**Chapter 9**

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

“You have a longshot, you see five journalists among them Amnon Abramovitch, the top Israeli journalist, sitting and keeping quiet. When Abramovitch cannot ask questions you put a muzzle on him. Like a dog. On all the journalists… He was sitting and didn’t speak because according to 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 on which the pictures of four of the public media’s best investigating journalists were hung, silently, for days. On Sunday morning the residents of the only Israeli metropolitan woke up to find the endorsement on these billboards: “They will not decide. You will decide” read the signs on the wall. The Prime minister, running the board show, released a video which said: “For three years the Left and the media haunt the attorney general to submit an indictment against me. Will they succeed?” (Liss 2019). The board shout the answer: “They don’t get to decide. You do”. The bill was to be paid by the voters.



The journalists were now hanging from the wall, as did the writing: they are the enemy; Netanyahu, the chosen by the people, is the super-leader who will protect the public from ‘the left and the media’. The attorney general is hanging in the balance. The thesis that Netanyahu is haunted by the leftist media is immanent to his experience as a politician. The idea that he, the son of a professor of Rahavia, where the Ashkenazi elite resides in Jerusalem, is a true reflection of the people – the masses, the periphery, the poor – and that he is actually being haunted by the hounds of the media on the people’s behalf – was his new version of populism. They are not the watch dogs of democracy, they are leftist activists seeking to take him off power, popular power for he always wins elections. The left, the media and the attorney general are portrayed as anti-democratic for the leader of the people is the only true manifestation of democracy. Anyone who is against him – even if the purpose of public media is to criticize the government – is against his popular democracy.

“The Iranian threat is off the radar and now we have the media. This is not just the public corporation: it is also the nomination of Netanyahu’s close associate, Rami Sadan, to the chair of channel 10; it is also the initiative to unite the regulative authorities on the commercial channels and the TV multichannel companies into one regulative authority subordinated to the communication minister (Netanyahu); and there are probably some other ideas how to weaken the media.” (Peretz 2016). The combined movement – to pursue greater and greater domination of the media while simultaneously accusing it of personally persecuting Netanyahu – does not just replace Iran but was already from the starting point of Netanyahu one central obsession of his. In his famous 1999 speech to the members of the Likud Netanyahu goes on stage and start saying ‘they-are-afraid, they-are-afraid, they-are-afraid’ not stopping until the whole crowd enthusiastically calls with him – ‘they are afraid; they are afraid’ --- they being not terrorist organizations, enemy states or opponent politicians – but the journalists. What are the charges of Netanyahu against the media, especially the news, what are the strategies he developed to counter these problems and what is his grand plan for altering forever news and journalism in Israel?

This chapter unfolds through several layers of media critique and control sought by the PM. First, the love-hate affair of Netanyahu and the media as revealed in his recent biographies written, tellingly, by top journalists. Second, the ideological shift by Netanyahu – from the neoliberal argument that the media should be diverse, pluralistic and competition-oriented to the neoconservative argument that the media haunts Netanyahu personally and what needs to be therefore done is to establish a rightwing, or more importantly, a Bibist media. The third part looks at the evolution of the argument further: now the accusation evolves so that the public media haunts the Netanyahu family and it does so because he is a true representative of the poor, disenfranchised people. Netanyahu is the people and the media, the agent of the Left, is persecuting him personally as the embodiment of the Jewish people. The main source for these part are Netanyahu’s own speeches. The next part explicates 10 strategies which Netanyahu is using consistently, throughout the years – to control the media. It ranges from a close association to the tycoons whom he influences to purchase media venues – channels, newspapers, radio stations – and make them pro-Bibi, to his close pressure on appointing chief editors and journalists to the crucifixion of the top investigative journalists as ‘enemies of the people’. The main sources for this part are the investigative articles of the top journalists both in written and broadcasted media against Netanyahu. The final part reads the accusation charges in Netanyahu’s trial as a text exploring the obsession of Netanyahu with controlling the media, which may well have brought his reign to conclusion after four election cycles in two years which were allegedly run on the personal interest of Netanyahu in incriminating the media and the judicial system, a deep state argument in its Bibist version, which led to his apparent downfall.

1. **Foreign Affair**

Ben Nitay an MIT graduate, had lived a comfortable life in Boston working as a consultant at BCG with no intention of returning to Israel with generous support of his reach uncles. He did give occasional talks part of Israeli advocacy on behalf of Kolet Avital, working at the consul. His first encounter with TV confrontation was when she had asked him to represent Israel against Prof. Edward Said, one of the most eloquent speakers on behalf of the Palestinian cause. This first encounter, describes Caspit in his biography on Netanyahu “was a constitutive event: the first meeting between Ben Nitai, no other than Benjamin Netanyahu, and the TV cameras. A new affair was lit. The camera loved him and he loved it back. It was the beginning of a superb friendship” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 43-44). This affair became a full relationship once the shocking news of the death of Netanyahu’s brother, Yoni, in the Entebbe raid, the hostages rescue operation in Uganda, became known on the 4th of July 1976. Ben has returned home, also to his childhood’s name, Benjamin Netanyahu, brother of Israeli hero, Yoni, to establish an international institute for terror which made Netanyahu ‘Mr. Terror’ as he returned to Israel and then back to Boston as a political delegate appointed by a prominent Likud MK, Moshe Arens.

The new recruit was a professional politician in the making. He soon compiled a list of all key politicians in Washington DC – and New York’s media elite. He became a fixture of news shows. His favorite venue, narrates Pfeffer in his biography *Bibi*, was ABC’s Nightline hosted by Tedd Koppel. It was claimed that in the 1980s, Netanyahu was Nightline’s most interviewed expert on terrorism (Pfeffer 2018: 147). Netanyahu became an expert not just on terrorism, but on being a top presenter. Weaving relations with production teams of the news rooms, he was a frequent interviewee with the top news people of the US. Within that he formed ‘the gang of four’ – Rosenthal and Spire of the New York Times, Will of Newsweek, and Crauthemmer of the Washington Post. Netanyahu’s team (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 56). Understanding the changing media with the establishment of 24 hours CNN channel, launching its flagship interview show in 1985, Netanyahu became one of its habitués (Pfeffer 2018: 155). Netanyahu was a professional. Taking private lessons from Lilian Wilder ‘the first and leading lady of coachers of TV performances’ and a hard-worker, taking days to prepare for each chief event or speech, working on the technique, the style and the content through catchy phrases and shining his arguments, choosing analogies, stories, diagrams and illustrations to vivid up his shows, perfecting this to a mastery (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 35-40, 357-358). Crucially, from his early days in Washington he has also cultivated the Israeli reporters, trading his inner-knowledge of the political backdoors of the administration with favorable mentions of him as the rising star of Israeli diplomacy in the US. In his Israeli trips he invested much time and energy in appearing on talk-shows, visiting newsroom, seeing publishers and making reporters his personal contacts (Pfeffer 2018: 160).

Yet these heydays were short. Three events exemplify Netanyahu’s growing complex with the Israeli media, producing his unbreakable linkage in the idiom ‘the left and the media’. The first was of his own initiative: the never-produced tape of his affair with Bar behind the back of his second wife Sara, which made Benjamin go on prime TV evening news *Mabat*. All of his advisers, colleagues, cousins and lawyers discouraged him from going on TV. On the contrary, there is no tape and a complaint at the police station would finish it off, they advised. Yet for Netanyahu, already at these early days, controlling the message, broadcasting it himself, in his own voice, through his own interpretation and making the crisis into an opportunity to destroy his enemy was to be done where he felt most comfortable: on prime TV. He got the exclusive interview he sought, confessing to the astonished eyes of the reporter and the people of Israel he has betrayed his wife Sara; it was he who is being under political blackmail, turned Netanyahu the story on its head (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 81-85). The headline of the reporter was just as Natanyahu planned it to be: ‘political blackmail’ thereby insinuating by implication his bitter rival within the Likud, Levi, as a potential criminal. Yet in the years to come, in the media, Netanyahu the infidel image clung onto him, haunting him ever after, echoing in the 2009 campaign of Livni, head of Kadima years later, which read: “Netanyahu, I don’t believe him” (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 236). His changing views on the Hebron agreement, the disengagement from Gaza and the Bar-Ilan speech and the infiltrators deportation plan with the UN, among other back-and-forth change of mind, coined Netanyahu’s image as an opportunistic leader who is worried mainly about his own survival.

The second major event which shaped his relationships with the Israeli media, and the constitutive of all, was the assassination of Rabin in 1995. In the days before the assassination the rallies of the right, 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, as wearing the Kafiya of Arafat and the word ‘traitor’, with its special religious undertone that traitors should be executed, became the single word most associated with these days. Netanyahu, like Sharon but unlike other Likud leaders, did not choose to distance himself from the rightwing extremist crowd. Politics was fought on the streets back then and even though the extremist were not Likud voters – but voted to the more extreme right and religious parties – they made the masses out there in the city squares. Most notable became the picture of Netanyahu on the balcony, ironically over-watching the Balfour residence to which Netanyahu would enter after the post-assassination election, were tens of thousands have gathered shouting ‘Rabin a traitor’ and ‘death to Rabin’ while Netnayhau waving at them smiling from the balcony with Sharon and Shamir at his side. The head of Shin Bet meets Netanyahu and Sharon to give warning. ‘I don’t need to translate the words of Netanyahu, head of the opposition’ he said 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 radicalize the crowds. After Gilon, head of Shin Bet, met Netanyahu to warn him, Netanyahu figured out the rightwing tactics work. He called to excel 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 a typical Netanyahu manner, he announces in 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 opposition; Netanyahu blamed the media. In his eyes, he was the true victim.

The third arena which fixated Netanyahu’s hostility towards the media was his televised debates, in particular this against Mordechai in 1999. Netanyahu was perfectly situated for this arena: it was the decisive factor with which he won the 1996 election against Peres. Despite the grave impression of Rabin’s assassination, and under continuing terror attacks with hundreds of Israelis dead by suicide bombers in the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the gap in favor of Peres was great before the debate, and gone the day after. Netanyahu mastered the medium and Yediot Achronot praised him as the winner in the 1996 debate, while Maariv, smaller in circulation, favored Peres. He won the election receiving 50.5% with Peres only 49.5%. 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 which could have gone wrong, did. Barak, the chief rival of Netanyahu and his successor as PM, declined participation. Netanyahu, eager to utilize the medium which no other knew as him, was confronted with the cumbersome general Mordechai who was perceived as without an ounce of charisma, dry and lame (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 140). Aided by Netanyahu’s personal media adviser for years, Eyal Arad, Mordechai gave a performance no one expected him to give, repeatedly saying to Netanyahu ‘Bibi, look me in the eyes’. The Likud has fallen in the polls and Netanyahu said in a Likud gathering after the debate: “I read over the weekend the newspapers, not all of them, because there is a limit to how much a man can suffer. There were there tens of thousands of words, swirls, condemnations and slander. We have an army of enlisted journalists for Barak. They are all committed to Barak. We will win because the truth would defeat the lie” (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 151). The thesis was set: the journalists twist the real picture. They are against Netanyahu and for his rivals. Netanyahu, in his mind, was yet again the victim. In an interview with Amnon Levi after the defeat he admitted: “at some point I gave up on the media”. If someone is standing on the queue to the bus, Netanyahu illustrates, and a person comes and pushes him, some would turn and ask ‘did I do something wrong? Hit you?’ others, like me I guess, would push him back” (Leshem and Ashuah 2017: 154). And ‘push him back’ is a gentle metaphor to the way Netanyahu as PM shaped the battleground against the public media in Israel.

1. **Pro Bibi – What to do against Media Leftistness: From Market Pluralism to My Own Media**

“I heard the claims that I have an obsession with the media” I want to tell you a secret: I do not 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): just as he mastered a strategy to become an authoritative speaker on terrorism on US media in the 90s, deciphering the ecosystem of newsroom and talk shows, weaving close ties with the editors, producers and secretaries by way of becoming “Mr. Terror” in their eyes, and just as he became a master of public lectures – refining his speeches, his gimmicks his rhythm – to become the undisputed ‘magician’ of Israeli politics and beyond, so was he a professional in perfecting his struggle against the public media in Israel. There were two fundamental fronts to that mission: one, to set in the public mind the media as a politicized factor which he, Netanyahu, is its victim; second, to control the media to the smallest details – every appointment from a minor journalist to the tycoon owner of the channel, as the next section would show.

Shaping the public discourse by way of positioning the media as an independent, collective, powerful actor, transformed gradually throughout the years. In the early days of the first reign of Netanyahu as PM, the thesis was closely bonded with his then neoliberal position. The first premise in his argument was to determine that the media is of the left in Israel, like the elites that set the minds of the people even if they were not democratically elected by the people and are therefore formally not in power. Thus, Netanyahu said, in the journalists’ yearbook 1998: “the majority of the journalists were on the left wing, from the moderate left to the hard left. I cannot say if 80 or 90%. But definitely the vast majority is on that camp… I did the Hebron agreement, everybody applauded me for two days. I ensure you that if I give away vast territories of the land of Israel I would be congratulated”(Leshem and Ashuah 2017).The idea is therefore, at this stage, to frame the public discourse with the notion that the public media is of a left leaning – only later to become an argument that the media and the left in Israel is one and the same. The left, here, is identified with giving back occupied territories to the Palestinians. If the first premise is that the media is of the left, and the second premise is that there is a monopoly of the left, the conclusion is that the remedy is privatization of the media. The tool for changing this constructed reality was hence to call for free competition and a market of opinions.

On 1998 Netanyahu as a PM launches a critical stage in his quest to change power also in the public media, by appointing a new CEO to the Israel broadcast service. He says in an interview just after his nomination: “I mean to open many more satellite televisions, another ground channel, radio broadcasts virtually unlimited… we’d make a free economy” (Netanyahu 1998). Netanyahu’s statements, at this early stage, suggest that against what he sees as a domination of left-leaning press, the remedy is opening more and more channels and news media. His plan includes transforming the Israeli public broadcast to a model more similar to the American PBS than to the European idea of public broadcast, and minimizing its effects by opening many more venues and news outlets. His main complaint against public media is of its political imbalance. His solution is professional ethics which distinguishes between the journalist’s own private view and the mission of public media, which is “to represent the plurality of views which are held by the public” (Netanyahu 1998). The free market, at this stage, is seen as the solution to the problem of the left-leaning media. Yet the occasion of this talk is Netanyahu’s appointment of a new CEO to the public broadcast authority “why do I have to deal with the problems? For what do I appoint a new CEO? He will have to deal with them”, he concludes. Thus, from early days on, changing the media is also about controlling its managers. Porat, his chosen man for the job, was the media adviser of the two previous Likud PMs – Begin and Shamir. Some of the PBA board members said in response that Porat is unfit for the job and it would have been better to appoint a professional man who would know how to distinguish between his political views and professional views (Krol 1998). The same charges which Netanyahu makes against the journalists, they make against him. But for him, it is precisely part of his mission to appoint right-wingers to control the public media. According to his analysis, the media was the first of three factors that caused him to lose the 1999 elections. “When I return… it would be with a media of my own, we would no longer be dependent on the leftist media which detests me and would do anything the get rid of me” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 193). Note it is not against the right, that he thinks the media turns, but personally against him, Netanyahu. The rationale of the free market – building alternative media outlets to minimize and trivialize the effect of the public broadcast – would dominate his period as the economy minister also, 2003-5. But this was, from a very early stage, only a mouth token. The real plan to break the left monopoly was inspired by the establishment of Fox news, and the social analysis at its base. Netanyahu explicated: “we know in the US mainly the east coast and the west coast, but between these two coasts there is a different America, a whole world. These are the republican strongholds. They do not believe the mainstream media. Make a note: Fox news is the new channel; it would break the monopoly. It would change America.” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 193). This exactly was Netanyahu’s plan for the second Israel. Israel HaYom, Bibi’s own newspaper, funded by Adelson, would be the vessel, launched in July 2007. It would not serve the right: on the contrary, a lot of its critique would be launched against the politicians of the right, rivals of Netanyahu from within the camp. Israel HaYom, for more than a decade, would pledge loyalty to Netanyahu the man.

The critique voiced against his Israel HaYom, Netanyahu dismissed by arguing that this is how it is done in the world. In a special session in memory of Zabotinski in August 2016, in his second period of being a PM, Netanyahu says:

One of the things in which Zabotinski believed is 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 communication market. In the USA there is Wall Street Journal which supports one direction, and NY Times which supports another, nobody is saying anything. In Britain there is the Guardian supporting one direction, Times which supports the opposite direction – no one is crying ‘overtaking’. But in Israel, God forbid if there is a different opinion… And against that the opposition people who speak highly on free speech try to struggle: against opening the communication markets, against competition. This is of course not pluralism, this is not liberalism, this is by the way not Fascism, closer to Bolshevism… the people would determine in the ballot box, the people would rule the remote control. This is Zabotinski’s theory. (Israel 2016)

Notice that the argument is no longer that there should be a plurality of opinions and news outlets, but that against a left-leaning outlet what is needed is a right-leaning outlet. The rationale has changed. Only Netanyahu has forgotten to mention Israel HaYom is not a public media outlet but a privately funded free tablet printed in millions of copies and distributed for free. It deteriorated the competition – the same competition which was his center goal as a neoliberal – and made other printed newspapers barely survive. It reshaped the mind of the people by being unashamedly identified with PM Netanyahu. And with it too brought a new narrative told by Netanyahu: the left is Bolshevik for not supporting freedom of speech; the people determine in the ballot box; therefore, the media, working against the people’s choice – meaning against Netanyahu – is undemocratic.

Therewith lied another transformation in Netanyahu’s argument. In the late 90s the Left in his mind was identified with the two-states solution, or disengagement from occupied territories. He kept on using the idea that he could be endorsed by the media should he just offer to disengage from the territories “only withdraw from Judea and Samaria and we’ll get off you” Netanyahu supposedly citing a Haaretz journalist and replies ‘no, no thanks’. But with it he mentions that superior officers in the Palestinian authority wish he would fall due to the investigations, thus wrapping the media, the left, the Arabs and the Palestinians, enemies of Israel, in one camp (Netanyahu 2017b).

Yet, the idea of what ‘left media’ meant changed with time. After the establishment of Yisrael HaYom it was made to mean one thing only: anti-Bibi. The linkage between striving for a free press and identifying the left with the personal objection to Netanyahu as the sole representative of the right became the dominant line in Likud-gatherings and speeches to the base: Netanyahu’s followers. Is there still a free press in Israel? Netanyahu both asks and answers, in a statement opening the Likud session on 5 December 2016:

So I opened channel 10 and I saw – “pro-Bibi”, you know, everything “pro-Bibi”, you open the news – “pro-Bibi”, you open satire, gossip, magazine, supporting not just me but my wife also, my children, unequivocal support! I said, it may be unique, let’s check. I open 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 open other channels, radio, GLZ, voice of Israel “pro-Bibi” all the time. It begins to be awkward…” .[[1]](#footnote-1)

Netanyahu uses irony to draw a picture of a public media that hunts him and his family down. He is but an ordinary citizen who is being persecuted by the media. He concludes: “Freedom of speech is not a privilege of journalists only. Freedom of speech is a right of every citizen and also my right as a prime minister; and it is my right to criticize the press for its one-sidedness in the coverage against me and my family, the lies they spread, all sort of distortions. It is the right of citizens to criticize the media as I have just done and continue to do in the free state of Israel”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Not only the press is now identified as unanimously anti-Bibi, the speech is an active call to the citizens of Israel, Likudnics, to the people of the right, the true “pro-Bibi” people, to go after the press. It is their right – and duty to their beloved leader.

1. **I am the People**

By 2017, all the pieces are coming together in Netanyahu’s remolded thesis: “the leftist press is recruited to a Bolshevik hunt, brainwash and character assassination against me and my family. It happens day in 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 am the first PM of the right that tries to change it.” (Netanyahu 2017c). The immediate context is of course the inquiries against Netanyahu and the approaching decision by the state attorney. But the narrative is against the left, and the development of deep state argument in its Israeli version. Notice that the accusation is that the left since the establishment of the state is controlling the state – thus equated to MAPAI’s rule – yet Netanyahu argues that they ruled undemocratically – which is of course a lie as MAPAI was elected as the dominant party time and again in democratic election just like the Likud is over the last two decades. This line merely prepares the ground for the thrust of the argument: “so they do whatever they can to get rid of me and thereby to perpetuate the rule of the left over the strongholds against the will of the voters the majority of whom are right-wingers” (Netanyahu 2017c). Thus, using the metaphor of ‘Bolshevik hunt’ in connection with ‘the recruited leftist media’ signifies for his followers the identity of the left with MAPAI and the media associated in their imagination with Bolshevism and Communism as a totalitarian regime. He then argues that the left still rules today – despite 40 years of Likud rule since 1977 – undemocratically against the will of the people. Netanyahu thereby lashes a vicious attack against the fourth arm of democracy – the public media – by equating it with the left and portraying it as the elites which preserve their power against the people. The people chose Netanyahu – but the media which is left is still controlling the country. The new construct being – the media is against the people.

The two sides of the equation are now disclosed: “the left and the media, and they are the same… have launched an obsessive hunt against me and my family with the purpose of conducting a *cout d’etat*.” (Netanyahu 2017b). The means – a trial against Netanyahu; the purpose – undemocratically taking down Netanyahu from power. The essence: Netanyahu is chosen by the people; therefore, Netanyahu is the people.

Netanyahu opens his speech at the support rally of the Likud sharing with his followers what a Likudnic like them told him that very morning; the leader is close to the people: “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 cannot defeat us in the polling booth so they try to overtake democracy and to take us down without elections” (Netanyahu 2017b).[[3]](#footnote-3) It is not Netanyahu who is on trial for corruption, it not his personal trial: it is the media persecuting the people of Israel. Who is the people of Israel? It is the Likud’s base. Netanyahu explicates: “we have Mizrachis and Russians, we have new Olim and old ones, we have secular and religious, we have Amona and Dimona, we have the people, the people of Israel” (Netanyahu 2017b). The elites against the people. Three weeks later he makes the final linkage between him and the people; he tells his supporters: “I saw in a TV item, an item reporting about our last meeting in Ganei HaTaarucha. With what mockery, with what arrogance they tried to portray us. They do not just despise us; they despise something deeper. They essentially despise the choice of the people; 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 would take down me and her, they would take down us. The Likud. The entire national camp which the Likud leads.” (Netanyahu 2017a).

Democracy is a contested concept. On Netanyahu’s reading, the old elites still control power and try to persecute him using the media and the judicial systems which are under their control. He, the chosen by the people, the sole representative of the national camp, of the Jewish nation, is in struggle against the anti-patriotic left which does not accept the rule of the people – the majority rule of the right “the people got fed up with the recruited media, and the people knows the truth” (Netanyahu 2017a). The core concepts of a liberal democracy – rule of law, checks and balances, independent judicial system, the centrality of human rights, the public press as the watch dog of democracy – are portrayed as an old-elite’s undemocratic rule against the people. A classic populist reading channeled to narrate the trials 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 give in – 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’.” (Netanyahu 2017b). By 2019, the journalists would be hanging of the skyscrapers in Tel Aviv. But throughout this period, from his first term as prime minster onward, the quest of Netanyahu to control the media would become a meticulous project which would change Israeli media inside out.

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

In Netanyahu’s mind, the media is itself a crime scene.[[4]](#footnote-4) As he said in a 1987 interview to Maariv: “For me, TV is a boxing arena. You stand against your opponent which 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 judge himself, as well as the journalists who report about the fight, become the enemies against which his fists are turned. This puts the journalists, and the judges, in an unethical position: being incriminating and politicized, they are forbidden from reacting as they do not want to fall into Netanyahu’s attempt of changing the rules of the game and becoming actors themselves. Notably, Illana Dayan’s reaction to the fiercest attack she suffered from Netanyahu after her investigative inquiry was broadcasted on Netanyahu’s aquarium, his prime minster office, was to read in full Netanyahu’s personal attack on her as a ‘radical leftist’ on camera.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, there is no plain battleground. Netanyahu, as a prime minister, enjoyed one major advantage: his almost complete control over the agenda setting of the media. He used this one major right of his to take his own arguments to the extreme: the media, as an arm of the Left, in his speeches since the trial has begun to be equated to the Nazi regime itself: “The Jews in the holocaust were taken and slaughtered, but it was impossible to control their emotions and thoughts. This is a leftist dictatorship. To cause the fall down of democracy and to actually make a coup d’état”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Any criticism against him – especially coming from the media which it is its unequivocal role to criticize – was damned as a personal attack against him as the sole leader of the people. Thus, Netanyahu did not just leave the media as a compound, unitary actor. One of his dominant tactics, as Ilana Dayan discloses, is that “he paints all criticism in colors of a personal attack”.[[8]](#footnote-8) This goes both ways: Netanyahu believes that any criticism of him, his government or his policies is a personal attack on him, and prefers to attack personally Illana Dayan or Ben Caspit or Guy Peleg the journalists, to personify the struggle. Netanyahu said in one of his investigations:

The internet, the television, the radio they are all left, left, left. Ynet and Yediot Aaharonot 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)

That was also the rationale, as we will shortly see, that was put as the main argument to the tycoons who Netanyahu hoped to convince to purchase public news outlets and thereby save Israel. Yet, this line was equally applied to right-wingers who resisted Netanyahu. Netanyahu perceives himself as the right – as portrayed in his characterization of any rival politician criticizing him from within the right camp as ‘not right any more’ – people like Dan Meridor, former president Rubi Rivlin, Avigdor Liberman, Gideon Saar, Naftali Bennet and Zeev Elkin, all more strident rightwing ideologues than himself, are dismissed as ‘not right’ once they become critical of Netanyahu. If you are not for Netanyahu, you are not of the right, you are not part of the national camp, and you are not loyal to the Jewish people. Indeed, any criticism of him is presented as against the people – as he is the sole representative of the people in his mind, as we just saw. But it also means that he personifies the struggle against the ‘old elites’: it is not just ‘the judicial system’ but attorney general Avichai Mandelblit personally that would come under attack, or the chief of the police – Roni Alsheich – two people Netanyahu himself appointed as his loyalists and once they cooperated with the investigation against him, as emanates from the prescription of their job, they become personally under attack from him, his loyalist ministers and his loyal media outlets. All the more so with clerks, state professionals which for him by definition are his sworn enemies, as his followers name them ‘Bagatz (the supreme court) party’ or ‘Salech A-Din (the attorney’s office) gang’.[[10]](#footnote-10) So his persecutors Liat Ben-Ari or Shai Nitzan become under a vicious personal attack, including against their families, from the combative crowds allegedly orchestrated from Balfour.

The same is evident in the public media: Netanyahu personifies his struggle and makes top journalists enemies of the people. This chapter opened with the four journalists hanging from the skyscrapers of Tel Aviv with the writing on the wall: ‘they don’t get to decide. You do.” The general incitement always has particular faces for the people to identify as the enemy of the people, by Netanyahu. The choice was not incidental: Netanyahu was engaged in a personal hunting of journalists who brought evidence against him and exposed his consistent attempts to control the media. Indeed, the police investigation was opened due to a testimony given by Ben Caspit, a rightwing journalist which Netanyahu has ever since vilified. This part pieces together the major strategies of Netanyahu in overtaking the media in Israel, particularly the news media, through the analysis of the major reports of the journalists. We take the long-term analysis of Nati Toker of DeMarker, Gidi Weitz of Haaretz, the 7th Eye, Illana Dayan of channel 12, and Guy Peleg and Raviv Drucker from channel 10, turned 13. The last two also were hanging from the walls. Netanyahu is a sophisticated, calculated, mighty enemy with an obsession to right the wrong and Right the media. Putting things right, in his case, means – as the unfolding chaplet would demonstrate – to establish a loyalist, obedient, castrated pro-Bibi media, very very far from his vision of a more pluralistic, competitive journalism. Some of the major means to achieve control over the media, are compiled under seven strategies used by Netanyahu and his men to achieve his goal.

1. **Owning the media: Tempting Moguls into establishing an Israeli Fox News Empire for Netanyahu**

The proximity of politicians and big capital is always a problem in a democracy. Netanyahu throughout his period in the US was supported and then fully-funded by big capital. However, the unique undertaking developed by Netanyahu throughout his years in power was to combine his two prime desires: to get closer to tycoons and to influence them into facilitating, buying, interfering and eventually creating for Netanyahu media of his own. The kind of argument Netanyahu uses to tempt them into the news media business, as reported by Parker, Milchan, Adelson, Elovich and others, is that the fate of the Jewish people is entangled with Netanyahu being in power and therefore, in order to remain in power, he has to have direct influence on the media which is otherwise, he was convinced, against him, the chosen by the people. Direct engagement with the owners of the media was a prime concern of Netanyahu. 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 treasury he made sure Milchan would win the shares of channel 10. He took care of him personally” testified at the police, of his own accord, Shayo Segal, Netanyahu’s chief of staff.[[12]](#footnote-12) On the face of it, case 1000 is about the presents, jewelry, cigars and champagnes that the Netanyahus have received – willingly or upon demand – from Milchan. However, Netanyahu had far greater plans for his mogul-friend: first, he had involved Milchan in raising the sum of money needed as a down payment so that Shiloach, classified by Netanyahu as ‘extreme Left’ would not purchase channel 10.[[13]](#footnote-13) Second, Netanyahu’s ambitious plan was to unite Reshet and Keshet – the two TV stations – and make Milchan a shareholder, possibly the lion’s share holder – of the strongest TV news channel ever, with a monopolistic status. Filber was to lead this endeavor.[[14]](#footnote-14) Netanyahu had hoped that should Milchan be the owner, Netanyahu would have his man as the CEO of the united news TV monopoly, as Zeev Feldman, the business manager of Milchan, has disclosed.[[15]](#footnote-15) By the end of 2015 Netanyahu was in a meeting at Milchan’s house with Filber, then CEO of communication ministry (with Netanyahu as the minister) in which he convinced Milchan to buy a share of channel 2.[[16]](#footnote-16) Netanyahu later on helped Balvetnick to buy channel 10, and by that to pay off some of Milchan’s debt.[[17]](#footnote-17) Netanyahu was also involved in attempts to convince Milchan to buy some of the ownership of Mozes company.[[18]](#footnote-18) Milchan was the go in between man, performing for Netanyahu the mediator role between Adelson and Mozes. What did Milchan get in return? Famously, Netanyahu tried to pass ‘the Milchan law’ which extends the tax benefits of expatriate tycoons who returned to Israel, to help out Milchan.[[19]](#footnote-19) But it may well be the case that while Milchan enjoyed being so close to the omnipotent power holder in Jerusalem, Netanyahu was the one who envisioned – and materialized – Milchan’s growing part in the communication business, and particularly the news scene, in Israel.

1. Len Blavetnick:

One key example for Netanyahu’s tactics is Blavetnick, a Jewish billionaire, who was competing – and won – against Ilan Shiloach in 2015 on the right to buy channel 10. The channel was owned by Yossi Meiman, Ron Lauder and Arnon Milchan of case 1000. Once the sale of channel 10, the nemesis of Netanyahu given its investigating journalism programs, became an option, Blavetnick calls Netanyahu to ask for his advice.[[20]](#footnote-20) He recalls the talk with Netanyahu: “since channel 10 is available for sale, do you think it’s a good idea?” Netanyahu’s reply: “it is a terrible business with horrible people… but it is not a bad idea… Israel needs more of a different kind of people in the media world… it is good if you could buy it”.[[21]](#footnote-21) Was it Blavetnick who called Netanyahu or the other way around? In any case, Blavetnick today is one of the owners of channel 13 (then channel10), and one of the leading shareholders in the struggle to downsize dramatically the news company of channel 13: more amusement less news. Downsizing the news was also a tool in Netanyahu’s toolkit. In all, Blavetnick has invested more than 200 million shekels so far. In his testimony regarding case 1000, he attests that he knows Netanyahu for many years, and has met him often upon his visits to Israel. He says that Netanyahu “always complains about the media… about the leftists that are not good for the state, anti-Israelis and anti-business… and that channel 10 in particular is anti-Israeli and anti-business.” Blavetnick reports in the investigation that Netanyahu talks to him regularly since he bought channel 10 and tells him that channel 10 is not fair to Netanyahu and his family and son, and that Netanyahu had asked him “to do something about it”. This was of course catching two wealthy birds in one stone, as Blavetnick’s buy of channel 10 made a lot of profit for Milchan, the previous owner friend.

But channel 10 is just the first milestone in the road Netanyahu hopes to pave for himself by his mogul friends’ money. Blavetnich reports that after he had bought channel 10, Netanyahu suggested to him that Yediot Ahronot may also be up for sale. Channel 10, Yediot Ahronot – on the road to the big plan. Blavetnick confirms that Netanyahu “spoke a little… that the country needs a channel like Fox news, that is more to the right and center… you can make a lot of money if you do that because the rightwing public opinion would be more interested and therefore more people would watch it”, Netanyahu told him. Blavetnick replied that he himself is not a professional and he would consider joining if there is a group of people that would take it upon itself.

But what was Netanyahu’s take on that? In his testimony he explicates: “channel 10 was sold (to Blavetnick) because that gentleman, what’s his name, Ilan Shiloach, is ultra-left that came to buy the channel.. I see the danger that channel 10 as bad it is would be even more so… so I turned to Blavetnick. He made a bid and won… I told him change this channel it is a terrible channel… Shiloach is the enemy of all what I believe in… I told Len ‘this is a national mission’ even though you are not going to make money out of it”.[[22]](#footnote-22) He told the investigators that when he saw Shiloach wanted to buy the channel he had to act and that for all he cared ‘the channel could be shut off”. Thus, from the prime minister’s testimony it seems that it was Netanyahu who suggested the purchase to Blavetnick in the first place. Indeed, Netnayhu had established here a pattern he would use often again: either you change the media outlet, or I’d use my power to close it down. ‘Shutting off’ channel 10 turned 13 would be a dominant shadow under which the journalists would have to live, their professional life hanging in the balance. Netanyahu also disclosed that he asked Haru his confidante to check how the prime minster would be covered in the channel after the Blavetnick bid, solicitated by the prime minister. Netanyahu confirmed to the police: “I want to know that the disaster called channel 10 does not repeat itself”.[[23]](#footnote-23) Netanyahu has definitely put a lot of pressure on Blavetnick to take down Drucker’s item of Netanyahu’s relations with Paker and other items. Blavetnick did not answer the calls. Which brings us to Paker.[[24]](#footnote-24)

1. James Paker

Paker’s grandfather was the founder and owner of a network of media, television and newspapers outlets which he bequeathed to his son who turned it into a powerful media monopoly in Australia. Netanyahu had hoped that Paker junior would realize this dream for him in Israel too.[[25]](#footnote-25) In 2013 Paker was negotiating the purchase of Walla news outlet, on behalf of Netanyahu. Paker described Netanyahu as the most impressive man in the world. Netanyahu’s prime goal in the relation with Paker is that he would overtake for him the Israeli empire of media Yediot Ahronot which according the Paker was ‘Bibi’s nightmare’. He indeed met several times with Noni Mozes. Milchan’s testimony exposed what he thought was Netanyahu’s line of argument with Paker: Israel is facing a second holocaust if Netanyahu’s regime would fall, and to prevent that he needs to purchase the Mozes empire. Milchan said Netanyahu has used the same line of argument on him too.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Filber has met with Milchan and Paker at Paker’s house in Caesarea, adjacent to Netanyahu’s house, to “discuss Netanyahu’s fantasy: the overtaking of a television channel, funded by Paker”. Eventually Netanyahu’s imitative was to establish an Israeli Fox news channel, funded by Paker, Milchan and Murdoch. Netanyahu requested Paker to invest 25 Million dollars in the project, to which he agreed. The initiative came to a halt due to an international police investigation, in connection with Paker’s gambling empire and the mafia in China. Paker has bought, with Netanyahu’s encouragement, the house next to Netanyahu in Caesarea and put it to the free use of the Netanyahus. Paker stopped coming to Israel once the police wanted his testimony in the cases against Netanyahu.[[27]](#footnote-27)

1. Sheldon Adelson

Unlike Milchan, Paker and Blavetnick, all probably tempted into media ownership by Netanyahu himself, Sheldon Adelson was the mentor of Netanyahu in terms of the power and control one can achieve through media ownership. Sheldon Adelson and his Israeli wife Miriam, today the CEO of Israel Hayom, the media patrons of Netanyahu, have developed a micromodel which was especially suited for Balfour’s needs. Adelson bought in 2015 in his city of residence, where he made his initial fortune in the gambling business, the *Las Vegas Review Journal* by a concealed proxy. The reporters and management did not know at the time who was the owner who just bought the newspaper, they just recalled that they have been requested to watch closely and look for faults of three judges in Nevada. One of these judges was the presiding judge over a law suit filed against Sheldon Adelson, and his gambling empire. The prosecutor was one of the senior executives in Adelson’s firm who accused him of trying to force him into illegal actions including relations with crime organizations and prostitute business. Adelson did not like the judge’s handling of the file in court and allegedly offered to fund a known lawyer to replace the judge, reported the *Review Journal*. Once this was published on the *Review*, the journalists responsible for these reports were fired one after another. He made sure they would be purged, and populated the journal with his own men and then used it to influence regulation, judges and policy of Las Vegas on his business. The journal became more and more identified with interests and people Adelson was in favor of and was the first journal to support Trump’s candidacy for presidency.[[28]](#footnote-28) The linkage of controlling the media, threatening judges and other rivals by negative media exposition and using the struggle against the public media as a political tool of the Right against the deep state mechanisms of the Left, was especially appealing to prime minister Netanyahu. Establishing Israel Hayom was the first bastion to conquer.

The newspaper was built on an uneconomic model: the idea was not to have a viable financial model based on advertising but in fact to break down the Mozes empire and change the political discourse by flooding the streets of Israel with free copies of the pro-Netanyahu free of charge newspaper look alike. It did precisely that: Adelson’s Israel Hayom, first given away for free on 30 July 2007, became the largest spread printed newspaper in Israel. It costed its owner, Adelson, over a billion shekels so far. It brought the closing down of Maariv newspaper and the shrinking of Yediot.[[29]](#footnote-29) More importantly, it arguably provided an efficient tool for embedding Netanyahu’s grip on power, and making ‘his base’ – the lower socioeconomic strata – key to his power holding endeavor. Adelson and Netanyahu shared a somewhat cynic conservative-populist worldview, and a strong taste for power. Adelson himself was key to strengthening the relationship between Trump and Netanyahu, as he was also one of the earliest patrons of Trump in the US and other Republican politicians. He influenced Trump to support the nuclear policy of Netanyahu and to transfer the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.[[30]](#footnote-30) Capital becomes policy. But his 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 has used his ultimate tool – his money – to threaten media outlets not just in the US but also in Israel. In 2011 he has threatened with a huge lawsuit against channel 10, with explicit aim of weakening the channel, critical of the prime minister, thus jeopardizing further the channel’s economic condition. He aimed to do the same to the 7th Eye, a critical website of the Israeli media. Adelson exported to Israel, via Israel HaYom, an interest-driven, corrupt pseudo-journalism which dominated, by the share influence of millions of free copies, the public discourse in Israel. As his wife eulogized him, ‘he had changed the course of history’.[[31]](#footnote-31) The end to the special relationship between Adelson and Netanyahu was actually caused with the revelation, on channel 13, former channel 10, of the transcripts of the Mozes-Netanyahu conversations. Once Adelson had found out that Netanyahu has played him both ways, and promised Mozes – without consulting Adelson – to curtail the number of copies and the Israel Hayom weekend edition, as well as supported, at least apparently, the legislation against Israel Hayom, Adelson decided to break clean from Netanyahu.

1. Elovich

Whereas Milchan and Paker are at the center of case 1000 against Netanyahu, and Adelson-Mozes at the heart of case 2000, Elovich and Netanyahu’s regulatory corruption are the core of case 4000. Elovich was a latecomer to the gang of moguls around Netanyahu as he is not a conservative tycoon or of the right. The relationship between Netanyahu and him were based on sheer interests, rather than a shared ideology. In April 2010 Shaul Elovich purchases the control over Bezeq, the landline telephony public company, for 5.5 billion shekels. Elovich holds a pyramid of companies from which he takes loans to finance the purchase. During that time the service the Israeli citizen gets from the monopoly over Bezeq deteriorates. Threatened by the cellular reform performed by Cakhlon, the minister of communication before Erdan, the Elovichs decide to act directly with ‘the big one’ as they would call Netanyahu in their conversations with Walla CEO, Ilan Yeshua, to get him to slow down the reform so that the monopoly of Bezeq would stay intact.[[32]](#footnote-32) The Netanyahus invite the Elovichs for dinner and in it Sara complaints on the negative covering her husband and herself receive from Walla, the second most influential news website at the time. The deal is on the make: The Elovichs receive direct requests, orders and demands from Benjamin, Sara and Yair Netanyahu, sometimes through their middlemen – Rubinstein, Hefetz and the others – and Yeshua, the diligent CEO, has to execute them without letting his editors, journalists and reporters know that the Walla website underwent the Bibist turn. On the other front, Elovich decides that in order to fund his purchase he might as well move ‘Yes’, his private company, to the hands of Bezeq – funded by the Israeli tax payer. In order to do that, they need Netanyahu to change the regulation and disobey the professional officials at the ministry of communication who condition the Yes-Bezeq deal upon the reform of opening the landline telephony to competition. Netanyahu uses the coalition agreement of 2015 to gain full control over all legislative, regulative and reforms in the communication market – including the telephony and the news agencies. He overthrows Erdan as the minister of communication, fires his CEO Avi Berger and appoints his right hand Filber instead.[[33]](#footnote-33) Now the Elovichs determine the conditions of the regulator – CEO of the communication ministry, Filber – themselves. They utilize the regulator to their own selfish financial benefits against the public interest. “We can make the reform of the landline telephony today, which would lead to saving hundreds of million shekels to the Israeli consumer” said the treasury referent over the communication market.[[34]](#footnote-34) But the Elovichs and Netanyahus’ self-interests were different. Filber in his testimony, after becoming a state witness, would disclose that when he spoke to Netanyahu about it, Netanyahu has made with his hand a gesture which shows – a mild drop of prices to the consumers, so that the profit of the Elovichs remains substantially high. Filber, on Netanyahu’s order, calls to a halt the reforms which were to open up the market for competition. The opposite ideological position coming from Netanyahu as a treasury minister under Sharon’s government. The passion to control the news media is stronger than the original economic views of the prime minister and minister of communication, Netanyahu the politician. The state comptroller defined in his report Filber as a ‘captive regulator’ who was enslaved to Elovich’s demands.[[35]](#footnote-35) By the end of 2016, the Eloviches understand there is a corruption investigation going on and call Yeshua and order him to destroy all the evidence of the direct pressures they have received from Netanyahu and his men, and the pressures Yeshua himself put on his journalists, pressures that have led his journalists to threaten with collective resignation. Once again the police investigation puts an end to the alleged regulative corruption which grew out of Netanyahu quest for absolute control over the media and communication market in Israel.

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

Netanyahu was from a very early day well exposed and kin to interfere with those that in his mind control the outlook of the public news broadcast, as the following story entails. Netanyahu is being questioned by the police and recalls what happened back in 2008, regarding the appointment of the CEO and chief editor of channel 12 news. He asks his investigator:

How do you think Avi Weiss got his job? I will tell you. In Iben-Gvirol-Marmorek corner there is a coffee house, where I met Mozy Vertheim when he was about to appoint Nissim Mishal. And I told him: ‘Mozy you are going to make a big mistake. You have another candidate, right?’. He said ‘yes, Avi Weiss’. I didn’t know him. I told Mozy: don’t take him (Mishal) because it is like giving Noni (Mozes) the news channel, take Avi Weiss”. So I got involved. This is diversity. This is diversity.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Mozy Vertheim was a key figure in channel 12 and Netanyahu was, back in 2008, the head of the opposition. Though Weiss was not ‘his guy’ what was crucial at the time for Netanyahu, is to jeopardize Yediot Ahronot’s total control and neutralize a journalist he considered as a hostile editor to him – Nissim Mishal. But consider Netanyahu’s argument for diversity: Weiss is Ashkenazi and secular, Mishal is Mizrachi and religious. In terms of diversity, it was clearly much more relevant to appoint the latter. Also, Mishal is an investigative journalist. Weiss is a producer. So on what grounds did Netanyahu think Weiss was better for diversity? Mishal was critical against all politicians, including Netanyahu. Weiss had not revealed his positions at the time – 2008. Mishal was in his eyes his enemy, Mozes’ guy. Weiss was better for Netanyahu personally, not in any way embodying the argument for greater diversity.

Ironically, the crucial role of chief editors was discussed by Netanyahu and Mozes in the conversations that the former had instructed his adviser, Arush, to record, and were later on handed in to the police. Mozes says: “Israel Hayom is yours, channel one is yours, the radio is yours, channel 10 you have closed down”. “None of them is yet mine” replies Netanyahu. “You want me to tell you why?” asks Mozes and continues: “maybe channel one is not (yours)… because they put a chief editor who is not right for the job, I’d say it gently, someone who is not right for the job.” Netanyahu responds: “simply the worst they could” Mozes explains: “because they want to show they have no commitment to no one, they have no sister, nothing, you know. But you cannot put Nir (Hefetz) there, can you, it would be too much, too much… because Nir knows how to manage media. Netanyahu replies: “he was at a good school” Noni: “Yes, Maariv, he will do anything you want, whatever you want – will happen, but it will be too much”.[[37]](#footnote-37) Netanyahu does not succeed in changing the chief editor of channel one, but he does make Nir Hefetz his and Sara his wife’s personal media adviser, the guy ‘who takes care’ of things, the one that knows how to manage media, to manage all news media – on the Netanyahus behalf. Later on, when Hefetz would become a state witness in the trial against Netanyahu, his testimony would reveal Netanyahu’s instruction to his loyalist media man: the excessive power of the CEOs in media channels, is dominant in Hefetz’ testimony at the police, as he explained the prime minister’s strategy thus:

Sometimes Netanyahu was content with contacting the chief editors only. In Maariv, Netanyahu demands I’d speak with the owner – Eli Azur – only. Period. In channel 12, today the news company, he requests I’d exclusively contact the CEO, Avi Weiss, or the chief editor, Avi Sudri. In Keshet it is Avi Nir, the CEO, only. In Reshet it is only the CEO Avi Zvi. In 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)

The direct control over the media, run from the owner to the CEO, was prevalent in Netanyahu’s attempt to appoint ‘his men’ to the job. For example, Netanyahu has acted to appoint his adviser, Harry Arush, to chairperson of channel 10 after Blavetnick became the owner in 2015. One of the owners, Aviv Giladi, wanted to flutter Netanyahu and thought, upon Netanyahu’s request and as a gesture of good will, to appoint Arush.[[39]](#footnote-39) This appointment did not ripen but Netanyahu tried on another occasion also to appoint Arush – when Netanyahu himself was serving as a minister of communication – to be the chief editor of channel 10.[[40]](#footnote-40) Netanyahu’s attempt to push his loyal men into prime positions was apparent also in the appointment of Rami Sadan, previously the media adviser of the Netanyahus, to the post – the chief editor of channel 10. Sadan did get the job. He then lost it due to misinformation he provided on his resume.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The constant pressure which was then put on the CEOs was of course exposed in Yeshua, CEO of Walla, testimony. He complained to Iris Alovitz: “I cannot bring to Walla half the journalists in Israel” when she inquired why, he replied: “ Bibi and Sara do not find them suitable”. Already in 2013 the chief editor, Ynon Magal, and today one of Netanyahu’s big supporters, has testified that a lot of pressure was put on him by the Elovichs to give positive coverage to the Netanyahu couple.[[42]](#footnote-42) Upon his departure, as he became a candidate and then a MK for the Jewish Home party, he was replaced by Avi Alkalay. But Alkalay did not get the official appointment, because of Sara Netanyahu’s pressure, calling him ‘an extreme leftist’ as Yeshua has later testified.[[43]](#footnote-43) Alkalay has later filed a defamation suit against Yair Netanyahu, for calling him a fifth column of the Wekxner Foundation who is a partner in the conspiracy against his father, Benjamin Netanyahu. Junior did not come to court and was fined by a quarter of a million shekels.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Both Yeshua and Elovich estimated that for controlling the journalists you need ‘a different kind of men to the job’. Netanyahu’s obsession with appointing loyalists to chief editors brought the defection of Avi Alkalay. Iris Elovich hoped to bring, as a proxy of Netanyahu, Eran (Tifenberg) from Ynet to ‘make order’ in Walla. He was recommended to Netanyahu by no other than his boss, Mozes, as an editor who can make what the boss wants happen.[[45]](#footnote-45) But this was not to be. Aviram Elad was supposed to get the position of chief editor, in 2016. Sara Netanyahu has attempted to thwart the approaching appointment since he has written a critique of Netanyahu 8 years before that. Hefez was pressing on her behalf, but the appointment went through.[[46]](#footnote-46) Once the Netanyahus have found out about Elad, Iris instructed Yeshua, attempting to appease them, to appoint immediately journalists that Netanyahu’s men instructed her to appoint: Guy Bechor, Erez Tadmor and Shimon Riklin. Three propagandists of Netanyahu.[[47]](#footnote-47) But this was not the end of it: Yeshua testified that Sara has put immense pressure on him to fire the chief editor, Elad, due to an article she did not like about the submarines investigation, case 3000, that he Hd authorize to be published on Walla.[[48]](#footnote-48) A direct involvement of the Netanyahus in appointing chief editors, once the owner and the CEO were in the bag. In this particular case, the way Elovich and Yeshua chose was to work above the head of the editors and journalists, without them knowing the direct pressure of the Netanyahus, due to the bigger financial interests of the Elovichs.

Another example for Netanyahu’s attempted influence chief editors was with who would lead the unified Reshet-Keshet corporate which he wanted to act as a monopoly on Israeli news. Netanyahu hoped that should Milchan be the owner of the united media conglomerate, Netanyahu would have his man as the chairperson, said Filber in his testimony.[[49]](#footnote-49) Netanyahu has supposedly sought it because of ‘competition’ while in fact it was his ambition to be the sole controller of the news monopoly in Israel.[[50]](#footnote-50) The pursuit of total control is envisioned in this conversation between Netanyahu’s men – Filber and Hefetz, discussing the situation of the IPB just before the reform took place.

Filber: “we need to look now for names for actuality head for TV.”

Hefetz: “why not a chief editor?”

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

The chief editor was already appointe, it was down to the head of actuality unit that they’ve now gotten. Of course, the very idea that the prime minister appoints ‘special men for a special mission’ – achieving personal control over news agents and its managers – is a task which reflects onto the importance – and maybe even obsession – with the news media. Netanyahu’s CEO, Filber, testified Koblentz, chairperson of the PBI, at the state comptroller’s report, has pressed the Kan corporate public media to replace its chief news executive, Shlomit Abraham-Globerzon, with one of four options – Elkabetz, Miro, Hason or Tene. He said most pressures came from Netanyahu’s men to change the CEO of the news authority. “We could close a deal in two minutes if you agree to that” said Filber to Koblentz.” Later on, they try to push another of Netanyahu’s man to the chief editor job – Menachem Horowitz. “I have offered Horowitz as a chief editor, approved by ‘the Boss’” Netanyahu of course, says Filber to Hefetz.[[52]](#footnote-52) The refusal of the IPB was one of the chief reasons why Netanyahu has acted to close down the IPB. As Filber was quoted: if he cannot control it, he can abolish it altogether.[[53]](#footnote-53) This pattern – of attempting to subjugate the managers of the news outlet and threaten with closing them down if they do not obey – was a recurrent pattern in Netanyahu’s quest to control the media.

1. **Infiltrating home-journalists into the Public Media**

Netanyahu is holding a position which says that the journalists should be controlled and managed by the owners and chief editors.[[54]](#footnote-54) Yet getting involved in direct appointments of journalists, panelists and publicists, or dismantling possible appointments of those who fall out of his grace, is a crucial part of his endeavors.

* 1. Journalists

In the on record 2014 meeting with Mozes, Netanyahu says: “There is one reporter, Igal Serna.” Mozes responds immediately: “I cannot control what he writes on facebook, and Shifer, what he says on TV he would never write in the paper.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Mozes demonstrates to Netanyahu that he is in control even of the most anti-Bibi reporters in his eyes, as long as it is in print. His print. Shifer, mind you, is the top journalist of Yediot newspaper. Notice that Serna and Shifer are professional journalists; Netanyahu criticizes their publicist writing on twitter, facebook or talk shows panels, yet this publicist approach – speaking from a position rather than a professional analysis – is precisely what Netanyahu demands Mozes to bring into his paper – on Netanyahu’s behalf. Netanyahu is being explicit, knowing that he has something that Mozes wants, i.e. the ability to limit the number of newspapers of the weekend edition of Yisrael Hayom: “What do you want me to do? You make me fight you, if you now make your life mission to bring to my downfall” says Netanyahu, in connection with Serna’s piece on Sara’s investigations. He continues: “I will fight you. It wouldn’t stop after the election – you fight me; I fight you back”. I cannot accept such a thing… This would become my life mission. You don’t know me. This (the Serna story) is something that could have been avoided.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Noni, seeking to appease Netanyahu, is trying to give him his ‘home journalist’ in return: “we spoke about a reporter, I am waiting for you”. Just like in the Walla case – the attempt of Elovich there and Mozes here is to satisfy Netanyahu by infiltrating his own people under the guise of ‘journalists’, when they are actually pro-Bibi publicists.

In another recorded conversation, Mozes implores: “give me the name of a Rightwing-journalist to recruit to the newspaper. I am telling you this for a long time now”. Netanyahu gives two names: Avi Ratson and Ronen Shoval. The former was an editor in Israel Hayom and Mozes said it would expose their relationship. The latter was a co-founder of Im Tirzu, a rightwing ideologue body, and was later brought up by Netanyahu to take on a key position at Walla.[[57]](#footnote-57) The other co-founder of Im Tirzu, Erez Tadmor, would later be recruited as Netanyahu’s election campaign manager and become a top panelist in talk shows. Mozes replies: “In the meantime, he (Ronen Shoval) is a candidate of the Jewish Home.” So it turns out that the reporter that Netanyahu named – Shoval – not only he is not a journalist, but he is a candidate for the Jewish Home rightwing party, a possible violation of the ethical code.[[58]](#footnote-58) It is no coincidence that candidates of rightwing parties are part of the dream list of Netanyahu. This would become a key feature of the Netanyahu team: playing both the political and communication arena, moving carelessly between the two. Mozes tries to return to the offering – a reporter to Netanyahu’s liking: “Where is the article writer, bring one” Bibi: “it is not the articles writer, it is how you report.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Netanyahu is of the opinion that there is not a professional journalist. There is only the position from which one writes. Every journalist is a publicist, writing from a political position, in his view.

Yet Netanyahu was also adamant about trying to dismiss journalists who were critical of him. Yossi Varshavsky, CEO of channel 13, has virtually admitted he has removed Ben Caspit, the nemesis of Netanyahu and one of his most consistent critic, who is by the way not just a right-winger but a Likudnic, from the Friday night TV news show because of Netanyahu’s pressure.[[60]](#footnote-60) He notoriously accelerated his attempts to close off the new public corporate Kan when it was established that Geula Even, wife of Gidon Saar, an internal rival within the Likud, was to be the anchor of the news evening magazine.[[61]](#footnote-61) Even, like Caspit, is a born and bred right-winger. The considerations of Netanyahu are purely pro or against Bibi, not political inclinations.

The other public evidence for direct attempts of Netanyahu and his men to interfere with journalists, is of course the testimonies released in case 4000. Here it is not direct talks between the prime minister and the CEO of the Yediot empire, but the owners of Walla instructing their CEO, Yeshua, to follow up on Netanyahu’s requests passed on by his messengers – Hefetz and Filber, the CEO of the minister of communication, i.e. the proxies of Netanyahu himself. For example, Netanyahu presses to fire Amir Tibon from Walla. Iris Elovich puts pressure on Yeshua, and they finally decide to relieve Tibon from his journalism, but they do not fire him, only fund him as a book writer, so that he would be removed from his journalism without raising suspicion. Elovich then reports to Hefetz, Bibi’s man, that Tibon is no longer in charge as they paid him to write a book.[[62]](#footnote-62) “The Eloviches pushed Ilan Yeshua as they wanted me to devote 90% of my time to the book.” Recollects Tibon himself, describing how time and again too critical stories about Netanyahu and his loyal ministers were stopped from being published by ‘those who make the decisions’.[[63]](#footnote-63)Another such example, is Omri Nachmias who was removed from Israel and sent to the US to cover the election there, and Elovich has seen this as a victory to Balfour’s demands.[[64]](#footnote-64) Yet another resounding example was the demand coming from Netanyahu to dismiss Tal Shalev. Iris Elovich explains her demand to Yeshua by suggesting that she was brought as a fig-leaf leftist to conceal the pro-Bibi-turn but became a Doberman.[[65]](#footnote-65) Tal Shalev still writes at Walla today.

Given the failures, Elovich is pressing Netanyahu’s men to give her names that would satisfy Netanyahu as journalists in Walla. They receive confirmation as to Almog Boker from Ran Baratz, one of Netanyahu’s advisers. Yeshua refuses, and Boker does not get the job.[[66]](#footnote-66) Erel Segal, of two rightwing outlets – channel 20 and Makor Rishon, was recruited to Walla upon Netanyahu’s recommendation in 2017 as a weekly columnist.[[67]](#footnote-67) The appointment was meant to appease Sara Netanyahu after Boker’s appointment did not go through. While the specific recruitment failed, the method is being established: Netanyahu is directly involved through his proxies Hefetz, Baratz and Filber in appointing and firing journalists from an otherwise public media outlet. Pressure is mounting and Iris Elovich discusses with Yeshua who of Netanyahu’s loyalists to bring as publicists to Walla. She suggests, coordinated with Netnyahu’s people, three names: Erez Tadmor, Shimon Riklin and Guy Bechor.[[68]](#footnote-68) The links in the chain are intertwined: chief editors appoint the right – and Right – journalists. Filber reports to Hefetz before a meeting with Netanyahu: “now between 13.00-15.00 the anchor of a personal program is Dror Eidar, a first swallow of pushing our men by Shimon.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Elkabtez, Netanyahu’s man appointed to the commander heading GLZ radio, is making his first appointments of ‘journalists’ – who are not really journalists but publicists, courtyard yes-men of Netanyahu.

b. Publicists

“Let’s institutionalize a niche… and call it a guest writer, once or twice a week” instructs Iris Elovich her CEO when the pressure from Balfour is mounting, and passes on the three publicists who are Netanyahu loyalists.[[70]](#footnote-70) Clearly, the bargaining that was going on between Netanyahu and Mozes, and Heftez and Elovich, here on record, just exposes the tip of the iceberg in terms of the mounting pressures of Netanyahu to have his loyal men, ideologues and confidants serve as journalists, panelists and publicists in the public news agents.[[71]](#footnote-71) The borders between being a journalist, publicist or plain mouthpiece are blurred. Indeed, the whole line of thought coming from Balfour was that any journalist who is not pro-Bibi is in fact a Leftist or belongs to the other team. Thus, the concept of a professional journalists itself is being challenged – as you have two options only – you are either with us or against us.

Demonstrating how pervasive this blurred line is, consider those journalists taking active part in Netanyahu’s electoral effort. Two weeks before the March 2020 elections, a video was released as part of the Netanyahu campaign. In this clip, three journalists – or so-called journalists – Yinon Magal, former editor of Walla news and at the time a radio 103 morning show co-presenter, Erel Segal, channel 11 afternoon show co-presenter and later publicist at Yisrael Hayom and channel 20 presenter, who resigned in 2008 from Maariv saying he was not allowed to express his political views, moving to Makor Rishon, a rightwing newspaper of religious Zionism, owned by Edelson, and Shimon Riklin, a rightwing activist and channel 10 panelist 2006-10, and as of 2018 the political commentator of channel 20, sit on the couch with guitars playing *Praise Jerusalem* – a religious Shabbat hymn, when prime minister Netanyahu enters the room, sits and sings with them the whole song.

“I am a Bibist number one in Israel” declared Erel Segal notoriously, as he resigned his job at Walla news just before it became case 4000. He claimed on channel 20 that there was no other pro-Bibi publicist that writes positively about Netanyahu’s governments, that he was brought to Walla as a pro-Bibi journalist and that he is not willing to continue being a fig leaf any longer.[[72]](#footnote-72) A few days later he also resigned the Israeli IDF radio station Galaz and resumed his job at channel 20 as well as received a column at Israel Hayom. He was later hired by channel 11 as a co-anchor with Kalman Libskind – two rightwing journalists – but he was suspended for five days from office after he posted on Facebook the *Praise Jerusalem* clip with Netanyahu and faced a hearing on breaking the journalists’ ethical code for participating in election campaign. Upon his suspension, his co-presenter, Libskind, defended him and refused to go back to the show without his partner. Libskind himself, it turned out, was wooed into channel 11 and IPB by Netanyahu’s men. Filber wrote to Hefetz that he spoke with Kalman Libskind and that he told him that “the deal is that you come (to IPB) with Machete”. “But of course”, replied Kalman, a distinguished investigative journalist from Maariv, recruited as a right-winger, and joined channel 11 as the co-anchor of the morning news magazine Kalman-Liberman, and as the co-anchor of the TV 6 o’clock news with self-described ‘Bibist number 1’ Segal.[[73]](#footnote-73) Segal was later fired from the TV show and Libskind remained as its sole presenter to date.

At the same week that Segal was recruited to GLZ, also Yaacov Bardugo has joined GLZ as a Bibist. This was part of the understanding between the new commander in chief of the public military station, Dekel, and Netanyahu.[[74]](#footnote-74) Bardugo, a Likud activist, became the sturdiest advocator of the prime minister and his wife. He was defended by Netanyahu, a year later, when accused of propaganda for Netanyahu, saying: “there is a limit to the thought-police and mouth-shutting of the left. We are not North Korea. If there will be no expression to the right also – GLZ has no right of existence.”[[75]](#footnote-75) This is part of the power of the prime minister and the minister of communication: either have it his way, or he threatens the very existence of the media outlet. Right after Bardugo’s appointment, the number of one-on-one meetings with Netanyahu personally have grew considerably and also phone conversations on a daily basis, as Hefetz has disclosed in his investigation. Bardugo, declaring on his morning GLZ Friday show that ‘I am not a journalist’, was soon appointed as the political commentator of GLZ. Far from being a journalist, he was nevertheless given full command over the evening news program.

c. Panelists and “Public Intellectuals”

Netanyahu talks about the question whether Israeli media is still free and says:

An important question which needs to be checked. So I opened channel 10 and I saw, you know, everything ‘pro-Bibi’. You open the news – ‘pro-Bibi’. You open the satire, the gossip, the magazine, they support me… I opened channel 2, the same, ‘pro-Bibi’. Friday magazine – there are five panelists – maybe one will be against me? Everyone with me! ‘Pro-Bibi’. Then I open other channels, the radio, GLZ, voice of Israel, ‘pro-Bibi’ all the time. It begins to be embarrassing.[[76]](#footnote-76)

His sarcasm demonstrates the level of frustration. Netanyahu takes the issue of panelists as a key exemplar to his claim about the one-sided media. However, two issues are critical here: first, he equates criticism with leftism: the media is supposed to be critical, certainly of the reigning government. For Netanyahu being critical is a political position against him personally. Second, designating the media as ‘pro and against Bibi’ – is his characterization. He does not say ‘there is no right-winger in the panel’. He does not say ‘there is no one of the national camp’ or even the Likud – for him it is either you are pro-Bibi, to use his expression, or against him. Everything is personal, everything is about him. When Netanyahu wants to right the media, he actually means to make it pro-Bibi. His ambition to have panelists who are pro-Bibi in every panel has materialized almost to the full. The cadre of pro-Bibi loyalists, advocated by Netanyahu’s men as speakers and panelists, publicist and public intellectuals, has become something of the leader’s cult.

On 22 July 2021 the “Association of Israel media” actually the loyalists of the pro-Bibi media, coming from channel 20 TV, Galey-Israel radio, Israel Hayom newspaper and internet website Mida, had an initiation gathering to unite and collect funds collectively.[[77]](#footnote-77) Their main thrust against public media was that ‘they are Bolsheviks’ – a phrase repeatedly used by their inspiring leader, Netanyahu, in his speeches at Likud fora. There is no truth anymore, and the ‘universalist’ elitist minority try to lose Jewish identity and control the state mechanisms, they’ve argued. Perhaps the most frequent line used by all participants was: “I am not a journalist”. If anything, explained Erel Segal, investigative journalism exposing corruption should be imitated so the equation would be balanced. “We are all warriors in this battle”. Shimon Riklin has organized the event, Erel Segal, Erez Tadmor, Gadi Taub and others preached on stage. “The story is the death of journalism” says Taub “it is an Orwellian propaganda they call us mouthpieces, us, the only ones who deviate from the chorus line, are called mouthpieces”. The event was described at the Mida op-ed as ‘a Zionist answer to the journalism council’.[[78]](#footnote-78)

What is unique about those gathered at the event, is first of all their shared ideology – a Jewish-Zionist reading of the national camp as an avant-garde against the deep state controlled by a small elite which is Left and which they perceive the journalists to be an integral part of. There are different emphases for the different members who were called to the flag by the leader: Taub would stress the mobile elites vs. the stationary people, the universlists vs. the local folks; Avhishai Ben-Chayim would conceptualize it as second Israel and its supreme leader vs. the hegemony of the Ashkenazi elite; Erez Tadmor would elaborate the deep state argument explicating in his book *Why you vote for the right and get the left* how the old elites still control the judicial system, the media and the gatekeepers. Yet what is most intriguing being the elasticity with which they pass from working in the media to acting in formal roles for Netanyahu’s regime. For example, Erez Tadmor, a regular panelist at Friday night talk shows, was the head of Im Tirzu, a rightwing NGO which acts vehemently against the academia, the media and civil rights organizations, but then became the head of Netanyahu’s election campaign. Ran Baratz, another golden panelist, was the head of Netanyahu’s propaganda machine and became the head of Mida website; Dror Eidar was a publicist at Yisrael Hayom and became Netanyahu’s appointment as the ambassador to Italy; Galit Destal-Atbarian is a writer, publicist at Yisrael Hayom, broadcaster at Galey Israel and a personal appointment of Netanyahu as number 10 at the Likud list which made her MK in 2021; Shimon Riklin, chief political commentator at channel 20 and leading pro-Bibi panelist, was part of Amana settlers’ movement, was a candidate for the Jewish Home party in the 20th Knesset and was supposed to be Netanyahu’s appointment at place 20 in the Likud list, which was later given to the Jewish home. Limor Samian-Darash is a senior lecturer at the Hebrew university, a publicist at Israel Hayom, a broadcaster at Galey Israel and was supposed to be Netanyahu’s personal appointment at place 23 on the 2015 election. All of them are frequent panelists on channel 20 but also on political shows on channels 12 and 13 who were often propagated by Netanyahu’s men – Hefetz, Filber and others – to be on the panels. Many of them had testified they have become frequent visitors to the Balfour residency once they were invited to the TV panels. The ease with which they move between media – and serve as Netanyahu’s people on public media – suggest they are right in their self-description as ‘not journalists’. However, their influence is toxic as many of the real journalists, when ‘being balanced’ by Netanyahu loyalist panelists, are being characterized as warriors of the other camp, even though they often are not – explicitly – of the Left, or the anti-Zionist or wish to disclose their political inclinations as citizens.

1. **Direct attacks on journalists and identifying them as the enemy of the people**

One of the crucial internet Likud virtual campaign videos that became viral in the 2015 elections presents the following scene: people are sitting in a circle imitating an AA meeting, each of them gets his turn, opening by the assertion ‘I am here because of Bibi’ and after each participant’s speech all the others reply ‘we love you X’. Who is represented in this Likud campaign clip? A worker of the public Israeli broadcast service, who is working in the tax-collecting branch, a unionist from the seaport, a cellular company guy (who has a white tiger as a pet) and ---- a Hamas terrorist activist. When the others say “we love you Mustafa”, the prime minister enters the room. ‘It is We or Them’ reads the Likud slogan. Notice the motives: The Left loves Arabs; all those who the public likes to hate are the enemies of the state, by endorsing Hamas terrorist; and Bibi ‘takes care’ of all of them: a reform of the ports breaking the trade unions, a reform-turned-annihilation of the Israeli public broadcasting, the cellular reform – and Hamas, all which only Bibi can deal with. The tactics of turning your ideological rivals into disloyal followers of the antipatriotic Left, is also at work here.

As of 2015, and increasingly as the investigations, hearing and trial against Netanyahu have progressed, his attacks on the public media grew vicious and inciting. Bibi like Bibi, turned it into a personal strife. A war against individual investigative journalists, comparing them to the worst of Israel’s enemies. The deep state argument against the ‘Left elites’ and the nationalist populism of ‘I am the people’ became united and intensified during rapid election rounds, as the next figure demonstrates: “They don’t want you to vote Likud” read the headline over Nasseralla, leader of Lebanon’s Shiite terror organization Hizbulla and Haminai, supreme leader of Iran. “They don’t want you to vote Likud” repeated the title above the faces of two journalists – Amnon Abramovich of channel 12 and Guy Peleg of channel 13. Those seeking nuclear weapons to destroy Israel are in the same team of the journalists: enemies of the people.



As we have already seen, the attacks against Israeli media were an integral part of Netanyahu’s agenda upon entering the political scene. In 1999 he sarcastically remarked against Gilhar, interviewing him before the direct election against Ehud Barak of Labor: “You would surely interview Barak with the same pinky oiliness that you interview all of the Left candidates”.[[79]](#footnote-79) A day later he incited against the journalists in Gan Oranim Likud’s election rally shouting repeatedly the “They are afraid” cry until the whole crowd shouted with him. ‘They’ who are afraid being journalists. The prime minister against the reporters. Netanyahu explicitly argued that “There is an army of journalists enlisted to Barak… We will win over the Left and the media that works with it.”[[80]](#footnote-80) Already in the 1990s the media is equated with the left, and the left is notoriously Arab-lover and anti-Zionist, an argument Netanyahu insists on despite the fact his rival candidate is a former IDF chief of staff, and his former commander in the unit, hardly a non-Zionist leftist. Netanyahu’s other encounter with journalist Gilhar, a decade and a half later, would be a pre-election interview at Walla in 2015, and would be exposed as the case 4000 investigation unfolds. Gilhar is instructed by Yeshua to have ‘pinky oilness’ interview with Netanyahu at his chambers and to start off with a general question about how the prime minister is doing. Gilhar, a newly recruit for the election coverage at Walla, started by a more critical question (though did not ask any question about Sara Netanyahu, as agreed in advance according to Netanyahu’s conditions). He was amazed to see that at the end of the interview Netanyahu has torn off his neck microphone, smashed it to the floor and left angrily the room to his chamber, a voice (presumably Hefetz, who sat behind Gilhar throughout the interview, facing Netanyahu) saying there: “this interview would never see the day of light.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Yeshua, Walla’s CEO, calls Gilhar a few minutes later alarmed and told him he has to go back to Balfour and ask a few more questions. “It is bigger than Walla” he explains. Gilhar declines. It was an exclusive interview with the prime minister a week before the elections. It did not go on air that day or the day after. Two days later, censured by Netanyahu himself and Hefetz, a short version of it was put on the Walla website for an hour and then taken off for good: there was a rebellion of the editors and journalists at Walla that said that should the interview not be broadcasted, they would collectively resign from Walla.[[82]](#footnote-82) Furious Netanyahu sits with Hefetz, according to the latter’s personal testimony, and censures one line after another from the interview, a censorship Gilhar thought was performed by Walla editors, not by the prime minister himself. For Netanyahu, everything is personal.

“The media has not internalized that elections are determined in the voting booth, not in the channel One studio” he nevertheless insists.[[83]](#footnote-83) Posing the media against the people would be the major line of argument Netanyahu would use as of the 1990s repeatedly in his election campaigns as the head of the national camp: “With what mockery they cover our meetings” said Netanyahu in a Likud party gathering for Rosh Hashanna (new year’s eve) on 31 August 2017 “with what mockery, what arrogance they try to present us. They don’t just despise us; they despise something deeper still. They actually despise the choice of the people; they despise democracy by the name of which they speak. They’d do anything to hurt me and my wife because they think that should we fall, the Likud, the whole national camp that the Likud leads, would fall. All means are right for that.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Netanyahu is the people and the media is the extended arm of his opponents. “The people is fed up with the recruited media.” He summed it up. It was Netanyahu himself, the prime minster, who time after another has found it suitable to mock journalists. In an election interview with Yonit Levi, top anchor of channel 12 news magazine, before the 2021 election, Netanyahu responds to her critical question by imitating her, with insulting body gestures, and says “I call it Na Na Na Na Na Na let’s look (for faults) all the time”.[[85]](#footnote-85) In another interview with Rina Mazliach, anchor of Meet the Press Netanyahu lashed at her saying: “This is your interview huh Rina… you simply cheat all the time”. Later on in the interview, when the attacks continue, she responds: “there is no other politician that has ever treated me like you did”.[[86]](#footnote-86)

But of course the most resounding response from Netanyahu came after Illana Dayan’ top investigative journalist of channel 12, has broadcasted her report on Netanyahu’s aquarium in 2016 – Netanyahu, his men and the way his wife interferes even with the top security appointment of heads of Mossad. In response, Netanyahu has sent a letter of incitement against the journalist, which she has decided to read and broadcast in the full in her own voice. In it Netanyahu accuses her with “a political propaganda against the prime minister and his wife” calls her “an extreme leftist woman” who calls the settlements a ‘robbery of land’ and receives support from the New Israel Fund which Netanyahu calls ‘an anti-Zionist fund’. “Dayan’s program tonight demonstrates why the communication market has to undergo a reform.”[[87]](#footnote-87) He of course commits himself to lead this reform, as the next section demonstrates.

1. **Influencing whole 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” Noni: “channel 1 no”.[[88]](#footnote-88) The command chain going from the owner to the CEO and chief editor and down to the individual journalists was all under inspection and interference, “one dunam one goat”, as Filber described the tactics, slowly maturing as Netanyahu’s years is office accumulated. Those media outlets established as pro-Bibi news broadcasting channels – starting with Israel HaYom – would be discussed in the next section but the attempt to seek comprehensive control on the established public media, and to weaken them substantially should these efforts fail, are crucial links in the unfolding story.

* 1. **IPB**

Netanyahu’s attempts to control the Israel Public Broadcast (IPB) was the longest and most hap hazardous. He approved the reform, then supported the committee to reexamine it, then endorsed its results to close down the IPB and establish an independent authority and then, realizing he thus lost control over it, argued that because the military operation in Gaza ‘it slipped him’ and did whatever in his power to cancel the new authority, to go back to the old reform, and when it failed – to split the new authority to a news authority under his control and the none-news authority which was already legislated. In the end he told his CEO, Filber, that he might as well abolish the IPB altogether.[[89]](#footnote-89) Several state comptroller inquiries have been concerned with the IPB. The relations between the national public broadcast and the politicians have always raised suspicion and were under inquiries. Netanyahu was not unique in his attempts to influence this media outlet.[[90]](#footnote-90) Yet, for him it became part of a mission that in his loyal minister of culture, Regev, was notoriously put as ‘what does the corporate worth if we cannot control it?’ and for Netanyahu it became a binary option: either the IPB is under his direct control, or it would be shut off forever. On the way, he used from regulatory and legislative means to complete boycott and threat of a split or, ultimately, a closure to gain control.

When Netanyahu got back into office as a prime minister, in 2009, a reform of the IPB was almost ready on the table. Netanyahu appointed Yuli Edelstein to the minister responsible for the IPB. Yet, Edelstein has tried to receive Netanyahu’s consent to appoint a new, professional chairperson to the IPB, who was elected to lead the reform. But he was three times refused, with no clear explanation, by Netanyahu who first tended to approve and then changed his decision.[[91]](#footnote-91) Netanyahu has received Edlestein’s resignation, and appointed the CEO of the prime minister office – his loyal right-hand Eyal Gabay – to the mission. A critical public response argued that: “appointing Gabay is a political overtaking of the IPB.”[[92]](#footnote-92) MK Shay of Kadima, today minister of diaspora in Bennet’s government, has argued that giving authority to the top political appointment of the prime minister entails “conflicts of interests and prohibited governmental power abuse as well as cynical manipulation of the crisis of the IPB to personal political needs”.[[93]](#footnote-93) Netanyahu had proved this warning right as the first change of the new rules of the IPB reform was that the chairperson was now to be appointed pending on approval of the minister. The minister being, of course, Netanyahu himself.[[94]](#footnote-94) He then appointed Amir Gilat, his spokesperson in the years before, as the chairperson of the IPB. Gilat has brought Netanyahu’s people back into the IPB, and appointed Yoni Ben-Menachem, who received very low scores by professional rankings and was said by Gabay himself that he is underqualified and therefore would not be appointed as a CEO.[[95]](#footnote-95) Gabay has left his position as the CEO of the prime minister and Ben-Menachem, Netanyahu’s man, was appointed as the CEO of the IPB. The whole point of the sought reform, to separate the IPB from political power, was turned on its head. Netanyahu was in control, by personally appointing the heads of the IPB and the regulator, as well as changing the relevant IPB law. The situation has become so severe, that the treasury has refused to pass on the funds for the IPB reform. The idea that the only way is to close the IPB altogether and reopen a professional body – was born in the Landes committee.

Thus, back in 2013 a reform plan was already ready for realization, awaiting only for the signature of the incoming minister of communication that Netanyahu appointed – Erdan – to be signed. This reform was the result of long negotiations between the PBI different unions – some 16 different organizations representing the workers, the finance ministry officials, who led the process and the prime minister’s office. Ironically, the trigger for the initial reform were reports of the comptroller which concerned the corrupted manners of the IPB, was due to the political unprofessional leadership of the organization – which was 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 Cakhlons’ said Netanyahu – and Erdan knew exactly how to play this role: he was to be the minister who will put an end to the hated IPB toll, the execution branch of which hustled thousands of Israelis who declined to pay the fees. But Erdan, a good student of his leader, whose slogan was always ‘cut down on the fat man’, i.e. the civil service, sought to do even better: not just to cancel the tax, but to take the IPB out of the government orbit of influence and into the professional, economically effective realm.

The Landes Committee that Erdan appointed, with professionals from the finance market and the Media as its members, was very clear in its recommendations: close down the PBI. Establish a new, professional body, with a council led by a judge that will be much leaner on the budget and professional in its behavior, distancing it from politicians and the bad political culture of the IPB (Landes, 2014). Erdan, the loyal minister of communication appointed by Netanyahu, and the finance minister Lapid, endorsed the report as did Netanyahu himself.[[96]](#footnote-96) Again, the new policy line was ready for implementation. But then came the 2015 election. The coalition agreement on which all coalition partners had to sign had a very peculiar article 26 in it which states that the government would lead major reforms in the communication market, all the coalition partners commit to support these reforms, as well as to abstain from supporting any initiative in the realm of communication without the expressed consent of the communication minister. All coalition parties and members will oppose any initiative that the communication minister would oppose to.[[97]](#footnote-97) Throwing Erdan out of office just before the conclusion of the reform, the new minister of communication, appointed by Netanyahu –was no other than prime minister Netanyahu himself. Why put into the coalition agreement such a clause? Obviously, because Netanyahu knew his new moves would generate an opposition even within the coalition: both Erdan, who was surprised to discover that his tailor-made elegant closing-down opening-up reform, which followed closely everything for which Netanyahu as a treasury minister had stood for, was to be reversed, and Cakhlon, who is to be the new finance minister and the only semi-center to the left of the most rightwing coalition Israel has ever had.

What was going on? Why the strategic move to close down the IPB was now turned on its head as Bittan, head of the coalition and Netanyahu’s executer at the time, proposed to reconsider and adopt the former reform which Erdan rejected back in 2013, instead of going with the new platform which Netanyahu supported in the last Knesset? The heads of the new authority are Leftists, disclosed Bittan (Toker, 2017b). And Regev, the minister of culture, said in the ministers’ committee of legislation on 31 July 2016: “What’s the value of the (new) authority if we don’t control it? The minister has to rule. What, we give money and then they will broadcast whatever they want?” (Malki, 2016). Why was the new authority, Kan, rejected by the loyal ministers of Netanyahu? Omer, the chairman of Kan, disclosed in the parliamentary committee that politicians pressured the new management of Kan to appoint their people, while Ben-Rubi, the new manager of the news radio station at Kan urged the politicians to admit that they do not want public authority broadcasting at all (Toker, 2017b). Indeed, on November 2017 Dery, who received unsympathetic attention regarding the police investigations in his case, put forward to the government the idea to close down all the news authority of public broadcast and leave just the news radio (Toker and Zerharia, 2017). The new communication minister, that Netanyahu was forced by the court to appoint as his replacement, immediately twitted that it is a good move which will save the public on taxes. The minister stroke down this twit immediately after its release: his master has not yet approved, even though it was the idea of the CEO, appointed by Netanyahu and today under investigation – Filber – to close down the new authority should the move to regain control of it failed. In any case, this new appointment of the minister – Kara – a Druze, and the first non-Jewish minister in Israel ever – was ordered by the court since Netanyahu is under investigation regarding the alleged connection he has with the editor of Yediot Achronot newspaper, allegedly trading more positive coverage of the prime minister for reduction in the free newspaper Israel Hayom which is being given for free, owned by Netanyahu’s friend Sheldon Adelson.

But how did the PBI saga develop? A hasty decision was passed by the Knesset to divide the new Kan authority into two separate organizations, so that the news authority would be completely out of reach of the Kan management, with a new council and chairperson. This law ended up in the supreme court which gave, on November 6, 2017, the state two weeks to reply whether it is going to amend this law or just cancel it, before the court gives its ruling. Judge Meltzer said that “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 replied that the amendment was lawful and lawfully submitted. Should the court decide to overrule the coalition’s hasty law, this will only serve as a vindication of the main argument of the Netanyahu government: that the courts are one-sided and get involved politically instead of being impartial judges. It goes back to politics of identity, and the accusation of ‘everything being political’ which is what president Rivlin said in 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 does a weak Media that begs for its life could be in the interest of Israel or of Israeli democracy?... where are we going to? 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 argues that the gist of this *coup d’état* is to weaken the gatekeepers of Israeli democracy, with whom he counts the judicial system, top bureaucracy, the attorney general and law enforcing forces side by side with the public Media. So what is this concept of governability, which according to the president abolishes statehood and brings about an ‘all is political’ revolution – which amounts to a *de facto* tyranny of the majority? The ideologues in Netanyahu’s government forward to following argument: the ministers represent the people who are the sole authority in democracies. The ministers, trying to implement their worldview through devising policies, are being opposed by the bureaucrats in their ministries, by the state attorneys, and by the courts, none of whom was elected by the people, and therefore lack any legitimacy but obfuscate the people’s democracy. Hence the attempts to politicize the management of the ministries, to weaken the attorney general, to reduce the power of the courts and to curtail the critic of the public media. This concept of governability seeks to transfer the rules of the game, not just to play by them. Under a neoliberal ethos the PBI reform was to abolish both the hated tax and the PBI itself and reopen it as an execution agent outside the public sector. But the new, sudden reform was based on a concept of governability that sought full control of the government over the management, funds and personnel.

1. **Channel 2 and Channel 10: On the edge Between Split, Merge and Closing down**

Despite his denial, Netanyahu was thoroughly involved in attempting to control whole media bodies. Even with his main argument against monopoly of the IPB, once the two commercial news outlets – channel 2 and channel 10 – were on the air, Netanyahu has fought either to control them – by influencing the owners, the CEOs or the chief editors, or to ensure they are always at the mercy of the political realm, so that they would always feel under threat of closing down. He used all his power – as a regulator, as a legislator and as the minister in charge – to make sure they are dependent on his decision for the survival of the channels. If there was no actual threat of closure, there was always a shadow of a possible reform – threatening to split, unite, transform, change the regulative instructions, cut the budget or any other reform which would make the managers of the channels and the journalists always fearing for their livelihood.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In 2012 Netanyahu, to the amazement of the public, tried to pass a bill which determines that he, the prime minister solely, would be personally and exclusively in charge of the fate of channel 2: he alone would be able to determine, when and if channel 2 would split into two channels. This was a bypass of the minister of communication (Cahlon, at the time) the professional staff in the ministry and the channel 2 board. Netanyahu wanted a direct control of the most powerful news body in Israel. There was a public upheaval and the bill was retrieved.[[99]](#footnote-99)

Many of the evidence for the sought control and its personal nature came from Netanyahu’s interviews and later investigations, and of course from the testimonies around his trial. For example, Netanyahu discussed with Mozes in the 2014 recordings the question of separating the two channels – 10 and 12 – or closing down the former. Netanyahu asks Noni what is his position and Mozes replies that two channels generate more criticism. Netanyahu says he does not think that the competition, meaning channel 2, would object to eliminating channel 10 later on. Netanyahu replies: “as for channel 10, you know this, in your media there is sometimes a neutral word about me, but a positive word – there is none. But on channel 10 – never a positive word, so unbalanced, super-negative.”[[100]](#footnote-100) From Netanyahu’s perspective in this conversation, this is a justification to close down channel 10. Then Noni gets to the crunch of his argument, and says that Netanyahu has already had his own guys – “Miman and Ronald”. Netanyahu responds that it made no difference, and Noni replies: “you know why it had no effect? Excuse my immodesty but you have to know how to manage. The owners need to have communication relations… you have to manage your journalists. You think it is easy to manage journalists, each with his pompous chest? You need to know how to do it. No one of the owners knew how to do it, Miman did not know, Ronald did not know, with all due respect to Michal and Avi, they know how to run them? Because of that you had to do everything. Find someone whom you can trust. He will be the owners of channel 10. Someone who would not be afraid to fight with the news”.[[101]](#footnote-101)

Netanyahu does not necessarily have a ready-made position or strategy, but he attempts to leave things hanging in the balance – always under threat of closing down – to receive a more scared and dependent journalism. Yet threats do materialize in his struggle to control and reshape the news media in Israel: for many years there was a threat to close down channel 10, and to split channel 2 – both of which in fact materialized under Netanyahu’s lead.[[102]](#footnote-102) Yet the road was a bumpy one. On the way of closing down channel 10, he was pulling the strings by activating ‘his’ media owners against the others. For example, Adelson caused the resignation of the managers of channel 10 due to a huge lawsuit against them which changed channel 10 totally.[[103]](#footnote-103) Commanding enormous lawsuits against public news outlets was a known tactics from the tycoons’ mad-struggles in the US, UK and Australia. It was replayed in the Israeli case concerning channel 10. As for channel 2, in 2014, the green light for Erdan’s reform, to split channel 2 into two, was already given – by no other than Netanyahu. The main argument used by Erdan was his mentor’s argument – to break the monopoly of channel 2 as the dominant commercial and public channel. However, at the very last minute, with full surprise of Erdan, a loyalist Netanyahu minister operating according to the prime minister’s logic and instructions, Netanyahu has surprisingly recalled the reform and cancelled it. His excuse was that since he is to become the new minister in charge of channel 2, he wanted to study the issue before the actualization of the split.[[104]](#footnote-104) Controlling the dominant news channel was more tempting than breaking down its monopoly. Power over ideology.

The effect of hanging in the balance was definitely part of the strategy. Netanyahu has caused a situation in which to be a critical, investigative journalist, is not the raison d’etre in Israel. The anxiety from the real option of closing down channels 10 and 13 before the unification with Reshet, brought a real existential threat to the journalists, and living under constant existential threat means less critical journalism. Even in channel 12 they always watched what happened to Maariv and other media outlets so you internalize those threats and do a less critical journalism which abides with the prospect expectations of the owners of your channel, discloses Drucker at an interview.[[105]](#footnote-105) Even the most independent journalists are caught in the balance – the same ‘balance’ which Netanyahu was so eager to achieve – to have as much loyalist of his people in the public media and to make sure everyone else in the news industry is well aware of his omnipotence and live under constant threat. After 4 electoral systems, and 12 years in power, Netanyahu continued to try to weaken channel 22, dismantle the news authority of the PBI and GLZ.[[106]](#footnote-106) The latter became a notorious example of how to professionally corrupt from within a whole public news media.

1. **GLZ**

Netayahu has exposed, in his investigation, that Dekel, the then new commander in chief of the Radio station, has asked him to provide names of reporters to infuse the station with, as he is willing ‘to balance’ the public station. ‘Balance’ is Netanyahu’s expression for combating what in his eyes from the start is a Leftist, biased public media. Only the act of balancing was not bringing journalists from minority groups like the religious, the Arabs or the Mizrachi communities. It did not even mean bringing on rightwing people. Rather, it meant bringing in Netanyahu’s men: those he could trust to pass on his messages and follow his instructions by attacking his designated opponents. With Netanyahu, there is no gray area: you are either for him or against him.

Erel Segal, self-declared “pro-Bibi number 1” was only the first of many Netanyahu loyalists to be incorporated into GLZ.[[107]](#footnote-107) Netanyahu has also disclosed, in an exclusive gathering with all the chief editors and news journalists at Galaz, back in 2016, that he had already talked with Dekel and ‘told him what my plans for Galaz were’. In this gathering the news chief editor of GLZ, Avi Barzilay, has confessed he is a Converted-Leftist and gave many compliments to the prime minister as well as ordered the cancellation of investigative reports on the Likud.[[108]](#footnote-108) Dekel, the new commander of GLZ has likewise had called to get more right-wingers into GLZ. He explicates: religious, right-wingers and living in the periphery.[[109]](#footnote-109) However, those recruited by him to GLZ were notoriously Netanyahu loyalists. Later it was also reported by the chief investigating reporter Avner Hofstein.[[110]](#footnote-110) Hofstein was fired the year after and sued GLZ and Dekel for limiting freedom of speech and censoring free media. He has received 83.000 shekels as a settlement.[[111]](#footnote-111) He accused Dekel of deliberately importing Bibists into GLZ. For example, in his talk show Erel Segal has often brought on Shimon Riklin and Galit Distal-Atberian as co-anchors.[[112]](#footnote-112) At the same week that Segal was recruited, also Bardugo has joined GLZ as a Bibist. Bardogu was to become so prominent in the station, and the sole publicist to broadcast 6 days a week. He has received the title of political expert and the co-anchorship of the evening news magazine. Because of clashed with him, two editors of the program have resigned from editing it, and several distinguished anchors refused to be co-anchors with him. On several occasions Bardugo has echoed fake-news as news so much so that top journalists in GLZ like Zror, Barkay and others refused to air them while Ivgi and Bardugo broadcasted them time and again.[[113]](#footnote-113) Bardogo, testifying that he speaks with Netanyahu several times a week or even a day and that once he was appointed to GLZ he became a frequent visitor to Balfour, became so prominent in GLZ that the Blue and White campaign was to include clips which stated “you have listened to Bardugo? You received Netanyahu”.[[114]](#footnote-114) The tensions only rose so even in the Gantz-Netanyahu government of 2020, the idea to shut off the station has surfaced. It was minister of defense Gantz and Chief of IDF Cochavi that have both declared they see no room for a military radio station and have asked not to appoint a new commander once the Elkabetz, Netanyahu’s man as disclosed in the Filber-Hefetz conversation, was to finish his term in office by the end of August 2021. They have also decided not to extend the life of the public radio station GLZ. "I think there is no room for employing soldiers in programs that are in essence political, regardless if they attack me or for me. IDF soldiers should be kept far away from any political handling and the station should have been state-like in its nature, which it is not for a long time now” explained Gantz.[[115]](#footnote-115) Gantz and his party have suffered vicious attacks from Bardugo as many other political opponents of Netanyahu – even from his own camp and party. But it was not just the one commentator: it became clear once the commander Elkabetz, has appointed Amir Ivgi, a channel 20 reporter who has notoriously declared in 2018 on channel 20 that “had there been more Ivgis out there, Netanyahu may have not ended up in the investigation room at all”.[[116]](#footnote-116) In IPB he was reciting Netanyahu’s messages and supported openly the loyal ministers whom he has interviewed, blocking personally the room for interviewing other voices who take a different line. Hardly a professional journalism symbol, he was appointed by Elkabetz to head the GLZ newsroom. There he shortly created a terror atmosphere among veterans and young workers alike.[[117]](#footnote-117) Between commander Elkabetz, head of newsroom Ivgi and political commentator Bardugo, the debate about the very justification of a military radio station has turned into a near-consensus among the relevant decision makers that a political radio station is doing a bad service for the IDF as well as for professional journalism.

1. **The Knesset Channel Attempt**

The 2017 bid for the operator of the Knesset channel was taken by no other than the Jewish legacy channel 20, the rightwing pro-Netanyahu outlet that in its regulative license was forbidden from broadcasting news. How did the legacy channel win the by-nature news channel of the Knesset? The members of the cables and satellite committee, making the decision, are political appointments, of Netanyahu’s government. Once the winning was announced, accusations that it was politically-diverged bid, have risen.[[118]](#footnote-118) Not only were the committee members politically-appointed, the only two media-content people, apart from the chair who is a political appointment, in the committee were shortly beforehand dismissed or resigned – so that their votes did not count, despite the fact that the bid was 50% on media content. Horovitz, the director that resigned from the committee shortly before the decision was due, said the discussions had a political and not a professional nature, causing his resignation.[[119]](#footnote-119) Thus, the regulative body was in fact infused with political appointments made over the years by Netanyahu. When push came to shove – the bid has fallen as a blessed fruit into the hands of the Jewish heritage channel 20. Yet the public outcry did not let go. There were appeals to the supreme court and it was disclosed that channel 20 did not even stand the very basic qualifications and requirements of the bid. Not only were they not allowed to broadcast news in their license, but the plan they have provided has exceeded those within the bid – limited to the public funding with no commercial funds. The bid was cancelled and another operator was elected. The CEO of this new operator, was no other than Eran Tifeborn – the head of the Mozes empire Ynet, on whom Noni told Netanyahu that was eager to ‘turn the ship around’ and receive a more pro-Bibi coverage that “In YNET it would be easier, since Eran (Tifenborn, the editor) is a right-winger.”[[120]](#footnote-120)

1. **Getting ‘his own’ media**

Netanyahu, opening an interview on channel 20:

“do you know why I’m here? Because it is the last place on the televised media in Israel that a prime minister of the right can speak… The only fair arena and this is why I am here. And it might be the case that you won’t be here longer because of the silencing I see on facebook… this is a complete fascism.”[[121]](#footnote-121)

Prime minister Netanyahu has abstained from giving interviews to the Israeli public media in his five last years or so in power. This does not mean he conceded his power 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 – having ‘emergency’ press gatherings for talking directly to the people about security of COVID-19 or other issues, but without a permission to the journalists to ask any questions. Excluding of course last two weeks of an election campaign over the years 2019-21 when he would have a blitz of interviews on every possible public media, an important part of which was to lock horns with the interviewers themselves to mock them or ridicule them or to accuse them of unfair interviews – as his campaigners found the combat against the mainstream media is good for the rightwing leader’s electorate. The only media outlet on which he was willing to get interviewed was ‘his own media’: some pro-Bibi outlets he has groomed over the years. Developing these safe heavens, like Israel Hayom newspaper, Galey Israel radio, Walla internet website and channel 20 TV,[[122]](#footnote-122) became media sites where he gladly sat for an ‘pinkish oiling interview’ as he once accused the public media for indulging Barak and other rival politicians.

But the grand plan, as he often painted the vision to the tycoons he thought would understand and fulfil 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 coming from such moguls as Herst in the US, Murdoch in the UK, Springer in Germany and Paker, the father of James Paker, tycoon-friend of Yair Netanyahu, in Australia.[[123]](#footnote-123) Netanyahu has often tried to persuade tycoons in getting into media business portraying it as a national mission which at once 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 enable a free market rightwing orientation that would benefit personally the other business web of these tycoons in Israel.[[124]](#footnote-124) Netanyahu had hoped, by that, to counter and then smash the Mozes media empire and to give a devastating blow to critical journalism in Israel. The linkage between his long reign – the longest presiding prime minister over Israel – and the Israel Hayom newspaper and other media outlets, is perceived to be a positive, possibly even causal relation.[[125]](#footnote-125)

* 1. Israel Hayom

Investigator: “what is the frequency with which you approach Elovich?”

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

Investigator: “that you are the minister of communication.”[[126]](#footnote-126)

The establishment of Israel Hayom was designed not just to propagate Netanyahu’s regime, but to ruin free press in Israel. The business model it employed was, unlike other free newspapers who charged high prices for ads, only very low prices. Given this was now the newspaper most widespread in Israel, the advertisers preferred it to Yediot and Maariv, which has virtually economically collapsed.[[127]](#footnote-127) The overall cost is estimated in over a billion dollars and a record of 550.000 copies which virtually deteriorated the printed press in Israel.[[128]](#footnote-128) The paper has peeked with around 300.000 copies in weekdays and half a million by weekends in 2015-6. The research conducted by Margalit and others on Israel Hayom showed that it had an influence on the electoral pattern of Israelis, and in that sense contributed significantly to the voting for the Right, the Likud party and Netanyahu. Israel Hayom has moved 2-3 mandates to the Likud in 2015.[[129]](#footnote-129) It worked in an anti-commercial way as it is not dependent on commercials and supported overtly one politician: Netanyahu.[[130]](#footnote-130) The Mozes empire and other media outlets were not confined to one politician but manipulated many politicians over the years, in great difference to Netanyahu. The defining feature distinguishing between other tycoons who supported or owned the media is the total support for one politician. Thus, in the analysis of the 2020 election 76% of the pre-election days Israel Hayom was at the complete service of Netanyahu and the Likud, as was the case in the two previous elections the year before. Israel Hayom was not a rightwing paper. Liberman and Bennet called it Pravda. It was 100% committed to Netanyahu.[[131]](#footnote-131) The relationship between newspapers and politicians in of course a complex one. But no other outlet was in the exclusive service of a party or a politician, even in the heydays of Mapai. Not only that, but Israel Hayom was propagating the deep state argument endorsed by Balfour.[[132]](#footnote-132)

Journalistically, the influence of Israel HaYom differs on the professional, political and discursive levels. In terms of journalism, it didn’t found the basis of top rightwing journalism but it is held by the public and the media community as a pro-Bibi outlet for free.[[133]](#footnote-133) In terms of discourse, the vast outreach to people, especially in the periphery, meant that Netanuahu’s regime has definitely benefited by directly influencing his electoral base. In terms of politics, frequent calls between Netanyahu and his media managers and the chief editor of Israel HaYom were exposed on life TV and in a series of investigative journalism by Raviv Drucker.[[134]](#footnote-134) Israel Hayom’s title after Drucker’s report is most telling: “Netanyahu: in a proper world Raviv Drucker would have entered prison today”.[[135]](#footnote-135) Indeed, in other media empire it is the tycoon who gets to determine the line of the paper; in Israel, it is the prime minster himself. Netanyahu, as Drucker has exposed only by the registered calls, frequently calls the editor and owner of Israel Hayom themselves. More so just before the paper is closing down and going out for print. The titles he gets are unfiltered: the words of the prime minister without editing, commenting or, criticism. The issue is presented from the side of Netanyahu, the Likud and those who hold his position. The minor response of the journalist is almost bracketed. Another example is a comparative analysis of the day after the fourth round of elections “as usual, the political covering can be divided into two camps” Yisrael Hayom and all the rest. Yediot Achronot, Haaretz and maariv report on the speculations and scenarios from the perspective of the bloc for change, and Yisrael Hayom reports from the opposite angle.”[[136]](#footnote-136)

Adelson has used his ultimate tool – his money – to threaten media outlets not just in the US but also in Israel. In 2011 he has threatened with a huge lawsuit against channel 10, with explicit aim of weakening the channel, critical of the prime minister, thus jeopardizing further the channel’s economic condition. He aimed to do the same to the 7th Eye, a critical website of the Israeli new media. A day after an embarrassing report was published on the 7th Eye on Adelson, Akiva Bigman, the handman of the editor, Bismut, has threatened with a condemning story to be published in Israel Hayom. The accusation against the 7th Eye was that it is supported by the New Israel Fund, depicted in Israel Hayom as the extreme left arm, and selective coverage. The 7th Eye has answered all of Bigman’s questions trying to expose ‘the Israel Hayom pattern’ in implicating other media and threatening them.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Adelson subsequently bought possession on NRG – the Maariv internet platform, and Makor Rishon – the rightwing Zionist-religious outlet.[[138]](#footnote-138) Once case 2000 was exposed, January 2017, the number of copies has declined sharply, in some 15%. Adelson said, after the recordings of Netanyahu-Mozes talks were released, he would never talk again with Netanyahu.[[139]](#footnote-139)

The effect of Israel Hayom went way beyond just changing the newspaper scene in Israel. It had a crucial political influence especially on those lower socio-economic strata, Netanyahu’s electorate. It profoundly influenced the print newspapers and virtually caused the collapse of Maariv. It gave a stage to the mouthpieces of Netanyahu in the media and it also was the main reason for the reduction in Israel’s index of democracy regarding free press. The combined index of the freedom of press in Israel shows that there is a sharp decline in the international indices – at 2008, when Israel Hayom had begun to be published in 2007. This decline did not recover but actually deteriorated. Israel has dropped from around 90% freedom of press in the 2000s to around 65% as of 2008.



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

* 1. Channel 20

The license given to channel 20 in 2014 as a vocational channel was: “to establish, produce, edit and broadcast a TV channel designated to Israel heritage in the form of a TV channel for all the family”.[[140]](#footnote-140) It later stated: “the broadcasts would include a wide variety of subjects related to Israel heritage, the Jewish religion, history, culture and traditions of the Jewish people in exile and in Israel, considering the social and cultural existence of the Jewish public on all its components, currents and shades in Israel and abroad”. The license specifically states that the channel “is not authorized to broadcast news programs” (article 30.1). It could act otherwise with the permission of the regulatory council.

The constitutive struggles in what became the life-vessel of a would be Fox news vision of Netanyahu,[[141]](#footnote-141) were the battle to constitute channel 20 as a vocational channel; the battle to authorize channel 20 to produce and broadcast news; the attempt to commit the state, rather 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 at Globes that morning about the rift between Jewish and Israeli as the constitutive chasm of Israeli politics.[[142]](#footnote-142) I came straight from the university, wearing a long dress with short sleeves. The interviewer was Naveh Dromi – in her 5 o’clock politics talk show – a common panelist representing the pro-Bibi publicist on Meet the Press and Haaretz. As I sat in the studio besides her and another interviewer from Forum Kohelet, a producer came in and asked me to put on a long-sleeved jacket. I was amazed, took the jacket as she left. Dromi was even more shocked than me: “I am furious” she told me “I think you should not put it on, this is a religious coercion.” I took it off. Another producer came in and said that they are sorry but they cannot afford a sleeveless dress as the owner is a religious man and they are afraid to receive a complaint. I wore the jacket but Dromi was shocked and could not speak. I talked for 10 minutes about my thesis and left the building. No, there are no official instructions or dress code. This is a classic Gramsci hegemony, where the actors play along the rules and values of the hegemon without him having to coerce them to. This was not the only such incident, as Haaretz report revealed. As it turned out, there is a ‘modesty officer’ as the channel 20 workers’ call her, named Lerner, and Brod, the speaker of Chabad, the religious organization, is the chief executive in all religious matters which concern channel 20.[[143]](#footnote-143) This reveals the owner of channel 20: Yitchak Michashvili, the son of tycoon Michael Mirashvili who started off in the gambling business in St. Petersburg later heavily involved with the gas industry in Israel. Mirashvili is a chief contributor to Drey of Shas, and was investigated at the police for giving 600.000 sequels to Yaffa Drey’s NGOs, but also funded the campaigns of Elkin, Edelstein and other religious-right politicians. He particularly invests in Jewish-related organizations like his Meromim fund. The religiosity of channel 20 was one of the reasons why the founding editor, Moti Schklar ex-IPB CEO left the channel after a condemning report on president Rivlin was published against his judgement.[[144]](#footnote-144) Before the news license was given, channel 20 went on a struggle and Mirashvili announced that should the news program not be authorized, the channel would be closed down.[[145]](#footnote-145) Netanyahu appointed Yoav Kish of the Likud to lead a quick change of the law, to lay off the burden of all the vocational channels, channel 20 included. Indeed, all vocational channels were annihilated so the restrictions of vocational channels would not apply to channel20. But after two weeks the news program of channel 20 presented 1.4% of rating. In terms of the channel itself, there was not enough professional staff to produce a proper news program. There was a limited number of workers. Most of them performed several roles each like being both an editor, reporter and photographer.[[146]](#footnote-146) Essentially, it was a ‘talking heads’ program and not a news production.

But despite the license which was given to channel 20 as a vocational Jewish heritage channel, from day one the attempt was to make it into a Fox news-like, a rightwing conservative channel. Yes, Netanyahu had again tried to sell his decade-old dream, this time to Mirashvili. While the original terms read 75% of the channel would be devoted to Jewish tradition, it soon became clear that under the article of ‘actuality’ programs the channel expends towards news coverage. Indeed, Netanyahu was personally involved in extending the license to include news production broadcast. In recordings that were released by Sefi Ovadiya on channel 13, Netanyahu repeatedly asks the minister of communication that he had appointed (once the supreme court saw the conflict of interests between the trial of Netanyahu and him heading the ministry of communication), saying “but how can we save the news” meaning the broadcasting of news by channel 20. Netanyahu provides his interpretation arguing that anyways channel 20 professes only 1 or 2% rating and “they also want it”.[[147]](#footnote-147) ‘They’ meaning the enemies of Netanyahu who do not even comply with 1% pro-Bibi media. In the conversation Netanyahu and Kara discuss whether to go by changing the law (which restricts news broadcast to vocational channels) or change the mind of the regulator, the cables and satellite council. Kara suggests he would dismiss the council and appoint other members, and Netanyahu shouts at him “why dismiss when you can cancel it. Cancel it”.[[148]](#footnote-148) instead of hiding the fact he was acting against the law of the regulator, Netanyahu publicly boasted about helping channel 20 to become a rightwing news channel. This was explicitly against the instructions of the attorney general, but two weeks before the September 2019 elections, it was important for Netanyahu to depict both his struggle against the attorney general and the ‘deep state mechanisms’, and to show he is the prime minister who takes care of the nationalist-religious camp.[[149]](#footnote-149) The background for this is that the regulator has finally decided to fine channel 20 for its deviation from its license, broadcasting news and actuality programs way beyond the permitted percentage for many months. The council ruled about the deviation already in September and gave the channel 4 months to reexamine it, but channel 20 did not change the programming whatsoever.[[150]](#footnote-150) The fine imposed was estimated at 4 million shekels, which could shut the channel down. Netanyahu’s attempt to solve this was to coerce systemic changes so that all the vocational channels would be abolished. Should that be the case, the regulatory demands like an independent news agency, 70 million investment fund and complete separation between the owner and the programs were to be inflicted. But Mirashvili did not have deep enough pockets. Channel 20 did not rise: the rating was a meagre 1% as Netanyahu himself pointed out, and the funds as well as professional staff was not built.

One of the great riddles of Netanyahu’s thesis is – if indeed ‘the people is rightwing’, and the people chooses 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 that was given is that the level of the news programs was very low, the two major reasons being the low budget given by the owner, and the lack of professional appointments. It thus became essentially a ‘talking heads’ channel rather than an Israel Fox news. However, was this ‘talking heads’ line merely a matter of budget? Was the vision really a rightwing conservative journalism? One of the most fascinating debates was actually among rightwing communication people. Two prime examples were Amit Segal and Kalman Libskind, both distinguished investigative journalists who were invited, naturally, to work in channel 20.

Kalman Libskind, a reporter of Maariv newspaper, that was pushed by Netanyahu’s people to channel 11 and has both the 10 o’clock morning magazine with Asaf Liberman on the radio and to the Bone – his evening talk show on channel 11, was recruited to channel 20. He was a regular panelist in The Patriots show of channel 20, and the only program that appealed to a more general rightwing population. He was also the anchor of the election night show which meant to give a different interpretation to the results as they came in live from the polls. However, in September 2020 Libskind published in Maariv a report calling Netanyahu, for the benefit of the right and the Israeli public, to accept a plea bargain on his trial and leave politics. To his amazement, the pro-Bibi communication people, most of whom are working at channel 20, have launched a coordinated attack, personal attack, against him. The main thesis in his piece “The Dangerous Flowerbed: on the Weeds that grew on the outskirts of Rightwing Journalism” is that the self-defined ‘communication people’, resolutely not journalists by their own characterization, are the ones that have opinions, that move frequently between the political scene and the pro-Bibi media, but that they have no journalistic values, no keen interest in the truth, no code of ethics and no knowledge in real investigative journalism. One of their major tools of work, he discloses, is fake news. He uses their accusation against him, and other three rightwing journalists who happened to think and write that for the better interests of the right in Israel Netanyahu should depart with politics, as a case in point.

How does fake news being produced, distributed and perceived as common knowledge? Riklin uses a fable against Libskind and divides journalists into three groups: the ants, the elephants and the goats. The ant journalists – would meet an ant and make it into an elephant – to serve their agenda. The elephant group, they do not need the whole elephant to see the big picture: they are not journalists; they are dealing with Tikun Olam – to bring about change. I, say Riklin, hope I am part of them. The goat – if you throw them a bone – they look into it and shout: there is a goat. So Libskind is of the latter kind, in Riklin’s allegory, as his report on the Galant affair shows. In Riklin’s analysis, Libskind has received an intended leak about the deviation from his authorized house plan, a report that cost Galant his role as chief of IDF staff. Liebskind misses the big story, the elephant, in Riklin’s reading of events: other officers wanted to prevent Galant from being the would be IDF chief of staff.[[151]](#footnote-151)

Riklin, the main figure in channel 20, is using the elephant allegory to explain why the secretive meeting of the attorney general Mandelblit with journalists of the religious right produced four opinion articles that call Netanyahu to leave politics. The big elephant in the room, argues Riklin in a 15-minute exclusive monologue on channel 20 against Libskind, is that Netanyahu is right: Mendelblit is a political actor, against Netanyahu and for ‘the gang of Salech A-Din – the attorney’s office in Jerusalem.[[152]](#footnote-152) Only Libskind, in his analysis of the events and this monologue, uses it to distinguish not between goat and elephant journalists, but between journalists to those who are not: instead of inventing and coordinating ‘the Mandelblit briefing’ story, this fake news, says Libskind, the simplest thing a journalist is expected to do is to check the facts, to look for the truth. Libskind rang the other three rightwing journalists who happened to write that it is better for the right that Netanyahu would depart – Segal, editor of Makor Rishon, Shilo, editor of BeSheva, and Akiva Novick of Haaretz, and asked them whether anyone of them has met Mandlblit the passing week. Well, none of them, including Libskind himself of course, has met Mandleblit the last month, let alone was briefed by him. Simple facts check.[[153]](#footnote-153) He analyzes how Riklin, Bardugo, Zered, Tadmor, Barashi and others, on channel 20 or Galei Israel, have recycled this fake news and used it to prove that the attorney general is a political actor of the Left, to which Libskind and the others were said to belong now. Libskind shows how the pro-Bibi ‘communication people’ as they like calling themselves, move frequently between politics and communication – run the campaign of Netanyahu and then perform as a panelist on his behalf (Tadmor); works as a speaker of the Likud and then have a morning show on Galey Israel (Zered); or run for office in the Likud or the Jewish Home parties and then act as political commentator on channel 20 (Bardugo, Erel Segal, Riklin etc.). Libskind describes how he longed for more rightwing, religious, nationalist journalists, but the fact someone is ‘for Bibi’ does not qualify him as a journalist. He ends his piece lamenting: “We wanted a generation of journalists, but what grew is a generation of charlatans.”[[154]](#footnote-154)

Amit Segal, another icon of rightwing investigative journalism, had his own show on the Knesset channel, called ‘odds and evens’. Surprisingly, when channel 20 had a bid over the Knesset channel, a bid it first won and then, by court order, lost, channel 20 proposal said that program like Segal’s show would not be part of the Knesset channel as “they enthusiastically work to slander MKs and disrespect them”.[[155]](#footnote-155) The channel 20 people who represented it in the committee argued that the channel should not be critical of the MKs but its role is to serve them. Segal has disclosed, after finding out that his show was dimmed too critical, that channel 20 has offered him to adopt the format of his show to channel 20 in a more Fox news boisterous fashion, but that he had refused. Segal has called channel 20 ‘a trash channel’ and argued they ‘respect’ only those politicians to whom they are loyal while slandering Left, center and Right politicians who do not support Netanyahu. Thus, two of the most evaluated rightwing journalists in Israeli public media have both found channel 20 unworthy of the title journalism. Interestingly, as Riklin’s own fable shows, he himself does not think of what they do on channel 20 as journalism; he himself proudly call them attempting to change the world. They do precisely that, armed with an opinion and a microphone, and working for Netanyahu.

As Libskind has exposed, magnified fake news is a common tool in channel 20 MOs. The methods of channel 20, and Netanyahu’s new-media staff, working in coordination – are varied. For example, channel 20 publishes on 31 January 2019 that facebook has foiled a post that said that an attempt to bring down Netanyahu’s regime was performed by an Iranian network. Netanyahu himself has posed this channel 20 notice on his personal facebook. Only the facebook note did not mention ‘attempting to bring down Netanyahu’s regime’. It was a fake news, a fake that was immediately echoed through Netanyahu’s facebook to millions of followers.[[156]](#footnote-156) Even more so: the channel 20 news only recites the Likud’s response to the facebook notice. The response was very likely written by Netanyahu’s team. A chamber echo of his own: channel 20, facebook and Likud. On another occasion, channel 20 interviewed an American former Israeli that has argued that the elections were stolen from Trump. A short while afterwards, channel 20 has taken the report off its website – but the damage was already done.[[157]](#footnote-157) Channel 20 sought to become a news agent, but actually produced taking heads channel of the same skin and color: those of its leader, Netanyahu. It turned out that the rightwing of Israel prefers news to fake news – even if part of their reason for watching channels 11, 12 or 13 is to get mad that the pro-Bibi camp is underrepresented.

* 1. Galey Israel

Local radio stations were held dear to some infamous Likud party center people. Indeed, there was pressure on Netanyahu to keep the lifeline of these radio pirate stations coming from below – the activists of both Shas and Likud parties. Galey Israel was the Judea and Samaria local radio station which was established in 2007, but began broadcasting after 2009, when Netanyahu returned to power. He facilitated the establishment of the second authority of radio and TV in Judea and Samaria. It was meant to be called Israel’s radio but the IPB has appealed, saying it is too close to the Voice of Israel, and the new title became Galey Israel.

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 has tried to convince Yediot and Walla to take as a publicist, has the early morning show. Sharon Gal, an ex-rightwing politician of Liberman’s party, has the following morning magazine. Erez Tadmor, the CEO of Im Tirzu, the rightwing organization, and then the head of Netanyahu’s election campaign in 2019, has the 9-10 slot. Mati Tuchfeld, the chief political reporter at Israel Hayom, has the noon news magazine. Galit Distal Atberian had the afternoon show, today she is a Likud MK enshrined by Netanyahu to place 10 on the list. Yair Netanyahu, the son of the prime minister, and Yaara Zered, the spokesperson of the Likud party, lead the Friday program and today the Friday show is anchored by Limor Samian-Darash, who was enshrined by Netanyahu in 2015 in the Likud list but then her place was given to Benny Begin, Gadi Taub, the house intellectual of Balfour, and Eitan Orkibi, until recently the chief editor of the op-ed publicist in Yisrael Hayom. None of them is identified as a journalist; all of them fall into the category of ‘changing the world’ and being massively pro-Bibi. Most of them walking in and out the Balfour residency in Netanyahu’s days, and commuting in-and-out rightwing politics and rightwing media. Rather than making rightwing Fox news, they are making pro-Bibi channels.

* 1. Walla

Besides the newspaper, the local radio stations and the TV channel, the final attempt of Netanyahu, the one that arguably led to his downfall, was the attempt to gain control over a major internet news website, like Walla. Mozes has suggested to Netanyahu, in their recorded conversations in 2014, that Ynet, the Yediot news website, may be easier to control as Tifenborn, its editor, is a right-winger. But the talks did not mature into a materialized bribery deal, a process for which Mozes and Netanyahu are put on trial in case 2000. Tifenberg himself would become the chief editor of the Knesset channel, once channel 20 failed to overtake the bid.[[158]](#footnote-158) Netanyahu, like Netanyahu, always has multiple venues of action. The other attempt was by Adelson, to purchase NRG, Maariv’s internet news site. Yisrael Hayom group did take over NRG but due to financial difficulties it was finally closed down in 2017 and NRG was transferred to Makor Rishon, another of Adelson’s involvement in the media, only highly identified with the religious national sector, thus failing to be Netanyahu’s public news website.

Against this background, the relationship with Elovich, as unfolded in case 4000, was the Netanyahus main hope to control a major digital news website. In her conversation with Zeev Rubinstein, the middle man with the Eloviches, Sara Netanyahu, Bibi’s full partner in his ambitious control over the media plans, said: “Me and Yair don’t have the force to be only in this. I have other roles in life, not just the keeper of Walla and the notifying Zeevik. Enough is enough! Make a positive Walla net and that’s it.”[[159]](#footnote-159) Rubinstein has quickly called Yeshua, the CEO and the key witness at case 4000: “it is horrible; my balls are at stake!” Yeshua obeys: “send the details of the report, I would immediately deal with it”.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Whereas the strategies so far have developed as alternative routes, in Walla there was a systemic work 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 call Netanyahu ‘the big’. In a typical moment, when Netanyahu has already called off the reform which would have cost Elovich dearly, and was just about to sign the new reform, which would allow the purchase of Yes by Bezeq and produce millions to Elovich, he says to his CEO, Yeshua that he has to satisfy the demands of the family. Yeshua responds: “we censure a report after a report. OK I’ll put more pressure. Elovitch: “the righteous reporters would suffer no harm. For me it would be a tremendous damage, he needs to sign this week. If he ain’t signing, there is no deal”.[[161]](#footnote-161) On another incident, the same week, implying that these are crucial moments for the defining deal which Netanyahu has to deliver: Elovitch:” you don’t think we went over the board with Zipi (livni)?” Yeshua: “you cannot not cite the leaders of the parties” (before elections). Elovitch: “I don’t need the signature of Zipi this week”. So there is a direct linkage between Netanyahus – the father the son and the mother – and the Elovich couple; there is full pressure from the owner on the CEO, Yeshua; and Yeshua is the one to operate the editors and journalists, under the watchful eyes of the Netanyahus and the Eloviches. Netanyahu, either directly or through his two men for the mission Hefetz and Filber, state witnesses in case 4000, is controlling the details down to the individual journalist and the particular report, or picture or interview: its time on air, its location, its size. Despite all that, in a critical moment says the boy, Yair Netanyahu, to his father: “after all the billions you gave the Elovitchs, look how they cover you.”[[162]](#footnote-162)

1. **Controlling by Regulation, Legislation and Ministers of communication**
2. Netanyahu’s Ministers of Communication

 “I as a communication minster have not visited the ministry even once. I do not know where the ministry of communication is”[[163]](#footnote-163) told Netanyahu 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 control game through them: letting them pass reforms which he sought yet reserving for himself the right to overrule these reforms and change them. That was a known Netanyahu governability pattern: work in different ways to achieve your goals, always remain the author and the decision maker of the final steps, appoint those who are personally loyal and obedient to you and maintain fear, uncertainty and a feeling of dependence throughout the system.

The communication ministry was a milestone for Peres, Rabin, Begin, Sharon, Ulmert and Netanyahu himself. It was for many years in direct control of the media and its infrastructures – and then became a small, professional and regulative ministry with no public aura or room for maneuver. It was Netanyahu who has made it a key bastion of his power, as penetrating not just the news broadcasting outlets from within, but controlling the mechanisms of the regulation and supervision became increasingly crucial from his point of view.

* 1. Edelstein

His understanding of the importance of controlling the regulator was already apparent in his appointment of Edelstein as the minister in charge of the IPB reform, as he got back into power in 2009. The struggle over the IPB, as we have already seen, was on appointing a professional chairperson to the IPB to take it through the reforms negotiated between the treasury ministry and the trade unions. Yet Netanyahu, who has first approved the appointment, has withdrew his consent, and after three such rounds of failure – Edelstein has resigned and Netanyahu has assumed the role of the minister in charge of the IPB reform in person.[[164]](#footnote-164) Netanyahu as the minister in charge drives a process of personalization in the IPB – contrary to all the reforms and the recommendation of the state comptroller reports. Controlling the top appointments at the IPB by making the minister in charge the sole authority to approve them led to further corruption in the IPB and to a virtual control of Netanyahu’s people over the main news outlet at the time – the Voice of Israel. Not indecently the minister in charge was Netanyahu himself. The pattern was now established: control by proxy turned into a direct control to prevent any attempts at professionalizing the system and maintaining personal tight control over those in charge of the news media.

* 1. Cakhlon

The communication minister appointed by Netanyahu in 2009 was Moshe Chakhlon. His most significant move was to implement the treasury’s reform in the cellular market and make it more competitive. It was so effective in terms of the individual consumer, that it made Netanyahu’s election slogan to the Likud members in 2013, given the social protest movement of 2011, “Be Cakhlons”. Yet personally Netanyahu did not want Cakhlon in the ministry of communication, or for that matter in the treasury: he caused Cakhlon’s resignation and defection from the Likud on the basis of personal strife between them.

* 1. Erdan

Netanyahu then appointed, in 2013, Gilad Erdan as the in-coming communication minister. Erdan took Netanyahu’s command – ‘be Cakhlons’ – into two arenas: the abolition of the TV and radio toll by an overall reform of the IPB which was supposed to make it into an independent, professional agent; and the split of channel 2 – to increase the competition within the monopoly of the commercial TV news agent. Both reforms were in the spirit of neoliberal Netanyahu – competition and market-oriented approach with reducing taxes on the citizens. Both were put on halt by Netanyahu with different degrees of success. The thrust of the Landes report (2014) was to disconnect the IPB from the political realm, appoint a judge as its man in charge and let it be a professional executing agency. Netanyahu was supportive of the reform throughout the process, pending on his vision that the new news corporate would be a fresh start and an opportunity to build it in his own image: new council, new chief editor, new newsroom. Netanyahu said, in 2016, that he objects to the establishment of the corporate KAN and that “it slipped away from me in Tzuk Etan” (the Gaza military operation).[[165]](#footnote-165) He has then feverously acted to abolish the new corporate, then to defer its opening and then to split it so that the news broadcast agency would be under the minister’s supervision. The justification for this line he gave the journalists an hypothesis: “what if all the people in the corporate are with Breaking Silence”?[[166]](#footnote-166) Meaning belong to the left. Netanyahu’s inability to control the appointments of the independent new news corporate was the reason for his fierce struggle for its abolition before it was even established. A confirmation that this was the main argument coming from Balfour, was given by his wife Sara at her investigation. She disclosed to the police officer: “Erdan went behind Netanyahu’s back and led him in lies and deceit to establish the left corporation of Noni Mozes.”[[167]](#footnote-167)

The other two reforms led by Erdan were crucial for Netanyahu’s control over the media: the split of channel 2 and Bezeq reform which was to open the wired infrastructures to competition and end the monopoly of Elovich, the tycoon which owned Walla news. In the channel 2 reform to split the monopole of the news company, the Edelstein affair was rehearsed all over again. Netanyahu was behind the reform, and its main pusher hoping to weaken the power of the critical news outlet. Erdan, his loyal minister, has brought the reform for Netanyahu’s final confirmation – after it was already approved in the ministers’ committee for legislation. Surprisingly, Netanyahu has chosen to appeal to the court to stop the reform which he himself has pushed: “given that in s few days the ministry of communication would be passed on to me, and provided that the bill is of significant consequences on the commercial communication world, I request, as the man who supposed to be in charge of the bill, to learn the subject to depth.”[[168]](#footnote-168) The bill did not pass and Netanyahu replaced Erdan as the minister of communication, appointing himself instead. The day Netanyahu has decided upon this change of ministers, he has called Erdan’s professional CEO – Avi Berger – and told him he is fired to be effective immediately. Why was the date so crucial? Because the reform in the wired communication infrastructure, said to harm Elovich’s monopoly as the owner of Bezeq, was to take place. Upon appointing Filber to his CEO the first mission was to call off this third reform and to allegedly bargain regulatory policies for the direct and indirect control over Walla internet outlet, as the state of Israel against Netanyahu would claim in the charges for bribery brought against him in case 4000.

* 1. Netanyahu and Hanegbi

Erdan has been moved by Netanyahu to another ministerial role and despite his wish to see the reform in the ministery of communication through he was refused by Netanyahu. His professional CEO Berger was fired over the phone by Netanyahu one day before the reform was to get approved and implemented. Apart of the Yes-Bezeq reform which Berger authorized, two other reforms were in the wings, stopped by Erdan-Berger and authorized by Netanyahu-Filber: closing down channel 10 and the political pressure coming from within the Likud to authorize the divergence of broadcasts of the pirate radio stations.[[169]](#footnote-169)

Once the original reform, to open up the landline telephony for competition, was impeded, it was time for Netanyahu, the incoming minister of communication, to move on to what Elovich had wanted most. 23 June 2015 was the final day for approving the Yes-Bezeq sale so sought by Elovitch, who wanted to pass on his debts over Yes to the publicly owned company – Bezeq. Netanyahu has signed the deal, passing the burden of the debt onto the public. Elovich has reported to Walla people: “Bulldozer.”[[170]](#footnote-170)

As Netanyahu’s trial advanced, an appeal to court was filed by Herzog, then the head of the Labour party today the president of Israel, declaring there is a clear conflict of interest and that Netanyahu cannot function as the minister of communication. With the pressure from the supreme court, Netanyahu had no other choice but to appoint what he called ‘a substitute’. Only there is no such category as a substitute minister: Netanyahu had to resign and to transfer authorities to Zachi Hanegbi as acting minister of communication – temporal appointment for 3 months. This was a warning sign to Hanegbi himself: the prime minister is in full charge, you are but a substitute, minister by name only, and a lame one too, like Netanyahu likes: a feeble 3 months’ appointment pending on Netanyahu’s extension – which never came. Netanyahu’s men remained in the office and effectively run the ministry under Netanyahu. After 3 months Netanyahu did not give Hanegbi a permanent appointment, but gave the position to another loyalist of his, Ayub Kara.

* 1. Kara

Short time afterwards appointing Kara to the minister of communication, recordings were leaked out whereby Netanyahu is screaming on his minister “are you crazy?” he shouted Kara.[[171]](#footnote-171) In the tapes Netanyahu admitted he had to give up the portfolio because of the appeal, and that he expects Kara to authorize channel 20, the Jewish heritage channel with no license to broadcast news, to do exactly that and give it the news permission. When the minister tells the prime minister it is in the hands of the cables and satellite committee, and asks whether to dismiss it, Netanyahu shouts back: “why dismiss it? Let’s cancel it!”.[[172]](#footnote-172) After the failure of channel 20 to become in charge of the Knesset channel, Kara was successful in giving channel 20 the license to broadcast news, but did not abolish the council.[[173]](#footnote-173) Kara also reports that there were tremendous pressures from the prime minister to prevent the unification of Reshet and Channel 10 so the latter – the nemesis of Netanyahu – would go bankrupt. Kara appointed Shmuelov-Berkowitz, the chairperson of the second authority for TV and radio, and a Netanyahu loyalist, to the job. She acted vehemently to prevent the unification to dissolve channel 10 news, but to no avail.

1. **Concentrating media legislation in his hands**

Noni to Bibi: “Well, it is clear. This have to make sure you are the prime minister… we need to do everything fast Bibi because I have to turn the ship”

Bibi: “first of all the law, I thought a lot about it. It is quite a reasonable thing. Why? Because it balances between two needs – to save the freedom of speech and to safeguard economic balancing.”[[174]](#footnote-174)

‘The Law’ is of course Israel Hayom law, a law to which Netanyahu objected vehemently arguing that it limits the freedom of competition,[[175]](#footnote-175) the law because of which the media says Netanyahu-Lapid government has fallen and the most rightwing government ever to be established in Israel was formed.[[176]](#footnote-176) The goal of the bill, tabled by Etan Cabel of the Labor party and other 8 MKs in 2014, 7 years after Israel Hayom went into print and was identified as Netanyahu’s newspaper, distributed for free on every street corner, read: “the goal of this law is to promote and strengthen written journalism in Israel and secure equal conditions for fair competition among the newspapers”. It was alleged that the proposal itself was actually written by Mozes people and handed in to Cable, but it was not confirmed. The law, passing the initial call on 14.11.14, sought to force daily newspapers to charge at least 70% of the other written newspapers’ fee and virtually forbidden free-of-charge newspapers from being distributed. Two giant media tycoons stood behind the quarreling sides: Sheldon Adelson, Netanyahu’s patron, was represented by Perach Lerner, the then acting adviser of Netanyahu to relations with the Knesset. Her husband was the PR person of Israel Hayom as of the beginning of 2015. On the other side was Noni Mozes, allegedly pulling the strings for the bill using MKs from both opposition and coalition providing them a sympathetic coverage in Yediot Achronot.[[177]](#footnote-177) Netanyahu would later argue that Cable and others have received a positive coverage from Yediot in return, allegeable for a bribery charge. It is a common practice but only I am being persecuted, he would argue. The media is against Netanyahu, once more. But then of course evidences – the Mozes-Netanyahu conversations – were provided only in Netanyahu’s case. The Mozes-Netanyahu conversations, the basis for case 2000, were recorded by Ari Harush, head of staff of Netanyahu’s office, under whom Lerner has worked and a family relative of her husband. Netanyahu himself has instructed Arush to record them, for future use – possibly to blackmail Mozes later on. In the recordings, Netanyahu uses his surprising support for the law to try to penetrate Mozes’ media empire ‘I have to turn the ship’ as Mozes disclosed. Netanyahu’s interests in relation to the law – for and against it – are entirely personal. He uses the idea of free competition to support both contradicting ends. He leaves everything hanging in the balance – supposedly to create a balance – and pending on his decision, as he likes. The law was dismissed once a new election was called by Netanyahu. He nevertheless had hoped Mozes would wait for the next Knesset and provide him with positive coverage. But the law which made the government fall is but the tip of the iceberg in terms of using legislation to getting a better hold of the media. One such example was the bill of the new public broadcasting corporate, 2014. Once this new law provided independence to the Kan corporate, Netanyahu decided to abolish it and roll the law back by bringing the old IPB back in.[[178]](#footnote-178) Legislation was elastic as the interests of the prime minister who sought control over the news. Netanyahu had made sure to concentrate all power connected with communication in his hands, and legislation was but the most basic of them.

1. **Regulation**

The 2015 coalition agreement had a special article 65 which, under the title ‘pursuing reforms in the communication market’ said:

65. The government would lead widespread reforms in the communication market. The Likud faction, Jewish Home faction and all other factions joining the coalition are obliged to support these reforms. Also, the coalition factions and their members would not support a bill on the subject of communication without a permission from the minister of communication. The coalition factions and their members would object any initiative and/or proposal on the subject of communication to which the minister of communication objects.[[179]](#footnote-179)

The all-powerful minister of communication was no other than Netanyahu himself. The coalition agreement has secured an overall majority for any reform that Netanyahu would want in the communication market. And huge reforms were certainly on the new minister’s table. First and foremost – the replacement of the regulative bodies of the news commercial media with one regulative committee which would be controlled by the minister of communication, i.e. Netanyahu. “Netanyahu wants to … become an omnipotent regulator” read the title in De Marker.[[180]](#footnote-180) For more than 20 years there were two separate regulative bodies. The council of cables and satellite is a body within the ministry of communication, funded by the state budget. The second authority was established to supervise the news broadcasts as an external statutory corporate with independent agencies funded by the commercial profit of the second authority. Its council was also permeated by political appointments but it was independent.[[181]](#footnote-181) What would the logic of a neoliberal treasury minister be? Independent body funded by its own resources. What was the bill proposed by Netanyahu, minister of communication? Against all professional advice, he proposed a unified regulatory body which is part of the government and funded by the state. Such structure in effect means that the politicians control the commercial news media, precisely the sort of control Netanyahu has always sought. Alarmingly, instead of appointing professionals to the regulative body, the politicians would control the supervisors of the commercial news. No more an independent judge to head the committee but the minister himself would appoint the committee which would recommend to him the chairperson and members of the council, and he would have the sole authority to accept the recommendation or dismiss the council altogether. The chairperson would also be the CEO and would be a direct political appointment of the minister, Netanyahu. It can even be a political figure and not a professional or a person with any relevance to the area of communication, as long as he is not currently in a political or partisan activity. Far, far away from the neoliberal vision of an independent professional body.

Netanyahu indeed appointed a committee to recommend the regulation of the communication market. Two of its major subjects: the split of channel 2 and more companies, like Yes and Hot, to be licensed for news broadcasts.[[182]](#footnote-182) Yes, mind you, was owned by no other than Elovich, with whom the netanyahus knew how to work. The political control over the commercial news media was now in Netanyahu’s hands.

But of course, the other great mission was to gain control over the public news corporation – the IPB. The whole idea behind the Landes committee and the Erdan reform was to professionalize and create an independent public broadcasting agency far from the reach of the politicians. Netanyahu as the minister of communication was striving to the exact opposite direction: direct political control over the public news. Once there was almost no going back from establishing the Kan corporate, Netanyahu tried to abolish completely the TV broadcast of news by Kan, leaving the radio only, or to have TV without news and current affairs.[[183]](#footnote-183) Once this also failed, the only option to politicize Kan was through the regulative body which was to supervise over the news corporate. Netanyahu thus proposed a new law of public broadcasting, in which the control is put back in the hands of the politicians.[[184]](#footnote-184) Not only that, but what Netanyahu’s ministry has proposed in one unified control body over the three news agents: the public corporation, the second authority and the cables and satellite council: all were to be united under the minister of communication, Netanyahu himself. He is to appoint the council members – two politicians and nine public figures, all in political hands. It would be an internal council within the ministry which would control its appointments, budget and decisions. A complete reversal of all the professional reports which sought to separate the news from political control and provide a financial independence.

Even on regulation, the control mechanisms went from the macro-picture to the nitty-gritty of utilizing the social media in the direction sought by the Netanyahus. In the investigation, Hefetz tells Sara Netanyahu: “Eva the regulator, we need to hold her.” Sara replies: “We need to be firm with her. Topaz should start putting out on the social media what we said and the failing channel 10.” In her investigation she is asked to respond to that. Mrs. Netanyahu says: “great. No problem. What is it, shutting mouths here? A police state? Pravda state? KGB state? I wish all the media bodies of the left would be shut down”. Investigator: “and if channel 10 would have been closed?” Sara: “it would have been great for the state of Israel… The police is trying to fail the prime minister. And that’s that”.[[185]](#footnote-185) The deep state argument is fully authenticated: the law enforcement bodies fail the prime minister in his attempt to gain full control over the free media in Israel. The result, is the indictment in cases 1000, 2000 and 4000, to which we now turn.

1. **Cases 1000, 2000, 4000: The State of Israel against Benjamin Netanyahu**

Mozes: “Bibi, there is election in three and a half months... We have 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 on the face of it in the same situation. We have already been in this movie, we did it. This is our fourth election, not third, fourth. 96, 99, 2009 and now”

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

On 28 February 2019 the attorney general has submitted the indictment to the court in Jerusalem. The police investigation had started in 2016 and the formal decision to persecute the prime minister was finalized by February 2018. The election cycles were now intertwined with the trial: the 2019 before the hearing, with full opportunity for Netanyahu to attack the attorney general and the law enforcement agents that persecute him as the long arm of the Left. The third one just before the opening of the trial itself. The trial itself was due to begin in May 2020 but was deferred because of the corona virus pandemic and the regulation decided upon by Netanyahu’s governments, among which the closing down of all courts, time and again. The fourth election round – when Netanyahu had given a resounding incitement speech against the state officials, law enforcement and judicial system on the steps of the court on his way to the first session where he declared ‘not guilty’. Thus, the prime minister has taken Israel for four rounds of elections, on the background of the trial and his struggle against the law enforcement – in Netanyahu’s language the deep state agents which falsely try to rob him off power, unable to do so through the voting booths – the last of which was just a month after Netanyahu had pleaded not guilty to the charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

On the face of it, these three cases are substantially different: case 1000 accuses Mr. 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 had helped Milchan in getting a business visa and tax exemptions as expatriate.[[187]](#footnote-187) Case 2000 is about curbing the strength of Israel Hayom vis-à-vis Yediot Aharonot in return for supportive coverage. Case 4000 is about corruption charges – Netanyahu as a communication minister has changed the regulation concerning the telecom company held by Elovich, Bezeq, and approving its merger with Yes, thus defying the restrictions on pyramids of control under Israeli law, in return for allowing the Netanyahus, directly an indirectly, to shape substantially the coverage in the Eloviches’ news website, Walla.

Yet from a broader perspective, all three cases are deeply connected to Netanyahu’s quest for control over Israel news media: television, newspapers and digital news. Thus, case 1000 article 6 reads: Netanyahu “has acted himself, and instructed his CEO at the communication ministry, 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-188) As Milchan himself testified, it was Netanyahu himself who pushed him into investing – first in channel 10 and then in the prospect merger – using the argument that this would keep Netanyahu in power and so the Jewish people would be saved. The relationships with Milchan were such, explicates the indictment in article 9d, that “Milchan was your man of trust, carrying in your name sensitive mediating tasks in the communication arena. Thus, for example, Milchan has acted in your service in 2009 vis-à-vis Arnon Mozes, owner of Yediot Ahronot, and with the owner of Israel Hayon, Sheldon Adelson to promote an agreement that Adelson would restrict the weekend edition of Israel Hayom newspaper and Mozes would abstain from negative publicity on your interests.”[[189]](#footnote-189) Article 27a further explicates benefits to channel 10, in which Milchan is partner, in 2009, when Netanyahu was a prime minister, limiting the interest that advertising bodies demand from media channels, to the immediate benefit of Milchan, to which end Netanyahu has committed himself. Article 28c explains how in 2015, when Netanyahu is both prime minister and minister of communication, Milchan asks him to help with regulation to promote a merger deal between Reshet and Keshet, a demand to which Netanyahu responded immediately by summoning a late night meeting with Filber, the CEO of the ministry, in which Netanyahu has instructed Filber to help Milchan and promote the merger deal. The indictment specifically says that “this also because you wanted your trusted man in an influential position in the central media outlet which would benefit you personally.”[[190]](#footnote-190) Crucially, rather than being driven by Milchan it is at least a fair estimation that Netanyahu was the mind behind getting Milchan, his trusted mogul friend, to get into the news media business, to purchase shares in channel 10, to concoct the deal between Edleson and Mozes and to act to facilitate the merger of Reshet and Keshet to produce almost a direct control of Netanyahu of the strongest news agency in Israel. But what about Parker? The indictment does not detail. Was it only personal benefits to the Netanyahus and their son? Was is merely the free use in the Parker mansion, which Netanyahu has convinced the young billionaire to buy next to his own house? It was the same house in which Filber has met with Milchan and Paker to “discuss Netanyahu’s fantasy: the overtaking of a television channel, funded by Paker”. Filber was well aware of the dream of his master, and that young parker, with an unstable mind as it turned out, had the means and admiration for Netanyahu to realize it. Eventually Netanyahu’s imitative was to establish an Israeli Fox news channel, funded by Paker, Milchan and Murdoch, testified Filber. Netanyahu requested Paker to invest 25 Million dollars in the project. The initiative came to a halt as the police investigation expedited Paker’s departure from Israel. The police and the attorney’s office have recommended to trial Netanyahu for bribery in case 1000, but the attorney general has decided to persecute him only for breach of trust and fraud. The indictment is far from showing the full picture as to why Netanyahu has harvested the relationships with his mogul friends, and the media empire he sought to acquire control of with their generous help.

Case 2000 is based on three meetings between Netanyahu and Mozes who were recorded, on Netanyahu’s order, in 2008-9, 2013 and 2014. In essence, the bribery deal is between Mozes, who requested from Netanyahu to influence Israel Hayom to curb its weekend edition and pass the Israel Hayom law and in return Mozes would ‘tilt the ship’ so that the covering on Yediot and Ynet would be in favor of Netanyahu. Netanyahu were to support the Israel Hayom law, to force free-newspapers to charge at least 70% of the other printed newspapers and to act with Adelson to limit the free copies. Mozes, the indictment cites, said: “assuming there is law, that you and me have agreed upon, I will do my efforts that you would be here as long as you want. I told you that before and I again look you in the eye and tell you that”.[[191]](#footnote-191) So Mozes promises ‘to tilt the ship’ (article 74) as he says, so that Netanyahu would remain prime minister as long as he wants, provided Israel Hayom law is passing. Article 73 discloses that Netanyahu has requested Mozes to change the coverage of the Netanyahus as long as the conversations continue, even without the law being passed. This means in effect that the bribery was actually materialized even if the final law was not passed, due to an early call for election – that Netanyahu has launched because of the Israel Hayom law. Mozes also established a direct connection between Netanyahu’s man and the chief editor of Yediot, Ron Yaron, and the chief editor of Ynet, the digital newspaper, Tifenborn, so Netanyahu could have a direct effect on these media outlets.[[192]](#footnote-192) This came into practice in many instances, for example as a negative report on Sara Netanyahu was only published in the back pages and negative reports on his rival, Bennet, were carried on, in order to meet Netanyahu’s demands. In return the conversations have discussed curtailing the number of the editions of Israel Hayom and promoting the Israel Hayom law. The indictment argues that Netanyahu has used his ruling power, thus breaching the public trust, using regulatory power, legislation and direct connection to tycoons to influence the election result and remain in power.[[193]](#footnote-193) This also reveals a particularly difficult view of ‘free press’ in Israel and how economic and political interests – connecting people with capital to people of power – can actually interfere and influence the fourth arm of democracy – the media and especially the news arena. The detailed instructions Mozes gives Netanyahu – how to select as chief editors those who can manipulate the system in a way that can reflect the economic or political interests of the owners – is particularly disturbing.

Case 4000 is a case of possibly the most comprehensive power corruption, using the complete control as a regulator and a legislature to promote private political interests of one person. The one person – being simultaneously the prime minister, the minister of communication and the regulator of the communication market – news included – demonstrates that power corrupts and that concentration of power in two hands is devastating for democracy. Case 4000 is a bribery case on both sides of the transactions: communication companies on the one hand and control over news media on the other. Elovich, owner of bezeq, was interested in purchasing all the shares of Yes TV satellite service, a merger deal worth 1 milliard shekels that went to Elovich and were authorized by Netanyahu as a minister of communication.[[194]](#footnote-194) The thrust of the deal was to override the professional position of the Israeli Antitrust Authority which bounded parallel ownership in the communication and other markets. The professional position of both the authority and the ministry of communication was that a shared ownership, like that of Bezeq and Yes, is forbidden and can only take place should the internet infrastructure of the landline telephony, the monopoly of Elovich’s Bezeq company – would be open for competition of commercial wholesalers. What Elovich wanted from Netanyahu is to dismiss the prohibition, to allow for the merger without opening the landline market for competition. Netanyahu was very thorough in providing Elovich precisely that: he dismissed not only the CEO of the communication ministry, Berger, who was responsible for the competition reform, but the minister himself – Gilad Erdan. Erdan, who held Netanyahu’s own economic original doctrine of free competition, wanted to follow the example of Cahlon as a minister of communication and complement his predecessor’s cellphone reform with a reform of the landline company held by Elovich. Elovich had repeatedly told Netanyahu that he is financially sanctioned by this reform and that he is unhappy with the way the minister and the CEO work. Netanyahu fired them both. Next he appointed Filber, with no prior knowledge in the area but who was Netanyahu’s right-hand as the secretary of his government and his trusted man, to CEO and instructed him to fulfil Elovich’s wishes. Mind you, Filber was the regulator under whom Elovich worked. But the testimony Filber gave as a state witness revealed how he actually worked for the interests of Elovich, Bezeq and against the professional policy of the communication professionals. Filber and Netanyahu worked to change the regulation, the legislation and the professional advice. Even more so – they worked against the ideological doctrine of Netanyahu as treasury minister: they worked to maintain the monopoly of Elovich and blocked the free competition reform which would have substantially helped the consumers – the citizens of Israel.

In return, the Netanyahus demanded complete control over the coverage of the prime minister and his family at Walla – the news website second only to Ynet at the relevant period – 2013-2015. The Netanyahus and their people demanded to interfere in the appointments of the chief editors, the journalists and the reporters. They demanded to influence the line-up, the place where articles concerning them would appear and for how long they would be shown on the website. They actively edited and reedited interviews and articles about them. They sought to conceal their close relationship with the Eloviches and their direct influence from the journalists at Walla news and the state comptroller. Netanyahu, controlling both ends of the communication ministry sought to call the shots as a regulator, legislator, minister of communication and prime minister to serve his own private interest as the mightiest power-holder in Israel ever. With coercing Israel to go for four electoral cycles in two and a half years, while the trial is going on, this may have well brought his fall from power, as Naftali Bennet, his rival already in the Mozes-Netanyahu talks, and the politicians that Walla news was ordered to slander, went into the prime minster office in the aftermath of the 2021 election.

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

“When I return… it would be with a media of my own, we would no longer be dependent on the leftist media which detests me and would do anything the get rid of me” (Caspit and Ziv 2018: 193). When Netanyahu has lost 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 a life project for Netanyahu. Far from being ‘two and a half positive coverage articles’, more like hundreds of positive coverage stories and a systemic bias towards the Netanyahus’ demands, Netanyahu has nevertheless attempted to frame his trial as a plot of the media against him. The analysis has demonstrated a systemic and profound attempt to divert the news scene and change structurally public broadcasting in Israel. Netanyahu had a vision: he wanted to establish a news empire owned by media tycoons that share his worldview of a rightwing nationalism and provide him the means to design and control a pro-Bibi media. He has acted holistically to bring it about: soliciting his tycoon-friends to get into the news media and purchase substantial parts of it, choosing CEOs and chief editors who he thought could manage, manipulate and lead newsrooms that do what the boss wants them to – and are loyal and obedient. Not just the owners, the CEOs and the chief editors, but Netanyahu sought to decide who will be the editors, the journalists – those who would and would not be reporting on the political scene, commentate on the party system and be invited to talk on Friday night panels. Not only that but Netanyahu, using arguments for ‘diversity’ and ‘competition’, was actually after a monopoly of news media in which he personally would be the regulator and have full control on every council, committee and public appointment made by this powerful public news agency. Throughout his reign as a prime minister, he acted relentlessly, using his power to appoint ministers of communication, to shape the regulation and to force through the coalition legislation, to bring this vision of a public-held Israeli Fox news on TV, radio, print and the internet in life. Netanyahu’s comprehensive plan has failed, and its demise would be told in court over the next years, a trial which is all about the different arena through which Netanyahu had hoped to achieve his goal. Whether the prime minister would be charged with fraud, breach of trust and bribery or not, is for the judges to decide; but the damage to the very idea of a public free press in Israel is appalling.

Consider one aspect which Netanyahu always complained about: a more ‘balanced’ media as he calls it. One major attempt to market this act of balancing was by forcing – through chief editors and CEOs – a co-anchors concept on the news magazines. The direct influence of Netanyahu was to insist that his own loyal mouthpieces would be injected as this ‘balancers’ into public news. Take GLZ, the military radio station on which he gained an enormous control through appointing its chief commanders – first Yaron Dekel and then Shimon Elkabetz. Notably, the senior of all GLZ reporter, Razi Barkai, was for a long time on Netanyahu’s radar. Once Dekel was made the national radio station commander, he had promised Netanyahu ’to balance’ the station. Barkai was to pay the price: he was the anchor for 20 years of the morning news magazine 9-11. He had learnt from the press – not receiving a personal conversation or even a phone call – that Dekel has decided to cut his program into half, to let Netanyahu’s self-described ‘number one Bibist’ to have his own program on the other half, and to force upon him a co-anchor on his own show – one of three Netanyahu loyalists – Bardugo, Daum or Segal himself.[[195]](#footnote-195) Learning about it from the other channels was a grand humiliation. The program was cut in half, but a public struggle run by Barkai and others in the station managed to block the co-anchor idea. Yet, this was only a short-lived victory as there was not enough resistance and Bardugo became to co-anchor, and in fact the dominant presenter of the evening news magazine – at 5 o’clock. The morning news magazine was cut in half; the evening news magazine was overtaken by Netanyahu’s mouthpiece.

Think about the idea of ‘balancing’: once you take a self-declared pro-Bibi non-journalist person and put him side by side with a journalist like Yaron Vilensky – the ‘balancing act’ is reversed: by implication you have now singled out Vilensky – a professional journalist – as a Left, biased and publicist anchor. You have bought into Netanyahu’s thesis that there is only the way you present the news – always from a position. You have destroyed the idea of a professional journalist. This logic of ‘balancing’ mind you, was not between Left and right – as Netanyahu was attacking through his media proxies his closest rivals on the right – president Rivlin, Liberman, Bennet, Ganz, Saar and many others. You have at once equated the right and the national camp with Bibi, and clustered all the others as biased Leftists. The toll is the destruction of the idea of professional journalism.

This has resonated way beyond GLZ. Think about Kan corporate – the one Netanyahu has failed to appoint its chief editor, and then failed to split and then failed to close down: this presumably anti-Bibi media has adopted the ‘balancing act’ of Netanyahu. Kalman Libskind was recruited, following the deal with the prime minister’s man Filber, as a rightwing journalist. He became a co-presenter together with Asaf Liberman. The balancing act has turned a professional journalist – Liberman – into a ‘Leftist’ publicist. Even the evening news magazine has replaced Ran Binyamini, a professional journalist, with Yechimovich and Gueta – both anti-Bibi but both ex-politicians, who know their way around the media but are ex-politicians: the news magazine, even with two anti-Bibi politicians, is no longer presented by journalists and has become a talking heads program. Bardogu and Vilenski, Yechimovich and Gueta – their views of the interviews they conduct become the center of the magazine – not the news, the experts, the interviewees – but the interviewers are at the center of stage. The damage to the whole endeavor of professional journalism is being done. While the struggle to ‘balance’ Keren Nuebach happened already in 2012, and was blocked by the Journalists’ association, a few years down the line almost all news magazines on the radio become ‘balanced’ with two non-journalists. Except of course, in pro-Bibi’s media: on channel 20, Galey Israel, Israel Hayom – it is all commentary – there is no real journalism by their own standards and definitions – are done almost exclusively from within the pro-Bibi camp. No ‘balancing act’ on his media, except as strawmen for the commentators’ to attack. Thus, far from being a minor effect, structural changes have taken place throughout the news broadcasting in Israel under Netanyahu. This of course within the framework of social media, fake news and the weakening of the public media throughout the OECD countries and especially in those countries led by nationalist-populist leaders like Trump, Berlusconi, Bolsenaro and Urban.

While the two initial claims of Netanyahu – that the media is not diverse enough and is leaning to the Left – were generally correct twenty years back, his attempt to change it could have taken two routes. The first, the neoliberal way, to separate the news agency from the political scene, professionalize it and let it live or die by its own funds and success. The second, foreign to Netanyahu’s perception, to have a public news media which is independent, professional and keeps diversity and plurality as part of its standards. The third one, chosen by Netanyahu and symbolizing a complete sell out of his neoliberal ideology, was to establish ‘his own media’ – a pro-Bibi media with him controlling the regulative bodies, the budget and the appointments on TV, radio and the website. The structural changes of the regulative bodies, the starvation of the news outlets and their dependence on the government and the politicians’ friends and media owners, and the idea that the media is divided to pro-Bibi and anti-Bibi, has had a devastating effect on news media in Israel.

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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. Illana Dayan reading out loud Netanyahu’s response. [↑](#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)
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