The struggle over information in the territories occupied by Israel is an integral part of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The dilemmas which Israeli policy makers must confront arise from the inherent inconsistency of a democratic country attempting to rule over a large, hostile population. The war over words is a part of a larger conflict over national legitimacy and both sides tend to define the clash as a zero-sum game (Benvenisti 1983).¹

The dilemmas faced by governments during any occupation concern the costs and benefits of varying degrees of censorship. Questions of principle aside, leaders must decide whether such restrictions do more harm than good. Is political information more inflammatory when it is published in a newspaper or when it is passed through rumor, leaflets, or written on walls? Does freedom of expression encourage moderation of extremism? Is it better to have foreign journalists bemoan the evils of censorship or to report what is actually happening? None of the Israeli Ministers of Defence who have come and gone since the beginning of the occupation in 1967 have been able to offer a convincing answer to these questions, and the extent of informational control has varied considerably over the years. While some of these variations can be explained by differences in political outlook, most are better attributed to the extent of perceived threat.

While the control of communication channels is always an important goal for both sides of a conflict, it becomes especially critical during times of crisis (Wolfsfeld 1988). The political impact of the news and information grows tremendously during times of crisis because of the prominence such stories are given and the large audience they attract. Political leaders from both sides find themselves sending messages not only to their own constituencies and to the other side, but to publics and decision makers around the world. At times of crisis, government policies inevitably become more restrictive in the name of national security. Censorship becomes more aggressive, newspapers are closed, the press are often banned from areas of conflict, and speeches, rallies, and demonstrations are either prohibited or severely restricted. In normal times political resistance is handled with both "carrots and sticks," but during times of crisis governments throw away the carrots and enlarge their sticks.
The ability of the government to control communication channels however, becomes much more difficult in times of crisis. The mass media become more powerful because of their increased audience, and are also more willing to take risks in defying the government because the story is more valuable. Alternative channels of communication also tend to flourish during a crisis, which makes the government's goal of control even more formidable. People are more likely to engage in political discussions, to spread rumors, and to distribute leaflets and posters. The growing need for information and guidance ensures a very wide and heterogeneous audience for such messages.

This commentary will offer a description of Israel's attempt to restrict the flow of information in the West Bank and Gaza and the Palestinians' efforts to circumvent these restrictions. The first part will offer a general overview of the censorship policy in the territories, while the second will show how each side adjusted to the uprising which began in December 1987.

Censorship in the Occupied Territories

The Israeli military censor takes responsibility for all publications which are produced either in Israel or in the occupied territories. As might be expected, however, the restrictions in the West Bank and Gaza are much stricter. Whereas Israeli newspapers are only required to submit materials which relate to security matters, the East Jerusalem papers are required to submit all materials, including crossword puzzles, advertisements, and photos. The decision of the military censor is final and there is no process of appeal.

The Palestinian editors see their newspaper as a "mobilized" press whose primary purpose is to further the interests of the Palestinian struggle. Over the years the editors of these papers, most of which are published in East Jerusalem, have developed a working relationship with the Israeli censor, and they usually know what kinds of materials are most likely to be rejected. The topics which are most frequently censored are those which serve the cause of national identity and mobilization (Benvenisti 1983, Rabhiya 1985): references to the PLO or the Palestinian movement, to Israeli punitive measures in the territories, and references to resistance, terrorism, demonstrations and strikes. There is a constant game of "cat and mouse" which goes on between the censor and the Palestinian newspapers (Benvenisti 1983, Rabhiya 1985). The editors are constantly testing the censor with ploys such as using the blank section of a crossword puzzle to spell out slogans, or by writing obituaries with clear political overtones. Although the newspapers are forbidden to leave space where material has been censored, the military censor eventually agreed to allow them to publish the words "we apologize" if an editorial was altered before publication.

The battle over information also takes place within a number of other arenas as well. The Army spokesman's office is in charge of supplying information about Israeli
military matters to all Israeli and foreign correspondents in Israel. As the army’s office of public relations, it naturally attempts to use the information at its disposal to present Israel and the army in the most favorable light possible. Many foreign reporters stationed in Israel also pay a fee to the Palestinian Press Service in order to receive the opposing perspective about what is happening in the territories. The Palestinian Press Service acts as a central clearing house for such information, and has a wide network of sources within the territories and the Arab world.

It is also important to emphasize the less formal means of communication which have always served the Palestinian population living in the territories. The most important of these is interpersonal communication, especially rumors. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the initial riots which broke out in Gaza on December 7, 1987 were started by just such a rumor. The rumor was that several Arabs had been intentionally run down by an Israeli truck and that message spread through the adjoining refugee camps and towns like wildfire. The uprising which began on that day continues at the time of writing and the struggle over informational control has become much more intense.

**Informational Control During the Uprising**

The uprising is, to a large extent a battle over world opinion and the media serves as the central arena for that struggle. The Palestinians can not force the Israeli army out of the territories; their major goal is to keep the Palestinian cause at the top of international agenda. The struggle over symbols, slogans, and stories is a decisive one, for both sides.

It is important to remember that protest strategies which depend on the mass media are especially likely to be used in open societies such as Israel. The number of foreign correspondents stationed in Israel is among the highest in the world, and the territories remain, for the most part, completely open. Every attempt to close them, even for a few days, is met with protests from both inside and outside of Israel. Compared with other conflict areas, the "costs" of gathering the news in Israel are quite low and this leads to a tremendously disproportionate amount of news coverage. Israelis, for their part, often talk about the "price of democracy," and at times of crisis that price rises dramatically.

The initial reaction of the Israeli authorities to the uprising was rather muted, in part because of the general consensus that it would quickly die out. As the disturbances continued to spread a great deal of blame for the problem was placed on the news media. The mass media were accused of provoking the riots and of ruining Israel’s international image by one-sided reports about the events. The Minister of Defence was under a great deal of pressure to "do something" about the media, and at one point he complained about being one of the few Ministers in favor of keeping the territories open to the press (Azuli-Katz, 1988).
The East Jerusalem press, as might be expected, became much more aggressive in its writings: graphic articles about repression, the number of injured and killed, and the amount of suffering were all delivered to the censor. The censor also became much more forceful and began to reject a much higher proportion of the stories, even those which had already been published in the Israeli press. The game of cat and mouse became much fiercer.

The restrictions on press freedom grew as the weeks of disturbances turned into months. The government attempted to gain control of both the internal communication channels among the Palestinians themselves and of the flow of information to Israel and the rest of the Western world. The Palestinian Press service was closed, and at the time of this writing at least thirty four Arab journalists have been arrested for varying lengths of time. Local commanders were given the right to declare certain areas closed to the press, and in certain incidence reporters were required to take an escort from the Army spokesman's office.5 Two American reporters had their accreditation removed for filing stories without the censor's permission. One of the reporters describes the changing rules of the game as the scale of the crisis grew:

Schematically, the media strictures form concentric circles. First, access to areas of tensions is barred; then, sources of second-hand information are silenced; and finally the finished news reports are subject to tightened censorship. Surrounding this system of restrictions like an outer ring is a public atmosphere of hostility to the press, encouraged from time to time by official statements directed against journalists (Greenberg 1988).

These policies increased the risks and costs of getting the news. The Palestinian Press service, for example, had provided a beeper service which often directed reporters to particular riots, and an "escort service" of their own. After the service was closed, foreign reporters had to depend on much less sophisticated measures for covering the breaking stories. Reporters also had to "sneak" into closed military areas, and while the physical danger of such acts was probably minimal, they could certainly be harassed, detained, or even arrested.

Naturally there were quite a few stories about these restrictions in the Western press, but officials in the Ministry of Defence had decided (probably correctly) that stories about censorship were much less damaging than pictures of soldiers quelling Palestinian riots. The success of these various efforts to control the Western press remains an open question, in part because many of the measures were taken at a time when the news value of the riots had declined.

It is fairly clear, however, that efforts to close the internal communication channels of the Palestinians were not very successful. Political leaflets, for example, have become a central medium of mobilization. Whereas previous leaflets had carried mostly political attacks and slogans, the leaflets put out by the "United leadership of the Uprising" offer specific instructions for civil disobedience. They include
announcements about strikes and riots, calls for various sectors (e.g. policeman and civil servants) to resign, and directives about refusing to pay taxes. As each leaflet is published, it presents a direct challenge to the Israeli authorities, and forces are mobilized and stationed in response to these calls for action. The Israeli authorities have shut down several printing presses, but have been unable to stop new ones from springing up.

Palestinian radio stations were set up by the PLO in northern Lebanon and offered a good deal of moral support to the uprising. Active villages were singled out for praise and less active villages were "encouraged" to join the struggle. There is good reason to believe that these broadcasts had a significant impact on the events themselves. The Israeli authorities began jamming these broadcasts, and one station was eventually blown up in a raid by the Israeli air force. This military action offers some indications of the importance which was attributed to these broadcasts.

The most common form of communication, however, remains word-of-mouth. News of injuries and deaths spread through the camps and cities very quickly, and this leads to more riots. Rumors, however, tend to lack in accuracy what they gain in speed. As the Army spokesman put it "no one, it seems, dies a natural death any more in the territories." Mosques also serve an important function in the exchange of information and are often used as bases for the organization and mobilization of protests. The loudspeakers which are intended for calling the faithful to prayer are often used for more political types of messages as well.

Some Lessons

As stated, the struggle over political information is a struggle for power. Unlike most such encounters, however, the weak can often win. There are at least two reasons for this anomaly. First, it appears to be much more difficult (at least for democratic regimes) to block channels of communication than it is for the weak to find alternative ways to communicate. There are just too many holes in the dam and the authorities have too few fingers. Secondly, the fight of the weak against the strong always offers a powerful magnet for media attention, and it is the underdog who needs that attention most. Israel suddenly finds her role being reversed and almost exclusively concerned with "damage control."

The dilemmas which Israel must face are ones which confront many other democratic regimes during crisis. The major difference in the Middle East is the length of the conflict. While most Western countries find themselves in crisis for only a brief time, the clock in Israel appears to be permanently stuck at the eleventh hour. A resolution of these dilemmas is predicated, first and foremost, on a resolution of the conflict.
END NOTES

1. This commentary is based in part on a larger study being carried out by the senior author on the effects of the mass media on political conflicts. The second author is employed as a journalist covering the occupied territories for an Israeli newspaper.

2. There are two separate administrative bodies which are responsible for governing the occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza (Benvenisti 1986). The military deals with all issues which are directly related to security and the civil administration deals with all other civic matters. The Minister of Defence holds political and administrative responsibility for both branches of government. The civil administration was created in November of 1981, and all of its employees are civilian, so the territories are only partially under martial law.

3. There is also a reasonable amount of evidence that these papers receive financial support from outside Arab sources such as the P.L.O. and Jordan.

4. It is important to emphasize that despite these restrictions, the Arab press has flourished under Israeli rule. Both the number of publications and their circulation has risen significantly.

5. It is important to emphasize that there are genuine security problems when a large number of reporters come to cover a riot. The cameras do have a clear effect on riot behavior, and forces often have to be shifted to deal with the media crowd.

6. This quote is taken from an interview by the senior author.

REFERENCES

Azuli-Katz, Orly, "Rabin: I am one of the few in the government who believes in open coverage in the Territories," Yidiot Achronot, June 3, 1988, p. 3, [Hebrew].


