**Chapter 9**

**Putting the Watch Dogs on Leash – From Neoliberal Reform to Media under Control**

You have a long shot. You see four journalists, including Amnon Abramovich, the top Israeli journalist, sitting and keeping quiet. When Abramovich can’t ask questions, you’re putting a muzzle on him. Like a dog. On all the journalists… He was sitting and didn’t speak because under the agreement he was forbidden from asking the minister of interior security questions. What do you think happens? (Tsabari in Persico 2020)

For several days in mid-January 2019, a mystery haunted the streets of Tel Aviv: Huge billboards with only the pictures of four of the media’s best investigative journalists without any text were displayed, for days. On Sunday morning, the residents of the only Israeli metropolis awoke to find words plastered on these billboards: “They will not decide. You will decide.” The prime minister, running the show, released a video declaring, “For three years, the left and the media have lobbied the attorney general to indict me. Will they succeed?” (Liss 2019). The billboard shouted the answer: “They will not decide. You will decide.” The bill for this campaign was paid by the voters.



The journalists displayed on the billboard accompanied by the above message now relayed the subliminal message that they are the enemy, while Benjamin Netanyahu, Bibi, the people’s choice, is the super-leader who will protect the public from “the left and the media.”

While not pictured or explicitly mentioned, the attorney general hung in the balance. The thesis that Netanyahu was being hounded by the leftist media was integral to his experience as a politician. The idea that he, the son of a professor from Rehavia, home to the Ashkenazi elite in Jerusalem, was a true reflection of the people – the masses, the periphery, the poor – and that he was actually being persecuted by the media for acting on the people’s behalf – was his new version of populism. They were not the watchdogs of democracy; they were leftist activists seeking to depose him, the popular leader and perennial victor in elections. The left, the media and the attorney general were portrayed as anti-democratic, while the leader of the people was the only true manifestation of democracy. Anyone who opposed him, even though one purpose of public media is to criticize the government, was depicted as an enemy of his popular democracy.

“The Iranian threat is off the radar and now we have the media. This is not just the public broadcasting corporation; it is also the nomination of Netanyahu’s close associate, Rami Sadan, to chair Channel 10 News; it is also the initiative to unite the authorities that regulate the commercial channels and the TV multichannel companies into a single authority subordinate to the communications minister (Netanyahu); and there are probably some other ideas how to weaken the media.” (Peretz 2016). The combined effort of pursuing ever-greater domination of the media while simultaneously accusing it of personally persecuting Netanyahu was not only a substitute for Iran. It had always been a central obsession of Netanyahu from the outset of his career. In his famous speech to Likud members in 1999, Netanyahu began chanting, “They are a-fraid, they are a-fraid, they are a-fraid,” and didn’t stop until the whole crowd enthusiastically joined in with him. The “they” he was referring to were not terrorist organizations, enemy states or political rivals. He was referring to the media. What exactly were Netanyahu’s grievances vis-à-vis the media, and especially the news organizations? What were the strategies and grand plan he developed to counter what he saw as these threats and thereby forever change journalism in Israel?

This chapter unfolds through several layers of controls the prime minister sought to impose on the media. The chapter begins with a review of Netanyahu’s love-hate affair with the media as revealed in recent biographies written, tellingly, by top journalists. Next, it describes the ideological shift by Netanyahu – from a fairly liberal argument that the media should be diverse, pluralistic, and competition-oriented, to a more partisan conservative argument for establishing a right-wing, or more importantly, a pro-Netanyahu media. The third part of the chapter looks at the later evolution of the argument, which claims that the public media hounds the Netanyahu family because he is a true representative of poor and disenfranchised Israelis. Netanyahu is synonymous with the people, while the media (the agent of the left) persecutes him personally as the embodiment of the Jewish people. The main sources for this part of the chapter are Netanyahu’s own speeches.

The next part describes ten strategies that Netanyahu consistently employed throughout the years to control the media. These include his close association with the tycoons he persuaded to purchase media venues – channels, newspapers, radio stations – and transform them into pro-Bibi outlets; the pressure he applied for appointing sympathetic chief editors and journalists; and the defamation of top investigative journalists as “enemies of the people.” The main sources for this part of the chapter are investigative articles against Netanyahu by top journalists in the print and broadcast media. The chapter concludes with a review of the indictment against Netanyahu’s as a reflection of his obsession with controlling the media. Arguably, it was precisely this obsession that ended his tenure after four election cycles in two years, following campaigns that prominently featured Netanyahu’s castigation of the media and the judicial system. Indeed, Bibi’s version of the “deep state” argument apparently led to his downfall.

1. **Foreign Affair**

Ben Nitay, an MIT graduate, was living a comfortable life in Boston working as a consultant at BCG, with no intention of returning to Israel and with generous support from his rich uncles. He did give occasional talks as part of Israeli advocacy efforts and on behalf of Colette Avital, who worked at the consulate in Boston. His first TV debate was when she asked him to go on television to represent Israel against Prof. Edward Said, one of the most eloquent advocates of the Palestinian cause. This first encounter, Ben Caspit recounts in his biography of Netanyahu, “was a formative event: the first meeting between Ben Nitay, none other than Benjamin Netanyahu, and the TV cameras. A new affair was kindled. The camera loved him and he loved it back. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 43-44). This affair became a full-fledged relationship after the shocking death of Netanyahu’s brother, Yoni, in the Entebbe raid [the hostage rescue operation in Uganda] on July 4, 1976. Ben Nitay returned home, also to his childhood name, Benjamin Netanyahu, brother of the Israeli hero, Yoni, to establish the Yonaton Netanyahu Anti-Terror Institute. He became “Mr. Terror” in Israel and then returned to Boston as a political emissary appointed by a prominent Likud MK, Moshe Arens.

The new recruit was a professional politician in the making. He soon compiled a list of key politicians in Washington, DC – and of New York’s media elite. He became a fixture on news programs. His favorite venue, Anshel Pfeffer notes in his biography *Bibi*, was ABC’s *Nightline* hosted by Ted Koppel. In the 1980s, Netanyahu was *Nightline*’s most frequently interviewed expert on terrorism (Pfeffer 2018: 147). Netanyahu became an expert not just on terrorism, but also on being a top presenter. He developed close relationships with newsroom production teams and was a frequent interviewee of the top journalists in the United States, including the “gang of four” – A. M. Rosenthal and William Safire of *The* *New York Times*, George Will of *Newsweek*, and Charles Krauthammer of *The* *Washington Post* (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 56). Understanding the changing media after the establishment of the 24-hour CNN channel, which launched its flagship interview show in 1985, Netanyahu became one of its regulars (Pfeffer 2018: 155). Netanyahu was a professional. He took private lessons from Lilian Wilder, “the first and leading lady of coachers of TV performances” and was a hard worker, taking days to prepare for each major event or speech, working on the technique, style and content, inserting catchy phrases and polishing his arguments, choosing analogies, stories, diagrams and illustrations to liven up his presentations and perfecting this masterfully (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 35-40, 357-358). Crucially, from his early days in Washington, he also cultivated Israeli reporters, trading his inside knowledge of political machinations in the American capital for favorable coverage of him as the rising star of Israeli diplomacy in the United States During his trips to Israel, he invested much time and energy in appearing on talk shows, visiting newsrooms, meeting with publishers and cultivating reporters as his personal contacts (Pfeffer 2018: 160).

Yet this heyday was short-lived. Three events exemplify Netanyahu’s growing obsessive antagonism toward the Israeli media, which led to the unbreakable linkage in his mind of “the left and the media.” The first event was of his own making: the non-existent tape of his affair with his public relations advisor, Ruth Bar. Netanyahu insisted on going onto the primetime TV evening news program, *Mabat*, against the advice of his advisers, colleagues, cousins and lawyers to announce the existence of a tape with evidence of this affair. There was no tape and they could end the matter by filing a complaint with the police, all those close to him advised. Yet Netanyahu, already in those early days, was determined to control the message, broadcast it himself, in his own voice, give it his own spin and turn what he considered a crisis into an opportunity to destroy his enemies. And he chose to do this where he felt most comfortable: on primetime TV. He received the exclusive interview he sought and confessed to the astonished reporter and the people of Israel that he had betrayed his wife Sara; Netanyahu turned the story on its head by claiming he was the subject of political blackmail (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 81-85). The headline was just as Netanyahu had planned: “Political Blackmail,” thereby insinuating that his bitter rival in the Likud, David Levy, was a potential criminal. Yet in the years to come, the image of Netanyahu as unfaithful clung to him. Years later, it echoed in the 2009 campaign slogan of Kadmina’s leader Tzipi Livni: “Netanyahu, I don’t believe him” (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 236). His changing views on the Hebron agreement, the disengagement from Gaza, the Bar-Ilan speech and the UN plan to deport infiltrators, among other flip-flops, contributed to Netanyahu’s image as an opportunistic leader concerned mainly with his own political survival.

The second major event that shaped his relationship with the Israeli media, and the most formative of all, was the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. In the days prior to the assassination, the rallies led by the settlers and the extreme wing of the religious national camp, became more and more toxic. Rabin was portrayed in SS Nazi uniform, wearing the kaffiyeh of Yasser Arafat, and he was branded with the word “traitor.” This term, with its specific religious undertone suggesting that traitors should be executed, became the single word most associated with those days. Netanyahu, like Ariel Sharon, but unlike other Likud leaders, chose not to distance himself from the extremist right-wing crowd. Politics was fought on the streets back then and even though the extremists were mostly not Likud voters – but voted for the extreme right and religious parties – they made up the masses in the city squares. Most visible, even iconic, became the picture of Netanyahu on a balcony, ironically overlooking the Balfour residence he would enter after the post-assassination election. Tens of thousands had gathered and were shouting “Rabin’s a traitor” and “Death to Rabin,” while Netanyahu continued waving to them, smiling from the balcony with Sharon and Yitzhak Shamir at his side. Carmi Gillon, the head of the Shin Bet, warned Netanyahu and Sharon about the potential for political violence. “I don’t need to translate the words of Netanyahu, head of the opposition,” he responded when asked about the incitement of the crowds (2012). Netanyahu did say later that Rabin was not a traitor but a political rival, repeating this phrase especially after the assassination. Yet Rabin himself said that Netanyahu and his fellow politicians were dancing on the blood of those murdered by Hamas and hence aiding Hamas. Netanyahu’s people received direct orders to fire up the crowds. After Gillon met with Netanyahu to warn him, Netanyahu understood that the right-wing tactics were working. He called on his supporters to escalate the pressure and to disrupt every event in which Rabin participated (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 100-1). As the leader of the opposition and the right, Netanyahu became associated with leading the incitement (Pfeffer 2018: 212-3). In typical Netanyahu style, he announced at a Likud faction gathering the morning after the murder: “No one should dare blame the Likud for the tragedy. It’s a false accusation. The real incitement began ten minutes after Rabin’s murder” (Pfeffer 2018: 216). The media blamed him as the chief inciter and head of the opposition; Netanyahu blamed the media. In his eyes, he was the true victim.

The third arena that contributed to Netanyahu’s hostility toward the media was his televised debates, in particular the debate against Yitzhak Mordechai in 1999. Netanyahu was perfectly suited for this arena and it was the decisive factor behind his victory in the 1996 election against Shimon Peres. Despite the grave impact of Rabin’s assassination, and in the context of ongoing suicide bombings that killed hundreds of Israelis in the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the large gap in favor of Peres vanished the day after the debate. Netanyahu mastered the medium and *Yedioth Ahronoth* crowned him the winner in the 1996 debate; *Maariv*, smaller in circulation, chose Peres as the winner of the debate. Netanyahu won the election with 50.5% of the vote, versus 49.5% for Peres. The televised debate made the difference (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 109). The debate against Mordechai in 1999 was supposed to be a “no-brainer.” Yet everything that could go wrong for Netanyahu, did. Candidate Ehud Barak, his chief rival and ultimately his successor as prime minister, declined to participate. Netanyahu, eager to utilize his unrivaled TV experience and expertise, was confronted with the cumbersome general Mordechai, who was perceived as dry and lame, lacking even an ounce of charisma (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 140). Aided by Netanyahu’s former long-serving personal media adviser, Eyal Arad, Mordechai gave a performance that no one expected, repeatedly saying to Netanyahu “Bibi, look me in the eyes.” The Likud plummeted in the polls and Netanyahu said at a Likud gathering after the debate, “I read the newspapers over the weekend, not all of them, because there is a limit to how much a man can suffer. There were tens of thousands of words, condemnations and slander. There’s an army of journalists enlisted for Barak. They are all committed to Barak. We will win because the truth will defeat the lie” (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 151). The thesis was established: the journalists were distorting the real picture. They were against Netanyahu and for his rivals. Netanyahu, in his mind, was yet again the victim. He admitted in an interview with Amnon Levy after the defeat, “At some point, I gave up on the media.” He added, “If someone is standing in line for the bus, and another person comes and pushes him, some would turn and ask, ‘Did I do something wrong? Did I hurt you?’ Others, like me I guess, would push him back” (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 154). And “push him back” is a gentle metaphor for the way Netanyahu as prime minister shaped the battleground against the public media in Israel.

1. **Pro-Bibi – What to Do Against the Leftist Media: From Market Pluralism to My Own Media**

I’ve heard the claims that I’m obsessed with the media. I want to tell you a secret: I don’t have an obsession with the media. What is certain is that the media has an obsession with me (Netanyahu 2017d).

Netanyahu is certainly a professional (2016a). He mastered a strategy to become an authority on terrorism in the U.S. media in the 1990s, deciphering the ecosystem of newsrooms and talk shows, weaving close ties with the editors, producers and secretaries to become “Mr. Terror” in their eyes, and he became a master of public lectures – refining his speeches, gimmicks, and rhythm to become the undisputed “magician” of Israeli politics. In the same way, he was professional in perfecting his struggle against the Israeli media. There were two fundamental fronts in that mission. The first was to imprint in the public mindset that the media was politicized and out to get Netanyahu, its victim; the second was to control the media down to the smallest details – every appointment from a cub reporter to the tycoon owner of the channel, as the next section describes.

The way that Netanyahu shaped public discourse by positioning the media as an independent, collective, and powerful actor gradually changed over the years. In the early days of his first term as prime minister, he had a more embracing approach to the media. The first premise in his evolving argument against the media in Israel was that it was affiliated with the left and was comprised of elitists who assumed the role of opinion makers, even though they were never democratically elected by the people and held no formal power. Thus, Netanyahu stated in 1998, “The majority of journalists were on the left, from the moderate left to the hard left. I cannot say if 80% or 90%. But definitely, the vast majority is in that camp … I did the Hebron agreement and everyone applauded me for two days. I ensure you that if I give away vast territories of the Land of Israel, I will be congratulated” (Leshem and Ashuah 2017).The idea at this stage was to frame the public discourse with the notion that the public media favors the left. Only later did this evolve into the claim that the media and the left in Israel are one and the same. Netanyahu here identified the left with returning occupied territories to the Palestinians. If the first premise was that the media is leftist, and the second premise was that there is a monopoly of the left, the conclusion was that the remedy is to privatize the media. The tool for changing this constructed reality was to call for free competition and a marketplace of opinions.

As prime minister in 1998, Netanyahu launched a critical stage in his quest to change power in the media by appointing a new CEO for the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA). Netanyahu said in an interview just after his election, “I intend to open many more satellite television channels, another ground channel, virtually unlimited radio broadcasts … we’ll make a free economy” (Netanyahu 1998). His statements at this early stage suggest that the remedy for what he saw as domination by a left-leaning press was to open more and more channels and news outlets. His plan included transforming the Israeli public broadcasting authority to a model more similar to the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the United States than to the European idea of public broadcasting, and to minimize its influence by opening many more venues and news channels. His main complaint against the media was that it was politically imbalanced. His solution included a code of professional ethics that distinguishes between the journalist’s own private view and the mission of public media, which is “to represent the plurality of views held by the public” (Netanyahu 1998). The free market, at this stage, was seen as the solution to the problem of the left-leaning media. Yet the occasion of this discussion was Netanyahu’s appointment of a new CEO for the IBA. “Why should I have to deal with these problems? Isn’t that why I’m appointing a new CEO? He’ll have to deal with them,” he concluded. Thus, from Netanyahu’s early days in office, changing the media was also about controlling its managers. Uri Porat, the man he chose for the job, was the media advisor of the two previous Likud prime ministers, Menachem Begin and Itzhak Shamir. Some IBA board members responded that Porat was unfit for the job and called for appointing a professional who could keep his political and professional views separate (Krol 1998). They leveled the same charge of political bias against Netanyahu that he often made against journalists in Israel. But for Netanyahu, it was precisely part of his mission to appoint right-wingers to control the media. According to his analysis, the media was the first of three factors that cost him the 1999 elections. “When I return… it will be with a media of my own. We will no longer be dependent on the leftist media that detests me and would do anything to get rid of me” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 193). Note that he did not complain that the media was biased against the right; rather, it was personally against him, Netanyahu. The rationale of the free market – building alternative media outlets to minimize and trivialize the effect of public broadcasting –also dominated his period as finance minister in 2003–2005. But, from a very early stage, this was only lip service. The real plan to break the left’s monopoly was inspired by the establishment of Fox News and the social analysis on which it was based. Netanyahu explained, “In the U.S., we know mainly about the East Coast and the West Coast, but between those two coasts there’s a different America, a whole world. Those are the Republican strongholds. They don’t believe the mainstream media. Take note: Fox News is the new channel; it will break the monopoly. It will change America” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 193). This exactly matched Netanyahu’s plan for the “second Israel” – that is, Jews from the socioeconomic and geographic periphery. *Israel Hayom*, the newspaper launched in July 2007 and funded by Sheldon Adelson, would not serve the right. Instead, it would be the vessel to serve as Bibi’s mouthpiece. Indeed, much of its critique would be aimed against right-wing politicians, rivals of Netanyahu from within the right-wing camp. *Israel Hayom*, for more than a decade, would pledge loyalty to Netanyahu the man.

Netanyahu dismissed criticism of *Israel Hayom* by arguing that this was how it’s done in the world. During his second term as prime minister, speaking at a special Knesset session commemorating Ze’ev Jabotinsky in August 2016, Netanyahu said:

One of the things Jabotinsky believed in was the idea of a free market, of competition, of choices of the citizens… there is a tough struggle, a tough struggle to prevent competition in the communications market. In the U.S., there’s *The Wall Street Journal* that supports one direction, and *The New York Times* that supports another, and nobody is saying anything. In Britain, there’s *The Guardian* that supports one direction and *The Times* that supports the opposite direction – no one is crying “takeover.” But in Israel, God forbid if there’s a different opinion… And those from the opposition who speak in lofty terms about free speech are fighting against opening the communications markets, against competition. This is, of course, not pluralism. This is not liberalism. This is, by the way, not fascism, but closer to Bolshevism… The people will decide at the ballot box, the people will rule. That is Jabotinsky’s theory. (Israel 2016)

Notice that the argument is no longer about a need for a plurality of opinions and news outlets, but that right-leaning media is needed to counter the left-leaning media. The rationale had changed. Only Netanyahu forgot to mention that *Israel Hayom* was not a public media outlet, but rather a privately funded newspaper printed in millions of copies and distributed for free. It severely harmed competition – the same competition Netanyahu had championed as a neoliberal – and other print newspapers barely survived. *Israel Hayom* sought to win hearts and minds with its unabashed identification with Netanyahu, and it also introduced a new narrative presented by the prime minister: The left is Bolshevik for not supporting freedom of speech; the people decide at the ballot box and the media is undemocratic in working against the people’s choice – that is, against Netanyahu.

Here was another transformation in Netanyahu’s argument. In the late 1990s, he identified the left with the two-state solution, or disengagement from occupied territories. He repeatedly claimed that the media would embrace him if he would just offer to disengage from the territories. “Just withdraw from Judea and Samaria and we’ll get off you,” a journalist from *Haaretz* promised, according to Netanyahu, who said his response was: “No, no thanks.” He also claimed that senior officers in the Palestinian Authority were eager to see his political demise in the wake of the investigations being conducted against him. Thus, Netanyahu wrapped the media, the left, the Arabs and the Palestinians, enemies of Israel, into a single camp (Netanyahu 2017b).

Yet, how Netanyahu defined the “leftist media” changed over time. After the establishment of *Israel Hayom*, leftist media meant only one thing: anti-Bibi. The linkage between striving for a free press and identifying the left with personal opposition to Netanyahu as the sole representative of the right became the dominant line at Likud gatherings and in speeches to Netanyahu’s followers. Is there still a free press in Israel? Netanyahu asked and then answered in a statement opening a Likud meeting on December 5, 2016:

So I turned on Channel 10 and I saw – “pro-Bibi.” You know, everything “pro-Bibi,” you turn on the news – “pro-Bibi,” you look at satire, gossip, magazines, supporting not just me but my wife too, my children, unequivocal support! I said, it may be unique, let’s check. I turned on Channel 2 – the same, “pro-Bibi.” Saturday night news. There are five panelists, maybe one would be against me? They are all for me! “Pro-Bibi.” Then I check other channels, radio, Army Radio, Israel Radio – “pro-Bibi,” all the time. It’s starting to be awkward…[[1]](#footnote-1)

Netanyahu used sarcasm to draw a picture of a public media that was out to get him and his family. In this portrayal, he was but an ordinary citizen who was being persecuted by the media. He concluded, “Freedom of speech is not a privilege reserved for journalists only. Freedom of speech is a right of every citizen, and it’s also my right as a prime minister. It’s my right to criticize the press for its one-sidedness in its coverage of me and my family, the lies they spread, all sorts of distortions. It’s the right of citizens to criticize the media, as I have just done, and continue to do so in the free State of Israel.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition to depicting the press as unanimously anti-Bibi, the speech was an active call to the citizens of Israel, to Likudniks, to right-wingers, to the true “pro-Bibi” people – to go after the press. It was their right – and their duty to their beloved leader.

1. **I Am the People**

By 2017, all the pieces were coming together in Netanyahu’s remolded thesis: “The leftist press was mobilized for a Bolshevik witch-hunt, to brainwash and conduct character assassination against me and my family. It happens day in and day out, every night. They create a flood of fake news… and why do they do this? Because since the establishment of the state, the left has controlled the media and other strongholds of power in an undemocratic way – and I’m the first prime minister from the right who is trying to change it” (Netanyahu 2017c). The immediate context was, of course, the police investigations against Netanyahu and the impending decision by the state attorney on whether to indict the prime minister. But the narrative is against the left; it reflects the development of an Israeli version of the deep-state argument. Note that Netanyahu complained that the left had controlled the state “in an undemocratic way” since its establishment. Yet the ruling party in Israel’s first decades, Mapai, was democratically elected time and again, just as the Likud was repeatedly elected in subsequent decades. This contention merely prepares the ground for the thrust of the argument: “They do whatever they can to get rid of me and thereby perpetuate the rule of the left … against the will of the voters, the majority of whom are right-wingers” (Netanyahu 2017c). Thus, the metaphor of a “Bolshevik witch-hunt” by “the mobilized leftist media” identifies the left with Mapai in the minds of his followers, and associates the media with a communist, totalitarian regime. Netanyahu then argued that the left was still ruling, undemocratically and against the will of the people – despite forty years of Likud rule since 1977. Netanyahu thereby launched a vicious attack against the fourth arm of democracy – the public media – by equating it with the left and by portraying it as run by the elites to preserve their power over the people. The people had chosen Netanyahu, but the leftist media was still controlling the country. The new construct was: The media is against the people.

The two sides of the equation were now clear: “The left and the media, and they are the same… have launched an obsessive witch-hunt against me and my family with the purpose of conducting a *coup d’état*” (Netanyahu 2017b). The means – a trial against Netanyahu; the objective – undemocratically toppling Netanyahu from power. In short, Netanyahu was chosen by the people and therefore embodied the people.

At a Likud rally, Netanyahu shared the story of what a rank-and-file party member, like those gathered in the crowd, had told him that very morning: “Bibi, they don’t just want to take you down, they want to take us down, all of us, the Likud and the national camp… they know they can’t defeat us in the polling booth, so they try to bypass democracy and take us down without elections” (Netanyahu 2017b).[[3]](#footnote-3) According to this view, it was not Netanyahu who was on trial for corruption; it was not his personal trial. Rather, it was the media persecuting the people of Israel. And who are the people of Israel? They are the Likud’s base. As Netanyahu declared, “We have Mizrahis and Russians; we have new immigrants and old ones; we have secular and religious; we have Amona and Dimona; we have the people, the people of Israel” (Netanyahu 2017b). It was a clash of the elites against the people. Three weeks later, he made the final linkage between himself and the people, telling his supporters, “I saw in a TV item, an item reporting about our last meeting at the Tel Aviv Fairgrounds. With what mockery, with what arrogance they tried to portray us. They don’t just despise us; they despise something deeper. They essentially despise the people’s choice; they despise democracy on behalf of which they speak. They’d do anything to hurt me and my wife because they think that if they could just take me and her down, they would take all of us down – the Likud, the entire national camp led by the Likud” (Netanyahu 2017a).

Democracy is a contested concept. In Netanyahu’s reading, the old elites still held the reins of power and were trying to persecute him through the media and the judicial system, which remained under their control. He, the one chosen by the people, the sole representative of the national camp, of the Jewish nation, was locked in struggle against the anti-patriotic left, which did not accept the rule of the people, the majority rule of the right. “The people are fed up with the mobilized media, and the people know the truth” (Netanyahu 2017a). The core concepts of a liberal democracy – the rule of law, checks and balances, an independent judicial system, the centrality of human rights, a free press as the watchdog of democracy – are portrayed as the old elite’s undemocratic rule over the people. It was a classic populist reading, channeled to portray the indictments against Netanyahu as a conspiracy of the left: “The media and the left that serves it, they find it hard to accept this so they make up endless cases, endless items, endless headlines, so something may stick – if not submarines, then cigars, if not cigars, then talks with the publisher, if not Case 1000, Case 2000, if not 2000, then 3000, 4000, 5000. They demand from the enforcement agencies – ‘give us something, no matter what it is’” (Netanyahu 2017b). By 2019, the journalists would be plastered on billboards in Tel Aviv. But throughout this period, from his first term as prime minster, Netanyahu’s quest to control the media was a meticulous project that transformed the Israeli media.

1. **A Media of My Own: The Toolkit and Toll of Changing the Israeli News Arena**

In Netanyahu’s mind, the media itself constituted a crime scene.[[4]](#footnote-4) As he explained in a 1987 interview with *Maariv*: “For me, TV is a boxing arena. You stand against your opponent who challenges what you represent, and you have to decide when, what and how you strike back.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Only in Netanyahu’s case, the referees and the journalists who reported about the fight became the enemies he sought to pummel with his fists. This put the journalists and referees in an untenable position: They were the target of incrimination and politicization, but couldn’t respond because they didn’t want to become part of Netanyahu’s attempt at changing the rules of the game and become actors themselves. Notably, Ilana Dayan decided to respond to the fierce attack she suffered from Netanyahu after broadcasting an investigative report on the Prime Minister’s Office. She read the full text of Netanyahu’s personal attack against her on camera , including his accusation that she was a “radical leftist.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, as prime minister, Netanyahu enjoyed one major advantage: his almost complete control of the media’s agenda. He leveraged this power to take his own arguments to the extreme. In speeches after his trial commenced, he drew an analogy between the media, as an arm of the left, and the Nazi regime: “The Jews in the Holocaust were taken and slaughtered, but it was impossible to control their emotions and thoughts. This is a leftist dictatorship that seeks the downfall of democracy and wishes to actually make a coup d’état.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Any criticism leveled against him, especially from the media (which, among its many functions, has the unequivocal role to criticize), was condemned as a personal attack against him as the sole leader of the people. One of his dominant tactics, as Ilana Dayan explained, was to “paint all criticism in colors of a personal attack.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This worked both ways: Netanyahu believed that any criticism of him, his government or his policies was a personal attack on him, and he in turn launched personal attacks against journalists like Ilana Dayan, Ben Caspit, and Guy Peleg in order to personalize the struggle. Netanyahu said during one of his interrogations, “The internet, television, radio – they’re all left, left, left. *Ynet* and *Yedioth Ahronoth* are ultra-left. This aggressive, leftist concentration that exists in the Israeli media is dangerous to democracy and to the future of the State of Israel.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

As we will shortly see, that was also the rationale presented to the tycoons Netanyahu hoped to convince to purchase news outlets and thereby save Israel. Yet, this was equally applied to right-wingers who opposed Netanyahu. Netanyahu perceived himself as the embodiment of the right and characterized any rival politician who dared to criticize him from within the right camp as “no longer a right-winger.” This included people like Dan Meridor, Reuven Rivlin, Avigdor Lieberman, Gideon Sa’ar, Naftali Bennett and Ze’ev Elkin. Even if such rivals were more stridently right-wing than Netanyahu, he dismissed them as “no longer right-wingers” once they became critical of him. If you were not for Netanyahu, you did not belong to the right, you were not part of the national camp, and you were not loyal to the Jewish people. Indeed, any criticism of him was presented as an attack against the people, since he was the sole representative of the people in his own mind, as noted above. But this also meant that he personified the struggle against the “old elites” – and not just “the judicial system.” For example, after attorney general Avichai Mandelblit and police commissioner Roni Alsheich – both Netanyahu appointees –cooperated with the investigation against the prime minister in the course of their duties, they suffered personal attacks from Netanyahu, his loyalists and like-minded media outlets. The civil servants and professionals involved in his investigation were, by definition, his sworn enemies, and were vilified by his followers as the “High Court party” or the “Saladin gang” (a reference to the Justice Department’s headquarters on Saladin Street).[[10]](#footnote-10) Lead prosecutor Liat Ben-Ari and state attorney Shai Nitzan were also subjected to vicious personal attacks that extended to their families. The vocal protests by combative crowds were allegedly orchestrated from the prime minister’s official residence on Balfour Street.

The same rationale was evident vis-à-vis the media: Netanyahu personified his struggle and portrayed leading journalists as enemies of the people. This chapter began with a description of the Tel Aviv billboards featuring the pictures of four journalists with the caption: “They will not decide. You will decide.” The general incitement always singled out particular faces for the mob to identify as enemies of the people. The choice was not coincidental: Netanyahu was engaged in a personal campaign against journalists who brought evidence against him and exposed his continual attempts to control the media. Indeed, the police investigation was prompted by testimony from Ben Caspit, a right-wing journalist whom Netanyahu has vilified ever since. Netanyahu’s strategies for taking control of the media in Israel were analyzed in extensive analyses by Nati Toker of *TheMarker*, Gidi Weitz of *Haaretz*, *The Seventh Eye*, Ilana Dayan of Channel 12, and Guy Peleg and Raviv Drucker of Channel 10 (which later became Channel 13). As mentioned, Peleg and Drucker were among the journalists featured on the billboards. Netanyahu was a sophisticated, calculating, and powerful enemy with an obsession to right a perceived wrong and shift the media rightward. In his mind, putting things “right” meant establishing a loyal, obedient, castrated pro-Bibi media, very far from his vision of a more pluralistic, competitive journalism. Seven strategies used by Netanyahu and his men in pursuit of his goal are outlined below.

1. **Owning the Media: Cajoling Moguls to Establish an Israeli Fox News Empire for Netanyahu**

The nexus between politicians and big capital is always a problem in a democracy. Throughout his period in the United States, Netanyahu was supported and then fully funded by big capital. However, the unique undertaking cultivated by Netanyahu throughout his years in power combined his two primary desires: to get closer to tycoons and to cajole them into facilitating, buying, interfering and eventually creating for Netanyahu media outlets of his own. The kind of argument Netanyahu used to lure them into the news media business – as reported by James Packer, Arnon Milchan, Sheldon Adelson, Shaul Elovich, and others – was that the fate of the Jewish people hinged on Netanyahu remaining in power. And to ensure this, he needed direct influence on the media, which was otherwise hostile to the leader chosen by the people. Direct engagement with the owners of the media companies was a prime concern of Netanyahu. Nir Hefetz, the Netanyahus’ media adviser, testified, “Netanyahu’s worldview was that you need to talk directly with the owners.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. Arnon Milchan

“When Bibi was the minister of finance, he made sure that Milchan would win the shares of Channel 10. He took care of him personally,” Shaya Segal, Netanyahu’s chief of staff, voluntarily told the police.[[12]](#footnote-12) Case 1000 is ostensibly about the presents, jewelry, cigars, and champagne the Netanyahus received from Milchan. However, Netanyahu had far greater plans for his mogul friend. First, he involved Milchan in raising the sum needed as a down payment on Channel 10 so that Ilan Shiloah, classified by Netanyahu as an “extreme leftist,” would not purchase the television outlet.[[13]](#footnote-13) Second, Netanyahu’s ambitious plan was to merge the Reshet and Keshet TV stations and make Milchan a shareholder, possibly the majority shareholder, of the strongest Israeli TV news channel ever, enjoying a monopolistic status. Shlomo Filber was to lead this endeavor.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to Milchan’s business manager, Zeev Feldman, Netanyahu believed he would have a loyalist as CEO of the TV news monopoly if Milchan were the controlling shareholder.[[15]](#footnote-15) In late 2015 at Milchan’s house, Netanyahu met with Filber, then director general of the Ministry of Communications (with Netanyahu as minister), and convinced Milchan to buy a stake in Channel 2.[[16]](#footnote-16) Netanyahu later helped Len Blavatnik acquire Channel 10, and thus pay off some of Milchan’s debt.[[17]](#footnote-17) Netanyahu was also involved in attempts to convince Milchan to buy some shares of Arnon Mozes’s Yedioth Ahronoth Group.[[18]](#footnote-18) Milchan was the middleman for Netanyahu, mediating between Adelson and Mozes. What did Milchan get in return? Famously, Netanyahu helped Milchan by working to pass “the Milchan Law,” which extends the tax benefits of expatriate tycoons who return to Israel.[[19]](#footnote-19) But while Milchan may have enjoyed his access to the omnipotent prime minister in Jerusalem, Netanyahu was the one who envisioned – and orchestrated – Milchan’s growing role in the communications business, and particularly the news scene, in Israel.

1. Len Blavatnik

One key example of Netanyahu’s tactics can be seen in the case of Len Blavatnik, a Jewish billionaire who successfully competed against Ilan Shiloah in 2015 to acquire Channel 10. The channel, whose investigative journalism made it Netanyahu’s nemesis, was owned by Yossi Maiman, Ronald Lauder, and Arnon Milchan of Case 1000. When Channel 10 went on the market, Blavatnik called Netanyahu to ask for his advice.[[20]](#footnote-20) He recalled asking Netanyahu, “Since Channel 10 is up for sale, do you think it’s a good idea?” Netanyahu’s reply: “It’s a terrible business with horrible people… but it’s not a bad idea… Israel needs more of a different kind of people in the media world… it’d be good if you could buy it.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Was it Blavatnik who called Netanyahu or the other way around? In any case, Blavatnik today is one of the owners of Channel 13 (formerly Channel 10), and one of the leading shareholders in the struggle to dramatically downsize its news operation in favor of more entertainment programs. Downsizing the news was also a tool in Netanyahu’s toolkit. In all, Blavatnik has invested more than 200 million shekels to date. It should also be noted that Blavatnik’s purchase reaped a considerable profit for the Milchan, the former owner and Netanyahu’s good friend. In his testimony in Case 1000, Blavatnik affirmed that he has known Netanyahu for many years, and met with him often when visiting Israel. He noted that Netanyahu “always complains about the media… about the leftists who are not good for the state, who are anti-Israeli and anti-business… and that Channel 10 in particular is anti-Israeli and anti-business.” Blavatnik told investigators that Netanyahu has spoken with him regularly since he bought Channel 10 and tells him that Channel 10 is not fair to him and his family. Netanyahu also asked him “to do something about it.”

But Channel 10 was just the first milestone in the road Netanyahu hoped to pave for himself with his mogul friends’ money. Blavatnik testified that after he bought Channel 10, Netanyahu suggested to him that *Yedioth Ahronoth* may also be up for sale. Blavatnik confirmed that Netanyahu suggested “that the country needs a channel like Fox News, which is more to the right and center… You could make a lot of money if you do that because people with right-wing opinions would be more interested and therefore more people would watch it.” Blavatnik replied that he was not an expert in this field, but would consider joining if there were a group of people ready to take it upon themselves.

But what was Netanyahu’s take on that? Netanyahu explained, “Channel 10 was sold [to Blavatnik] because that gentleman who came to buy the channel – what’s his name, Ilan Shiloah – is ultra-left...I see the danger that Channel 10, as bad it is now, would be even worse… so I turned to Blavatnik. He made a bid and won… I told him to revamp this channel. It’s a terrible channel… Shiloah is the enemy of everything I believe in… I told Len, ‘This is a national mission’ even though you won’t make any money from it.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Netanyahu told the investigators that when he saw that Shiloah wanted to buy the channel, he felt that he had to act, and that for all he cared, “the channel could be shut down.” Thus, the prime minister’s testimony seems to indicate that it was Netanyahu who first suggested the purchase to Blavatnik. Indeed, Netanyahu had established a pattern he would often use again: Either you change the media outlet, or I’ll use my power to shut it down. The ongoing threat to shut down Channel 10 (later 13) cast a dominant shadow over the professional lives of its journalists. Netanyahu also disclosed that he had asked his confidant Ari Harow to monitor how the channel was covering the prime minister after Blavatnik assumed control. Netanyahu confirmed to the police investigators, “I wanted to know that the disaster called Channel 10 did not repeat itself.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Netanyahu definitely placed a lot of pressure on Blavatnik to prevent the broadcast of Drucker’s report on Netanyahu’s relations with Packer and other items. Blavatnik did not answer the calls. This brings us to Packer.[[24]](#footnote-24)

1. James Packer

Packer’s grandfather was the founder and owner of a network of media, television and newspapers outlets, which he bequeathed to his son, who then turned it into a powerful media monopoly in Australia. Netanyahu had hoped that the grandson, James Packer, would realize this dream for him in Israel too.[[25]](#footnote-25) In 2013, while negotiating the purchase of the Walla news outlet at Netanyahu’s behest, Packer described Netanyahu as the most impressive man in the world. Netanyahu’s primary goal in his relations with Packer was for the latter to acquire control of the Yedioth Ahronoth Group, an Israel media empire that Packer called “Bibi’s nightmare.” Packer indeed met several times with Yedioth’s owner Arnon Mozes. Milchan’s testimony revealed what he thought was Netanyahu’s line of argument with Packer: Israel would face a second Holocaust if Netanyahu’s regime fell, and to prevent that he had to purchase the Mozes’s empire. Milchan said that Netanyahu had used the same argument with him too.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Filber met with Milchan and Packer at Packer’s house in Caesarea, adjacent to Netanyahu’s house, to “discuss Netanyahu’s fantasy: the takeover of a television channel, funded by Packer.” Eventually Netanyahu’s initiative was to establish an Israeli Fox News channel, funded by Packer, Milchan, and Rupert Murdoch. Netanyahu asked Packer to invest $25 million in the project, to which he agreed. The initiative came to a halt due to an international police investigation related to Packer’s gambling empire and the mafia in China. Packer had purchased his house in Caesarea with the prime minister’s encouragement and gave his neighbors, the Netanyahus, free use of it. Packer stopped coming to Israel once the police sought his testimony in the cases against Netanyahu.[[27]](#footnote-27)

1. Sheldon Adelson

Unlike Milchan, Packer, and Blavatnik, all probably tempted into media ownership by Netanyahu, Sheldon Adelson was actually Netanyahu’s mentor in demonstrating the power and control one can achieve through media ownership. Adelson and his Israeli wife Miriam, today the CEO of the pro-Netanyahu *Israel Hayom*, developed a micro-model that was especially suited for the prime minister’s needs. In 2015, Adelson bought the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* through a concealed proxy. (Las Vegas, Adelson’s city of residence, was where he made his initial fortune in the gambling business.) The newspaper’s reporters and management, who did not know at the time who the new owner was, were asked to closely monitor the conduct of three judges in Nevada. One of the judges was presiding over a lawsuit filed against Sheldon Adelson and his gambling empire. The plaintiff was one of the senior executives in Adelson’s firm, who accused him of trying to compel him to act illegally, including entering into deals involving crime organizations and the prostitution business. Adelson was not pleased with the judge’s handling of the case and the *Review-Journal* reported that Adelson had offered to hire a well-known lawyer to replace the judge. The journalists responsible for publishing such reports were fired one after another. After purging the newspaper of those journalists, Adelson brought in his own people and used the paper to influence regulation, judges, and the policy of Las Vegas with regard to his business interests. The *Review-Journal* became more and more identified with interests and people favorable to Adelson; it was the first newspaper to support Donald Trump’s candidacy for president.[[28]](#footnote-28) This linkage of controlling the media, threatening judges and other rivals through negative media exposition, and using the struggle against the public media as a political tool to serve the right and combat the deep-state mechanisms of the left was all especially appealing to Netanyahu. Establishing *Israel Hayom* was the opening salvo in his campaign to conquer the media.

The newspaper was built on an unprofitable model. The idea was not to have a viable business plan based on advertising, but rather to bring down the Mozes empire and change the political discourse by flooding the streets of Israel with free copies of the pro-Netanyahu newspaper. It did precisely that: Adelson’s *Israel Hayom*, launched on July 30, 2007, became the print newspaper with the largest circulation in Israel, at a cost to its owner of over a billion shekels. It led to the collapse of the *Maariv* newspaper and the shrinking of *Yedioth*.[[29]](#footnote-29) More importantly, it arguably provided an efficient tool for tightening Netanyahu’s grip on power and solidifying his “base” – the lower socioeconomic classes and the key to his political strength. Adelson and Netanyahu shared a somewhat cynical conservative-populist worldview, along with a strong appetite for power. Adelson was key to strengthening the relationship between Trump and Netanyahu, as he was also one of the earliest patrons of Trump and other Republican politicians. He influenced Trump to support Netanyahu’s stance against the Iran nuclear deal and to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.[[30]](#footnote-30) Capital shaped policy. But Netanyahu’s ambitions were not satisfied with *Israel Hayom* and its immense political influence. Adelson bought NRG, the news website associated initially with *Maariv*, and also funded *Makor Rishon*, the media outlet of the religious-national camp and one of the chief ideological strongholds of the right in Israeli politics.

Adelson used his ultimate tool – his money – to threaten media outlets not only in the United States, but in Israel, as well. In 2011, he threatened Channel 10 with a huge lawsuit, explicitly aiming to weaken the channel, which was critical of the prime minister, and thus further undermine the channel’s economic condition. He aimed to do the same to *The Seventh Eye*, a critical website about the media. Adelson exported to Israel, via *Israel Hayom*, an interest-driven, corrupt form of pseudo-journalism that dominated the public discourse in Israel by flooding it with millions of free copies. As his wife eulogized him after his death in January, 2021, “He changed the course of history.”[[31]](#footnote-31) However, the special relationship between Adelson and Netanyahu actually soured earlier, when Channel 13 broadcast the transcripts of the Mozes-Netanyahu conversations. Adelson decided to make a clean break from Netanyahu after discovering that Netanyahu had played him both ways. Apparently, the prime minister had promised Mozes – without consulting Adelson – to curtail the number of copies of *Israel Hayom* and its weekend edition, and to support, or at least give lip service to supporting the legislation aimed against *Israel Hayom*.

1. Shaul Elovich

With Milchan and Packer at the center of Case 1000 against Netanyahu, and Adelson-Mozes are at the heart of Case 2000, Elovich and allegations of Netanyahu’s regulatory corruption are the core issues of Case 4000. Elovich was a latecomer to the gang of moguls around Netanyahu, since he is not a conservative tycoon or a right-winger. The relationship between Netanyahu and Elovich was based on sheer shared interests, rather than a shared ideology. In April 2010, Shaul Elovich paid 5.5 billion shekels to acquire control of Bezeq, a public telecommunications company that held a monopoly on landline telephony in Israel. To finance the acquisition, Elovich took loans from the pyramid of companies he held. At the time, the service Israeli citizens were receiving from Bezeq was deteriorating. Threatened by the cellular reform led by the then communications minister, Moshe Kahlon, Elovich decided to engage directly with “the big one,” his codename for Netanyahu in conversations with Walla CEO Ilan Yeshua. Elovich urged Netanyahu to slow down the reform so that Bezeq’s monopoly would remain intact.[[32]](#footnote-32) The Netanyahus invited Elovich and his wife Iris for dinner and Sara Netanyahu used the opportunity to complain about the negative coverage she and her husband were receiving from Walla, the second most influential news website at the time. A deal emerged: The Eloviches would receive direct requests, orders, and demands from Benjamin, Sara, and Yair Netanyahu, sometimes through their middlemen, Ze’ev Rubinstein, Hefetz, and others, and Yeshua, the diligent CEO, would execute them without letting his editors, journalists, and reporters know that the Walla website had moved into Netanyahu’s camp. On another front, Elovich decided to move his private satellite TV company, Yes, into the hands of Bezeq. This required a change in regulation and Netanyahu’s willingness to buck opposition from ministry officials who insisted on conditioning the Yes-Bezeq deal upon opening landline telephony to competition. Netanyahu used the coalition agreement of 2015 to gain full control over all legislation, regulation, and reforms in the communications market, including telephony and the news agencies. The prime minister dismissed Gilad Erdan, who had succeeded Kahlon as communications minister, fired the ministry’s director general Avi Berger, and appointed his right-hand man Filber to replace him.[[33]](#footnote-33) Now the Eloviches were in a position to utilize the regulator, Filber, to advance their own personal financial gains at the public’s expense. “We could make the reform of the landline telephony today, which would save hundreds of millions of shekels for the Israeli consumer,” a senior treasury official declared.[[34]](#footnote-34) But the self-interests of the Eloviches and Netanyahus dictated otherwise. After becoming a state witness, Filber testified that when he spoke to Netanyahu about this, Netanyahu made a hand gesture to indicate that the price for consumers could be lowered slightly, but that the profits for the Eloviches must remain high. Filber, upon Netanyahu’s order, called for a halt to the reforms that were slated to open up the market to competition. Netanyahu had advocated the opposite ideological position while serving as finance minister in Sharon’s government. Netanyahu’s passion to control the news media was stronger than his economic convictions. The state comptroller referred to Filber as a “captive regulator” who was enslaved to Elovich’s demands.[[35]](#footnote-35) By the end of 2016, the Eloviches understood there was a corruption investigation under way and called Yeshua, ordering him to destroy all evidence of the direct pressure exerted by Netanyahu and his men, and of the pressure that Yeshua had himself put on his journalists and had led them to threaten to collectively resign. Once again, the police investigation put an end to the alleged regulatory corruption that stemmed from Netanyahu’s quest for absolute control over the media and the communications market in Israel.

1. **Running the News Show: Controlling CEOs and Chief Editors**

From his earliest days as a politician, Netanyahu was keenly interested in influencing those he saw as shaping the outlook of public news broadcasts. This is illustrated in the following story: During questioning by the police, Netanyahu recounted what happened in 2008 when it came time to choose a CEO and chief editor of Channel 12 News:

How do you think Avi Weiss got his job? I’ll tell you. There’s a café at the corner of Ibn Gvirol and Marmorek where I met Muzi Wertheim when he was about to appoint Nissim Mishal. And I told him, “Muzi you’re making a big mistake. You have another candidate, right?” He said, “Yes, Avi Weiss.” I didn’t know him, but I told Muzi, “Don’t take Mishal because it’s like giving Mozes the news channel. Take Avi Weiss.” So I got involved. That’s diversity.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Moshe (“Muzi”) Wertheim was a key figure at Channel 12 and Netanyahu was the head of the opposition in 2008. Although Weiss was not “his guy,” what was crucial at the time for Netanyahu was to prevent *Yedioth Ahronoth*’s total dominance and to neutralize a journalist he considered hostile toward him – Nissim Mishal. But consider Netanyahu’s argument for diversity: Weiss is Ashkenazi and secular, while Mishal is Mizrahi and religious. In terms of diversity, it was clearly much more relevant to appoint the latter. In addition, Mishal was an investigative journalist, while Weiss was a producer. So, on what grounds did Netanyahu think Weiss was better for diversity? Mishal was critical of all politicians, including Netanyahu. Weiss had not revealed his positions at the time. In Netanyahu’s eyes, Mishal was an enemy; he viewed him as Mozes’s guy. Weiss was better for Netanyahu personally, and in no way embodied the argument for greater diversity.

Ironically, Netanyahu and Mozes discussed the crucial role of chief editors in conversations recorded by Netanyahu’s bureau chief, Ari Harow, at the prime minister’s request. Police investigators eventually got hold of these recordings. Mozes told Netanyahu, “*Israel Hayom* is yours, Channel One is yours, the radio is yours, you’ve shut down Channel 10.” “None of them are mine yet,” Netanyahu replied. “You want me to tell you why?” Mozes asked and then continued, “Maybe Channel One isn’t (yours)… because they put a chief editor who is not right for the job, to put it mildly.” Netanyahu concurred, “Simply the worst [editor] they could [have appointed].” Mozes explained, “It’s because they want to show they have no commitment to anyone… But you can’t put Nir [Hefetz] there, can you, it would be too much, too much… because Nir knows how to manage media. Netanyahu: “He was at a good school.” Mozes: “Yes, *Maariv*. He’ll do anything you want, whatever you want – but it will be too much.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Netanyahu failed to get a more sympathetic chief editor appointed at Channel One, but he did hire Nir Hefetz as the personal media advisor for both himself and his wife Sara. Hefetz was the guy who “takes care of things,” the one who knew how to handle all news media on the Netanyahus’ behalf. Later, when Hefetz became a state witness in the case against Netanyahu, his testimony revealed Netanyahu’s directives to his faithful media man and underlined the excessive power of the CEOs of media channels. Hefetz explained the prime minister’s strategy:

Sometimes Netanyahu was only content with contacting the chief editors. At *Maariv*, Netanyahu demanded that I speak with the owner – Eli Azur – only. Period. At Channel 12, today the News Company, he requested that I exclusively contact the CEO, Avi Weiss, or the chief editor, Avi Sudri. At Keshet it was Avi Nir, the CEO, only. At Reshet, it was only the CEO, Avi Zvi. At *Israel Hayom* usually the chief editor, but also the journalist Mati Tuchfeld. But in general, he demanded it would always be the chief editor.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Direct control over the media, from the owner to the CEO, was the overarching objective in Netanyahu’s attempt to appoint “his men” to the job. For example, Netanyahu worked to appoint Harow as chairperson of Channel 10 News after Blavatnik became an owner in 2015. One of the other owners, Aviv Giladi, wanted to flatter Netanyahu and thought about appointing Harow in response to Netanyahu’s request, as a gesture of good will,[[39]](#footnote-39) although Harow was not appointed in the end. Later, when Netanyahu was also serving as communications minister, he tried again to appoint Harow to a key position at Channel 10 – this time chief editor.[[40]](#footnote-40) Netanyahu’s attempt to place his loyalists in strategic positions was also apparent in the appointment of Rami Sadan, previously the Netanyahus’ media adviser, to the post of chief editor at Channel 10. Sadan did get the job, but then was ousted due to false information he provided on his resume.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The testimony of Walla’s CEO, Yeshua, starkly exposed the constant pressure placed on media executives. He complained to Iris Elovich, “I can’t bring half the journalists in Israel to Walla.” When she inquired why, he replied: “Bibi and Sara don’t find them suitable.” Already in 2013, the chief editor at the time, Yinon Magal, testified that he was under heavy pressure from the Eloviches to give positive coverage to the Netanyahu couple.[[42]](#footnote-42) When Magal left Walla to run for the Knesset on the Jewish Home’s slate, Avi Alkalay was chosen to replace him. But Alkalay did not get the official appointment because of opposition from Sara Netanyahu, who allegedly branded him “an extreme leftist.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Alkalay later filed a defamation suit against Yair Netanyahu for calling him a fifth column of the Wexner Foundation and a partner in the conspiracy against his father, Benjamin Netanyahu. The younger Netanyahu, who did not come to court, was ordered to pay damages of 250,000 shekels.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Netanyahu’s obsession with appointing loyalists to the role of chief editor led to the departure of Avi Alkalay. Iris Elovich, as a proxy of Netanyahu, hoped to bring Eran Tiefenbrunn from Ynet to “put things in order” at Walla. Tiefenbrun was recommended to Netanyahu by none other than Mozes, who described him as an editor who can get done what the boss wants.[[45]](#footnote-45) But it was not to be. In 2016, Aviram Elad received the job of chief editor at Walla, despite Sara Netanyahu’s efforts to veto his appointment because of a critical article he had written eight years earlier. Hefetz pressed on her behalf, but the appointment went through.[[46]](#footnote-46) Iris Elovich instructed Yeshua to try to appease the Netanyahus by immediately hiring journalists that Netanyahu’s people had told her to appoint: Guy Bechor, Erez Tadmor, and Shimon Riklin – all propagandists of Netanyahu.[[47]](#footnote-47) But that was not the end of it: Yeshua testified that Sara put immense pressure on him to fire the chief editor, Elad, after he approved publication of an article she didn’t like about the submarine investigation, Case 3000.[[48]](#footnote-48) This was just another example of the Netanyahus’ direct involvement in appointing chief editors, after the owner and the CEO were “in the bag.” In this particular case, Elovich and Yeshua chose to work above the heads of the editors and journalists, without telling them about the direct pressure from the Netanyahus – all to promote the larger financial interests of the Eloviches.

Another example of Netanyahu’s attempted influence involved the proposed Reshet-Keshet corporate merger; Netanyahu wanted the merged entity to operate as a monopoly in the Israeli news arena. If Milchan became the owner of the united media conglomerate, Netanyahu would have his man as the chairperson, Filber explained in his testimony.[[49]](#footnote-49) The prime minister described this plan as a move to boost “competition,” while, in fact, it was his ambition to gain sole control of the news monopoly in Israel.[[50]](#footnote-50) Netanyahu’s men, Filber and Hefetz, discussed this pursuit of total control at the time:

Filber: “Now we need to look for names to head the current affairs programming.”

Hefetz: “Why not a chief editor?”

Filber: “In addition to the chief editor, Shimon Elkabetz… Another dunam, another goat.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

The chief editor, Elkabetz, had been already appointed, so it was now time to select someone to head the current affairs unit. The very idea that the prime minister was involved in appointing “special men for a special mission” – to achieve personal control over news agencies and their managers – illustrates Netanyahu’s obsession with the news media. According to Eldad Koblentz, CEO of the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA), Filber pressed the Kan public broadcasting corporation to replace its chief news executive, Shlomit Abraham-Globerzon, with one of four options – Elkabetz, Miro, Hason or Tene. Koblentz said the greatest pressure from Netanyahu’s men was to replace the CEO of the news authority. “We could close a deal in two minutes if you agree to that,” Filber told Koblentz.” Later, they lobbied for the appointment of another Netanyahu supporter for the chief editor’s job – Menachem Horowitz. “I suggested Horowitz as chief editor, approved by the boss,” Filber informed Hefetz, referring to Netanyahu, of course.[[52]](#footnote-52) The IBA’s resistance to these pressures was one of the chief reasons why Netanyahu worked to shut it down. Filber was quoted as saying, “If he [Netanyahu] cannot control it, he can abolish it altogether.”[[53]](#footnote-53) This pattern of attempting to intimidate the managers of the news outlets and threaten to close them if they didn’t obey was a recurring pattern in Netanyahu’s quest to control the media.

1. **Infiltrating the Public Media with Pro-Bibi Journalists**

In Netanyahu’s view, journalists should be controlled and managed by the owners and chief editors.[[54]](#footnote-54) Still, a crucial part of his endeavors was focused on direct appointments of journalists, panelists, and publicists, or pushing out those critical of him.

* 1. Journalists

In a recorded conversation with Mozes in 2014, Netanyahu complained, “There is one reporter, Igal Sarna.” Mozes immediately responded, “I can’t control what he writes on Facebook, and what [Shimon] Shiffer [a top journalist at *Yedioth*] says on TV, he would never write in the paper.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Mozes emphasized to Netanyahu that he was in control of even the most anti-Bibi reporters when it came to the print newspaper. Both Sarna and Shiffer are professional journalists. Netanyahu criticized what they said on Twitter, Facebook and talk shows panels. Yet their publicist approach – expressing a view rather than a professional analysis – is precisely what Netanyahu demanded that Mozes bring into his paper, only on Netanyahu’s behalf. Netanyahu was being explicit, knowing that he had something Mozes wanted: the ability to limit the circulation of the weekend edition of the rival newspaper, *Israel Hayom*. Regarding Sarna’s piece on investigations into Sara’s actions, Netanyahu raged, “What do you want me to do? If you make your life’s mission to bring about my downfall, I will fight you. It won’t stop after the elections – you fight me, I’ll fight back. I cannot accept such a thing… This will become my life’s mission. You don’t know me. This [the Sarna story] is something that could have been avoided.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Mozes, seeking to appease Netanyahu, tried to offer him a “friendly” journalist in return: “We spoke about a reporter; I’m waiting for you.” As Elovich did in the Walla case, Mozes attempted to satisfy Netanyahu by bringing in pro-Bibi publicists under the guise of “journalists.”

In another recorded conversation, Mozes implored, “Give me the name of a right-wing journalist to recruit to the newspaper. I’ve been telling you this for a long time now.” Netanyahu gave him two names: Avi Ratzon and Ronen Shoval. The former was an editor at *Israel Hayom* and Mozes objected, saying it would expose their machinations. The latter was not even a journalist; he was a co-founder of Im Tirzu, a right-wing ideological organization. Netanyahu later suggested assigning Shoval to a key position at Walla.[[57]](#footnote-57) The other co-founder of Im Tirzu, Erez Tadmor, was later recruited as Netanyahu’s election campaign manager and became a prominent panelist on talk shows. Mozes replied, “In the meantime, Shoval is a candidate of the Jewish Home party.” So, not only did Netanyahu suggest appointing someone (Shoval) who was not a journalist, but his proposed appointee was also running for the Knesset, which constituted a possible violation of the ethical code.[[58]](#footnote-58) It is no coincidence that candidates of right-wing parties were part of the dream list of Netanyahu. This became a key feature of the Netanyahu team: playing in both the political and communication arenas, moving seamlessly between the two. Mozes tried to return to his offer of hiring a reporter to Netanyahu’s liking, “Where is the article writer? Bring one.” Bibi: “It’s not the article writer – it’s how you report.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Netanyahu was of the opinion that there is no such thing as a professional journalist; there is only the viewpoint from which one writes. Every journalist is a publicist, writing from a political viewpoint, according to Netanyahu.

Netanyahu was also adamant about trying to dismiss journalists who were critical of him. Yossi Varshavsky, the CEO of Channel 13, basically admitted that he fired Ben Caspit from the Friday night TV news show because of Netanyahu’s pressure.[[60]](#footnote-60) (Incidentally, Caspit, a nemesis of Netanyahu and one of his most consistent critics, is not only a right-winger but also a Likudnik.) Netanyahu notoriously accelerated his attempts to shut down the new public broadcasting corporation, Kan, when Geula Even, the wife of Gideon Sa’ar, an internal rival within the Likud, was selected to be the anchor of the evening news magazine.[[61]](#footnote-62) Like Caspit, Even was a born and bred right-winger. But Netanyahu’s sole consideration was whether a person was “for or against Bibi,” regardless of their other political inclinations.

The other public evidence of direct attempts by Netanyahu and his men to interfere with journalists is, of course, the testimonies released in Case 4000. Here it was not a case of direct talks between the prime minister and the owner of a media empire, as in the example of Netanyahu’s discussions with Mozes. In Case 4000, the owners of Walla allegedly instructed their CEO, Yeshua, to fulfill Netanyahu’s requests as communicated by his proxies – Hefetz and Filber. For example, Netanyahu exerted pressure to fire Amir Tibon from Walla. Iris Elovich, in turn, put pressure on Yeshua. Walla’s owners ultimately decided to relieve Tibon of his journalistic duties, but didn’t fire him; instead, they kept him on their payroll as a book writer to avoid raising suspicion. Elovich then reported to Hefetz, Bibi’s man, that Tibon was no longer involved in news coverage because they were paying him to write a book.[[62]](#footnote-63) “The Eloviches pressured Ilan Yeshua since they wanted me to devote 90% of my time to the book,” recollected Tibon, who described how time and again critical stories about Netanyahu and his loyal ministers were quashed by “those who make the decisions.”[[63]](#footnote-64)Another case of such interference involved Omri Nachmias, who was removed from the Israeli scene and sent to the United States to cover the elections there. Elovich saw this move as a victory for the prime minister in accordance with the latter’s demands.[[64]](#footnote-65) Yet another resounding example was Netanyahu’s demand to dismiss Tal Shalev. Iris Elovich explained this demand to Yeshua by suggesting that she had been hired as a fig-leaf leftist to conceal Walla’s pro-Bibi turn, but had become a “Doberman.”[[65]](#footnote-66) Tal Shalev still writes at Walla today.

After failing to get rid of Shalev, Iris Elovich pressed Netanyahu’s people to give her names of others she could hire to satisfy Netanyahu. Ran Baratz, one of Netanyahu’s advisers, sent her a name: Almog Boker. But Yeshua refused to hire Boker.[[66]](#footnote-67) In 2017, Erel Segal, who worked for two right-wing outlets (Channel 20 and *Makor Rishon*) was recruited by Walla, upon Netanyahu’s recommendation, to write a weekly column.[[67]](#footnote-68) The appointment was meant to appease Sara Netanyahu after Boker’s appointment failed to go through. The modus operandi, although not always successful, was firmly established: Netanyahu was directly involved through his proxies Hefetz, Baratz, and Filber in appointing and firing journalists from a media outlet. As the pressure mounted, Iris Elovich and Yeshua discussed which Netanyahu’s loyalists to bring as publicists at Walla. In coordination with Netanyahu’s people, she suggested three names: Erez Tadmor, Shimon Riklin, and Guy Bechor.[[68]](#footnote-69) Filber reported to Hefetz before a meeting with Netanyahu: “Now between 1 to 3 PM, the anchor of a personal program is Dror Eidar, a first harbinger of placing our men by Shimon.”[[69]](#footnote-70) Elkabetz, a Netanyahu man appointed to command the Army Radio, selected “journalists” who were actually publicists and “yes men” of Netanyahu, but who were not journalists.

b. Publicists

“Let’s institutionalize a niche… and call it a guest writer, once or twice a week,” Iris Elovich instructed her CEO when handing him the names of the three pro-Bibi publicists in response to the growing pressure from the Netanyahus.[[70]](#footnote-71) Clearly, the bargaining that was going on between Netanyahu and Mozes, and between Hefetz and Elovich, here on record, was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the mounting pressures applied by Netanyahu to have his loyal men, ideologues, and confidants serve as journalists, panelists, and publicists in the news organizations.[[71]](#footnote-72) The boundaries between being a journalist, publicist, or pure mouthpiece were blurred. Indeed, the whole line of thinking from the prime minister’s Balfour residence was that any journalist who was not pro-Bibi was in fact a leftist or affiliated with a rival team. Thus, the very concept of a professional journalist was being challenged; there were only two options – you’re either with us or against us.

The active participation of these “journalists” in Netanyahu’s electoral effort illustrates the pervasive blurring of the lines between journalism and politics. Two weeks before the March 2020 elections, a video was released as part of the Netanyahu campaign. In this clip, three so-called journalists are sitting on a couch with guitars, playing *Praise Jerusalem*, a religious Shabbat hymn, when Netanyahu enters the room, sits down and sings along with them. The three are: Yinon Magal, former editor of Walla news and at the time a Radio 103 morning show co-presenter; Erel Segal, a Channel 11 afternoon show co-presenter and later a publicist at *Israel Hayom* and presenter at Channel 20, who had resigned in 2008 from *Maariv* claiming he had not been allowed to express his political views, and had moved to *Makor Rishon*, a rightwing, religious Zionist newspaper, owned by Adelson; and Shimon Riklin, a right-wing activist and Channel 10 panelist (from 2006–2010), and the political commentator of Channel 20 since 2018.

“I am the No. 1 ‘Bibist’ in Israel,” Segal famously declared when he resigned from his job at Walla News just before Case 4000 came to light. He claimed on Channel 20 that he was the only pro-Bibi publicist, the only one providing positive coverage of Netanyahu’s governments. Segal claimed that he was hired by Walla as a pro-Bibi journalist and was unwilling to serve as a fig leaf any longer.[[72]](#footnote-73) A few days later, he also resigned from Army Radio and resumed his job at Channel 20; he also received a column at *Israel Hayom*. Segal was later hired by Channel 11 as a co-anchor with Kalman Liebskind, another right-wing journalist, but was suspended for five days after posting the *Praise Jerusalem* clip on Facebook and faced a hearing on violating the journalists’ ethical code for participating in an election campaign. His co-presenter, Liebskind, defended him and refused to go back to the show without his partner. Liebskind himself, it turned out, was wooed to Channel 11 and the public broadcasting corporation by Netanyahu’s men. Filber wrote to Hefetz that he had spoken with Liebskind and had told him that “the deal is that you come with a machete.” “But of course,” replied Liebskind, a distinguished investigative journalist from *Maariv*, who had been recruited as a right-winger, and had joined Channel 11 as the co-anchor of the morning news magazine with Asaf Liberman, and as the co-anchor of the TV six o’clock news with self-described “No. 1 Bibist” Segal.[[73]](#footnote-74) Segal was later fired from the TV show and Liebskind has remained as its sole presenter to date.

During the same week that Segal was recruited to Army Radio, another Netanyahu advocate, Yaacov Bardugo, also joined the station. This was part of the understanding between the new commander of the public military station, Yaron Dekel, and Netanyahu.[[74]](#footnote-75) Bardugo, a Likud activist, became the staunchest supporter of the prime minister and his wife. When, a year later, Bardugo was accused of spewing propaganda for Netanyahu, the prime minister rushed to his defense: “There’s a limit to the thought-police and mouth-shutting by the left. We are not North Korea. If it doesn’t allow freedom of expression for the right too, then Army Radio has no right to exist.”[[75]](#footnote-76) This reflected the power wielded by the prime minister, who also served as minister of communications: Either do it his way, or he threatens the very existence of the media outlet. Right after Bardugo’s appointment, he began to frequently meet one-on-one with Netanyahu and they had telephone conversations on a daily basis, as Hefetz disclosed in his testimony. Bardugo, who declared “I’m not a journalist” on his Friday morning program on Army Radio, was soon appointed as a political commentator for the Army Radio station. Although he was not a journalist, he was given full command over the evening news program.

c. Panelists and “Public Intellectuals”

In his sarcastic remarks cited earlier (“You turn on the news – everything’s ‘pro-Bibi’… there are five panelists, maybe one would be against me? They’re all for me!”[[76]](#footnote-77)), Netanyahu addressed the question of whether the Israeli media was still free. His sarcasm demonstrates his level of frustration. Netanyahu raised the issue of panelists to illustrate his claim about the one-sided media. However, two points are critical here: First, he equates criticism with leftism. The media is certainly must be critical of the ruling government. But for Netanyahu, criticism is a political position against him personally. Second, he characterizes the media as either “for Bibi or against Bibi.” He does not say “there is no right-winger on the panel” or “there is no one from the national camp or from the Likud.” For him, you are pro-Bibi, to use his expression, or against him. Everything is personal; everything is about him. When Netanyahu talked about reforming the media, he actually meant to make it pro-Bibi. His ambition to have loyal supporters on every panel materialized almost completely. The cadre of pro-Bibi loyalists, placed by Netanyahu’s men as speakers and panelists, publicists and public intellectuals, promoted the cult of the leader.

On July 22, 2021, the “Association of Israel Media” was launched by prominent members of the pro-Bibi media – from Channel 20, Army Radio, the *Israel Hayom* newspaper and the Mida website.[[77]](#footnote-79) Their main accusation against the media was that “they are Bolsheviks” – a phrase repeatedly used by their leader, Netanyahu, in his speeches at Likud gatherings. There was no truth anymore, and the “universalist” elitist minority was trying to shed Israel’s Jewish identity and control its institutions, they argued. Perhaps the most frequent line used by all participants was: “I’m not a journalist.” If anything, explained Erel Segal, investigative journalism exposing corruption should be imitated in order to balance the equation. “We are all warriors in this battle,” he declared. Shimon Riklin organized the event, while Segal, Erez Tadmor, Gadi Taub, and others preached on stage. “The story is the death of journalism,” Taub asserted. “It is Orwellian propaganda to call us mouthpieces; we, the only ones who deviate from the chorus line, are called mouthpieces.” The event was described in an op-ed published on Mida as “a Zionist response to the Israel Press Council.”[[78]](#footnote-80)

What was unique about those gathered at the event was, first of all, their shared ideology – a Jewish-Zionist reading of the national camp as an avant-garde against a “deep state” controlled by a small leftist elite, of which journalists are an integral part. Those called to the flag by their leader to appear at the event chose various themes to emphasize: Taub spoke of the mobile elites versus the immobile people, the universalists versus the locals. Avishai Ben-Hayim conceptualized the latter as the “second Israel,” galvanized by Netanyahu to resist the hegemony of the Ashkenazi elite. Tadmor raised the deep-state argument and asserted that the old elites still controlled the judicial system, the media, and the gatekeepers, as explained in his book *Why You Vote for the Right and Get the Left*. Yet what was most intriguing was how fluidly they transitioned from working in the media to acting in formal roles on behalf of Netanyahu’s rule. For example, before Tadmor took on the role of Netanyahu’s campaign manager, he was a regular panelist on Friday evening talk shows and head of the right-wing Im Tirzu NGO that engages in extreme actions and publicity against the media, academia, and civil rights organizations. Ran Baratz, another prominent panelist, was the head of Netanyahu’s propaganda machine and became the head of the Mida website. Dror Eidar, a publicist at *Israel Hayom*, was rewarded by Netanyahu with the ambassadorship to Italy. Galit Distel Atbaryan was a writer, a publicist at *Israel Hayom*,and a broadcaster on the right-wing Galey Israel radio station before being placed by Netanyahu in the tenth slot on the Likud list and entering the Knesset in 2021. Riklin, the chief political commentator at Channel 20 and a leading pro-Bibi panelist, was part of the Amana settlers’ movement and a candidate for the Jewish Home party in 2015. Limor Samian-Darash is a senior lecturer at Hebrew University, a publicist at *Israel Hayom*, a broadcaster at Galey Israel and was supposed to be Netanyahu’s personal appointment at the 23rd slot in the 2015 election. (Riklin was also originally slated to be Bibi’s personal appointment at No. 20.) All of the above were frequent panelists on Channel 20, but also appeared on political programs on Channels 12 and 13 – their participation facilitated by Hefetz, Filber and other Netanyahu men. Many of them testified that after appearing on the TV panels they became frequent visitors to the Balfour residence. The ease with which they moved between the various media, serving as Netanyahu’s proxies, suggests they were correct in their self-description as “not journalists.” However, their influence was toxic. Many of the real journalists, “balanced” by Netanyahu’s loyalist panelists, were characterized as warriors of the other camp, even though many were clearly not affiliated with the left or did not wish to disclose their political inclinations.

1. **Direct Attacks on Journalists as the Enemy of the People**

One of the crucial Likud campaign videos that went viral in the 2015 elections presents the following scene: People are sitting in a circle and each get up in turn to introduce themselves, as in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Each person begins by declaring, “I am here because of Bibi,” and the others respond, “We love you, [the person’s name].” Who is represented in this Likud campaign clip? An employee of Israel’s public broadcasting authority, a member of the longshoremen’s union, a cellular company worker (who has a white tiger as a pet) and a Hamas militant. When the others say, “We love you, Mustafa,” the prime minister enters the room. “It is we or them,” the Likud slogan proclaims. Notice the themes: The Arab-lovers on the left embrace the Hamas terrorist. Bibi will “take care” of such enemies of the state – including the unions that are blocking critical reforms at the ports, in public broadcasting and in the cellular industry. The tactics of turning your ideological rivals into disloyal followers of the anti-patriotic left were also at work here.

As the investigations and legal proceedings against Netanyahu progressed, his attacks on the public media grew increasingly vicious and inciting. Bibi, as usual, turned it into a personal battle and waged war against individual investigative journalists, comparing them to the worst of Israel’s enemies. The deep-state argument against the “leftist elites” and the populism of “I am the people” converged and intensified during the rounds of election held in rapid succession. “They don’t want you to vote Likud. We’ll show them,” the campaign poster (below, right) declares under the pictures of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamenei. The same text appears (below, left) under the pictures of two journalists – Amnon Abramovich of Channel 12 and Guy Peleg of Channel 13. Those seeking nuclear weapons to destroy Israel are on the same team as the journalists. They are all enemies of the people.



As we have seen, the attacks against the Israeli media were an integral part of Netanyahu’s agenda upon entering the political scene. In 1999, he sarcastically remarked to Dov Gil-Har during an interview prior to the direct election against Ehud Barak, “You’ll interview Barak with the same rose-colored lens and fawning sycophancy you always use when interviewing the left’s candidates.”[[79]](#footnote-81) A day later, he incited against the journalists at a Likud election rally, chanting – “they are a-fraid” – until the whole crowd shouted along with him. Journalists were the “they” he was referring to. The prime minister pitted himself against the reporters. Netanyahu explicitly contended, “There is an army of journalists enlisted for Barak… We will defeat the left and the media that works with it.”[[80]](#footnote-82) Already in the 1990s, he equated the media with the left, and portrayed the left as notorious Arab-lovers and anti-Zionists. Netanyahu persisted with this argument even though his rival, Barak, was a former IDF chief of staff – hardly an anti-Zionist leftist. Netanyahu again encountered Gil-Har in 2015, this time in a pre-election interview at Walla. Some details surrounding this encounter were later exposed when the Case 4000 investigation unfolded. Walla CEO Yeshua instructed Gil-Har to treat Netanyahu with kid gloves and to start the interview by asking a general question about how the prime minister was doing. Gil-Har, a new recruit for the election coverage at Walla, started by asking a more critical question. (However, he did not ask any questions about Sara Netanyahu, as agreed in advance in accordance with Netanyahu’s conditions for granting the interview). At the end of the interview, Gil-Har was amazed to see Netanyahu rip the microphone from his neck, slam it to the floor and stomp angrily out the room. The Walla cameraman heard someone shouting on the phone, “This interview will never see the day of light.”[[81]](#footnote-83) (It was probably Hefetz, who had sat behind Gil-Har during the interview, facing Netanyahu.) Yeshua called Gil-Har a few minutes later in alarm and told him that he must go back to the prime minister’s residence and ask a few more questions. “It’s bigger than Walla,” he explained. Gil-Har turned down his boss’ request. It was an exclusive interview with the prime minister, a week before the elections. Nonetheless, it did not go on the air that day or the next. Two days later, after being censored by Hefetz and Netanyahu himself, a short version was posted on the Walla website for an hour and then taken down for good. The censorship had sparked a rebellion by the editors and journalists at Walla, who threatened to collectively resign over the doctored interview.[[82]](#footnote-85) According to Hefetz’s personal testimony, a furious Netanyahu took the time to go through the interview line by line and dictate which lines to censor. Gil-Har was sure that this censorship had been performed by Walla editors, not by the prime minister himself. For Netanyahu, everything was personal.

“The media has not internalized that elections are determined in the voting booth, not in the studio of Channel 1,” he nevertheless insisted.[[83]](#footnote-86) The media versus the people was a major theme Netanyahu repeatedly used in his election campaigns as the head of the national camp. “With what mockery they cover our meetings,” Netanyahu said at a Likud party gathering to mark the Jewish New Year on August 31, 2017. “With what mockery, what arrogance, they try to portray us. They don’t just despise us; they despise something deeper still. They actually despise the choice of the people; they despise democracy… They’d do anything to hurt my wife and me because they think that if we fall, the Likud, the whole national camp led by the Likud, will fall. All means are kosher for that.”[[84]](#footnote-87) Netanyahu is the people and the media is the extended arm of his opponents. “The people are fed up with the biased media,” he concluded. It was Netanyahu himself, the prime minister, who time after time found it appropriate to mock journalists. In 2021, in a pre-election interview with Yonit Levi, the top anchor of the Channel 12 news magazine, Netanyahu responded to her critical question by imitating her, with insulting body gestures, and said, “I call it na na na na na na, let’s look (for faults) all the time.”[[85]](#footnote-88) In an interview with Rina Mazliah, anchor of the Meet the Press program, Netanyahu lashed out at her, “This is your interview, huh Rina? … You simply cheat all the time.” Later in the interview, when the attacks continued, she responded, “No other politician has ever treated me like you have.”[[86]](#footnote-89)

But, of course, the most resounding response from Netanyahu came in 2016 after Ilana Dayan, the star anchor on Channel 12, reported on how Netanyahu, his close associates and his wife had interfered even with top security appointments at the Mossad. In response, Netanyahu sent a scathing letter of incitement against the journalist, which she decided to broadcast in full in her own voice. In this letter, Netanyahu accused Dayan of “political propaganda against the prime minister and his wife” and labeled her “an extreme leftist” who calls the Jewish settlements “land robbery” and receives support from the New Israel Fund (which Netanyahu termed “an anti-Zionist fund”). “Dayan’s program tonight demonstrates why the communications market must be reformed.”[[87]](#footnote-90) He, of course, committed himself to leading this reform, as the next section describes.

1. **Influencing Entire Media Outlets**

“Mozes: *Israel Hayom* is yours. Channel 1 is yours. The radio is yours. Channel 10, you’ve closed.” Netanyahu: “None of them is mine.” Mozes: “Channel 1, no.”[[88]](#footnote-91) The chain of command from the owner to the CEO and chief editor and down to the individual journalists was all subject to Netanyahu’s oversight and interference. As noted above, “One dunam, one goat,” as Filber described the methodical tactics that slowly evolved during Netanyahu’s years in office. The media outlets established as pro-Bibi news broadcasting channels, starting with *Israel Hayom*, will be discussed in the next section. But the attempts to gain comprehensive control of the established media, or to substantially weaken them if those efforts failed, are crucial links in the unfolding story.

* 1. Israel Broadcasting Authority

Netanyahu’s attempts to control the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) were the most persistent and yet haphazard. He approved the reform, then supported the committee to reexamine it, then endorsed its results to shut down the IBA and establish an independent authority. Then, realizing he had thus lost control, Netanyahu argued that the matter had “slipped” by him because of the military operation in Gaza and did everything in his power to cancel the new authority and return to the old reform. When that failed, he attempted to divide the new public broadcasting authority into a news organization under his control and a second authority that would handle other topics. In the end, he told Filber, then serving as director general of the Ministry of Communications, that he might as well abolish the public broadcasting authority altogether.[[89]](#footnote-92) Several state comptroller inquiries have focused on the IBA. The relations between the public broadcasting authority and politicians have always raised suspicion. Netanyahu was not unique in his attempts to influence this media organization.[[90]](#footnote-93) For him, however, it became part of a mission. As his loyal minister of culture, Miri Regev, notoriously put it, “What good is it if we can’t control it?” It became a binary option for Netanyahu: Either the public broadcasting authority would be under his direct control, or he would shut it down forever. In this pursuit, he employed regulatory and legislative means, along with threats to completely boycott or dismantle it.

When Netanyahu returned as prime minister in 2009, a reform of the IBA was almost ready for implementation. Netanyahu assigned ministerial responsibility for the IBA to Yuli Edelstein, who tried three times to win the prime minister’s consent to appoint a new, professional chairperson to lead the reform at the IBA. But each time, Netanyahu gave and then withdrew his consent for Edelstein’s proposed appointee, offering no clear explanation why.[[91]](#footnote-94) Edelstein finally gave up and Netanyahu appointed the director general of the Prime Minister’s Office, his loyal supporter Eyal Gabay, for the IBA mission. This sparked public criticism and claims that “appointing Gabay constitutes a political takeover of the IBA.”[[92]](#footnote-95) MK Nachman Shai of the Kadima party, today the minister of diaspora affairs in Naftali Bennett’s government, argued that giving authority to the top political appointment of the prime minister entails “conflicts of interests and a prohibited abuse of governmental power, as well as cynical manipulation of the IBA crisis for personal political needs.”[[93]](#footnote-96) Shai’s warning was correct: The first reform instituted under Gabay was to make the chairperson’s appointment subject to the communications minister’s approval. The communications minister, of course, was Netanyahu himself.[[94]](#footnote-97) Netanyahu then appointed Amir Gilat, his former spokesperson, as the chairperson of the IBA. Gilat brought Netanyahu’s people back into the IBA, and appointed Yoni Ben-Menachem as its director general – despite his lack of professional qualifications. Indeed, Gabay himself said that Ben-Menachem was unfit to lead the IBA and ended up resigning from his job as director general of the Prime Minister’s Office.[[95]](#footnote-98) The whole point of the reform of the public broadcasting authority – to shield it from political interference – was turned on its head. Netanyahu gained control by personally appointing the heads of the IBA and the regulator, as well as changing the relevant legislation. The situation became so severe that the treasury refused to transfer the funds for the reform. The Landes Committee decided that there was no choice but to shut down the IBA and create a new professional body.

Thus, in 2013, a reform plan was already ready for implementation, awaiting only the signature of the incoming communications minister appointed by Netanyahu – Gilad Erdan. This reform was the result of long negotiations between some 16 different organizations representing the IBA employees, and officials from the Finance Ministry and the Prime Minister’s Office. Ironically, the initial reform was triggered by State Comptroller reports concerning corruption at the IBA, linked to the political and unprofessional leadership of the organization appointed by the prime minister’s representatives, with their direct involvement in some of the programs and beneficiaries (Comptroller, 2011). Erdan, the new minister, however, did not sign the reform. “Be Kahlons,” Netanyahu urged his ministers, referring to the reforms Moshe Kahlon had brought to the cellular market. Erdan knew exactly how to play this role: He would be the minister who would end the hated IBA tax. But Erdan, a good student of his leader, whose slogan was always “trim the fat man” (that is, the civil service), sought to do even more. He planned not only to cancel the tax, but to transfer the IBA from the government’s orbit of influence into the professional, economically efficient realm of the market.

Erdan appointed finance and media professionals to the Landes Committee, which issued very clear recommendations: Close the IBA and establish a new, professional body, with a council led by a judge. The idea was that the new body would maintain a much leaner budget and conduct itself professionally, distancing itself from politicians and the corrupt political culture of the IBA (Landes, 2014). Both Erdan, the loyal communications minister appointed by Netanyahu, and the finance minister, Yair Lapid, endorsed the recommendations, as did Netanyahu himself.[[96]](#footnote-99) Again, the new policy was ready for implementation. But then came the 2015 elections. The coalition agreement that all coalition partners had to sign included a very peculiar article (Article 26) stating that the government would lead major reforms in the communications market, that all of the coalition partners were committed to supporting these reforms, and that they would refrain from supporting any communications-related initiative without the express consent of the communications minister. Under this article, all coalition parties were also obligated to oppose any initiative that the communications minister opposed.[[97]](#footnote-100) Just before finalizing the reform, Netanyahu booted Erdan from the Ministry of Communications and appointed himself to replace him. Why did Netanyahu insist on inserting Article 26 into the coalition agreement? He obviously knew that his new moves would generate opposition even within the coalition from both Erdan and Kahlon. Erdan was surprised to discover that his elegant, tailor-made plan to shut down and recreate the public broadcasting authority, a plan that was consistent with everything Netanyahu had advocated as finance minister, was to be reversed. Kahlon was slated to be the new finance minister and represented the most centrist party in Israel’s most right-wing coalition ever.

What was going on? Why was the strategic move to close the IBA and create a new public broadcasting authority now reversed? Instead of following through on the plan Netanyahu had supported in the previous Knesset, MK David Bitan, the coalition whip and Netanyahu’s go-to guy at the time, proposed reconsidering and adopting the reform Erdan had rejected back in 2013. The heads of the new authority are leftists, Bitan explained (Toker, 2017b). And Regev, the minister of culture, asserted on July 31, 2016, “What good is it if we don’t control it? The minister should rule. What, we give the funding and then they broadcast whatever they want?” (Malki, 2016). Why was the new authority, Kan, rejected by Netanyahu’s loyal ministers? Gil Omer, the chairman of Kan, disclosed that politicians pressured the new management of Kan to appoint their people, and Omer Ben-Rubi, the manager of Kan’s Israel Radio, urged the politicians to admit that they did not want any public broadcasting at all (Toker, 2017b). In November 2017, the interior minister, Aryeh Dery, riled by unsympathetic coverage of the police investigations against him, proposed closing Kan’s TV news division and relegating news coverage to the radio only (Toker and Zerharia, 2017). Ayoub Kara, the new communications minister, appointed by Netanyahu after the court ordered the prime minister to step down from this additional role, immediately tweeted that shutting down Kan’s news division would be a good move that would save the taxpayers’ money. Kara quickly deleted this tweet. His master had not yet approved it, even though the idea came from Netanyahu’s man Filber, who was then serving as Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office. Filber had proposed terminating Kan if the takeover effort failed. The court had ordered Netanyahu to step down as communications minister because he was under investigation for allegedly conspiring with the editor of *Yedioth Ahronoth* to receive favorable coverage in exchange for reducing the circulation of the free newspaper, *Israel Hayom*, owned by Netanyahu’s patron Sheldon Adelson.

What happened next in this public broadcasting saga? The Knesset hastily decided to divide the new Kan authority into two separate organizations, so that the news authority would be completely out of reach of Kan’s management, with a new council and chairperson. This legislation reached the Supreme Court. On November 6, 2017, the court gave the state two weeks to state whether it would amend the law or just cancel it, before handing down a ruling. Justice Melcer noted, “There is no such model in any of the Western democracies. It is impossible and impractical, and therefore does not exist” (Toker, 2017a). The government defended the law and claimed that if the court decided to strike it down, that would only reinforce the Netanyahu government’s contention that the courts are one-sided and politically motivated rather than serving as impartial judges. It goes back to the politics of identity, and the accusation that “everything is political,” as Israel’s president, Reuven Rivlin, said at the opening of the 2017 fall Knesset session:

The Israeli media can be criticized… but it is one thing to try to fix it… quite another to want to control it. Tell me, how could a weak media that begs for its life be in the interest of Israel or of Israeli democracy?... Where are we going? Is this governability? … There is no longer statehood, only governability. Democracy in such an atmosphere means that the strong rules. The power of the occasional majority is what governs (Rivlin, 2017).

The president argued that the gist of this *coup d’état* was to weaken the gatekeepers of Israeli democracy, including the judicial system, senior civil servants, the attorney general and law enforcement agencies, along with the public media. So what is this concept of governability, which according to the president had replaced statehood and fostered an “all is political” revolution – which amounts to a *de facto* tyranny of the majority? The ideologues in Netanyahu’s government argued in reply: Government ministers represent the people, who are the sole authority in democracies. The ministers are trying to formulate policies consistent with their worldview, but face opposition from the bureaucrats in their ministries, from the state attorneys, and from the courts – none of whom were elected by the people, and therefore lack legitimacy. Indeed, they undermine the people’s democracy. Hence, Netanyahu’s allies attempted to politicize the management of the ministries, to weaken the attorney general, to reduce the power of the courts and to curtail criticism by the media. This concept of governability provided a foundation for changing the rules of the game. Under a neoliberal ethos, the reform of Israel’s public broadcasting authority aimed to abolish both the hated tax and the IBA itself, and then reopen a new executive authority that would operate outside the public sector. But the new, sudden reform was based on a concept of governability that sought full government control over the public broadcasting authority’s management, funds and personnel.

1. Channel 2 and Channel 10: On the Verge of Splitting, Merging, or Closing

Despite his denial, Netanyahu was thoroughly involved in attempting to control entire media organizations. Although focused on the IBA’s public broadcasting monopoly, he also fought to control the two commercial news outlets – Channel 2 and Channel 10 – after they went on the air: He tried to influence their owners, CEOs and chief editors, and to ensure they were always at the mercy of the political realm, so that they would always feel under threat of being shut down. Netanyahu exercised all of his power – as a regulator, as a legislator and as the minister in charge – to show the media outlets that their very survival depended on him. If there was no actual threat of closure, there was always the specter of a possible reform – threatening to split, unite, transform, change regulations, cut budgets and other measures that would make the managers of the channels and the journalists always fear for their livelihood.[[98]](#footnote-101)

In 2012, Netanyahu, to everyone’s amazement, tried to pass a bill stipulating that he, the prime minister, would be personally and exclusively in charge of Channel 2; he alone would be able to determine when and if Channel 2 would split into two channels. This effectively bypassed the communications minister (Kahlon, at the time), the ministry’s professional staff and Channel 2’s board of directors. Netanyahu wanted direct control of the most powerful news organization in Israel. There was a public uproar and the bill was withdrawn.[[99]](#footnote-102)

Much of the evidence for this quest for control and its personal nature came from Netanyahu’s interviews and subsequent investigative reports – and from the testimonies surrounding his trial, of course. For example, in the 2014 recordings, Netanyahu discussed with Mozes the question of separating the two channels – 10 and 12 – or closing the former. Netanyahu asked Mozes for his opinion and Mozes replied that two channels generate more criticism. Netanyahu said he did not think that the competition, meaning Channel 2, would object to eliminating Channel 10 later on. Netanyahu added, “As for Channel 10, you know that in your media there is sometimes a neutral word about me, but never a positive word. On Channel 10, there’s never a positive word. It’s so unbalanced, super-negative.”[[100]](#footnote-103) From Netanyahu’s perspective, this justified shutting down Channel 10. Then Mozes got to the crux of his argument, asserting that Netanyahu already had his own guys – “[Yossi] Maiman and Ronald [Laufer].” Netanyahu said that it made no difference, and Mozes replied, “You know why it had no effect? Excuse my immodesty, but you have to know how to manage. The owners need to be able to communicate… you have to manage your journalists. You think it’s easy to manage journalists, each with an inflated chest? You need to know how to do it. None of the owners knew how to do it. Maiman didn’t know. Ronald didn’t know. With all due respect to Michal [Grayevsky] and Avi [Balashnikov], do they know how to run them? That’s why you had to do everything. Find someone whom you can trust to be the owner of Channel 10. Someone who will not be afraid to fight with the news group.”[[101]](#footnote-104)

Netanyahu did not necessarily have a ready-made position or strategy, but attempted to leave things hanging in the balance – always with the threat of closing media outlets – in order to make journalists feel more vulnerable and dependent. Yet threats did materialize in his struggle to control and reshape the news media in Israel: For many years, there were threats to close Channel 10 and to split Channel 2 – and indeed, Netanyahu ultimately carried out these threats.[[102]](#footnote-105) Yet the road was bumpy. In his effort to silence Channel 10, he pulled the strings behind the scenes by activating “his” media owners against the others. For example, Adelson induced Channel 10’s managers to resign by filing a huge lawsuit against them. The resignations totally changed Channel 10.[[103]](#footnote-106) Orchestrating enormous lawsuits against public news outlets was a known tactic from the playbook of tycoons in the United States, Britain, and Australia. It was replayed in the Israeli case against Channel 10. As for Channel 2, the green light for Erdan’s reform of splitting it into two outlets was given in 2014 – by none other than Netanyahu. Erdan based this plan on the prime minister’s stated objective of breaking the monopoly of Channel 2 as the dominant commercial and public channel. However, at the very last minute, much to the surprise of Erdan, a loyal minister operating according to the prime minister’s logic and instructions, Netanyahu backtracked and cancelled the reform. His excuse was that since he was slated to become the new minister in charge of Channel 2, he wanted to study the matter before executing the split.[[104]](#footnote-107) Controlling the dominant news channel was more tempting than breaking down its monopoly. Power over ideology.

Creating a cloud of uncertainty about the channel’s future was definitely part of the strategy to stifle critical, investigative journalism in Israel. The real possibility of closing Channels 10 and 13 before the merger with Reshet posed an existential threat to the journalists and discouraged critical journalism. Even at Channel 12, the journalists always watched what was happening at *Maariv* and other media outlets, and tailored their journalism to fit more closely with the expectations of the channel’s owners, the investigative journalist Raviv Drucker explained in an interview.[[105]](#footnote-108) Even the most independent journalists were caught in the balance – the same “balance” Netanyahu was so eager to achieve: to place his loyalists in the media outlets and to make sure everyone else in the news industry was well aware of his omnipotence and lived under constant threat. After four rounds of elections and twelve years in power, Netanyahu continued to try to weaken Channel 22, and dismantle the news authority of the public broadcasting authority and Army Radio.[[106]](#footnote-109) The latter became a notorious example of how to corrupt an entire news outlet from within.

1. Army Radio

Netanyahu disclosed under interrogation that when Yaron Dekel took over the reins of the radio station, he asked the prime minister for names of reporters to hire, explaining that he was willing “to balance” the public station. For Netanyahu, “to balance” meant to combat a leftist, biased public media. To balance did not mean recruiting journalists from minority groups like the religious, the Arab, or the Mizrahi communities. It did not even mean bringing in right-wing people. Rather, it meant bringing in Netanyahu’s men, those he could trust to convey his messages and follow his instructions by attacking his designated opponents. With Netanyahu, there was no gray area: You were either for him or against him.

Erel Segal, the self-declared “pro-Bibi number 1,” was only the first of many Netanyahu loyalists to join the ranks of Army Radio.[[107]](#footnote-110) In an exclusive gathering with the chief editors and news journalists at Army Radio in 2016, Netanyahu disclosed that he had already spoken with Dekel and had “told him what my plans for Army Radio are.” At this meeting, the chief news editor, Avi Barzilay, noted that he was formerly a leftist and heaped compliments on the prime minister. Barzilay promptly ordered the cancellation of investigative reports on the Likud.[[108]](#footnote-111) Dekel, the new commander of Army Radio, likewise called for recruiting more right-wingers, along with religious Israelis and those living in the periphery.[[109]](#footnote-112) However, the people he brought to Army Radio were clearly Netanyahu loyalists, as later noted by the chief investigative reporter, Avner Hofstein.[[110]](#footnote-113) Hofstein was fired the next year and sued Army Radio and Dekel for limiting freedom of speech and imposing censorship on the media; he received a settlement of 83,000 shekels.[[111]](#footnote-114) Hofstein accused Dekel of deliberately importing pro-Bibi advocates into Army Radio. For example, Erel Segal often brought Shimon Riklin and Galit Distel Atbaryan as co-anchors on his talk show.[[112]](#footnote-115) As noted, Bardugo joined Army Radio the same week as Segal. Bardugo became a prominent voice on Army Radio, the only publicist to broadcast six days a week. He was awarded the title of political expert and made the co-anchor of the evening news magazine. Two editors quit the program following clashes with Bardugo, and several distinguished anchors refused to be co-anchors with him. Bardugo and fellow right-winger Amir Ivgi repeatedly trumpeted fake news that top Army Radio journalists such as Rino Tzror and Razi Barkai refused to air.[[113]](#footnote-116) Bardugo noted that he spoke with Netanyahu several times a week or even a day and became a frequent visitor to the prime minister’s Balfour Street residence after joining Army Radio. He became so prominent at the station that the Blue and White party’s campaign included clips stating, “You listened to Bardugo? You received Netanyahu.”[[114]](#footnote-117) As tensions continued to rise, the idea of shutting down the station surfaced in 2020. The minister of defense, Benny Gantz, and the IDF chief of staff, Aviv Kochavi both declared that they saw no room for a military radio station and asked not to appoint a new commander after Elkabetz finishes his term in August 2021. (Elkabetz was Netanyahu’s man, as disclosed in the Filber-Hefetz conversations.) “I think there is no room for employing soldiers in programs that are in essence political, regardless of whether they attack or support me. IDF soldiers should be kept far away from any political orientation and the station should be state-oriented, which it has not been for a long time now,” Gantz explained.[[115]](#footnote-118) Gantz and his party came under vicious attacks from Bardugo, as have many other political opponents of Netanyahu – even from his own camp and party. But it was not just one commentator. That became clear once Elkabetz hired Ivgi, a Channel 20 reporter who notoriously declared in 2018 that “had there been more Ivgis out there, Netanyahu may not have ended up in the investigation room at all.”[[116]](#footnote-119) At Channel 20, he recited Netanyahu’s messages and openly supported the loyal ministers he interviewed, while refraining from airing dissenting voices. Hardly a model of professional journalism, Ivgi was appointed by Elkabetz to head the Army Radio newsroom, where he soon created an atmosphere of terror among veterans and young employees alike.[[117]](#footnote-120) Now that Army Radio was led by commander Elkabetz, newsroom chief Ivgi and political commentator Bardugo, there was no longer much debate about the justification of a military radio station: The consensus among the relevant decision makers was that the politicized radio station was not good for the IDF or for professional journalism.

1. The Knesset Channel Attempt

The 2017 tender for operating the Knesset Channel was won by Channel 20, a right-wing, pro-Netanyahu outlet whose license prohibited it from broadcasting news. How did this “Jewish legacy” outlet win the tender for the inherently news-oriented Knesset Channel? The decision was made by a tender committee composed of members of the Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Council appointed by Netanyahu’s government. The announcement of the winning bid sparked accusations about the political bias it reflected.[[118]](#footnote-121) Not only were the committee members political appointees, they were not media professionals. Despite the fact that the bid was based 50% on media content, the only two media-content professionals on the committee (apart from the chair, who was a political appointment) were dismissed or resigned – so their votes did not count. The actor and director Roy Horovitz, for example, resigned from the tender committee shortly before the decision was made, citing the political nature of the process.[[119]](#footnote-122) Thus, the regulative body was in fact infused with political appointees made over the years by Netanyahu. The tender fell like a ripe fruit into the hands of the Jewish heritage Channel 20. Yet the public outcry did not subside. There were appeals to the Supreme Court and it was disclosed that Channel 20 did not even meet the minimal requirements of the tender. As noted, Channel 20 was not licensed to broadcast news. Moreover, the bid it submitted exceeded the bounds stipulated in the tender, which limited the Knesset Channel to public funding, without any commercial sponsors. The bid was ultimately rejected and another operator was selected. The CEO of the new operator was none other than Eran Tiefenbrunn, the head of the Mozes empire’s Ynet website. Mozes assured Netanyahu that Tiefenbrunn was eager to “turn the ship around” and give more pro-Bibi coverage. “Eran is a right-winger,” Mozes assured him.[[120]](#footnote-123)

1. **Getting ‘His Own’ Media**

At the beginning of an interview on Channel 20, Netanyahu said:

Do you know why I’m here? Because it’s the last place on the televised media in Israel where a prime minister from the right can speak… The only fair arena and that is why I’m here. And it might be the case that you won’t be here much longer because of the silencing I see on Facebook… this is absolute fascism.[[121]](#footnote-124)

Netanyahu abstained from granting interviews to the Israeli public media in his last five years or so in power. This did not mean he conceded his prerogative to hold “press conferences” on prime-time TV. On the contrary, he controlled the agenda and very often the opening items of the news magazines – calling “emergency” press gatherings to talk directly to the people about security, COVID-19 or other issues, but without allowing journalists to ask any questions. Of course, this excluded the last two weeks of an election campaign over the years 2019–2021, when he would have a blitz of interviews on every possible media outlet. An important part of these interviews was to lock horns with the interviewers themselves, to mock or ridicule them, or to accuse them of asking unfair questions. Indeed, Netanyahu’s campaigners saw that confronting the mainstream media won points with the right-wing leader’s supporters. Besides these pre-election blitzes, the only media outlets where he was willing to be interviewed were “his own media,” the pro-Bibi outlets he had groomed over the years. He would gladly sit for a fawning interview at these safe havens, such as the *Israel Hayom* newspaper, the Galey Israel radio station, the Walla website and Channel 20.[[122]](#footnote-125)

But the grand plan, as he often confided in his tycoon friends, thinking they would understand and help him fulfill his dreams, was a nationalist, populist and conservative media empire, loyal to him and supportive of his government. The images Netanyahu had in mind were of such moguls as Hurst in the United States, Murdoch in Britain, Springer in Germany and Packer, the father of James Packer, tycoon-friend of Yair Netanyahu, in Australia.[[123]](#footnote-126) Netanyahu often tried to persuade tycoons to get involved in the media business by portraying it as a national mission that would save the future of the Jewish people by depicting its leader in a positive way, rescuing Israel from the horrors of the left and facilitating a free-market, right-wing approach that would benefit the business interests of these tycoons in Israel.[[124]](#footnote-127) In this way, Netanyahu had hoped to counter and then destroy the Mozes media empire and deliver a devastating blow to critical journalism in Israel. It is possible to see a correlation, and perhaps even a causal relation, between his long tenure as prime minister (the longest in Israel’s history) and growth of the *Israel Hayom* newspaper and other pro-Bibi media outlets.[[125]](#footnote-128)

* 1. Israel Hayom

Investigator: “How often do you contact Elovich?”

Netanyahu: “Much less than I contact Sheldon Adelson and Regev. Much, much less, but what’s the problem here?

Investigator: “[The problem is] that you’re the minister of communications.”[[126]](#footnote-129)

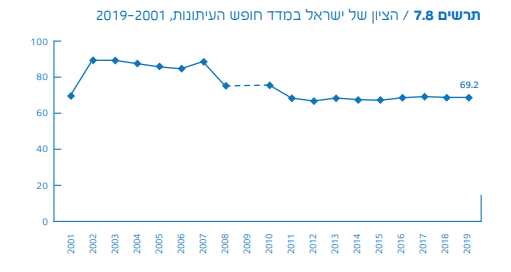
*Israel Hayom* was designed not just to promote Netanyahu’s regime, but to destroy the free press in Israel. Unlike other free newspapers that charged high prices for ads, *Israel Hayom*’s business model included low-priced ads. Once it became the newspaper with the largest circulation in Israel, printing up to 550,000 copies a day, advertisers preferred it to *Yedioth* and *Maariv*, and those two newspapers virtually collapsed economically.[[127]](#footnote-130) The free newspaper has cost its owners an estimated one billion dollars.[[128]](#footnote-131) The paper peaked with around 300,000 copies daily on weekdays and half a million by weekends in 2015–2016. Research conducted by Yotam Margalit and others indicated that *Israel Hayom* influenced the voting patterns of Israelis, and, in that sense, significantly contributed to support for the right, the Likud party, and Netanyahu. In the 2015 elections, it is thought that the Likud gained an extra two to three Knesset seats thanks to *Israel Hayom*.[[129]](#footnote-132) It operated in a non-commercial way since it was not dependent on advertisements and explicitly supported one politician: Netanyahu.[[130]](#footnote-133) The Mozes empire and other media outlets were not confined to one politician, but manipulated many politicians over the years. *Israel Hayom* was unique in its total support for one politician: 76% of its pre-election coverage in the recent rounds of elections was devoted to Netanyahu and the Likud. *Israel Hayom* was not a right-wing paper; Lieberman and Bennett called it *Pravda*. It was 100% committed to Netanyahu.[[131]](#footnote-134) The relationship between newspapers and politicians is, of course, complex. But no other outlet was in the exclusive service of a party or a politician, even in the heyday of Mapai. In addition, *Israel Hayom* was propagating the deep-state argument endorsed by Netanyahu.[[132]](#footnote-135)

The influences of *Israel Hayom* was different on the journalistic, discursive, and political levels. It did not establish a reputation for outstanding right-wing journalism; it was simply viewed by the public and the media community as a pro-Bibi publication, distributed for free.[[133]](#footnote-136) In terms of discourse, the vast outreach to people, especially in the periphery, meant that Netanyahu’s regime definitely benefited by the newspaper’s direct influence on his electoral base. From a political perspective, frequent calls from Netanyahu and his media managers to the chief editor of *Israel Hayom* were exposed in a series of investigative reports by Raviv Drucker.[[134]](#footnote-137) *Israel Hayom*’s headline after Drucker’s report is most telling: “Netanyahu: In a proper world, Raviv Drucker would have entered prison today.”[[135]](#footnote-138) In other media empires, the tycoon gets to determine the paper’s editorial policy; in Israel, it’s the prime minster himself. Netanyahu, as Drucker exposed, frequently called the editor and owner of *Israel Hayom –* sometimes just as the paper was about to be sent to print. The prime minister received unfiltered headlines and his words were printed unedited, with no commentary or criticism. The issues were presented from the viewpoint of Netanyahu and the Likud. The journalist was relegated to a minor role. Another example is a comparative analysis of the day after the fourth round of elections. The political coverage, as usual, can be divided into two camps: *Israel Hayom* and all the rest. *Yedioth*, *Haaretz* and *Maariv* reported on the speculations and scenarios from the perspective of the “bloc for change,” which ultimately formed the Bennett-Lapid government, while *Israel Hayom* reported from the opposite angle.”[[136]](#footnote-139)

Adelson used his ultimate tool – his money – to threaten media outlets in Israel. In 2011, he threatened to file a huge lawsuit against Channel 10. The explicit aim was to weaken the channel, which was critical of the prime minister, and further undermine its economic viability. As noted, Adelson sought to do the same to *The Seventh Eye* website. A day after *The Seventh Eye* published an embarrassing report on Adelson, Akiva Bigman, a close associate of *Israel Hayom*’s editor-in-chief Boaz Bismuth, threatened to retaliate with a story accusing *The Seventh Eye* of selective coverage and of receiving support from the New Israel Fund, depicted in *Israel Hayom* an extreme leftist organization. *The Seventh Eye* responded that Bigman’s threat was part of *Israel Hayom*’s pattern of trying to intimidate other media outlets.[[137]](#footnote-140)

Adelson subsequently acquired NRG, *Maariv*’s internet platform, as well as *Makor Rishon*, a right-wing, religious-Zionist newspaper.[[138]](#footnote-141) Once Case 2000 came to light in January 2017, *Israel Hayom* reduced the number of copies it printed by about 15%. After the Netanyahu-Mozes recordings were released, Adelson vowed that he would never talk with Netanyahu again.[[139]](#footnote-142)

*Israel Hayom*’s impact went far beyond changing the newspaper scene in Israel. It had a crucial political influence, especially on the lower socioeconomic strata, Netanyahu’s electoral base. It profoundly influenced the print newspapers and virtually caused the collapse of *Maariv*. It provided a platform for Netanyahu’s mouthpieces in the media, and was the main reason for Israel’s lower ranking in international indexes of press freedom, a decline that began when *Israel Hayom* began publishing in 2007.



Israel’s Freedom of the Press, The Israeli Democracy Index 2020 (IDI, 2020: 163).

* 1. Channel 20

The license granted to Channel 20 in 2014 was “to establish, produce, edit and broadcast a TV channel dedicated to Israel heritage in the form of a TV channel for the entire family.”[[140]](#footnote-143) It later stated: “The broadcasts will include a wide variety of subjects related to Israel’s heritage, the Jewish religion, history, culture and traditions of the Jewish people in the Diaspora and in Israel, considering the social and cultural existence of the Jewish public, including all its components, currents and hues in Israel and abroad.” The license specifically states that the channel “is not authorized to broadcast news programs” (Article 30.1), but it could act otherwise with the permission of the regulatory council.

The formative struggles in pursuing Netanyahu’s vision of creating an Israeli version of Fox News[[141]](#footnote-144) included the battle to authorize Channel 20 to produce and broadcast news; the attempt to commit the state, rather than its owner, to fund the channel; the attempt to shake off the regulation altogether; and the failed move to control the Knesset Channel.

One afternoon in late June, I received a phone call from Channel 20 inviting me to talk about my op-ed in *Globes* that morning on the question of a Jewish state versus an Israeli state as the fundamental fault line of Israeli politics.[[142]](#footnote-145) I came straight from the university, wearing a long dress with short sleeves. The interviewer was Naveh Dromi on her evening talk show on politics. She was a regular panelist as a pro-Bibi publicist on Meet the Press and her op-eds appeared in *Haaretz*. As I sat in the studio besides her and another interviewer from Forum Kohelet, a producer entered and asked me to put on a long-sleeved jacket. I was shocked, but took the jacket. Dromi was even more shocked. “I’m furious,” she told me. “I think you shouldn’t put it on; this is religious coercion.” I took it off. Another producer came in and said they were sorry but couldn’t allow a sleeveless dress because the channel’s owner is a religious man and they were afraid he’d complain. I put on the jacket, but Dromi remained speechless, in shock. I talked for ten minutes about my thesis and left the building. No, there were no official instructions or dress code. This was a classic example of “Gramsci hegemony,” where the actors play according to the rules and values of the hegemon without being coerced to do so. This was not the only such incident, a report in *Haaretz* revealed. As it turned out, there was someone named Lerner at Channel 20 whom the employees referred to as the “modesty officer.” Menachem Brod, a Chabad rabbi and spokesperson, was the chief executive in all religious matters pertaining to Channel 20.[[143]](#footnote-146) The channel’s owner was Yitzhak Mirilashvili, the son of tycoon Michael Mirilashvili, who started in the gambling business in St. Petersburg and later became heavily involved in the gas industry in Israel. Mirilashvili was a chief contributor to Aryeh Deri and was investigated by the police for giving 600,000 shekels to Yaffa Deri’s NGOs, but also funded the campaigns of Ze’ev Elkin, Yuli Edelstein and other religious-right politicians. He particularly invested in Jewish-related organizations like his Meromim Foundation. The religiosity of Channel 20 was one of the reasons why the founding editor, Moti Schklar, left the channel.[[144]](#footnote-147) Before the news license was granted, Mirilashvili announced that if the request was denied he would shut down the channel.[[145]](#footnote-148) Netanyahu appointed Likud MK Yoav Kish to quickly amend the law to lift the restrictions on such channels. But after two weeks, Channel 20’s news program received ratings of only 1.4%. In terms of the channel itself, the professional staff was too small to produce a proper news program and most of the employees performed multiple roles, such as editor, reporter and photographer.[[146]](#footnote-149) Essentially, it was a “talking heads” program and not a news production.

While Channel 20 was licensed to operate as a Jewish heritage channel, there was an attempt from day one to make it into a Fox News-like, right-wing channel. Yes, Netanyahu again tried to sell his decade-old dream, this time to Mirilashvili. While the original terms stipulated that 75% of the channel’s programming would be devoted to Jewish tradition, it soon became clear that its current events programs were expanding toward news coverage. Indeed, Netanyahu was personally involved in extending the license to include news production and broadcasting. In recordings released by the journalist Sefi Ovadia on Channel 13, Netanyahu repeatedly asks the minister of communications he had appointed, “But how can we save the news [on Channel 20]?” Netanyahu complains that the channel had ratings of only 1 or 2%, yet “they also want it”[[147]](#footnote-150) – “they” meaning his enemies, who would not even accept a 1% pro-Bibi media. In the recorded conversation, Netanyahu and Kara discuss whether to amend the law (to allow Channel 20 to broadcast news) or to lobby the regulator – the Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Council. Kara suggests dismissing the council members and appointing others to replace them. Netanyahu shouts at him in response, “Why dismiss when you can disband it? Disband it!”[[148]](#footnote-151) Instead of hiding the fact that he was acting in violation of the regulations, Netanyahu publicly boasted about helping Channel 20 become a right-wing news channel. This was explicitly contrary to the directives of the attorney general. However, two weeks before the September 2019 elections, it was important for Netanyahu to highlight his struggle against the attorney general and the “deep-state mechanisms,” and to show that he was a prime minister who catered to the nationalist-religious camp.[[149]](#footnote-152) The background for this was the regulator’s decision to fine Channel 20 for deviating from its license by broadcasting news and current events programs, far beyond the permitted limits, for many months. The Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Council ruled on the deviation in September and gave the channel four months to study the ruling, but the channel did not change its programming in any way whatsoever.[[150]](#footnote-153) The fine imposed was estimated at 4 million shekels, which could have potentially shut the channel down. Netanyahu’s attempt to resolve this was to coerce systemic changes so that all such channels would be abolished. Channel 20 could then begin operating as an independent news agency, but this would require an investment of 70 million shekels and a complete separation between the owner and the programming. However, Mirilashvili did not have deep enough pockets, and Channel 20 lacked the funds and professional staff to lift it from its meager 1% rating.

Here is one of the great riddles of Netanyahu’s thesis: If indeed “the people are right-wing” and the people choose Netanyahu time and again, why was Channel 20, the would-be Israeli Fox News, such a failure? Why was the right camp in Israel not watching Channel 20? One answer is that the level of the news programs was very low, due to the channel’s small budget and lack of professional personnel. As noted, it thus became essentially a “talking heads” channel. However, was this really only a budgetary issue? Was the vision really to foster right-wing, conservative journalism? One of the most fascinating debates was among right-wing media people. Two prime examples were Amit Segal and Kalman Liebskind, both distinguished investigative journalists who were invited, naturally, to work at Channel 20.

Liebskind, a reporter for the *Maariv* newspaper who was pushed by Netanyahu’s people to Channel 11, was also recruited for Channel 20. Liebskind had both a morning magazine with Asaf Liberman on the radio and an evening talk show on Channel 11. He was a regular panelist on Channel 20’s “The Patriots” show, the only program that appealed to a more general right-wing population. He was also the anchor of the election night program, which meant interpreting the results as they came in live from the polls. In September 2020, Liebskind published a column in *Maariv* calling on Netanyahu to accept a plea bargain in his trial and leave politics, for the benefit of the right and the Israeli public. To his amazement, the pro-Bibi media people, most of whom were working at Channel 20, launched a coordinated, personal attack, against him. Liebskind responded in an article entitled “The Dangerous Flowerbed: The Weeds that Grew on the Outskirts of Right-wing Journalism,” arguing that the self-defined “media people” – who move back and forth between the political scene and the pro-Bibi media, and readily admit they are not journalists – have no journalistic values, no keen interest in the truth, no code of ethics and no knowledge of real investigative journalism. One of their major tools of work, he contended, is fake news. As a case in point, he noted their attack against him, and against three other right-wing journalists who concurred that it would be in the best interests of the political right in Israel if Netanyahu departed from politics.

How is fake news produced, distributed, and perceived as common knowledge? Riklin used a fable to criticize Liebskind: According to Riklin, journalists can be divided into three groups: the ants, the elephants, and the goats. When ant journalists meet an ant, they make it into an elephant in order to serve their agenda. The elephants do not need the whole elephant to see the big picture; they aren’t journalists, but are out to change the world. I, says Riklin, hope that I am one of them. As for the goat journalists, if you throw them a bone, they look at it and shout: Here’s a goat! In Riklin’s allegory, Liebskind is a goat journalist, as reflected in his reporting on the “Galant affair.” In Riklin’s analysis, Liebskind received a leak about building violations at Yoav Galant’s home and then published a report that ultimately cost Galant his appointment as IDF chief of staff. Liebskind missed the big story, the elephant, in Riklin’s reading of events: Other IDF officers wanted to prevent Galant from becoming the chief of staff.[[151]](#footnote-154)

Riklin, the leading figure at Channel 20, used the elephant allegory to explain why a secret meeting between the attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, and journalists of the religious right produced four op-eds that called upon Netanyahu to leave politics. The big elephant in the room, Riklin argued in a 15-minute monologue on Channel 20, is that Netanyahu was right: Mandelblit is a political actor, biased against Netanyahu and working in collaboration with “the Saladin gang” – the Ministry of Justice in Jerusalem.[[152]](#footnote-155) Liebskind, in his analysis of the events and in response to this monologue, distinguished not between goat and elephant journalists, but between journalists and non-journalists. Instead of concocting fake news about “the Mandelblit briefing,” Liebskind argued, the simplest thing a journalist is expected to do is to check the facts, to look for the truth. Liebskind telephoned the other three right-wing journalists who also called on Netanyahu to step down – Haggai Segal, editor of *Makor Rishon*, Emanuel Shilo, editor of *Besheva*, and Akiva Novick of *Haaretz* – and asked them whether any of them had met with Mandelblit during the past week. Well, none of the four (including Liebskind) had recently met with the attorney general. A simple fact check.[[153]](#footnote-156) Liebskind described how Riklin, Bardugo, Yaara Zered, Erez Tadmor, and others, on Channel 20 or Galey Israel, recycled this fake news to “prove” that the attorney general was a political actor of the left, and that Liebskind and the others had now joined its ranks. Liebskind gave examples of how the pro-Bibi “media people,” as they like to call themselves, move frequently between politics and the media: running Netanyahu’s campaign and then performing as a panelist on his behalf (Tadmor); working as a spokesperson for the Likud and then presenting a morning show on Galey Israel (Zered); or running for office as Likud or Jewish Home candidates and then serving as political commentators on Channel 20 (Bardugo, Erel Segal, Riklin and others). Liebskind wrote that he longed to see a larger number of right-wing, religious, nationalist journalists, but the fact that someone is “for Bibi” does not qualify him as a journalist. He concluded his article by lamenting, “We wanted a generation of journalists, but what grew is a generation of charlatans.”[[154]](#footnote-157)

Amit Segal, another icon of right-wing investigative journalism, had his own show on the Knesset Channel. Surprisingly, when Channel 20 made its bid for the Knesset Channel, it stated that a program like Segal’s would not be aired on the Knesset Channel because it “actively seeks to slander MKs and disrespect them.”[[155]](#footnote-158) The representatives of Channel 20 who presented the bid to the tenders committee argued that the channel should not be critical of MKs and that its role is to serve them. After learning that his show was deemed too critical, Segal disclosed that Channel 20 had offered him to bring his show to Channel 20 in a more boisterous, Fox News style, but that he had refused. Segal called Channel 20 “a trashy channel” and contended that it only “respects” politicians to whom it owes allegiance, while slandering politicians from the left, center, and right who do not support Netanyahu. Thus, two of the most prominent right-wing journalists in Israeli, Liebskind and Amit Segal, both found Channel 20’s work to be unworthy of being considered journalism. Interestingly, as Riklin’s own tale shows, he himself did not consider Channel 20’s mission to be journalism; he himself proudly asserted that they were out to change the world. And that is precisely what they did: They waged battle for Netanyahu, armed with an opinion and a microphone.

As Liebskind explained, fake news is a common tool in Channel 20’s modus operandi – one of the various methods employed by Channel 20, working in coordination with Netanyahu’s new media team. For example, according to a Channel 20 broadcast on January 31, 2019, Facebook had announced deleting a post from an Iranian network that had been aimed at “bringing down Netanyahu’s regime.” Netanyahu, in turn, posted the Channel 20 report on his personal Facebook page. However, Facebook’s announcement had never mentioned anything about “bringing down Netanyahu’s regime.” It was fake news, but it was immediately echoed via Netanyahu’s Facebook page to millions of followers.[[156]](#footnote-159) Moreover, Channel 20 only cited the Likud’s response to the Facebook announcement. The response was very likely written by Netanyahu’s team. Netanyahu had an echo chamber of his own: Channel 20, Facebook, and the Likud. On another occasion, Channel 20 interviewed an Israeli expatriate living in the United States who argued that the U.S presidential elections had been stolen from Trump. A short while afterwards, Channel 20 removed the report from its website – but the damage had already been done.[[157]](#footnote-160) Channel 20 sought to become a news agency, but actually became a “taking heads” channel of Netanyahu spokespersons. It turned out that right-wing Israelis prefer news to fake news – even if part of their reason for watching Channels 11, 12 and 13 is to stoke their anger at the underrepresentation of the pro-Bibi camp.

* 1. Galey Israel

Galey Israel was the local radio station of Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Established in 2007, it began broadcasting in 2009, after Netanyahu returned to power and facilitated the establishment of the Second Authority for Television and Radio in the Judea and Samaria Region. An analysis of the major radio programs and their anchors tells a lot about the radio station of the occupied territories. Avi Ratzon, the journalist Netanyahu tried to convince *Yedioth* and Walla to hire as a publicist, presents the early morning show. The morning magazine is next, hosted by Sharon Gal, formerly a right-wing politician from Lieberman’s party. Erez Tadmor, co-founder of the right-wing Im Tirzu organization and Netanyahu’s campaign manager in 2019, has the 9 am–10 am slot. Mati Tuchfeld, the chief political reporter at *Israel Hayom*, hosts the midday news magazine. Galit Distel Atbaryan had the afternoon show before Netanyahu awarded her a Knesset seat by placing her in the tenth spot on the Likud list. Yair Netanyahu, Netanyahu’s son, and Yaara Zered, the spokesperson of the Likud party, lead the Friday program. Another Friday anchor is Limor Samimian-Darash, who was originally tapped by Netanyahu to become a Likud MK in 2015, but was ultimately replaced by Benny Begin. Gadi Taub, the then house intellectual of Balfour, and Eitan Orkibi, until recently a senior editor at *Israel Hayom*, are also mainstays of the station. None of them see themselves as journalists; all of them fall into the category of those “changing the world” and are strongly pro-Bibi. Most of them were regular visitors at the Balfour residence during Netanyahu’s tenure, while commuting in and out of right-wing politics and the right-wing media.

* 1. Walla

Besides the *Israel Hayom* newspaper, the Channel 20 TV channel, and local radio stations like Galey Israel, Netanyahu also attempted to gain control over a major internet news website. Arguably, it was this attempt that led to his downfall. In their recorded conversations in 2014, Mozes suggested to Netanyahu that Ynet, the *Yedioth* news website, might be easier to control than Walla because Ynet’s editor, Tiefenbrunn, was a right-winger. Although Mozes and Netanyahu never reached a deal, their talks led to indictments in Case 2000. Tiefenbrunn later became the chief editor of the Knesset Channel, after Channel 20 ultimately failed to win the tender.[[158]](#footnote-161) Netanyahu, as always, pursued additional options. He persuaded Adelson to purchase NRG, *Maariv*’s internet news site, and place it under *Israel Hayom*’s control. However, due to financial difficulties, the website was transferred in 2017 to *Makor Rishon*, another one of Adelson’s media holdings. But *Makor Rishon* was primarily identified with the national-religious sector, making it unsuitable to serve as Netanyahu’s public news website.

Against this background, the relationship with Elovich, as unfolded in Case 4000, was the Netanyahus’ main hope for controlling a major digital news website – Walla. In her conversation with Zeev Rubinstein, the middleman with the Eloviches, Sara Netanyahu, Bibi’s full partner in his ambitious media plans, said: “Yair and I don’t have the strength to focus solely on this. I have other roles in life, not just the keeper of Walla and the contact person with Zeevik. Enough is enough! Make a positive Walla net and that’s it.”[[159]](#footnote-162) Rubinstein quickly called Yeshua, the CEO and key witness in Case 4000, and said in alarm, “It’s horrible; my balls are at stake!” Yeshua was ready to comply: “Send the details of the report. I’ll deal with it immediately.”[[160]](#footnote-163)

In the case of Walla, there was a systematic plan to produce a pro-Bibi news outlet, from the owner to the last of the reporters. First, the owners, the Eloviches. In the conversations recorded by Yeshua, the Eloviches referred to Netanyahu as “the big one.” In a typical moment, when Netanyahu had already called off the reform that would have cost Elovich dearly, and was just about to sign the new reform, which would allow Bezeq’s purchase of Yes and result in millions for Elovich, the latter ordered his CEO, Yeshua, to satisfy the demands of the Netanyahu family. Yeshua responded, “We censure report after report. Okay, I’ll apply more pressure. Elovitch: “The righteous reporters will suffer no harm. For me, it would be tremendously damaging. He [Netanyahu] needs to sign this week. If he doesn’t sign, there’s no deal.”[[161]](#footnote-164) In another incident during the same critical week, Elovitch asked Yeshua, “You don’t think we went overboard with Tzipi [Livni]?” Yeshua: “You can’t avoid mentioning the leaders of the parties [prior to an election].” Elovitch: “I don’t need Tzipi’s signature.” So there’s a direct link between Netanyahus – the father, the son, and the mother – and the Elovich couple, and there is heavy pressure from the owner on the CEO, who had to manage the editors and journalists under the watchful eyes of the Netanyahus and the Eloviches. Netanyahu, either directly or through Hefetz and Filber, both state witnesses in Case 4000, controlled the details down to the individual journalist and the particular report, picture, or interview – its size, location, and how long it would stay posted on the site. Nonetheless, at a critical moment, Yair Netanyahu complained to his father, “After all the billions you gave the Elovitches, look how they cover you.”[[162]](#footnote-165)

**Controlling by Regulation, Legislation, and Ministers of Communication**

a. Netanyahu’s Ministers of Communication

“As communications minister, I didn’t visit the ministry even once. I don’t know where the Ministry of Communications is,”[[163]](#footnote-166) Netanyahu told his investigators. Yet throughout his years in power, one important means of control was appointing his loyalists as ministers of communication and playing a complex game of allowing them to institute reforms he sought, while reserving the right to overrule and amend these reforms. Netanyahu had a clear pattern of governance: Work in different ways to achieve your goals, always remain the author and the final decision maker, appoint those who are personally loyal and obedient to you, and maintain fear, uncertainty and a feeling of dependence throughout the system.

The Ministry of Communications was of key interest to previous prime ministers too, including Peres, Rabin, Begin, Sharon, and Olmert. For many years, the ministry directly controlled the media and its infrastructure. It later became a small, professional, and regulatory ministry with no public aura or room for maneuver. It was Netanyahu who made it a key bastion of his power. He not only sought to penetrate the news outlets from within, but also increasingly focused on controlling the mechanisms of regulation and supervision.

b. Edelstein

Netanyahu’s understanding of the importance of controlling regulation was already apparent in his appointment of Edelstein as the minister in charge of the IBA reform in 2009. As described above, the struggles over the IBA centered on appointing a professional chairperson to the lead it through the reforms that had been negotiated between the Ministry of Finance and the unions. After three unsuccessful attempts to win Netanyahu’s approval for a proposed chairperson, Edelstein resigned and Netanyahu personally assumed the role of minister in charge of the IBA reform.[[164]](#footnote-167) He then orchestrated a process of personalization at the public broadcasting authority, contrary to all of the negotiated reforms and state comptroller’s recommendations. Controlling the top appointments at the IBA by making the minister in charge the sole authority to approve them led to further corruption in the IBA. Netanyahu’s people had virtual control over the main radio news outlet at the time – Israel Radio. The pattern was now established: Control by proxy evolved into direct control in order to prevent any attempts at professionalizing the system, with the aim of maintaining tight control over those in charge of the news media.

c. Kahlon

The communications minister appointed by Netanyahu in 2009 was Moshe Kahlon, whose most significant move was to implement the treasury’s reform in the cellular market, making it more competitive. This reform was so effective in benefiting individual consumers that Netanyahu’s election directive to Likud members in 2013 was: “Be Kahlons.” Yet personally, Netanyahu did not want Kahlon at the Ministry of Communications, or for that matter at the treasury. In the wake of the personal strife between Netanyahu and Kahlon, the latter resigned and defected from the Likud.

d. Erdan

In 2013, Netanyahu appointed Gilad Erdan as the new communications minister. Erdan applied Netanyahu’s directive – “be Kahlons” – in two arenas: 1) canceling the TV and radio tax as part of an overall reform of the IBA designed to turn it into an independent, professional agent; and 2) splitting up Channel 2 to create competition in the commercial TV market. Both reforms were in the spirit of the neoliberal Netanyahu – competition and a market-oriented approach, while easing the citizens’ tax burden. Both were put on hold by Netanyahu. The Landes Report (2014) recommended disconnecting the IBA from the political realm, appointing a judge to be in charge of oversight and allowing the IBA to operate as a professional agency. Netanyahu was supportive of the reform throughout the process, but envisioned it as an opportunity to build a new public broadcasting authority in his own image: a new council, a new chief editor, a different newsroom. When the new broadcasting entity, Kan, failed to meet this vision, Netanyahu explained that it had “slipped away” while he was preoccupied with Operation Protective Edge in Gaza.[[165]](#footnote-168) He then feverishly acted to abolish the new public broadcasting authority, then to defer its launch and then to divide its operations, so that the news division would be under the minister’s supervision. He justified his insistence on ministerial oversight by asking, “What if all the people in the public broadcasting authority are with Breaking the Silence” [an anti-occupation organization of IDF veterans]?[[166]](#footnote-169) Netanyahu’s inability to control the appointments at Kan was the reason for his fierce struggle to abolish it before it even got started. In response to questions from police investigators, Sara Netanyahu confirmed that Balfour viewed Kan as leftist: “Erdan went behind Netanyahu’s back and led him in lies and deceit to establish the leftist [public broadcasting] corporation.”[[167]](#footnote-170)

In the case of Channel 2, Erdan – like Edelstein before him – encountered resistance from Netanyahu in implementing a reform the prime minister had initially championed. Erdan, the loyal minister, brought the reform for Netanyahu’s final confirmation after it had already been approved by the ministerial committee for legislation. Surprisingly, Netanyahu appealed to the court to stop the reform that he himself had pushed: “Given that in a few days the Ministry of Communications will be transferred to me, and since the bill has significant consequences for the commercial communications world, I request, as the person responsible for the bill, to study the subject in depth.”[[168]](#footnote-171) The bill did not pass and Netanyahu appointed himself to replace Erdan as the minister of communications. The day Netanyahu decided to replace Erdan, he called the ministry’s director general, Avi Berger, and told him he was fired, effective immediately. Why was the timing so crucial? A third reform led by Erdan was about to be implemented that was also critical for Netanyahu’s control over the media: the effort to end Bezeq’s monopoly in wired infrastructure. Bezeq was controlled by Elovich, the same tycoon who owned the Walla website. Netanyahu appointed his close associate Filber to replace Berger and assigned the new director general his first mission: to call off this third reform and to allegedly offer Elovich favorable regulatory policies in exchange for direct and indirect control of the Walla website. This alleged quid pro quo constitutes the basis of the state’s indictment of Netanyahu and Elovich in Case 4000.

* 1. Netanyahu and Hanegbi

The Netanyahu-Filber team authorized two other reforms: shutting down Channel 10 and allowing piratic radio stations to broadcast.[[169]](#footnote-172) (Netanyahu was under pressure from key Likud and Shas activists to keep these radio stations on the air.) In addition, after blocking the planned Bezeq reform, which was intended to inject competition into the landline telephony market, it was time for Netanyahu, the incoming minister of communications, to address Elovich’s top priority: Bezeq’s merger with Yes. The deadline for approving the deal was June 23, 2015. Netanyahu came through for Elovich, approving the merger, which saddled the public with Yes’ debt burden. Elovich reported to his people at Walla that Filber had been a “bulldozer” in getting the deal approved.[[170]](#footnote-173)

As Netanyahu’s trial advanced, Isaac Herzog, then the head of the Labor Party and today the president of Israel, petitioned the Supreme Court, arguing that Netanyahu should not be permitted to continue as communications minister because of a clear conflict of interest. Under pressure from the court, Netanyahu had no choice but to appoint what he called a “substitute.” Only there is no such category as “substitute minister.” Netanyahu had to resign and transfer authority to Tzachi Hanegbi as the acting minister of communications – a temporary, three-month appointment. This was a warning sign for Hanegbi: The prime minister is still in full charge; you’re only a substitute, a minister by name only, powerless. Netanyahu’s men remained in key positions at the ministry and effectively managed it under Netanyahu’s guidance. After three months, Netanyahu chose not to give Hanegbi a permanent appointment. Instead, he appointed another loyalist, Ayoub Kara, to serve as communications minister.

* 1. Kara

Soon after appointing Kara, recordings were leaked in which Netanyahu could be heard screaming at the new communications minister, “Are you crazy?”[[171]](#footnote-174) In the recorded conversation, Netanyahu admitted that he had been forced to surrender the communications portfolio because of the court challenge, and that he expected Kara to authorize Channel 20 to broadcast news, despite the fact that it was not licensed to do so. When the minister told the prime minister that the matter was in the hands of the Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Council, Netanyahu shouted, “Let’s disband it!”[[172]](#footnote-175) Kara was ultimately successful in granting Channel 20 a license to broadcast news, but did not abolish the council.[[173]](#footnote-176) Kara also reported that there was tremendous pressure from the prime minister to prevent the merger of Reshet and Channel 10. Netanyahu was hoping that Channel 10, his nemesis, would go bankrupt if left on its own. Kara appointed Yulia Shamalov Berkovich, the chairperson of the Second Authority for TV and Radio, and a Netanyahu loyalist, for this mission. Despite her best efforts, the merger went through.

**8. Concentrating Media Legislation in Netanyahu’s Hands**

Mozes to Netanyahu: “Well, it’s clear. We have to make sure you’re the prime minister… we need to do everything fast, Bibi, because I have to turn the ship”

Bibi: “First of all the legislation. I’ve thought a lot about it. It’s quite a reasonable thing. Why? Because it balances between two needs – to protect freedom of speech and to maintain economic balance.”[[174]](#footnote-177)

The “legislation” Netanyahu mentions is the *Israel Hayom* bill, of course, a bill to which Netanyahu vehemently objected, arguing that it limits competition.[[175]](#footnote-178) This legislative initiative reportedly triggered the demise of the Netanyahu-Lapid government and the subsequent formation of the most right-wing government in Israeli history.[[176]](#footnote-179) The goal of the proposed legislation, sponsored by Eitan Cabel of the Labor Party and eight other MKs in 2014, seven years after *Israel Hayom* went into print and was distributed for free on every street corner, was “to promote and strengthen print journalism in Israel and secure equal conditions for fair competition among the newspapers.” It was alleged, but unconfirmed, that the proposal itself was actually written by Mozes’s people and handed to Cabel. The proposed law, which passed its initial reading on November 14, 2014, sought to force daily newspapers to charge at least 70% of the price of other newspapers and virtually forbid the distribution of free newspapers. Two media tycoons stood on the opposing sides: Sheldon Adelson, Netanyahu’s patron, and Arnon Mozes. Adelson was represented by Perach Lerner, Netanyahu’s liaison to the Knesset, whose husband began working as *Israel Hayom*’s public relations person in early 2015. Mozes lobbied MKs from both the opposition and the coalition to support the legislation, allegedly promising them sympathetic coverage in *Yedioth Ahronoth*.[[177]](#footnote-180) Netanyahu later contended that Cabel and others indeed received positive coverage from *Yedioth* in return for supporting the Israel Hayom bill. “But I was the only one charged with bribery for this common practice,” Netanyahu would argue. “I’m the only one being persecuted because the media is out to get me.” However, the evidence that surfaced – recordings of the Mozes-Netanyahu conversations – implicated none other than Netanyahu. These conversations, which formed the basis for Case 2000, were recorded by Ari Harow, Netanyahu’s chief of staff, under whom Lerner had worked. Harow was also a family relation of Lerner’s husband. Netanyahu himself had instructed Harow to record them – possibly to blackmail Mozes in the future. In the recordings, Netanyahu tries to leverage his support for the legislation to penetrate Mozes’s media empire and convinces Mozes “to turn the ship.” Netanyahu’s interests regarding the law – for and against it – were entirely personal. He appealed to the idea of free competition to support both contradictory ends. Netanyahu characteristically left everything hanging in the balance – supposedly to create a balance. The legislation stalled after a new election was called by Netanyahu. He nevertheless hoped that *Yedioth* and Ynet would already begin covering him more favorably, even though Mozes would have to wait for the next Knesset to advance the legislation.

The Israel Hayom bill that brought down the Netanyahu-Lapid government is but the tip of the iceberg in terms of Netanyahu’s use of legislation to make inroads into the media. Another such example was the legislation establishing the new Israel Public Broadcasting Authority, Kan, in 2014. After seeing that the legislation gave Kan independence, Netanyahu decided to abolish it and roll back the law by bringing the old IBA back in.[[178]](#footnote-181) Legislation was elastic, stretched to fit the interests of a prime minister who sought to control the news. Netanyahu made sure to concentrate all of the powers connected to the media in his hands, and legislation was the most basic of these powers.

**a.** Regulation

The 2015 coalition agreement included a special article (Article 65) entitled “Pursuing Reforms in the Communications Market.” The article states:

65. The government will institute comprehensive reforms in the communications market. The Likud faction, Jewish Home faction and all other factions joining the coalition are obliged to support these reforms. In addition, the coalition factions and their members will not support a bill on the subject of communications without the approval of the minister of communications. The coalition factions and their members will oppose any initiative and/or proposal on the subject of communications to which the minister of communications objects.[[179]](#footnote-182)

The all-powerful minister of communications was none other than Netanyahu. The coalition agreement secured an overall majority for any reform that Netanyahu might want in the communications market. And major reforms were certainly on the new minister’s desk. First and foremost was his plan to replace the regulatory bodies overseeing the commercial news media with a single committee reporting to the minister of communications. “Netanyahu wants to … become an omnipotent regulator,” *TheMarker* declared in a headline.[[180]](#footnote-183) For over twenty years, there were two separate regulatory bodies: the state-funded Cable and Satellite Broadcasting Council within the Ministry of Communications, and the Second Authority for TV and Radio. The latter was established to supervise the news broadcasts as an external statutory corporation with independent agencies funded by its commercial profits. Its council was also permeated by political appointments, but it was independent.[[181]](#footnote-184) What would the logic of a neoliberal finance minister dictate? An independent body funded from its own resources. What was the bill proposed by Netanyahu as the minister of communications? Against all professional advice, he proposed a unified regulatory body that would be part of the government and funded by the state. This structure would effectively give the politicians control of the commercial news media, precisely the sort of control Netanyahu always sought. Instead of appointing an independent judge to head the body, the minister himself would appoint the chairperson, who could even be a political figure and not necessarily a communications professional, as long as the chairperson was not currently engaged in political or partisan activity. This was very distant from the neoliberal vision of an independent professional body.

Netanyahu indeed appointed a committee to recommend the regulation of the communications market. Two of its major subjects were splitting up Channel 2 and licensing additional companies, like Yes and Hot, to broadcast news.[[182]](#footnote-185) Yes was owned by none other than Elovich, with whom the Netanyahus knew how to work. Political control over the commercial news media was now in Netanyahu’s hands.

But of course, the other great mission was to gain control of the public broadcasting corporation. The whole idea behind the Landes Committee and Erdan’s reform was to create an independent and professional public broadcasting agency that would be far from the reach of the politicians. Netanyahu as the minister of communications worked in the exact opposite direction, trying to gain direct political control of the public news media. Once it became too late to backtrack on establishing Kan, Netanyahu tried to limit Kan to radio broadcasts, or to deny it a license to cover news and current affairs in its TV broadcasts.[[183]](#footnote-186) Once this also failed, the only way to politicize Kan was through the regulatory body slated to oversee Kan’s news division. Netanyahu thus proposed a new public broadcasting law aimed at placing control back in the hands of the politicians.[[184]](#footnote-187) Not only that, Netanyahu’s Ministry of Communications proposed centralizing oversight of Kan, the Second Authority for TV and Radio, and the Cables and Satellite Broadcasting Council in a single council that would report to the minister of communications, Netanyahu himself. He would appoint the council members: two politicians and nine public figures. It would be an internal council within the ministry and would control the ministry’s appointments, budget and decisions. This would be a complete reversal of all the professional reports that aimed to separate the news from political control and achieve financial independence.

Even in the realm of regulation, the control mechanisms ranged from the big picture to the nitty-gritty of utilizing social media in the direction sought by the Netanyahus. According to transcripts from the police investigation, Hefetz told Sara Netanyahu, “Eva, the regulator – we need to hold her.” Sara replied, “We need to be firm with her. Topaz should start putting out on social media what we said about the failing Channel 10.” The prime minister’s wife was asked by investigators to comment on this discussion with Hefetz. Mrs. Netanyahu responded, “Great, no problem. What is this here, we need to keep silent? It’s a police state? A Pravda state? A KGB state? I wish all the media bodies of the left would be shut down.” Investigator: “And if Channel 10 would have been shut down?” Sara: “It would have been great for the State of Israel… The police are out to get the prime minister. And that’s all it is.”[[185]](#footnote-188) This was a full endorsement of the deep-state argument: The law enforcement bodies were trying to block the prime minister from gaining full control over the media in Israel – the same quest for control that led to the indictments in cases 1000, 2000 and 4000, to which we now turn.

**9. Cases 1000, 2000, 4000: State of Israel vs. Benjamin Netanyahu**

Mozes: “Bibi, there is election in three and a half months...We managed it in 2009, you may have forgotten.”

Netanyahu: “I haven’t forgotten at all.”

Mozes: “It was intelligently managed, in a good way, and we were ostensibly in the same situation. We were already in this movie, we made it. This is our fourth election, not third, fourth. 96, 99, 2009 and now.”

(The 2014 Mozes-Netanyahu conversation, recorded).[[186]](#footnote-189)

On February 28, 2019, the attorney general submitted the indictment to the court in Jerusalem. The police investigation had started in 2016 and the formal decision to prosecute the prime minister was finalized by February 2018. The election cycles were now intertwined with the trial. The 2019 elections preceded the hearings, giving Netanyahu a full opportunity to attack the attorney general and the law enforcement agents that were “persecuting” him as “the long arm of the left.” The third election was held just before the opening of the trial itself. The trial was due to begin in May 2020, but was deferred because of the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing decisions by Netanyahu’s governments to close all the courts, time and again. The fourth election round was held after Netanyahu had delivered a resounding, inciting speech against the state officials, law enforcement, and the judicial system on the steps of the court, where he pleaded “not guilty” to charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. Thus, the prime minister took Israel through four rounds of elections against the background of his trial. In Netanyahu’s language, the deep-state agents were trying to rob him of power after failing to do so through the voting booths.

At first glance, the three cases are substantially different. Case 1000 accuses Netanyahu of accepting almost $300,000 in gifts, including jewelry, cigars and champagne, from 2007 to 2016, from two businessmen: the Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan and the Australian billionaire James Packer. In return, Netanyahu helped Milchan obtain a business visa and tax exemptions as a returning Israeli.[[187]](#footnote-190) Case 2000 is about curbing the strength of *Israel Hayom* vis-à-vis *Yedioth Ahronoth* in return for pro-Netanyahu coverage by the latter. Case 4000 is about corruption charges: Netanyahu as a communications minister amended the regulation affecting the telecom company held by Elovich, Bezeq, and approved its merger with Yes, thus defying the restrictions on pyramids of control under Israeli law, in return for allowing the Netanyahus to substantially shape the coverage on the Eloviches’ news website, Walla.

Yet from a broader perspective, all three cases are deeply connected to Netanyahu’s quest for control over Israel’s news media: television, newspapers and digital news. Thus, Article 6 in Case 1000 reads: Netanyahu “has acted himself, and instructed his director general at the Ministry of Communications, Filber, to help Milchan in regulation issues concerning the merger between the media companies Reshet and Keshet so that the investment, which Milchan was examining at the time, would be financially beneficial for him.”[[188]](#footnote-191) As Milchan himself testified, it was Netanyahu who had pushed him into investing – first in Channel 10 and then in the prospective merger – arguing that this would keep Netanyahu in power and, consequently, save the Jewish people. According to Article 9D in the indictment, Netanyahu’s relations with Milchan were such that “Milchan was your confidant, performing sensitive mediating tasks in the communications arena on your behalf. Thus, for example, Milchan acted in your service in 2009 vis-à-vis Arnon Mozes, owner of *Yedioth Ahronoth*, and with the owner of *Israel Hayo*m, Sheldon Adelson, to promote an agreement whereby Adelson would restrict the weekend edition of the *Israel Hayom* newspaper and Mozes would abstain from negative publicity concerning your interests.”[[189]](#footnote-192) Article 27A further notes how Milchan derived immediate benefits as a partner in Channel 10 when Netanyahu limited advertising demands on the media channels in 2009. Article 28C explains how in 2015, when Netanyahu was both prime minister and minister of communications, Milchan asked for his help with regulation to promote a merger between Reshet and Keshet. Netanyahu responded immediately, summoning Filber, the ministry’s director general, to a late-night meeting and instructing him to accommodate Milchan and promote the merger deal. The indictment specifically states: “This was also because you wanted your trusted man in an influential position in a central media outlet that would benefit you personally.”[[190]](#footnote-193) Crucially, rather than being driven by Milchan, it is at least a fair assumption that Netanyahu was the driving force behind getting Milchan, his trusted mogul friend, involved in the news media business – purchasing shares in Channel 10, promoting a deal between Adelson and Mozes, and facilitating the merger of Reshet and Keshet. But what about Packer? The indictment does not provide details. Was it only a matter of personal benefits to the Netanyahu family? Was is merely the free use of Packer’s mansion (adjacent to Netanyahu’s home in Caesarea), which the prime minister had convinced the young billionaire to buy? Filber met with Milchan and Packer at the latter’s mansion to “discuss Netanyahu’s fantasy: the takeover of a television channel, funded by Packer.” Filber was well aware of his master’s dream and knew that young Packer, with an unstable mind, as it turned out, revered Netanyahu and had the means to help the prime minister achieve his dream. According to Filber, Netanyahu’s ultimate objective was to establish an Israeli version of Fox News, funded by Packer, Milchan, and Murdoch. Netanyahu asked Packer to invest $25 million in the project. The initiative came to a halt as the police investigation expedited Packer’s departure from Israel. The police and the State Attorney’s Office recommended indicting Netanyahu for bribery in Case 1000, but the attorney general decided to prosecute him only for breach of trust and fraud. The indictment reveals little of the full picture of why Netanyahu cultivated relationships with his mogul friends, and the media empire he sought to control with their generous help.

Case 2000 is based on three meetings between Netanyahu and Mozes that were recorded, upon Netanyahu’s directive, in 2008–2009, 2013 and 2014. The indictment describes a bribery deal in which Mozes asked Netanyahu to pass the Israel Hayom legislation and to convince *Israel Hayom* to curtail its weekend circulation, in return for ordering *Yedioth* and Ynet to cover Netanyahu more favorably. The indictment quotes Mozes as saying: “Assuming there’s the [Israel Hayom] law we’ve agreed upon, I’ll do my part to ensure you’ll be here as long as you want. I told you that before and I’m again looking you in the eye and telling you this.”[[191]](#footnote-194) Mozes promised “to tilt the ship” (Article 74) so that Netanyahu would remain prime minister as long as he wanted, provided the Israel Hayom legislation was enacted. Article 73 discloses that Netanyahu requested that Mozes change the coverage of the Netanyahus before the law’s passage. This means, in effect, that the bribery occurred even without the law’s actual enactment. Mozes also established direct channels of communication for Netanyahu’s man with the chief editor of *Yedioth*, Ron Yaron, and the chief editor of the Ynet website, Tiefenbrunn, so that Netanyahu could have a direct influence on these media outlets.[[192]](#footnote-195) This influence was applied in many instances. For example, a negative report on Sara Netanyahu was relegated to the back pages, and negative reports on his rival, Bennett, were given prominent coverage to meet Netanyahu’s demands. The indictment argues that Netanyahu abused his power and breached the public’s trust in using regulatory power, legislation and direct connections with tycoons to influence the election results and remain in power.[[193]](#footnote-196) It also raises difficult questions regarding the “free press” in Israel and the convergence of economic and political interests that influences the fourth arm of democracy – the news media. The detailed instructions Mozes gave Netanyahu – on how to select chief editors who can manipulate the system in a way that reflects the economic or political interests of the owners – are particularly disturbing.

Case 4000 may be the most comprehensive case of political corruption, where complete regulatory and legislative control was allegedly exploited to promote the private interests of one individual. That one individual was simultaneously the prime minister, the minister of communications, and the regulator of the communications market, including the news media. The case suggests that such concentration of power in a single person is destructive to democracy. Case 4000 is a bribery case involving communications companies and control over the news media. Elovich, the owner of Bezeq, was interested in acquiring full ownership of the Yes TV satellite company. As minister of communications, Netanyahu authorized this merger deal, which would transfer an estimated one billion shekels into Elovich’s hands.[[194]](#footnote-197) The proposed deal would override the professional position of the Israeli Antitrust Authority, which restricted parallel ownership in the communications and other markets. The professional position of both the Authority and the Ministry of Communications was that shared ownership, like that of Bezeq and Yes, was prohibited and would only be allowed if Bezeq opened its landline telephony infrastructure for use by competitors. Elovich wanted Netanyahu to allow the merger without opening the landline market for competition. Netanyahu was very diligent in providing Elovich precisely what he wanted. He not only fired the director general of the Ministry of Communications, Berger, who was responsible for the competition reform, but also dismissed the minister, Gilad Erdan. Erdan, who supported Netanyahu’s original doctrine of free competition, wanted to follow the example of Kahlon as minister of communications and complement his predecessor’s cellphone reform with a reform of the landline company held by Elovich. Elovich, who would be financially hurt by the reform, repeatedly complained to Netanyahu about the plan and expressed his dissatisfaction with the performance of Erdan and Berger. Netanyahu appointed himself to replace Erdan and selected his confidant Filber to serve as the new director general of the Ministry of Communications, despite his lack of prior knowledge in the communications arena. Netanyahu instructed Filber to fulfill Elovich’s wishes. Thus, instead of performing oversight as Bezeq’s regulator and following the recommendations of the Ministry of Communications professionals, Filber worked to promote the interests of Elovich and Bezeq. The testimony Filber gave as a state witness revealed how he and Netanyahu had endeavored to change the regulation, legislation, and professional advice. In direct contradiction to the ideological doctrine of Netanyahu as finance minister, they worked to maintain Elovich’s monopoly and to block the reform that would have boosted competition and have substantially helped Israeli consumers.

In return, the Netanyahus demanded complete control over Walla’s coverage of the prime minister and his family. During this period, 2013–2015, Walla was second only to Ynet in the rankings of news websites. The Netanyahus and their people demanded the right to interfere in the appointments of the chief editors, the journalists and the reporters, as well as in the content itself, including where an item appeared on the website and for how long. They actively edited and reedited interviews and articles about them. At the same time, they tried to keep the journalists at Walla and the state comptroller unaware of their close relationship with the Eloviches and their direct influence on the website. Netanyahu, controlling both ends of the Ministry of Communications, sought to call the shots as a regulator, legislator, minister of communications, and prime minister to serve his own private interest as the mightiest politician in Israel ever. By forcing Israel into four electoral cycles in two and a half years while the legal proceedings against him were underway, Netanyahu may have brought about his own downfall. The politicians that Walla was ordered to denigrate, including Naftali Bennett, were among those who rose to power in the aftermath of the 2021 election.

1. **Netanyahu and the News: Structural Changes and Long-term Effects**

“When I return… it will be with a media of my own. We will no longer be dependent on the leftist media that detests me and would do anything to get rid of me” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 193). When Netanyahu lost the election in 1999, he famously blamed the media and said he would return with a media of his own. A media of his own became his life’s mission. Despite countless positive news items and a systematic bias in response to the Netanyahus’ demands, Netanyahu has nevertheless attempted to frame his trial as a plot against him staged by the media. The analysis outlined above has demonstrated a persistent and intensive attempt to influence news coverage and institute structural changes in public broadcasting in Israel. Netanyahu had a vision: to establish a news empire owned by media tycoons who share his right-wing, nationalist worldview and provide him the means to design and control a pro-Bibi media. He took comprehensive action in pursuit of this goal. This included soliciting his tycoon friends to get into the news media and purchase substantial media holdings, and choosing loyal CEOs and chief editors he deemed capable of managing and manipulating newsrooms that do what the boss tells them to do. Netanyahu sought control of decision-making at all levels, including which reporters would be assigned to cover the political scene and which journalists would be invited to appear as political commentators on TV panels. While claiming to seek “diversity” and “competition,” Netanyahu actually wanted to build a monopolistic news media in which he personally regulated and controlled every aspect. Throughout his terms as prime minister, he acted relentlessly and wielded his power to appoint ministers of communication in an effort to shape regulation and promote legislation in pursuit of this vision of an Israeli Fox News, including TV, radio, print and internet outlets. Netanyahu’s comprehensive plan failed, and its demise will be recounted over the next few years in a trial that is all about the different arenas in which Netanyahu had hoped to achieve his goal. The judges will decide whether the prime minister will be convicted of fraud, breach of trust and bribery, but the damage to the very idea of a free press in Israel is devastating.

Netanyahu always talked about the need for a “more balanced” media. One major attempt to market this act of balancing was by pressuring chief editors and CEOs to adopt a model of co-anchors in the news magazines. The direct influence of Netanyahu was to insist that his own loyal mouthpieces be injected as these “balancers.” A good example is Army Radio. Netanyahu gained enormous control of the military radio station through appointing its commanders – first Yaron Dekel and then Shimon Elkabetz. Notably, the senior reporter at Army Radio, Razi Barkai, was for a long time on Netanyahu’s radar. When Dekel was appointed as the station’s commander, he promised Netanyahu to introduce more “balance.” Barkai was to pay the price. After serving as the anchor of the morning news magazine for twenty years, he learned from the media – not in a personal meeting or even a phone call – that Dekel had decided to cut his program in half and give Netanyahu’s self-described “No. 1 Bibist” (Erel Segal) his own program during the other half. Dekel also assigned a co-anchor to broadcast with Barkai during his truncated time slot. The co-anchor was slated to be one of three Netanyahu loyalists – Bardugo, Hanoch Daum, or Segal himself.[[195]](#footnote-198) Learning about this development from other media outlets was humiliating for Barkai. His program was indeed cut in half, but a public battle by Barkai and others at the station managed to block the co-anchor idea. Yet, this was only a short-lived victory. Bardugo, Netanyahu’s mouthpiece, became the co-anchor and dominant presence on the evening news magazine.

This notion of “balancing” is a deathblow to professional journalism. Once a self-declared pro-Bibi non-journalist is assigned to “balance” a professional journalist like Yaron Vilensky, the implication is that the latter is a biased leftist. This supports Netanyahu’s thesis that the news is always presented from a particular viewpoint, and that there is no such thing as objective journalism. It is noteworthy that for Netanyahu it was not even a matter of balancing left-wing and right-wing viewpoints; he used his media proxies to attack his rivals on the right – Rivlin, Lieberman, Bennett, Gantz, Sa’ar, and many others, even branding them as “leftists.”

This has resonated far beyond Army Radio. Kan, the supposedly anti-Bibi public broadcasting corporation that “slipped by” Netanyahu, also adopted his “balancing” approach. Kalman Liebskind was recruited via the prime minister’s man Filber as a right-wing journalist and became a co-presenter with Asaf Liberman. The balancing act turned a professional journalist, Liberman, into a “leftist” publicist. Even the evening news magazine replaced Ran Binyamini, a professional journalist, with Sheli Yechimovich and Yigal Guetta. While Yechimovich and Guetta are both anti-Bibi, they are also both ex-politicians, and the news magazine became a talking heads program. In these two examples – Bardugo/Vilensky and Yechimovich/Gueta – the views of the co-anchors take center stage rather than the news, expert opinions, or interviewees. This has caused ongoing damage to the whole endeavor of professional journalism. There was already an effort “to balance” Keren Neubach on Israel Radio in 2012, but it was blocked by the Israel Press Association. In the ensuing years, almost all news magazines on the radio became “balanced” with two non-journalists. The exception, of course, is the pro-Bibi media – Channel 20, Galey Israel, *Israel Hayom* – where everything is commentary; there is no real journalism, according to their own standards and definitions. There is no “balancing act” on the pro-Bibi media, except as straw men for the commentators to attack. Thus, far-reaching structural changes were made throughout the news broadcasting industry in Israel under Netanyahu. This occurred in parallel to the rise of social media and fake news, and the weakening of the public media throughout the world, especially in countries led by nationalist-populist leaders like Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, Jair Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán.

While Netanyahu’s two initial claims – that the media is not diverse enough and is slanted toward the left – were generally correct twenty years ago, he could have attempted to change this in several ways. The neoliberal way is to separate the news industry from the political scene, professionalize it and let it live or die by its own funds and success. The second way, foreign to Netanyahu’s perception, is to cultivate a news media that is independent, professional and maintains diversity and plurality as part of its standards. Netanyahu chose a third way that was completely at odds with his own ideology. He sought to establish his “own media” – a pro-Bibi media that provided him control over the regulative bodies, the budget and the appointments on TV, radio, and internet outlets. The structural changes in the regulatory bodies, the growing dependence of the news outlets on the government and on the politicians’ friends and media owners, and the idea that the media is divided into pro-Bibi and anti-Bibi camps – all have had a devastating effect on the news media in Israel.

1. Netanyahu speech, Likud session, 5 December 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Netanyahu speech, Likud session, 5 December 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gidi Weitz <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium-1.5805792> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Maariv* 1987 <https://www.the7eye.org.il/196004> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ilana Dayan reading aloud Netanyahu’s response on her program *Uvda* (Fact). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://13tv.co.il/item/news/hamakor/season-17/episodes/a1eaz-1971977/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/2017-1701/Article-3b17c5b67df3851006.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gidi Weitz, *Haaretz* <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/.premium-1.7803098> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. שמחה רוטמן מפלגת בגצ ספר [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.themarker.com/advertising/.premium-1.8098889> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://13tv.co.il/item/news/hamakor/season-20/episodes/xtgi9-2189919/?utm_source=MAIN&utm_medium=super_pic> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.ha-makom.co.il/post-sharon-raviv-new/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://www.the7eye.org.il/390434> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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16. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium-1.5805792> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium-1.5805792> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium-1.5805792> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. <https://www.themarker.com/misc/article-print-page/1.7924797> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-1.8914993> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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30. <https://www.the7eye.org.il/401729> [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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33. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium-1.5805792> [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium-1.5805792> [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/.premium-1.5805792> [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Lital Dobrovizki and Tomer Ganon, *Calcalist*

    <https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3773524,00.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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38. <https://www.themarker.com/advertising/.premium-1.8098889> [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. <https://www.themarker.com/advertising/.premium-1.8098889> [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
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41. <https://www.themarker.com/advertising/.premium-1.8098889> [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. <https://b.walla.co.il/item/3135654> דוד ורטהיים‏, [עורך וואלה לשעבר ינון מגל: היו לחצים לסקר באופן אוהד את נתניהו](http://news.walla.co.il/?w=//3135654), באתר וואלה!‏, 15 בפברואר 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. <https://www.themarker.com/allnews/1.5828989> [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
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48. <https://www.themarker.com/allnews/1.5828989> [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. <https://www.the7eye.org.il/390434> [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. <https://www.themarker.com/advertising/1.5843375> [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. <https://twitter.com/RavivDrucker/status/1195969588485332994> The expression, which dates back to the early days of the Zionist movement, refers to methodically establishing facts on the ground, one step at a time. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. <https://13news.co.il/item/news/domestic/crime-law/netanyahus-investigations/hefetz-conversations-930957> [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
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60. <https://www.the7eye.org.il/422635> [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
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64. <https://www.the7eye.org.il/390434> [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. <https://www.the7eye.org.il/390434> [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
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