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Amit Kama & Vered Malka

Communication Department, Academic College of Emek Yezreel, Emek Yezreel, Israel

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Identity Prosthesis: Roles of Homeland Media in Sustaining Native Identity

AMIT KAMA and VERED MALKA

Communication Department, Academic College of Emek Yezreel, Emek Yezreel, Israel

This article focuses on the ways media texts produced in Israel constitute a vital part in the lives and identities of Jewish Israeli migrants in the United States. In this qualitative study, Israelis residing in the United States were interviewed about their media consumption patterns and their perceptions about the Israeli media’s impact on their lives in the United States. Analyses reveal that homeland media constitute indispensable identity prosthesis; that is, homeland media not only help combat homesickness but are used as devices in sustaining and empowering native identity. Israeli media bolster these migrants’ sense as if they never left home. They are wholly Israeli notwithstanding the geographic distance. Living in the diaspora is masked by an illusion maintained via consumption of homeland media. Paradoxically, diasporic life can be indefinitely extended because these media afford this illusion. The importation of culture and news from the homeland soothes the migrants’ uneasiness of being away from native soil and consequently they prolong their sojourn abroad.

KEY TERMS diaspora, identity, Israel, transnational

POST-MODERN MIGRATION AND MEDIA

During the last decades, especially following postcolonial processes and an increasing advancement of globalization, a sociocultural/economic-political phenomenon has taken place on the world stage, namely the migration of

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Address correspondence to Amit Kama, Communication Department, Academic College of Emek Yezreel, Emek Yezreel, Israel. E-mail: amit8860@yahoo.com
individuals who seek a home in another country not necessarily because of ill fortune or dire circumstances. Affluent individuals who have high levels of education and whose jobs can be termed *white collar* arrive in host countries where their presence is potentially influential. Many of them form transnational diasporas that maintain solid ties with their homelands and compatriots around the globe (Cohen, 1997; Christiansen, 2004; Georgiou, 2006; Silverstone, 2001). Many diasporic communities nowadays tend to settle on the center of the widely documented and discussed axis of assimilation—separation. In today’s atmosphere of postmodern license for malleable and pluralistic identities, migrants are no longer required to choose a monolithic identity that is dichotomically constructed as either well assimilated within the host society or defiantly grounded in their homeland (Adoni, Caspi, & Cohen, 2006; Hall, 1993; Hwang & He, 1999; Silverstone, 2001; Tsagarousianou, 2007). Hence postmodern migrants can and do maintain a dual linkage with both countries by existing in two complementary cultural spheres (Caspi, Adoni, Cohen, & Elias, 2002; Oh, 2012; Reece & Palmgreen, 2000; Sreberny, 2005).

The centrality of the media in contemporary societies and their potential to gratify a variety of migrants’ needs have been paving the road for a rich array of studies, from looking at the institutional level (e.g., Hepp, 2006) to examining media’s contributions to consolidation of communal identity (e.g., Bonini, 2011; Fogt & Sandvik, 2008; Georgiou, 2001; Keshishian, 2000). The introduction and adoption of new technologies—satellite television (Gillespie, 1995; Hargreaves & Mahdjoub, 1997; Karim, 1998) and the Internet and its interpersonal applications (Helland, 2007; Kang & Yang, 2011; Mitra, 1997)—have also motivated numerous studies. Aside from these new media that simplify and facilitate communication with the homeland, the relatively new diasporic media provide a burgeoning platform in which migrants communicate with each other (Cunningham, 2001; Dayan, 1999; Johnson, 2010; Kama, 2008; Oh, 2012; Sun, Yue, Sinclair, & Gao, 2011). Perhaps for the first time in history, migrants are able to conduct an extensive network of interactions, albeit mediated, with their compatriot relatives and friends at home and in the new country as well as consume texts that are produced both at their homeland and the host country (Hiller & Franz, 2004; Melkote & Liu, 2000; Tsagarousianou, 2004). Taken together these developments bear a significant impact and therefore call for a rigorous (re)assessment of issues of identity and its formation, consolidation, and maintenance.

The present study explores the meanings attributed to the Israeli media and their significance within the lived experiences of migrant Israelis from practical and symbolic perspectives. Three key questions formed the basis on which this research was formulated and analyzed: What roles do Israeli media play in Israeli migrants’ lives? How do they perceive their impact on their social and personal circumstances? Is consumption of Israeli media relevant to their identity and their decisions regarding migration?
Migration from Israel to the United States has been under scrutiny for about three decades. Although many scholars have been examining psychological, sociological, and anthropological dimensions (e.g., Gold, 2002; Kass & Lipset, 1982; Lev Ari, 2008; Meyers, 2001; Sabar, 2000; Shokeid, 1988; Uriely, 1998), none has looked at the consumption of Israeli media (i.e., made in Israel for the consumption of its residents; not media produced by and for the migrants). As will be elaborated later, the extensive literature on Israeli migrants corroborate their adamant refusal to forsake their Israeli identity and its manifestations. The present study’s objective was to shed light on their media consumption habits as mechanisms that assist them in sustaining their Israeliness.

This study is situated in New Jersey, where approximately 80,000–100,000 Israeli Jews reside in northern New Jersey. They constitute a privileged community of educated, nonreligious, and prosperous migrants who enjoy a lively communal life profoundly connected to Israel. This connectivity is evident, among other things, in their intensive consumption of Israeli media. Israeli migrants are similar to their compatriots who reside in Israel: They all tend to express strong national sentiments (Kimmerling, 2002). More than many other national communities, Israelis tend to express strong love/hate emotions regarding their country. They may convey deep anger, disappointment, and even resentment; but at the same time, they would stress their love, care, and a strong sense of personal responsibility to the country’s well being. Although Israeli society has gone through major changes throughout the last decades, among them becoming less collectivistic and more individualistic, most people still deeply associate themselves with the state. Therefore, it may come as no surprise that many Israeli migrants are characterized by their firm, enduring national sentiments, as well as a continuing sense of responsibility to the homeland destiny. Consequently, Israeli migrants face the still rather common conceptualization of the act of immigration as an act of betrayal, of national irresponsibility (Gold, 2002; Sabar, 2000). As will be demonstrated later, the ardent consumption of Israeli media plays a crucial role in this complex context.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in 2009 among 117 women and men, aged 30–59 (83% of the sample were in between 35–44), all of whom are married (see also Rebhun & Lev Avi, 2011). They were asked to complete a written multiple-choice questionnaire and subsequently were interviewed for about 20 min. Vered Malka, the second author, who resided at that time in the area carried out semistructured interviews with 57 couples in tandem, three interviews were performed individually.
Respondents were recruited via the snowballing sampling technique: Vered Malka’s close friends referred her to their friends and so on. This allowed a diverse sample both geographically and sociodemographically. Being a member of the community herself facilitated not only high levels of cooperation and a free flow of communication between this researcher and her interviewees, but also an acute understanding of their sensibility and sensitivity.

The respondents have resided in the United States for various periods of time: 23% arrived 2 years or less prior to the research, 47% has lived there for 3–6 years, 13% 7–10 years, and 17% 11 years or more. The lion’s share arrived in the United States for a limited period as part of job or education projects. As will be demonstrated later, most of the Israeli migrants perpetually espouse a sojourner’s orientation. They tend to perceive their stay as temporary, as if their initial motivation for coming to the United States (i.e., for a definite period or task) lingers on. This orientation permeates and shapes their media consumption patterns.

Israelis in northern New Jersey as well as in other parts of the United States (Cohen & Haberfeld, 1997) enjoy socioeconomic advantages: 89% of those who partook in this research hold an academic degree, 43% hold a masters or a doctorate. About half of the respondents reported income of $150,000 per year or more, most of the others earn between $100,000–149,000. Our survey yielded that they consume media quite frequently: 114 out of 117 interviewees say they consume American media as part of their daily routine. Regarding Israeli media, 55% of the participants say their relative share of their overall media diet is 75% or more. When asked about patterns of Israeli media consumption, 77% reported checking the popular news website YNET a few times a week, among them 70% do so a few times a day. Other popular websites are the news portal WALLA, Ha’aretz (the online equivalent of the elite daily), and a few that specialize in economic news, like Globes and Themarker. Interviewees also purchase Israeli printed dailies frequently (Yediot Ahronoth, the leading daily in Israel is the most popular one in local stores), listen to popular Israeli radio stations (the military-based twin stations GALATZ and GALGALATZ are the most popular among them), and follow television broadcasts, mostly via the Internet. MAKO, a website that is associated with the most popular Israeli TV channel (channel 2) and enables users to watch many of its news and entertainment programs online, is extremely popular among interviewees. NANA10, another website that is associated with a popular national TV channel (channel 10), is very common as well. Selected television shows from Israel are also viewed via a local satellite channel, mostly by veteran immigrants.

The present article focuses on the oral interviews that were transcribed and thematically analyzed according to guidelines of the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Interviews began with two basic
questions: What are the roles the Israeli media play in your life since you have migrated? What roles do the Israeli media play in other community members’ lives? Our objective was to look for utterances significantly relevant to the research questions (Kearney, Murphy, & Rosenbaum, 1994). As qualitative readers we did not initially know our objectives but distilled themes that were conspicuous and repeated by several interviewees (van Manen, 1990). In accordance with interpretive epistemology, we sought to reveal these ideas while being reflexive (Nelson, 1989) and paying sensitive and equal attention to all participants (Orbe, 1998).

Despite the overarching qualitative nature of the current article, adding relevant quantitative data can shed light on the phenomena implicit in the interviewees’ utterances. The two methods complement each other to produce a more coherent portrayal of this community vis-à-vis their communication consumption. The following themes are not unqualified, for reality mediated by scientific research can never be wholly known nor anything but subjective interpretation (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Borderless Homeland

The Israeli environment, an alien island embedded in a foreign landscape (Sabar, 2000), where daily exchanges and mundane routines can be performed nearly exclusively with other compatriots in Hebrew, and in which Israeli media are freely accessible and constitute a vital ingredient of social interactions, is evidently the primary instrument that enables Israeli migrants to remain far from home and yet feel “at home abroad” (Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2011, p. 24). Another prominent feature of this strong orientation toward the homeland is prolonged, frequent travels to Israel.

One of the principal contributions of the present study emerged from the insight that Israeli media are the chief lubricant to ease the hardships of migration, homesickness, and alienation from the foreign culture. Interestingly, its very existence aids the perpetual postponement of the avowed yearning to go home. Israeli symbolic and material goods available in the host country enable the migrants to take advantage of two concurrent “present”: The real present in the diaspora and an imaginary present in Israel. Respondents thus exist in two parallel universes, the former of which is constructed as ephemeral and temporary, as already two decades ago Shokeid (1988) accentuated Israeli migrants’ persistent refusal to acknowledge the stability and permanence of their situation. Our interviewees corroborated how being in constant touch with home enforces the sense and sincere belief that going home is feasible at any moment, because they are all immersed in the minutiae of life at home. They can return at a moment’s notice and feel as if migration never took place. In other words, the continuous, persistent consumption of homeland media reveals two phenomena: Although this use as a symbolic bridge is prevalent among
many migrant communities around the world (Christensen, 2004; Georgiou, 2006; Gillespie, 1995), it nonetheless constitutes a unique existential paradox, to be discussed later.

The following themes exemplify the most prominent aspects of the roles Israeli media play in the interviewees’ lives according to their perspective.

“It smells like home”

“It smells like home” said one interviewee, Dikla, in order to explain her frequent use of Israeli media. She noted “it fulfills the connection to the place, part of my identity … A source for updates, because it is important for me to know what’s going on with my people.” Bonini (2011) concurred that migrants’ use of media recreates “the ‘warmth’ of domesticity” (p. 869) making them feel at home-far-from-home. Orna used a compelling metaphor: “[Israeli media are] an umbilical cord that cannot be severed … If it is severed, something in my essence would also be severed. It is my roots and belonging. I am rooted in this country.” The two women are longing to go home, but their spouses’ employment precludes it. For them as well as many others, particularly women, life in the United States is just temporary and they are perpetually haunted by homesickness.

The current theme echoes the first research question regarding the roles Israeli media play in the migrants’ lives. Thus, for the majority of the interviewees they play a major role in preserving a sense that they are still in Israel, if not in body at least in spirit. They draw a symbolic sustenance from these media to uphold and validate their identity as Israelis, and implicitly avoid immersion in the host society and culture. Homeland media function as an identity prosthesis without which life abroad would be impossible, although material comfort derived from their affluence contradicts such a notion. Similar to prosthetic memory that is not a product of real lived experiences but is grounded on mediated representations (Landsberg, 2004), homeland media sustain a simulated sense of experiences as if the consumers abroad actually experience them. Their identity is thus anchored in an illusion somewhat akin to the prosthetic embodiment of corporeal signifiers (Preston, 2010). In other words, they perceive themselves to be active and vital members of Israeli society despite the obvious geographical distance. Israeli society by and large can be described as a “hybrid imagined community” (Georgiou, 2006, p. 22; Oh, 2012) because its members never cease to be identified as such, even when they are citizens of foreign states (Meyers, 2001). Citizenship is not dependent on territory, which was an imperative criterion of the modern state (Anderson, 1991). Professed Israeliness is steady and solid regardless of place of residence. Theirs is truly an “essentialist sense of identity” (Cohen, 2008, p. 1012). Israeli diaspora hence signifies itself according to an immutable
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criterion that “feeds into a transnational nationalism” (Ang, 2003, p. 145, emphasis in original).

Menashe explained how he runs his life with the assistance of the identity prosthesis that makes him “no less Israeli” than if he still resided in Israel:

> Israeli media is very meaningful ... A bridge to Israeli society ... Without it, it would be very difficult for me. I would be less aware, less involved, less Israeli ... It gives me a sense of belonging.

Menashe represents many others. Although he’s been in the United States for 5 years and does not know when he will return and even dares making financial commitments for the long run, his Israeliness is thoroughly palpable. His living room is dominated by a wide-screen TV ceaselessly tuned to “The Israeli Network” and a radio tuned to Israeli channels. By enveloping themselves with streaming Israeli texts Menahse’s family symbolically insulate themselves within an Israeli cocoon.

Calanit, who migrated a dozen years ago and cannot say when she will return, reiterated the necessity of keeping in touch with the homeland: ‘I couldn’t live without it [Israeli media] here. It is part of myself’. Margalit states she’s returning ‘next summer’ and confesses that the Israeli media let her feel ‘I’m actually there.’ Unlike other respondents, Orit is highly critical of Israel’s policy and yet she runs her home as if it were in Israel. She said:

> Israeli media “nails” me to the real place where I belong. Here I am disconnected ... I prevent myself from connecting to this place ... Part of my being is the need to cushion myself with as many characteristics of home as possible.

Ofer’s life is grounded in an inseparable connection with Israel thanks to the Israeli media that help “keeping in touch with the country and furnish me with a sense of belonging ... You are there; you are part of the happening. It eases the separation.” By and large, the respondents are resolute regarding the Israeli media function as a metaphorical lubricant to make the act of migration, be it a result of free choice or some external requirement, workable. Anava—whose high standard of living negates any material hardship— noted that “Without [Israeli media] remaining here would be unbearable. You cannot escape who you are.”

Like other diasporas (Ang, 2003; Thompson, 2002), mass media are but one mechanism that sustains native identity from afar. Other mechanisms include frequent and long visits to Israel and strict adherence to national and religious holidays. Sharona explained, “You do this [consumption of Israeli media] like you eat Israeli food here.” Interpersonal communication with family members and friends aided by the new and nearly free of charge technologies is also of paramount significance.
Yona is well aware of the “blinding illusion” of long-distance involvement via the mediated prosthesis:

Israeli media is very important for me … to keep me updated … I miss the pictures, the sights, and the sounds. An immediate physical connection is very important for me concerning my homeland. It gives me a sense of illusion that I am involved. It blinds me to feel nearby … Consumption of news helps me not to get lost in the new space where I’m living … To preserve something that I love, and to prove to myself that I have not left. It is important for me to be Israeli, to prove to myself that I have not forgotten, that I have not forsaken it.

Although Yona has been residing in the United States for more than a decade, but her job organizing Israeli cultural event in various community centers7 demonstrates that like many of her compatriots she enthusiastically adheres to her Israeliness. She also professed a yearning to go home sometime in the vague future. This is quite typical to many migrants who despite a lack of any concrete plans never abandon the idea of returning home.

It is noteworthy that interviewees who came to the United States prior to the Internet and satellite TV era refer to those days as challenging times, in the sense of coping with home sickness under conditions of limited accessible communication technologies (see also Bonini, 2011). Daily newspapers from Israel were harder to find, telephone calls were expensive, and consequently letters were the leading means of communication and updating.

“AS IF I NEVER LEFT”

The following theme is concerned with the second research question that was aimed at delving into the ways the migrants perceive the Israeli media’s impact on their social and personal circumstances. Indeed, besides the articulated notions that consuming Israeli media makes homesickness somewhat bearable, interviewees express a lingering anxiety lest they lose their ingrained Israeliness. They rhetorically struggle to validate their innate identity while bearing an entrenched symbolic commitment (Uriely, 1998), despite the obvious change in their lived circumstances. That is, palpable negation of the corporeal act of migration is accomplished by perceiving the residence abroad as merely temporary. The present is conceived as liminal. Home is undoubtedly Israel: “I am connected to that place, it’s my home,” and via the Israeli media Re’ut sustains “a sense of belonging,” because it is crucial for her “to be involved.” The diasporic present is indeed but a hiatus between past and future in the real home. Therefore, life revolves around a hub of returning home, in which symbolic and material resources are invested, chief among these is cultural consumption. Ronit asserted: “I use it in order to strengthen a sense of belonging. You can live here and not feel part of anything.”
Migration is a fleeting state for most of the respondents, only a very few declared a wish to stay in the United States. A quarter of them circled the “this year” or “the next year” options in the questionnaire regarding their plans to return to Israel. Forty-three percent replied that they plan to return “in the foreseeable future.” Another quarter replied that they do not have any definite dates. Only a tenth answered they have no intention of returning. Although returning is often never materialized and migration is consolidated, Israeliness is never compromised. Rony stated, “I feel as if I never left. It is natural for me, because my life at present is still very connected to there … my Israeli identity is not shaken.”

This overwhelming negation is possible thanks to the Israeli media that allow a distant sense of home and a recurrent up keeping of pure identity, into which no foreign element is incorporated. The Israeli migrant does not follow the common path of a hybrid identity (Kraidy, 2002) implemented by a hyphenated denominator (e.g., Taiwanese-American). The lion’s share of interviewees not only vehemently rejects such an option but moreover refuses to acknowledge any ontological problem. Bracha declared she has “no problem of identity … thanks to the Israeli media.” Ephraim who resides in the United States for a decade said, “I don’t really feel in the USA. I exploit whatever is here, but try to keep an Israeli environment.” Although a minority of the interviewees seeks to enjoy both cultures (Israeli and American), most profess no interest in the latter and refuse to form a new identity. Nehemiah stressed the point,

The media help in alleviating homesickness and enable the ability to feel connected, to be updated, to maintain the identity, the Israeli essence. What happens here speaks to me less than a terror attack at home. Allegedly what happens here should be important for me, but Israel is in my blood.

Hillel—one of the few who have no intention of returning—pointed to an Israeli distinctiveness: “Our education made us believe we are the chosen people … We don’t try to assimilate, like the others. Try to show we’re different. Israelis treat their country differently from other migrant groups.” Nina noted that, “Whoever comes to live here don’t want to forsake their identity; to be Israelis but not live in Israel.” Amnon, her husband, continued, “People who have Israeli channels use them to build a small Israel here. Other migrants want to be American.” They and the others are concerned with their identity both introspectively and toward those who still live in Israel. Oren clarified, “I’m not content with living here … and would rather not say that I live here when speaking to people in Israel.” Indeed, eschewing being labeled as migrants is paramount. Bracha summed it up:

Israeli media produce a sense of Israeliness during the hard moments that I had and felt out of place. It is a very convenient haven in face of
the changes. It gives stability and continuity and strengthens identity and belonging. Thanks to the Israeli media I have no problem of identity. [...] Israel is home period.

Israeli media constitute a channel for consumption not only of news and actual events but of sports, literature, entertainment, and celebrity gossip as well. Elad said, “It is important for me to keep updated not only with news. This is how I feel a part of Israel.” Perseveration of Israeli identity is thus being fueled and reinforced by an avowed preference for homeland cultural supply over the American fare. Raviv explained why he prefers Israeli entertainment: “It is part of my identity … Without it there would be a huge vacuum for me.” Tamar used the same notion of “vacuum” to denote her existential anxiety lest she loses her roots. Consumption of Israeli culture and entertainment is insatiable, especially because the American one is not deemed worthy enough: “[Israeli media] satisfy a huge vacuum, in the practical sense of which book is prominent, music, culture, gossip, who said what.” This can be partly explained by the effortlessness of the native tongue, but it also constitutes a sentimental, nostalgic, and patriotic ritual of maintaining a tight relationship with the home country for these migrants and their offspring to be prepared for a perpetually imminent return. Marit simply stated: “It helps with the kids’ education.”

To remain fully fledged Israelis, the migrants must keep abreast with news stories as well as with (con)temporary celebrities and talked-about television characters, art shows, and so on. They wish to be fluent with recent slang idioms, too. One interviewee, reports examining “recommendations for day trips in the country.” In other words, this fervent reliance on the media is another mechanism by which the migrants can sustain their original identity and repudiate the act of migration, as if nothing has really changed in their mundaneness. Sylvia summarized it thusly: “Culturally speaking, music is a tool of connection to Israel. It feels as if I am at home. Connected … As an Israeli, there are needs that emanate from the distance and the media satisfy them.”

As migrants whose proficiency in English is not on a par with Hebrew and whose mastery of the subtleties of the American culture is far from satisfactory, consumption of Israeli culture is also motivated by pragmatic considerations: “The language is easy, the culture is familiar” (Shelly). Hamutal claimed that “these are intimate moment with the language and culture” since consumption of Israeli materials does not necessitate cumbersome re-socialization nor re-acculturation.

Being well knowledgeable and updated in popular television materials—Internet sites that enable real-time viewing are imperative—is extremely significant. Interviewees are proud of their expertise in minute details and hence their ability to surprise their Israeli friends and relatives with a wealth of information. All of them accentuate their need to feel they are neither
separate nor different than if they remained in Israel. Their present location is only temporary and should not be construed as if they are now Americans in any way. Yaffa explained, “It enables me to be part of it, to be updated … It is very important for me not to feel a stranger when I visit [Israel].”

The longer the stay, the more intense the Israeli media consumption. Gad differentiates between new and old comers: “The former tend to rely less on Israeli media than the latter, for whom the Israeli channel is a vital ingredient. Those who arrive for a short period want to disengage themselves, they are confident about their identity. The old comers are very much connected.” His wife agreed: “The old comers need the [Israeli] media very much. They are more knowledgeable about all the details.” Edna noted that “In the beginning we consume less, and it increased. From disengagement to connection after some years.” In other words, the longer the stay, the stronger the media consumption is to bolster the Israeli identity and consequently not assimilate in the host society. The new comers do not yet feel the pangs of ontological insecurity and homesickness. They do not need any prosthesis as a means for mundane survival. As time passes, pain swells and the old comers seek means to remedy a growing existential anxiety, which can be alleviated by an increasing connection with the homeland. Despite the objective circumstances indicating migration as a definite reality, migrants whose stay is long deny these facts and immerse themselves even deeper in the Israeli culture provided via the media.

Israeli media consumption increases among migrants whose Israeli identity is being eroded as time passes. They feel a need to confirm their identity not only for their own sake, but also for their children’s sake who may forget Israel, as well as a proof for their relatives and friends who grow skeptical regarding their avowed promise to return. Galia claimed, “I use this media in order to alleviate my guilt, to remind everyone and myself that this is all temporary and we return right away.” It is crucial to be knowledgeable about all particulars of daily life in Israel as a proof of their intention to return. Yona summed it up: “I must know what’s going on there. It is my obligation as an Israeli woman for my ancestors. In the beginning, I consumed less.”

However, migrants whose identity is solid and their date of return is set (though it may never occur), prefer to disengage from the Israeli media they perceive as suffocating. Nina explained,

In Israel, media consumption is very meaningful. Here I feel a need to disengage, to be involved in the American everyday life … But if I had no Israeli media at all, I would have been anxious. I know that if something happens [there] I still have YNET.

Alongside those interviewees whose media consumption increases over time as a pretext for their extended sojourn, others’ consumption increases
as they prepare to return home in order to avoid a cultural shock. Gavri said that he is “always ready for a situation when we return.” Many respondents are eternally on the edge of ending their migration, albeit often a dream that never materializes. Intensive consumption of Israeli media supposedly attests that these plans are concrete and can be carried out presently. Connectivity with the homeland thus constitutes an imperative of the preparation for the imminent return. Accordingly, Israeli media consumption is not only part of being in touch with home, but reinforces the temporariness of migration. Because permanent migration is vigorously negated and denied, one must by all means be fed by the mediated umbilical cord with news from home. Keeping in touch with home either by the media or through interpersonal communication enables the migrants to grasp their return as feasible at any given moment.

“FROM DISENGAGEMENT TO CONNECTION”

The final theme is concerned with the third research question, in which we asked whether consumption of Israeli media is relevant to the migrants’ identity and their decisions regarding migration. Because of the aforementioned phenomena (i.e., consumption of Israeli media as fundamental means to maintain solid national identity and to reduce everlasting longing to the homeland), life in the diaspora is paradoxically justified and tolerated. “Without it and other Israeli stuff, I would have long gone home,” said Sylvia, “the media enable people to remain far away.” All other interviewees repeated this surprising insight. Surprising because of the inherent contradiction: Migration is feasible precisely because it is neither perceived nor construed as a concrete fait accompli. Immersion in the host country is not an option or desired. Importation of all things Israeli serves as an anesthetic against the pains of alienation and homesickness. It eases the daily struggles. Homeland media thus can actually extend indefinitely the period of migration. Shlomo reiterated: “Without it, it would be hard for me. I believe that we would have returned earlier without the Israeli environment.” In other words, “desperation is easier in this Israeli place” (Ephraim).

This paradox is frequently voiced by all interviewees who nonetheless seem to be oblivious to its inherent fallacy: If Israeliiness is indeed so crucial, why do they remain abroad? Sharon indirectly replied, “I would have gone back unless I had all this Israeliiness, including the Israeli media. It is very convenient to be Israeli here.” The paradox is conspicuous in the common declaration that their settlement would have been terminated earlier in case the connectivity with the homeland was not continuous and extensive. The mediated connectivity justifies or gives the illusion of justification for their permanent sojourn. The identity prosthesis enables the deferral of return. Sarah said that “if Israeli media wasn’t accessible for me, it would have been hard and vexing. It would make my stay here shorter”.

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Identity Prosthesis

Israeli Jews residing in New Jersey constitute a transnational community, in which social space overrides the geographical one. Like other migrant groups of the recent past, they do not identify their place of residence as a mere extension of their homeland, neither do they exist in a national-less sphere, but conduct extensive conversations between social, cultural, and territorial spaces that exist simultaneously here and there (Christiansen, 2004; Oh, 2012; Pries, 1999). They are hence transmigrants, whose identity and lived experiences are derived from constant interactions between their current and past places of residence, whereas their homeland is conceived as their enduring home (Glick-Schiller, Basch, & Szanton-Blanc, 1994). Indeed, their existence is enmeshed within the American array of career, school, and daily routines; and yet they persist in cultivating an intensive connectivity with Israel. This very connectivity is the solid foundation of their unshaken Israeli identity. In other words, they live in a “determinitalized world” (Appadurai, 1991, p. 196) where identity is not necessarily conditioned on a homogenized physical territory. This community resembles a growing number of groups who, thanks to simultaneous dialogues with two states, deconstruct the concept of the modern nation-state, in which one people lives in a well-defined territory (Glick-Schiller et al., 1999).

Recent technological advancements enable transnational migrants to nurture their connectivity with their homelands (Elias & Lemish, 2011) and contribute to the perseveration of their native identity even in the face of the concrete circumstances of residing in another country (Georgiou, 2006; Kang & Yang, 2011). We would like to offer the concept of identity prosthesis to describe the homeland media and their constant use as part of the efforts of sustaining native identity. This prosthesis is of immense significance for it both facilitates and nourishes the deeply needed identification with Israeli society and the simulated sense of being at home, as if migration has never been performed. Ontological security is hence being continually ratified: One is at home in spite of the actual geographical distance. Because of, inter alia, this prosthesis, the lion’s share of Israeli migrants passionately refuse to label themselves as American or, at least, adopt a hybrid identity. They are forever Israelis who only temporarily dwell elsewhere (Rebhun & Lev Ari, 2011). Like the Chinese labor migrants to the United States in the beginning of the 20th century (Siu, 1952), they are sojourners whose return is impending and undeniable (Kass & Lipset, 1982; Shokeid, 1998; Uriely, 199811).

Consumption of Israeli media proves to be crucial in cultivating this approach. It enables the migrants to remain abroad for longer periods of time while reassuring them that return is feasible. They believe that being updated with the minutiae of, for example, celebrity gossip or political news will smooth their reintegration once they return. They surround themselves with various Israeli characteristics that constitute a comfortable enclave and...
consequently are able to postpone their return. They actually enjoy both worlds: an Israeli “island” within the beneficial American surroundings. Identity prosthesis serves this paradox of remaining in the United States as if it were “Little Israel” while generating an illusion that return to Israel is impending.

Media consumption relieves migrants’ guilt and shame for forsaking their homeland in favor of a land of plenty. Instead of sharing the relentless burden (e.g., terrorist attacks, wars) all loyal and “good” Israeli citizens should supposedly bear, they find solace in vicariously experiencing events. They feel that they fully share whatever their compatriots go through. This phenomenon complements the prosthesis aspect since the media enable these migrants to perceive themselves united with the Israelis at home. To be sure, this bond has no concrete ramifications or manifestations. After all, whatever happens within Israel cannot affect anyone who lives thousands of miles away.

As the period of migration extends, as Israeliiness grows shaky, and date of return becomes fuzzier, Israeli media consumption becomes more urgent and intensive. The initial period of migration is typically characterized by disengagement from the homeland and this is a defense mechanism shared by many novice migrants who must cope with new and unfamiliar intricate tasks of settling down without the emotional burden of homesickness (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984; Tartakovsky, 2009). As time goes by and migrants settle down, they can allow themselves to reconnect to the world they loved and left. The intensifying connectivity therefore conveys the lost home; it balances their bereavement that eventually is acutely felt.

On the other hand, migrants whose date of return is established tend to disengage from the Israeli media. Their identity is firm and secure and they are motivated by the opportunity to flee the overwhelming adversities at home. They can thus relax and enjoy the American culture before returning to the torrid spot in the Middle East. They feel free to stop consuming political and/or entertainment news. But, at any event, they all make an effort to periodically glance at the Internet sites.

In this article we have tried to shed some new light on the field of study of the interface between media consumption and contemporary migrant communities. Several new insights are offered to the existing body of work within this context; first, is the unveiling of the ironic role of the media in assisting migrants to remain abroad despite their avowed wish to return “home.” Second is the conceptualization of the media function as an identity prosthesis to describe their constant use as part of the efforts of sustaining native identity. In sum, this study adds to our understanding of the multifaceted consumption of homeland media by migrants who, regardless of their prolonged stay oversees, conceive of themselves as sojourners. This all-embracing reliance on texts imported from the homeland not only precludes immersion within the host country culture and society, but furthermore...
reinforces the perception that the act of migration has never really been completed. This phenomenon is at odds with other diasporas whose homeland media consumption patterns do not necessarily exclude assimilation within the host society, for example, new immigrants in Israel (Adoni, et al., 2006; Elias & Lemish, 2011). These groups mostly construct a hybrid identity composed of old and new elements.

Israeli migrants use homeland media for various psychological and social ends: They are means to persevere connectivity with the home they feel they have never really left and thus can help maintain an intact Israeli identity despite the substantial distance. Their group of reference is forever other Israelis: relatives and friends in the United States and in Israel. Because residence abroad is perceived as temporary, these media also reinforce the sojourners’ confidence that their return, albeit quite seldom materialized, is both imminent and feasible.

It seems that recent technological means of interpersonal and mass communication expand and enhance homeland media consumption and consequently there is no urgent need now to establish diasporic media, that is, public sphericules that serve as platforms for internal communication among the migrants for their own use. However, many studies have shown the burgeoning of such media (Cunningham, 2001; Johnson, 2010; Kama, 2008; Riggins, 1992; Sun et al., 2011; Viswanath & Arora, 2000). Even when diasporic newspapers have been published in the United States by Israeli migrants, their life span was usually short (Meyers, 2001). We suggest further study to understand the reasons why such endeavors, usually successful among other diasporas, are futile in the Israeli case. Finally, the concept of identity prosthesis should surely also be studied or corroborated among other groups of migrants to learn whether it is a unique phenomenon or more universally valid.

NOTES

1. Because there are no official data, these figures were extrapolated by the authors on the basis of informal records kept by various Jewish organizations and the Israeli consulate. Rebhun and Lev Ari (2011) estimated 250,000 Israelis (and their non-Israeli spouses) reside in the United States.

2. These relatively short interviews may be construed as a methodological limitation since longer, in-depth interviews with a smaller sample could have yielded richer data.

3. The sampling technique mirrors our phenomenological standpoint according to which an under-stating of the migrants' lived experiences does not necessitate random sampling.

4. These numbers may be conceived as high in other parts of the United States, but because of the high standard of living in this area it is conceptualized as a middle bracket here.

5. A half of the interviewees visit Israel once a year, most of them spend 4–7 weeks there every summer.

6. Names are pseudonyms. Quotations were translated from colloquial Hebrew and reflect original grammatical and lexical lapses.

7. Migrant Israelis initiate and perform Hebrew cultural activities not only to persevere their national identity, but primarily because they do not tend to participate in such events outside of their community (Flumann, 2007).
Eighty-two percent of Uriely’s (1998) sample were categorized as “permanent sojourners” who have lived in the United States for lengthy periods, maintain general intentions of returning, but have not concrete plans.

Kang and Yang (2011) also noted that first-generation migrants do not pursue a multi-ethnic identity, which is common among second- and third-generation Taiwanese in the United States.

Particularly news concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the precarious security situation, as Cathy explained, “I need to know that the sky has not fallen.”

Gold (2002) disagreed with other researchers and states that Israeli migrants are no longer sojourners. On the contrary, they start developing social and political organizations as well as business ventures that attest to their willingness to accept the migration as irreversible.

REFERENCES


