceived the situation as an “irrevocable opportunity” (Biton Committee Report, 2016: 208) to create a “flagship” series that will enjoy a “long and significant shelf life” (Biton Committee Report, 2016: 213). According to the committee members, a new television series was keenly desired because:

We lack a “classic,” “heavy,” serious series, which is based on hard facts, that could follow us for many years and “replace” the grand chronicle that was never written. It seems that the public is yearning for knowledge comprised of visual affluence(Biton Committee Report, 2016: 213).

A combined analysis of the report and the perceptions of memory actors as they were expressed in the interviews conducted for this study enables us to assess what were the “imagined affordances” (Nagy and Neff, 2015) of the documentary series that the committee hoped would achieve the Mizrahi right to memory*.* Committee members perceived a television series as a polished, well-organized, and well-planned attempt to reshape how Israeli society would come to acknowledge the Mizrahinarrative. In contrast to new digital media projects aiming to relate that narrative, a well-established television series would provide “much less weapons for those rejecting the series’ message” (committee member N.). This is interesting, as it is common in the field of memory studies to perceive new media, as opposed to traditional media, such as television, as a powerful tool in overcoming memory marginalization and forced forgetting (Erll, 2011; Høg Hansen et al., 2014). Other interviewees praised the power of visualization, which is a fundamental aspect of such a series, to infuse a “soul into the scripts […] and […] catch the attention span of the audience” (committee member H).

A few weeks after the report was issued, the IETV published a request for a tender (Tender No. 5618) that officially called for proposals to produce a documentary series about Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Although the request for tender was not written by the committee, its wording is important because it translates the committee’s perceptions regarding *The* *Mizrahi Pillar of Fire* into a set of operational guidelines. According to the tender, *The* *Mizrahi Pillar of Fire* should be a well-funded “documentary series with high production value” (Tender no. 5618, 2016: 2). The series was to include twelve HD-quality episodes of 35 to 45 minutes each and be assigned to an experienced producer.When analyzed together, the committee report and the IETV request for tender reveal what Mizrahi activists imagined when advocating for a “classic,” “heavy,” “serious” television series.

Most importantly, members of the Biton Committee preferred a televised documentary series, perceiving television as a medium that could wield a coercive power over the audience. “When you open Channel 12[[1]](#footnote-1), for example, that’s it. You are in their captivity. You watch whatever they show you” (committee member Maman.). This, according to the same interviewee, is different from the “free choice available on the internet” (ibid). Nevertheless, some committee members were unsure of whether a new television series, based on the qualities of the traditional television model, would answer contemporary society’s memory needs. According to the report, “The media world has changed and television is no longer its center” (Biton Committee Report, 2016: 213). The main concern was that “the televised model of *The* *Pillar of Fire* will not necessarily engage the public of our time, especially the younger generations” (Biton Committee Report, 2016: 213). Committee members were hesitant about the series, as it was to be based on a “model that today may look dull” (Biton Committee Report, 2016: 213). However, despite these misgivings, there was overall enthusiasm for the opportunity to produce a revised *Pillar of Fire*. Television is for passive viewers, claimed one interviewee. “It is important that people who don’t know what to expect after the 20:00 news, will encounter *The* *Mizrahi Pillar of Fire*. If it will be a good series, they will stay to watch it. If not, they will choose another channel” (committee member Maman.).

**Discussion**

The Biton Committee’s work succeeded in exploring the Mizrahi narrative, meticulously chronicling Mizrahi marginalization in Israel and in the Israeli educational system, and recommending sweeping changes likely to have an impact far beyond education policies. While some scholars criticized the work of the committee as being too “friendly” to the Israeli hegemonic narrative (Tal, 2019), I view the establishment of the Biton Committee and the publication of its report as milestones in the conflicted relationship among Jews of different ethnicities in Israel. This study used the centrality of the Biton Committee’s work in Israel to reflect on memory actors’ perceptions of memory and media, and, as such, it advances the ongoing academic discourse about the human actors behind memory work and the different ways in which media are crucial to their work (Ferrari, 2020; Kubic and Bernhard, 2014).

As demonstrated above, Biton Committee members perceived themselves as memory actors in a historic mission to create “memory justice.” This can be further contextualized by showing how memory actors involved in the committee’s work actually promoted what we can define as the “Mizrahi right to memory”in Israel. While the discussion about memory in relation to rights is relatively marginalized in the field of memory studies (Tirosh, 2017), it is clear that for those actively engaging in an ongoing memory debate, the notion of memory in relation to rights and justice is an important aspect of their work. As such, a major conclusion of this study is that we should further develop our understanding of memory rights, their definitions, and how to promote and protect them in both the national and international sphere. As mentioned in this study, Kook (2020) defines the right to memory as an idea that seek to promote memory and remembrance as “accessible and available to everyone” (Kook, 2020: 9). Others noted that a right to memory is an individual’s right to record memories through the use of media (Worcman & Garde-Hansen, 2016), and that media “should play a political, social, and cultural role that guarantees the right to memory and — equally important — the right to communicate that memory in public” (Lee & Thomas, 2012:206). The findings of this study highlights that for memory actors, the right to memory is an integral part of the attempt to create “memory justice” – a form of memory that is democratized and thus serving the memory needs of the most marginalized and needy. This can be claimed to promote the basic principles of memory ethics (Margalit, 2002).

In addition, memory actors involved in the Biton Committee were fully aware of the power of media, the media’s role in creating the marginalization of the Mizrahi community in Israel, and the media’s potential to promote the Mizrahi right to memory through a new documentary series that would detail the Mizrahi narrative in Israel. These perceptions of the role of media in mnemonic activities are indeed contextualized using the notions of technological imaginary (Ferrari, 2020) and imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff, 2015). The memory actors addressed in this study “imagine” media as tools that may shape the consciousness of large segments of society. As such, they are perceived as prominent history teachers of our time. This may explain why a new documentary series, *The Mizrahi Pillar of Fire*, and the imagined affordances of such a series – among them the ability to mediate the narrative almost “coercively” on a more passive audience – are considered a “game changer” in the attempt to realize the Mizrahi right to memory in Israel.

The study also highlights that our memory actors perceived the traditional media of television as better situated to meet the need of having their once marginalized narrative recognized and collectivized than new digital media, such as social networks. Indeed, the tension between “old” and “new” media regarding the question of memory and its dissemination in society is the subject of great attention in recent scholarly discussions of media and memory (Pentzold et al., 2016). Yet, the findings regarding *The* *Mizrahi Pillar of Fire* further complicate scholarly discourse on television (perhaps the most important “old medium”), new media, and memory. Many share the premise that via new media devices, “silenced or overwritten memories can also make their sudden return” (Hansen et al., 2015: 4). Nevertheless, the resurfacing of memories in new media platforms, , as we found in relation to The *Mizrahi Pillar of Fire,* may not satisfy the needs and wants of contemporary memory actors.

In this case, memory actors wanted to produce a significant, traditional television account of the Mizrahi story. They underscored the need to rectify what they perceived as past injustices and an inadequate representation of their version of the national memory at the “scene of the crime:” nationally broadcast television. According to the actors’ perceptions and their “technological imaginary” (Ferrari, 2020), a high-quality documentary series carries with it an *aura of legitimation –* a sense of importance and public recognition that answers the very basic memory need at the heart of the Mizrahi struggle to obtain official recognition of their historically marginalized and forgotten narrative. The series’ narrative is intended to reshape society’s narrative in a way that would correct past injustices. Indeed, the very broadcasting of a highly acclaimed series would become a “media event” (Dayan and Katz, 1994), or an “electronic monument” in the words of the now classic Dayan and Katz’s understanding of media. This sense of eminence, importance and, indeed, enhanced recognition is carrying the potential to shape society’s future memories (Zelizer, 2018).

Interestingly, Erll (2020) recently suggested that memory studies scholars should refocus their attention on mass media. According to her, mass media have become ever more important throughout the COVID-19 epidemic, with users reassessing their relationships to such media, perceiving them as more reliable and trustworthy sources of information during a once-in-a-lifetime crisis. Yet this study demonstrates that for memory actors trying to promote “memory justice,” traditional mass media have always been considered an important, even crucial, aspect of their work.

The findings of this study call for a more nuanced discussion of media (and “new media”) in relation to memory. Moreover, memory actors’ perceptions of memory and media should be better incorporated in studies about society’s memory. Indeed, a more detailed exploration of the human agency behind memory work and the media perceptions of such agents is needed if we seek to better understand how memory is debated and constructed.

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1. Channel 12 is the most popular commercial TV channel in Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)