A relatively small but powerful group of privately-owned, politically independent papers rules the roost on the daily newspaper scene in Israel today, both in terms of circulation and influence with the "elite". Many of the dailies (16 out of 27 still survive on subsidies from political sources.

Two big evening independents, Ma'ariv (Evening) and Yediot Aharanot (Latest News) account for about half of the total circulation of all dailies and a large chunk of the advertising. In 1976, nearly two-thirds of the total national outlay on advertising went to these two and three other papers: Ha'aretz (The Land), The Jerusalem Post and Davar (Word) - the only party-affiliated publication in the group.

The dominance of the independents reflects the rapid social change that the country has undergone since its founding in 1948 when most of the newspapers (all small-scale) represented rigid European-based religious and socialist-Zionist viewpoints. (1) They were read chiefly by immigrants from Europe who brought with them strong habits of newspaper reading and thrive on ideological controversy. As the state developed, waves of immigrants from areas such as the Middle East itself, plus a steadily increasing population of native-born Israelis created a new and larger audience. They demanded a more diverse press which would deal with emergent social concerns like housing, jobs, organized crime and juvenile delinquency. A basic issue...
was the demand by the more recently-arrived immigrants (e.g. from North Africa) for more political clout and higher economic rewards.

Elihu Katz, director of the Institute for Communications at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem points out that there has been a trend towards a "secularization of culture" in Israeli society which is reflected in the attention given by the popular media to day-to-day affairs. (2) The independent dailies, like their counterparts elsewhere, have become big businesses, striving for increased advertising and circulation. At the same time, increasing costs have taken their toll of the smaller, affiliated papers. Another reason for the decline of these papers, in the words of Ralph Lowenstein has been:

The shifting nature of Israeli politics. The party press is a kaleidoscope reflecting the births, deaths, mergers and splits in the parties themselves. Each time one of these events occurs, one or more dailies appear, change their names, or disappear... except for Davar, the party press receives little advertising from non-government sources. Were it not for heavy subsidies, many of the party dailies would have ceased to exist some years ago. (3)

According to the Ministry of Information, 11 Hebrew-language and 4 foreign-language newspapers folded between 1948 and 1975 and only 3 new dailies have appeared since 1967. As Katz remarks, "The Israeli newspaper scene is strewn with dead and dying newspapers". (4)

For all this, the country, with just over three million people, has probably the most diversified and spirited daily press of any country its size, and certainly of any country in the Middle East. In 1976, according to the Israel
Central Bureau of Statistics, there were 27 dailies, 14 of them in Hebrew, 4 in Arabic and the rest in 9 languages: English, French, German, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Roumanian, Bulgarian and Yiddish. In 1975, total weekday circulation was about 650,000, reaching 750,000 on Fridays and eves of holidays when weekend supplements are published by the larger papers. (No papers are published on the Sabbath).

The diversity of publications is accounted for by the rapid demographic changes mentioned previously, plus the fact that Israel has universal education, the highest literacy rate in the region and a tradition (rare in the Middle East) of a democratic free press.

In contrast to its Canadian counterpart, the Israeli press is first and foremost a national press, reflecting a deep feeling of national unity which overrides all local differences. National readership is facilitated by the compactness of the country and by joint advertising and distribution set-ups. Tel Aviv is the major publishing centre, home of nearly all the dailies and linked by efficient transportation networks to the other large centres.

Given the above, and considering the state's sensitivity to world politics, it is natural that the Israeli newspapers reader would look outside his local sphere for news. His interest is in national and international affairs rather than in local politics which are, in any case, overshadowed by the influence of the central government. Also a large percentage of the population is "foreign born" and many retain a strong interest in their lands of origin.

Hicks and Gordon, who conducted a study of "Foreign News Content in Israeli and U.S. Newspapers" in 1974 found that "The prime orientation of the Israeli papers was Europe, with the U.S. a strong second. Interestingly enough, the Middle East ranked only third." (5) These investigators also found that there was an equal balance between "hard" news (politics, economics etc.) and "soft" news (entertainment, sports, culture) whereas the U.S. newspapers studied carried a preponderant amount of "soft" news.

Profile of the Dailies

The Jerusalem Post, largest of the non-Hebrew independent dailies, has delivered the news in English, through peace and war, since its founding in 1932 by Gershon Agron, who had come to what was then Palestine from the U.S.A. in 1927 as a correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor and the Hearst newspapers. Agron, who was soon to head up the Palestine bureau of the Jewish Telegraphic News Service, decided that what was needed was "a paper that would effectively present the point of view of the Yishuv (Jewish settlers) to the British administration and to the outside world in general." (6)

The Post's forerunner, The Palestine Post, appeared in Jerusalem on December 1, 1932, and soon found itself, as a defender of Jewish rights, in conflict with the British Mandatory power. There were almost daily hassles with the censor; editors' phones were bugged and the editors themselves were sometimes taken in for questioning by the police.

Since that time, the Post has followed the fortunes of the State, missing only two days of publication as a result of forced closure by the censor. It even managed to bring out an issue the morning after the Post's premises in the heart of Jerusalem were totally destroyed by an explosion, caused by unknown saboteurs, in February 1948 which killed
3 and wounded 37. The paper, using a borrowed press, came out next day in the form of a couple of stencilled sheets. Reporters continued under fire in the besieged city in those first frantic months of the War of Independence. Agron reported:

The area around the building appeared to be a special target for the enemy gunners and two people were killed just outside the office... At times, work stopped momentarily and the staff (some of whom took to wearing steel helmets) took shelter while shells burst on the walls and roof, the splinters pockmarking the walls and ceiling of the newsroom... (7)

A study recently done for the paper revealed that half of its readers were of European origin whose first language was not necessarily English—more likely German, Polish or Russian. Two-thirds of the readers did not buy another Israeli paper, but 40% felt it was important to read a Hebrew-language paper to know “what was really doing on.” For many, the daily reading of the Post functioned in combination with the reading of another paper. Interestingly, quite a number of English-speaking Arabs were also reading the Post. (8)

The paper has generally supported the former all-powerful Labour (Mapai) Party, and a major shareholder (26%) is the giant Histadrut (General Federation of Labour) organization, which has long been under the sway of Mapai. The Post editors claim that in spite of the heavy financial interest held by Histadrut, the paper has retained editorial independence:

Within this framework of support of Government policy, there was no restraint in criticizing failures and omissions. The Government did not put pressure of any kind on the paper. The Histadrut, a substantial shareholder, did not use this position to interfere with the “unfettered discretion” promised originally to the editor. (9)

From half-a-dozen years of reading the paper, while resident in Israel, I would say the above is basically justified, although the critique of government has often been mild in comparison to that of the independent Hebrew-language dailies.

The recent election of the anti-Mapai Likud government of Menahem Begin threatened a shakeup in the fortunes of the paper, rumors averted when the Histadrut itself stayed, by a narrow margin, under control of the Labour party. Now, like most of the Israeli press, the Post
expresses approval of Begin (10) after initial criticism of the election of a right-wing former "terrorist."

(Ownership: Histadrut holds 26%, Israel Investment Corp. 25%, staff of the Post 20%, Jewish Agency 8%, and others hold the balance.)

The "big three" independent Hebrew language dailies, Ha'aretz, Ma'ariv and Yediot Aharonot, were all founded before 1948 and have shown a steady growth since that time. They are the main spokesmen for public opinion and (especially Ha'aretz) form a "decision-making basis for elite action, providing briefing and feedback for government officials." (11)

Ha'aretz (weekday circ. 60,000) has been called the "New York Times of Israel." This morning daily is read by intellectuals, politicians and businessmen. Inclined to middle-of-the-road politics, it nevertheless reflects a wide spectrum of views and can be highly critical of the establishment. It became a leader in investigative journalism in the 70's when several of its reporters were beaten up by bully boys as a result of an expose of organized crime in the Tel Aviv area. It dared to strongly attack Gen. Moshe Dayan after the initial debacle of the Yom Kippur War.

In a 1969 interview, editor and publisher Gershom Schocken, replying to charges that the paper was too arrogant remarked, "there are many aspects of Israel society that are changing and we shall certainly not stop criticizing." (12) The country's oldest surviving daily (founded in 1917), Ha'aretz has created a legend of authority and respectability about itself, though it is felt by some media watchers that the paper is now resting on its laurels, and has lost something of its old vitality.

The two "evening" papers (they are on the street by 10 a.m.) are the outstanding "news" papers of Israel in terms of journalistic flair. With weekday circulations of 200,000 and 150,000 respectively, Ma'ariv and Yediot Aharonot have doubled their readership since 1960's and account for about half the advertising revenue of all dailies. Both are "serious" tabloids, freely critical of government and, together with Ha'aretz in the vanguard of resistance against any attempts to gag the media.

Such attempts were successfully resisted for example in the scandal-ridden latter days of the regime of Labour Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. In the summer of 1976, the government had begun to take an Agnew-like stance against the media, accusing them of "trial by press" (13) after a government minister committed suicide following press hints of financial wrongdoing. Rabin himself was bitter at the treatment afforded him in the press in the illegal foreign currency affair which led to his downfall.

It's pertinent to record here, in reference both to the censorship situation in Israel (14) and techniques of government secrecy in Canada, that Rabin, in his campaign against the newspapers, tried to "stretch" the censorship laws and use them as a political weapon to try to plug "leaks" about Kissinger's Mid-East "shuttle diplomacy." Philip Gillon, a reporter for The Jerusalem Post, pointed out that:

leaks have been a feature of Israeli life for many years. Ben-Gurion alone was able to keep them plugged, largely by not telling most members of his Cabinet what he had in mind. It is an open secret today that most Cabinet ministers have their pet journalists to
whom they feed information they consider helpful to themselves or damaging to their colleagues...(15)

According to Gillon, Levi Eshkol, a former prime minister, used to deny access to journalists "by converting normal Cabinet meetings into meetings of the Security Committee...and now Rabin is trying to prevent leakages by adding regulations banning publication of documents classified as top secret communications between the Government of Israel and foreign governments."

In the face of determined opposition by the media, Rabin dropped the proposed new regulations. Ma'ariv's deputy editor Moshe Zak declared:

*By force, the Government will achieve nothing. There are hundreds of ways in which journalists can evade or obstruct such censorship...we will never accept political censorship.* (16)

Moshe Kohn, a veteran reporter for The Jerusalem Post, told me in Jerusalem this summer that there has been a drastic reduction in the business of leaks and news management since the election of Begin.

The popularity of Ma'ariv and Yediot (as it's called) can be attributed not only to their "chutzpah" or nerviness but also to the quality and amount of their national and international reporting. They both (in contrast to most Canadian dailies) maintain correspondents in major world capital and at the U.N. They do not indulge in "sensationalism", American style, to any extent, but strain readers' credibility on occasion with wild political speculation--probably a reflex of the tight censorship situation.

The most important affiliated Hebrew language daily is Davar, with a circulation of about 40,000. It is the organ of the Histadrut and is read by trade unionists and members of Mapai kibbutzim (communal settlements). Davar also publishes Omer (Saying) a daily in easy Hebrew for new immigrants. Although the Labour party has long had an interest in Davar, plus other, smaller dailies, the party's control over the media had begun to wane even before the election of Begin. Certainly, the situation described by Lowenstein, could not exist today:

*When the Histadrut was called upon in 1968 to pay almost $2 million in debts accumulated by Davar, opposition parties sought a debate on the political content of the paper, but were overruled.* (17)

Other party-subsidized papers include: Al Hamishmar (On Guard) representing the left-of-centre Mapam party, and a group of small religious party papers: Hatzofeh (Scout), Hamodia (Announcer) and She'arim (Gates). The majority of the smaller independent dailies, coming out in a variety of European languages, have usually served as spokesmen for the Labour Party--an effective propaganda instrument influencing new immigrants.

I'll conclude this survey with a quick look at Arabic language dailies functioning under Israeli rule today--a remarkable situation, since some of them are fiercely and vocally opposed to that rule. M. Nasser, a media researcher sympathetic to the Arab view comments that:

*Since almost all the Arab states, except Lebanon and Kuwait--do not have a free press, it is remarkable to see freedom of the press exist under Israeli occupation...the Arabic newspapers are as freely critical of Israeli policies as they are of Arab actions...they seem to function more freely than any Arabic newspaper did during the Jordanian rule of the West Bank before 1967.* (18)
Situated in East Jerusalem, the important dailies are: Al-Kuds (Jerusalem) Al Sha'ab (The People) and Al Fajr (The Dawn--closed down for a couple of weeks by the Israeli censor at one point). Al Anba (The News) is published in West (Jewish) Jerusalem under public Israeli ownership, aided by government subsidy.

Even though the Arab language dailies have to live with what Nasser terms a "second-class freedom", even Time, not Israel's greatest supporter, saw fit to state (though not without the usual Time, wise backhand swipe) that the West Bank Arabs were living under an "occupation as benevolent as an occupation can be":

Their newspapers, although censored, are probably allowed more latitude than those in any Arab state and yet remain bitterly opposed to their Israeli overlords. (19)

FOOTNOTES

3. cf. note 1, pp.327-8
4. cf. note 2, p.183
6. From an article, May 12, 1948 reprinted in The Jerusalem Post, December 7, 1972, p.7
7. Ibid. p.30
9. cf. note 6, p.10
12. cf. note 1, p.328
16. Ibid. p.7
17. cf. note 1, p.327