The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel

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Abstract: Haredim, or ultra-orthodox Jews, live in cultural ghettos, withdrawn from the influences of modern life. To strengthen the hand of Haredi rabbis against their members being influenced by the outside media, institutional Haredi dailies newspapers were created by these rabbis - becoming in effect mouthpieces to their flock.Over the last thirty years an alternative Haredi media has evolved inside Israel - comprising independent weekly magazines, Haredi news websites, and Haredi radio stations - which have challenged the rule of Haredi rabbis. The challenge reached a peak with rabbinical bans on the Internet not adhered to by a considerable segment of the Haredi community. Today, many Haredim have computers and some of these have Internet. One of the major results is a loss of Haredi rabbinical hegemony. The article draws upon a survey of Haredi rabbis in Israel carried out by the author.

Keywords: Haredim, rabbis, mass media, computers, Internet

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Le défi médiatique à l'autorité rabbinique Haredi en Israël

Résumé: Les Haredim, ou juifs ultra-orthodoxes, vivent dans des ghettos culturels, soustraits aux influences de la vie moderne. Les médias haredi ont évolué au cours des trente dernières années à l'intérieur d'Israël - des magazines hebdomadaires indépendants, des reportages Haredi et des stations de radio Haredi – sont nés et ont remis en question la loi des rabbins Haredi. Le défi a atteint un sommet avec les interdictions rabbiniques sur Internet non respectées par un segment prévenant de la communauté Haredi. Aujourd'hui beaucoup de Haredim ont des ordinateurs et certains d'entre eux ont Internet. L'un des principaux effets est la perte de l'hégémonie rabbinique hébraïque. L'article met ce résultat en évidence. Pour ce faire il s'appuie sur une enquête menée par l'auteur qui porte sur les rabbins haredi en Israël.

Mots-clés: Haredim, rabbins, medias de masse, ordinateurs, Internet

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Rabbis have a difficult encounter with the mass media. They perceive mass media as threatening the Jewish value system. With the Western commercial media not generally encouraging religious ideology, but instead catering to popular taste, and in search of the ratings, the rabbis see in the media threats to their value system. The Jewish religious community in Israel comprises the ultra-orthodox Haredim and the modern orthodox (*dati leumi*) accounting for 8% and 15% respectively of the Israeli Jewish population. The modern orthodox seek to reconcile religion with modernity, and perceive the contemporary state as a sign of the Jewish redemption. The Haredi (Hebrew for fearful ones) community is characterised by social withdrawal from what the Haredi Jews see as the dangers of modern society. The Gutman Survey (2012) found that 43% of Israeli Jews defined themselves as traditional, and 40% who replied said they were secular. Non-0rthodox religious streams, Conservative Judaism and Reform Judaism are miniscule in Israel (in contrast to their dominant sizes in United States Jewry), in part a reflection of their failure to obtain official recognition from the Israel Government.

The Haredi community in Israel is the natural continuation of European Haredi Jewry. The influence of religious hierarchies -- notably rabbis -- is paramount in the Haredi communities – whether in the Lithuanian Haredi stream where the rabbi's role is to interpret *halakhah* (Jewish religious law), or in the hassidic Haredi stream in which the `admor' fulfils a father figure role in the community and his influence is wider-ranging; he is also consulted on a range of social and family matters. Haredi rabbis have over the years issued religious decrees (*pesuk din*) against exposure to mass media regarded as a threat to Torah family values. Israel's Haredim, have been challenged by changing media patterns – press, radio, advertising, television and Internet.

It declined to have contact with the secular society for fear that `impure' aspects of modern society will influence their style of life. One of the major challenges to Haredi self-isolation has come from mass media. To strengthen the hand of Haredi rabbis against their members being influenced by the outside media, institutional Haredi daily newspapers were created by these rabbis - becoming in effect mouthpieces to their flock. Over the last thirty-five years an alternative Haredi media has evolved inside Israel - comprising independent weekly magazines, Haredi news websites, and Haredi radio stations - which have challenged the rules of haredi rabbis. Haredi Jews live within cultural ghettos, withdrawn from their own influences of modern life. This reached a peak with rabbinical bans on the computer and on Internet being challenged by a considerable segment of the Haredi community. Today, many Haredim have computers and some of these have Internet - if subject to filtered programmes or only at the place of work, and not at home (Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem, 2008). One of the major results of the loss of Haredi rabbinical hegemony has been that today many Haredim seek higher education, and many Haredi housewives go out to work. The media has become a stage for discussion among the Haredi community about such issues as work employment for Hare-

dim. On the one hand, independent Haredi media have become fora for discussion of such issues. On the other hand, the institutional Haredi newspapers published by the Haredi rabbinical establishment has become a channel used to campaign against Haredim leaving the yeshiva portals or interrupting Torah learning. A key question to be addressed here is how Haredim have encountered the- technological changes in the mass media -- from the press to computers -- while at the same time maintaining their cultural ghetto identity.

The synagogue-state relationship in Israel has been subject of research attention. Much less attention in research about state-religion relations inside Israel has been given to non-official actors like news media (Cohen, 2012a). Religion content in different Israeli news media forms, religious and secular, was examined (Cohen, 2005). Cohen (2016a) surveyed religious identity among Israeli journalists.Coverage of Jewish religious holydays was analysed (Cohen, 2016b, 2018). Gabel discussed reactions of the modern orthodox community to the media (2011). Broader questions on Jewish theological views about the mass media have been addressed (Cohen, 2001, 2014). To the extent that the subject has been researched, much research has focused upon the relationship of the Haredim and the media. The Haredi sector is estranged from the general population, with their own separatist media, raising important anthropological and socio-psychological questions. The Haredi press has been described (Levi, 1990; Micolson, 1990; Baumel, 2002, 2005) examined the Haredi press through linguistic tools in order to generate the Haredi outlook on the social role of media inside the Haredi community. Another question researched has concerned Jews and the Internet. Horowitz (2000) and Cohen (2015a) describe rabbinical attitudes to the computer and the Internet. Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai (2005) and Cohen (2013b) examine how Internet has been adapted to Haredi community needs, and Cohen (2013a) by orthodoxy. Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (2009) analysed Orthodox Jewish women's internet forums. Cohen (2017), Schwartz (2005) and Warhaftig (2009) examine Jewish legal questions and ethical issues concerning the computer and new media. The specific question of on-line Judaism has been addressed (Cohen, 2012b, 2015b, and 2015c).

The article examines how developments within the Haredi media have challenged rabbinical haredi leadership. In doing so, the article will examine Haredi responses to media change including the creation of alternative Haredi media to the secular Israeli media, the exposure of Haredi Jews to institutional haredi media and to the independent Haredi media, rabbis' responses, and the overall impact of these developments upon Israeli Haredi society.

The article draws upon a survey of rabbis carried out by the author. Questionaires were mailed to rabbis in Israel; 305 filled questionnaires were received. Among questions raised were rabbis' attitudes to the freedom of the press, to the right to know, to the question of media supervision, to the question of limits upon children's exposure to the media, and to quantitative and qualitative evaluations of media coverage of Haredim. These provide clues to the type of mass media which rabbis would want in their communities. The findings concerning Haredi rabbis will

also be compared with the attitudes of rabbis surveyed by the author from other religious streams - modern orthodox, Conservative and Reform.

Haredi controls on media draw upon the perceived need to preserve their cultural ghetto from influences contrary to their version of Torah values. To preserve the cultural ghetto, following the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 which was secular in nature, leaders of the Agudat Yisroel Haredi political party established in 1950 their own daily newspaper, *Hamodia*. It was a recognition that otherwise the Haredi community would be exposed to secular media influences. Founded in 1949 by the Gerar Rebbe, *Hamodia* was intended to give Haredim a source of news under rabbinic supervision. Three other Haredi newspapers have since been established. *Yated Neeman* was established in 1985 after leaders of the Lithuanian school of Haredim became disillusioned that their views did not get expression in *Hamodia*, which is inclined towards the Hassidic school. A third newspaper was established in 2010 by Meir Porush after he lost the Jerusalem mayoral elections to Nir Barkat, blaming in part the refusal of *Hamodia* to support him editorially, but supporting instead Barkat, a secular candidate. Porush subsequently created the newspaper, *Hamevaser*. The fourth paper *Peles* began following differences over who would succeed the Lithuanian branch of Haredim following the death in 2012 of its leader, Rabbi Yosef Elyashiv. After Rabbi Aharon Steinemann took over as head of the Lithuanian school, opponents who had favoured Rabbi Shmuel Auerbach in Jerusalem instead created their own newspaper, which necessarily drew readers away from *Yated Neeman*.

While rabbis do not frequent the offices of the four papers on a day-by-day basis their representatives, or `censors', do. The role of the censor is to make sure that concepts or ideas that the newspaper's board of rabbis view as alien to Torah Judaism are not printed in the paper. Their representatives have been known to eliminate offending words of an article or advert that conflicts with their religious standards. The censor is not himself a rabbi but rather learned who while understanding the secular world, also understands the principles and pedagogic goals on which the paper stands for.

Heavily influenced by Jewish theological principles, the content of Haredi media reflects less what reality is and more what it should be. Drawing on the biblical precept that "the camp shall be holy" (Deuteronomy 23:15), Haredi editors seek to ensure that the newspaper that enters the Haredi home does not `impure' the family atmosphere. The Haredi press is characterised by an overwhelming attitude towards modesty in sex-related matters, the standards of which are interpreted by Haredim in the strictest manner. There are no pictures in the Haredi media of women. Nor is news reporting done by women though feature reporting and in-house editing is. Women reporters themselves sign their articles with their initials only. There is no editorial content about entertainment, sport, singers, or women, or sexual abuse. AIDs, for example, is referred to as `a contagious disease'. To get around the limitations when important information needs to be published, *Hamodia* and *Yated Neeman* carry columns entitled "From Day to Day" and "On the Agenda" respectively

which through attacking a subject as unJewish – for example an Israeli success in an international sporting event – are thereby informing their readers that it occurred. Yet, the institutional daily Haredi press see the censor's role in inclusive terms. For example, the way a newspaper describes a religious leader as *gaon* (most learned) or simply rabbi is an allusion to that rabbi's standing in the eyes of the paper and its sponsors (Baumel, 2002).

The manner in which the Haredi media dealt with the Moshe Katzav affair is a laboratory rest case of how they cover the news without compromising their strict standards. When then President Katzav of Israel was charged in 2007 with rape and resigned the presidency, it presented a dilemma for the Haredi media. On the one hand, the Haredi media as a whole does not discuss matters like rape. On the other hand, the indictment of the president could not be ignored. Thus, *Yated Neeman* reported: "Yesterday, the attorney -general decided to indict Katzav for a series of criminal offences, such as using state funds and obstructing legal procedures." And, the *Ba-Kehilla* weekly reported that "a flood of criminal suspicions and new revelations are likely to bring about the resignation of the president." A news conference by Katzav in which he announced his resignation - broadcast live by the mainstream media - was not broadcast live by the Haredi radio stations but broadcast after it was edited, and no mention of words like "sexual harassment", "rape" or `"abuse" were broadcast. When in 2010 he was found guilty, Katzav had left the presidency and therefore no words were published in the Haredi press.

1. Findings from the poll of rabbis

The survey of Haredi rabbis carried out by the author found considerable support among Haredi rabbis for the principle of the right to know, and slightly lesser support for the freedom of the press. 41% of Haredi rabbis were very positive about the principle of the right to know, and a further 27% did so `to some extent'. (Only 10% disagreed with the principle, and a further 22% agreed `only to a small extent'.) By contrast to the question of whether Haredi rabbis agree with the principle of the right to know, incrementally fewer agreed with the principle of the freedom of the press.Yet, even this was supported by a majority of Haredi rabbis. 26% were very positive. A further 31% agreed `to some degree', with the principle of the freedom of the press. 16% disagreed entirely with the principle of the freedom of the press, and 26% disagreed `to some extent'.

86% of Haredi rabbis agreed a lot that the press damaged religious values, and a further 14% to some extent. No Haredi rabbis `did not agree to a small degree' or `did not agree at all'. A similar figure was found for radio. The figures were even higher for television, and whether television damaged religious values. 95% of Haredi rabbis `agreed a lot' that television damaged religious values. Similar findings were found with cinema. Theatre was slightly less: 91% of Haredi rabbis agreed that theatre damaged religious values `a lot'. Interestingly, only 74% said Internet dama-

ged religious values `a lot'. A further 13% said that Internet damages religious values `to some extent'.

Sixty-four per cent of Haredi rabbis said that advertising damages religious values `a lot', and a further 19% said so `to some extent'. 10% said `not at all', and 5% agreed `only to a small extent'.

All this has led Israeli rabbis to favour supervision over the media; to favour a separatist Haredi media from the general secular media; and to limit the exposure to children to the media. 82% of Haredi rabbis favoured `to a large extent' supervision of newspapers, and a further 13% favoured this "to some degree". Identical figures favoured supervision of radio and television.

Rabbis favour supervision of children's exposure to mass media. 85% of Haredi rabbis think it very important to limit the exposure of children to television (8% did not at all, and 7% agreed to a little extent). Similar findings were found for radio. 81% said it was very important to limit children's exposure to Internet, 5% did not agree at all,14% said so to some degree. 77% of Haredi rabbis said it was `very important' to limit children's exposure to newspapers (8% said `not at all'; 7% agreed to `a small degree').

This has led Haredi rabbis to favour separatist Haredi media under their supervision. 77% of Haredi rabbis favour Haredi newspapers `to a large extent', and a further 9% `to some extent'. (5% did `not at all', and 9% to `a small degree'). There are no Haredi television stations in Israel, but in the event that they would have existed 52% would have favoured them `to some extent'. In the case of Haredi radio stations - 82% of Haredi rabbis favoured it `to a great extent' and a further 8% `to some extent'. (6% said `not at all', and 3% `to a limited degree').

Seventy-seven percent of Haredi rabbis `favoured very much' newspapers and broadcasting geared for children. 11% favoured this `to a limited extent'. Indeed, 59% favour "very much" Haredi newspapers and broadcasting for women, a further 24% `to some extent', 21% did not agree at all, and 7% to a small extent.

Seven per cent and 28% of Haredi rabbis rated the quality of religion coverage in the daily haredi newspapers which are subject to their supervision as `excellent', and `good', respectively. A further 28% said it was `average'. 30% and 7% said it was `not too bad', or `bad' respectively. 9% and 22% of Haredi rabbis rated the quality of religion coverage in the Haredi weeklies, which are not supervised by rabbis as `excellent', and `good' respectively. A further 40% said it was `average'. 22% and 6% said it was `not too bad' or `bad'. 9% and 27% of Haredim, rabbis described Haredi radio as excellent or good. 33% `average'. 26% and 6% said it was `not too bad' or `bad' respectively.

In terms of whether reporting was balanced, 2% and 27% of Israeli rabbis said that religion reporting in the daily Haredi press was `excellent' or `good' respectively. A further 36% replied the `balance' was `average'. 20% and 15% said it was `not too bad' or `bad' respectively. 4% and 23% said balance in the Haredi weeklies was

`excellent' or `good'. A further 37% said it was `average'. 23% and 14% said it was `not too bad' or `bad' respectively. 6% and 29% said the balance in reporting religion in the Haredi radio stations was excellent, and good respectively. A further 23% said it was average. But 31% and 12% said it was `not too bad' or `bad' respectively.

In terms of the accuracy of religion reporting, 23% of Haredi rabbis said that the accuracy of religion coverage in daily institutional Haredi newspapers was good (no response for `excellent'). 34% said it was `average'. 23% and 18% said it was `not too bad' or `bad'. The independent weeklies received even incrementally higher ratings than the institutional daily newspapers. 2% and 25% of Haredi rabbis described the accuracy of religion coverage in Haredi weeklies as excellent or good, respectively. 37% said it was average, 21% and 16% `not too bad' or `bad'. 6% and 27% described the accuracy of religious radio as `excellent' or `good'. 37% `average', and 21% and 16% as `not too bad' or `bad' respectively.

That there was little or no difference between the question of Haredi rabbis' ratings about the accuracy, balance, and quality of religion reporting of the various Haredi media, and the question of supervision of the media, raises important questions about their campaign against the independent Haredi media like the weekly magazines, Haredi radio stations, and Haredi news websites. Haredi rabbis are concerned at the influence of the independent Haredi media on such matters as Haredim seeking employment instead of studing in religious Talmudical colleges; seeking academic education in order to win employment; and doing national military service (Zicherman, 2014). Despite their felt need to supervise media, in practice the data from the poll of rabbis suggests that unsupervised Haredi media was to their overall satisfaction.

By contrast to Haredi rabbis, the rabbis of other communities -- the modern Orthodox (*dati leumi*), Conservative, and Reform -- have not as a rule issued Jewish legal rulings regarding media exposure but instead seek to reach a synthesis between the Torah world and modernity, and deploy techniques like media literacy in order to ingratiate critical responses by the modern Jew to the mass media. 71% of modern orthodox rabbis favour the right to know to a `very great extent', or `great extent' in contrast to 41% of Haredi rabbis. And, 47% of modern orthodox rabbis favour the freedom of the press to a `very great extent', or `great extent' in contrast to 26% of Haredi rabbis. Yet, there was a consensus between modern orthodox rabbis and Haredi rabbis on the questions of supervision of the media, and whether the media damage religious values.

The gap was even greater between Haredi rabbis and the rabbis of the non-orthodox streams, Conservative and Reform. 97% and 96% of the rabbis from the non-orthodox streams favour `to a great extent' or `a very great extent' the right to know, and the freedom of the press respectively. And, only 48% of Conservative rabbis, and even less Reform rabbis, saw a need for supervision of the media.

2. Haredi rabbis and media developments

Haredi rabbis have over the years issued legal pronouncements against exposure to mass media, In part they were regarded as a threat to Torah family values. But the media were also a threat to rabbinic control of the `message'. From the appearance of newspapers in the nineteenth century, through to the development of radio and television, and latterly video, computers and internet and cellcom phones, Haredi rabbis have enacted such decrees (Cohen, 2012a). 32% of the Haredi population read a newspaper. 14% read secular papers, according to a 1995 survey (Israel Advertisers Association). In 2017 the most read printed medium was the independent *Mishpacha* news weekly, and 8.9% the *Ba-kehilla* independent weekly. But in spite of the growth of the independent Haredi media, the daily institutional Haredi newspapers still enjoys respectable audiences - *Hamodia* was read in 2017 by 18.1%; *Yated Neeman* 17.1%; *Hamevaser* 11%; and *Peles* 13.7% (TGI, 2017).

Prior to the creation of religious radio stations in 1995, the only radio was the secular public radio, Israel Radio (*Kol Yisroel*) and the military radio station, *Galei Zahal*. 35% of Haredim listen to the second radio channel, which specialises on news and current affairs (a not dissimilar figure from other religious streams). 46% of Haredim surveyed said they did not listen to radio at all (Israel Advertisers Association, 1995). 30% of Haredim who do not listen at all radio said they did so for religious reasons (Rokeach, 1997). The Haredi ban on radio drew upon the prohibition against hearing social gossip (*loshon hara*) as well as the importance of modesty because radio programming prior to television had a much wider gamut of subjects including drama. Radio today is mostly an informational tool. Asked by the Rokeach survey of radio listening patterns whether the military radio station, *Galei Zahal*, clashes with religious values, 51% of Haredim agreed (in contrast with only 20% of modern orthodox, 14% traditional, and 18% secular Israeli Jews). The ban on secular radio was much less respected than the ban on secular newspapers because Israel's ongoing political-defence problems make it difficult for people to adhere to it with many Israelis following the news hourly. This is particularly true in the Israeli case where history is characterised by wars and terrorism as a well as possessing a political system based upon coalitions is a constant source of tension and brinksmanship. When Israel Television was established in 1968, Haredi rabbis banned their followers from watching television because its content was considered morally inappropriate; while entertainment per se is not invalidated the Haredi perspective is nevertheless critical of it regarding it as no more than simply a relief from such higher values as religious study. The ban on television has been broadly accepted; only 5.3% of Haredi households possessed a television set in 2015 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015). When videos cameras were produced -- with many Haredi families using them to record family celebrations -- no rabbinical ban was introduced initially because its usage could be controlled. However, after it was discovered that television programmes could be seen if videos were plugged into computers, Haredi rabbis in1993 banned videos. And the means today to see films on

computer, such as You Tube, has necessarily weakened the Haredi public's adherence to the ealrier ban on television.

The major media development which threatened the rabbinical hegemony are computers and Internet (Cohen, 2011, 2013a). In 2000, just a few years after Internet entered Western lifestyles, the Haredi rabbinical leadership imposed a prohibition on Internet as a moral threat to the sanctity of Israel. The Internet threatened the high walls which Haredi rabbis had set up to resist secular cultural influences. The ban followed upon a special rabbinical court (*bet din)* established to deal with the spread of computers. In part the ban was directed at children whose religious studies had been distracted with computers, both Internet and data bases. Gatherings and conferences were held in different Haredi communities in Israel, and abroad, to generate consciousness over the Internet `danger'. Elsewhere, there have been instances of so-called `modesty squads' demonstrating outside netcafes used by Haredim to surf. Haredi rabbis have used different tools to deter the Internet usage and engender fear of its consequences. Haredi anti-Internet posters included a cartoon with the snake of the Garden of Eden, which caused Adam to sin, exploding within the computer screen and bringing down the Haredi child.

In the Haredi city of Betar, south of Jerusalem, for example, the local rabbinate in 2009 declared that Betar would become the first Internet-free city. "Internet is like a tsunami that threatens to envelop and endanger the entire Haredi community" (*Yerushalayim* 25.9.2009; *Ba-Kehilla* 24.9.2009). Residents who required Internet for business purposes would need to install an Internet-restricted connection with a filtering device. Schools in Betar were instructed not to accept children who had unlimited access to the Internet. But today even the Betar authorities have not succeeded in practice to fully impose their line.

A distinction within the Haredi world could be delineated between the so-called European Lithuanian school and the European Hassidic and Sephardi or oriental branches of Haredim. The more stricter Lithuanian school placed a ban not only upon Internet but also upon computers as a whole, calling upon its members to get rid of them from their houses. The Sephardim generally are more tolerant, and the European hassidim are more inclined to go to work in contrast to the Lithuanians who study in *yeshivot* (talmudical colleges), surviving economically on stipends. The Hassidim were more sensitive of the need for Internet in businesses, and drew a distinction between Internet at home, which they banned like the other Haredim, and businesses which they allowed if enquipped with filtering programs.

The distinction noted earlier between Haredi rabbis and the rabbis of other streams regarding traditional media, including press, radio and television, was even truer regarding new media. The author's poll found that 87 per cent of Haredi rabbis said that Internet damaged religious values to "a very great extent", to "a great extent", and to a "certain extent". This contrasted with 75%, of modern orthodox rabbis, 59% of Conservative rabbis, and 33% of Reform rabbis.

While 74% of Haredi rabbis had a computer only 22% were connnected to the Internet. By contrast 68% of modern orthodox rabbis, 87% of Conservative rabbis, and 96% of Reform rabbis were connected to the Internet. 56% of Haredi rabbis with Internet had computer filtering devices - in contrast to 17% of modern orthodox rabbis, 12% of Reform rabbis, and 7% of Conservative rabbis. There was greater agreement among different rabbis regarding limiting children's access to the computer. 100% of Haredi rabbis saw a need to limit children's access to the computer, as did 90% of modern orthodox rabbis, 77% of Conservative rabbis, and 74% of Reform rabbis (Cohen, 2015a).

Haredi rabbis face a new Internet challenge with the creation of Facebook. True, Haredim have always emphasised the importance of interpersonal relations both in terms of family and community. And, Facebook did not pose the direct threat that Internet sites with sexual content did. But social networking did breach Haredi rules of conduct notably by building relationships between men and women. It also resulted in the free passage of information and gossip in a society in which gossip is frowned upon by Jewish religious law. In one sense, the matter lay with grassroots Facebook users themselves to develop their own Haredi facebook code of networking– not dissimilar from the codes which the unofficial Haredi Internet websites did.

3. The rise of the independent Haredi media

The monopoly enjoyed by the daily Haredi press has been successfully challenged since the Eighties by a commercially-orientated independent Haredi media. These are commercial attempts by journalists from a Haredi background to deploy such techniques as modern graphics, fetching headlines, and cover a broader range of subjects than those in the Haredi daily papers. The openness of the weekly magazines is characterised by the fact that, unlike the daily institutionalised Haredi papers each of which focuses upon their own political party sponsor, the weekly papers reported the activities of all members of Haredi political parties.. The independent Haredi weeklies, while respecting the code of not publishing immoral matter which will upset Haredi Jewish sensitivies, introduced a new level of press freedom in an otherwise highly hierarchical media environment. The independent weeklies discuss stories like the misuse of public funds by Knesset members and Orthodox leaders, or the distortion or corruption of the Kashrut (kosher food) supervision system, and behind the scenes' wheeling and dealing of the Council of Torah Sages (the umbrella board of Haredi rabbis in Israel). It reports the politics inside the Haredi political parties, and instances of corruption in Haredi institutions. Some of them do also consult rabbinical authorities over content. No paper - including the institutionalised Haredi daily papers - abides by the standards of *halakhah* in terms of not publishing no gossip at all.

The first independent Haredi weeklies (today obsolete) were *Erev Shabbat* and *Yom Shishi*. To be true, *Yom Shishi* was not geared solely for the Haredi community

but sought to interest the entire Jewish religious world in its coverage, within the confines of not hurting Haredi tastes such as with pictures of women. The main Haredi weeklies today are *Mishpacha*, and *Ba-Kehilla*. These take middle-of-the-road political positions. Reflecting its Hebrew name "Mishpacha" (or `Family') it includes a `twilight zone of social issues' not covered by the daily Haredi newspapers, among them youth dropouts from the yeshiva world, discrimination against oriental Sephardi students in European or Ashkenazi Haredi schools, the controversy over Haredim serving in the Israeli Army, returnees to Judaism, special education, psychology. So were non-Jewish subjects -- not usually covered in the Haredi media - like Martin Luther King, and Rembrandt. Another is *Sha'a Tova,* which has a right-wing orientation - and even incited against Itzhak Rabin in the heady atmosphere which followed the Oslo accords and preceded Rabin's assassination. More recently, *Shavua*, published by the Kav Ha-itonut Ha-Datit group, is a national chain of free newspapers drawing entirely upon advertising comprising local editions in key Haredi populated areas in Israel.

The first Haredi radio station, Radio *Kol Chai* was established by Knesset approval in 1995 as part of a larger national broadcasting plan for for the creation of regional radio stations. But whereas the other stations were geographically intended to cover different areas, Radio *Kol Chai* was the only station geared to a specific sociological sector -- to provide the religious orthodox population with a station reflecting their interests. Another station Radio *Kol Berama* was established in 2009, primarily to serve the haredi Sephardi population. These radio stations were not intended in principle to widen debate - but in effect it contributed to a freer flow of information and debate within the Haredi camp, including providing information for, and about, new Haredim. On the one hand, these are not strictly under the supervision of the rabbis, but unlike the independent weeklies do consult rabbis. On the other hand, they are not independent commercial operations like the news weeklies and haredi Internet, but like all radio in Israel are based upon the public broadcasting model and are subject to the supervision of the Second Television & Radio Authority. Independent Haredi radio have a wide following among Haredim. In 2017 30% of Haredim listened to *Radio Kol Chai* in contrast to 20% who listened to *Radio Kol Berama* (TGI, 2017).

A handful of Haredi news websites exist, and operate independently from rabbinic supervision. These include *Kikar Shabbat* and *B'Hadrei Haredim*. The news sites print uncensored information about the political infighting within different sections of the Haredi world such as between rival Hassidic courts. They report criticism - sometimes vehemently – of the positions and behaviour of Haredi leaders. The names of those sponsoring the sites, and editing them, have been hidden from public light. In light of the Haredi ban on Internet, some Haredi leaders refuse to be interviewed by the sites. This was tantamount to rabbis spitting in their own faces, and rejecting a key channel to present the rabbis' views of, say, the dominance of Torah learning over Haredim working. Notwithstanding that they accept the social limits within the Haredi religio-culturo ghetto, the sites do not subject themselves to

the rabbinical censors which inspect the copy of the Haredi daily newspapers. One website, *Kikar Shabbat*, today carries pictures of faces of women.

4. The challenge of Internet and the Haredim

Despite rabbinical bans, organised rallies, and other forms of mass persuasion and pressure against computers and the Internet spanning twenty years in a community which generally regards rulings by their rabbis as unquestionable, Internet is used by a considerable body of Haredi Jews today (Cohen, 2013b). In 2015, 55% of Haredi households in Israel possessed at least one computer (compared to 82% of all Israeli households). (14% of Haredi households had a touchscreen computer/tablet (compared to 41% of all Israeli households), and 1.4% had a videogame console (compared to 15% of all Israeli households). But Internet was far less spread. 31% of Haredi households in Israel were linked to Internet in 2015 as compared to 79% of all Israeli households (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

Haredi women are more inclined to use the computer than Haredi men. 56% of Haredi women had used the computer at least once the past three months compared to 48% of Haredi men. Women (42%) were also more inclined to have surfed the Internet at least once in the last three months than men (38%) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Age is a factor in Haredi usage of the computer, and the Internet. According to the CBS 2016 survey, 58% of those aged 20-39 had used a computer at least once in the previous three months as compared to 48% aged 40-59, and 28% aged 60+. In terms of Internet usage, a difference may be drawn between those less than 60 and those over 60 in age. Whereas only 23% of 60+ had surfed the Internet at least once in the last three months, there was little difference between the 40-59 age group (40%) and the 20-39 age group (43%) (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Education and income were also important variables for computer use and Internet surfing. In education there was a wide gap between those who were highly educated and those not. While 57% of those with 16 years of more of education, and and 53% of those with 13-15 years of education, used the computer at least once in the last three months, only 29% of those with 12-1 years of education had. There was a similar pattern with Internet usage. While 45% of those who had 16+ years of education, and 40% with 13-15 years of education, had surfed the Internet at least once in previous three months, only 24% of those with 1-12 years education had (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

In socio-economic terms, there were smaller gaps between high income and lower income brackets. 69% of Haredim earning 7,500 - 10,000 shekels monthly, 66% of those earning in the less than 4000 - 7500 shekels salary range, and 62% of those earning less than 4000 shekels monthly had used a computer at least once in previous three months. In the 10,000-14,000 shekel salary range 69% of Haredim had surfed the Internet at least once in previous 3 months. A similar pattern was

found with Internet usage. 48%, 54%, and 50% of those in the upto 4000 shekels salary range, 4000-7500 salary range, and the 7500--10,000 salary range respectively compared to 69% of higher earning 10,000-14,000 shekel had used Internet at least once in the previous 3 months (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016) .

Yet, Haredim still remain behind the rest of the Israeli Jewish population. In a survey of those without computer or Internet, Haredim were found in 2005 to be the largest grouping. 42% of of Haredim had no computer at home in contrast to 29% of the general Israeli population. Of those Israeli Jews who possessed computers but were not linked to Internet, 27% were Haredi Jews. Haredim were also less inclined to be heavy Internet users.

In terms of Israeli neighbourhoods, while in mixed neigbourhoods and cities like Ramat Gan and and Ashkelon, 73% and 71% of households in 2007 possessed personal computers, in the Haredi town of Benei Beraq, only 53% did. And, while 66% and 61% of households in Ramat Gan and Ashkelon used Internet in 2007, only 29.5% of Benei Beraq households did. Yet, the impact of computers and Internet even among Haredim is evident. An incremental increase has occurred since 2002. The 53% of Benei Beraq residents who possessed computers in 2007 was an increase from 37% in 2002, and the 29.5% of Benei Beraq residents who possessed Internet in 2007 was an increase from only 6.4% in 2002, which as shown above has increased even further today (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007).

Conclusion

The Haredi cultural ghetto has failed to stop the rise of the independent Haredi media, and the pressures of the computer and Internet in particular (Horowitz, 2000). Haredi rabbis have failed to stem the movement of new Haredim - who, rather than `sit and learn' the holy Jewish texts, in particular the Talmud, in the yeshiva, today work and advance in the workplace. Hierarchical rabbinical structures have been challenged particularly by the egalitarian nature of Internet. At best, rabbinical authority on the Web is inefficient. A criterion in Jewish law-making is that law pronouncements require to be acceptable to the community, otherwise this will bring into question the very legitimacy of the law-making body itself. A rabbi requires to address issues deeply and profoundly with people rather than give directives from above. The increasing number of communication delivery systems, together with a the greater diversification of programmes enabling individuals to choose messages which may challenge organised religious hierarchical authority.

Nevertheless, Haredi rabbis can look with considerable satisfaction that the cultural ghetto walls which have existed for hundeds of years - if themselves dented - are nevertheless still in place. There is certain evidence that rabbis have succeeded to maintain the legitimacy of the body of rabbinical decrees in the eyes of the Haredi population. The bans on television and secular newspapers have been the most successful of the bans against media with the overwhelming number of Haredim respec-

ting it. The earlier ban on radio is less respected than the television ban because Israel's ongoing political-defence problems of the country make it difficult for people to adhere to the ban. Yet, even public radio is criticised by many Haredim.

Haredim have come -- belatedly -- to recognise that Internet even has a positive role in Jewish religious education and provide Torah on-line resources. In so doing, Haredim have sought to create their own on-line cultural ghettos by isolating Internet to `kosher sites' - in a not dissimilar way to the self-censorship imposed earlier within the independent Haredi weeklies and independent Haredi radio stations. Jewish study has been enhanced through the application of technology like Torah educational websites, and even on-line yeshivot and on-line *shiurim* (religious lessons). This suggests that rabbis have succeeded to a considerable extent in maintaining the legitimacy of rabbinical decrees in the eyes of the Haredi population.

The plethora of messages challenge religious hierarchical authority and organised religion, as people find alternative – perhaps more deeply spiritually meaningful means – to give religious expression (Campbell, 2005, 2010). To the extent that the media are not formally under the control of the rabbis, the latter have lost the battle. But the basic feature of the cultural ghetto exists. The traditional off-line frameworks of Jewish life - the synagogue, the yeshiva, and the Jewish home - remain paramount for Haredi Jews no less today.

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