ONLINE NEWS ABOUT ISRAEL AND PALESTINE:

A cross-national comparison of prominence and trends

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This article measures the relative attention given to Israel and Palestine in 37 leading news sites in 10 languages over two years. Findings clearly show that the Palestinian entities and Israel are the world's most prominent polities after the US in top news stories of international online coverage. Most news attention is given by Middle Eastern news sites, and only then by European and American news sites. During periods that attention to Israel decreases, attention to China increases. After presenting these rather surprising findings, the study considers a number of directions for interpreting them.

KEYWORDS: Israel; Palestine; online news; cross-national comparison; newsworthiness; network analysis

Introduction

Many believe that our globalized world is flat; but could it be that some of its parts are more flat than others? In this article we ask whether views of our assumed global plateau may indeed have their centers and peripheries, focal points and fuzzy backgrounds. We are here concerned with the worldview, or geosophical imagination, of news organizations and reporters—and possibly their audiences too—in perceiving our contemporary world. In a previous study we demonstrated the continuing centrality of the United States in the global news map charted by international news reporting (Segev and Blondheim, 2010). This present study investigates the place assigned to the Palestinian entities (Gaza and the West Bank, hereafter Palestine), Israel, and to their conflict in the landscape of international news coverage. At issue is the degree of flatness, or in other words equal news presence, of

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countries from this region, and the salience of the long drawn-out conflict it features in world news.

Thus, in one sense, this study is an inquiry into the geography of the mind, or geosophy of journalism: the ways ideological, religious, and psychological endowment condition perceptions of the *ecumene* (Wright, 1947). In probing the "multifaceted world of aesthetic feeling, imagination, and subjectivity" of contemporary journalists that cover the region (Bowden, 1970, 399), we expect to uncover perceptions of place that are "situated not simply by physical circumstance, but by the religious, mercantile, political, and intellectual contexts, manifest at a… specific point in time" (Keighren, 2005, 554; cf. Withers, 2001, 4).

But at the same time this study is an inquiry into journalistic practices and professional standards in assigning news value to events and players. Inevitably, it touches on the problem of objectivity; but rather than media's possible favoritism to one side in a conflict, at issue is possible bias towards featuring a particular conflict in the news of the world. To the extent that foreign news coverage affects international foreign policy agendas, journalism's geosophy can have the most significant consequences (Bennett, 1990; Katz, 2009).

While traditional studies of international news bias tended to focus on the news of mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television, the present project studies online news reporting the world over. Its purpose is to gauge the amount of attention paid to Palestine, Israel, and their veteran conflict in relation to the attention given to other international players in today's digital news market. We do so by charting the relative prominence of countries and political entities[1] in popular news sites from around the world, in the course of 2009 and 2010. We also analyze which countries give Israel and Palestine particular news attention, and in what categories of reporting. The study is based on data gathered over nearly two years, and it traces the fluctuations in the conflict's news salience over that period.

A common method to assess the relative importance of countries and issues in the news is frequency analysis. Dearing and Rogers (1996) measured the number of news stories as an indicator of media attention to, and the popularity of, certain issues (cf. Benton and Frazier, 1976; Golan and Wanta, 2001; Kiousis, 2004; Pritchard, 1984). Wu (2000) studied the frequency of news items mentioning specific countries in the international news section of newspapers from 38 countries. In a more recent study, he (2007) compared the prominence of countries in online news to their prominence in broadcast and print outlets (using *CNN* and the *New York Times* respectively). His study, based on a mere two-week survey, indicates that there were no significant differences between online and traditional media in their patterns of coverage. The volume of international trade and the presence of news agency correspondents in a country were found to be the two best indicators of online prominence.

While most previous studies examined the salience of countries in the news presented by traditional media, our study follows Wu's example in investigating online news. This is mainly because more and more people get their news online. A report by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2008) reveals that forty percent of Americans get their national and international news from the internet. Similarly, Wurff and Lauf (2005) and later Schifferes, Lusoli, and Ward (2009) found a continuous growth in online news readership in Europe. The increasing use of online news sources raises questions about their geopolitical perspective, which could affect the world picture they depict, and consequently, at least to some extent, public perceptions of the world we live in. While national and regional web-based news sites can be expected to be self-centered and highlight local and national issues, in their coverage of the rest of the world they inevitably make choices that both reflect and effect geosophic and geopolitical biases.

Automatic means of web mining enable us to examine a dramatically longer period than that which was possible in traditional studies of news content, as well as to survey a

much larger range of countries and entities. Software tools developed specifically for this study allow a large-scale real-time frequency analysis of (a) countries mentioned in (b) different topical categories of (c) news sites from around the world, in (d) a variety of languages, over (e) nearly two years of news reporting. We use these variables to gain more detailed understanding of the place of Israel and Palestine in online news from around the world.

Methods

The data analyzed were collected from news sites identified with 12 different countries (Table 1). These countries were selected on the basis of several considerations. First, we chose countries with a large number of online users. Such countries often act as cultural and media centers for smaller countries in their peripheries (Tunstall, 2008). To a large extent this factor corresponds to the reach of the language used in a country. Currently, the most popular online languages are English, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, French, German and Arabic (Danet and Herring 2007).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Second, we chose economically leading countries. As previous studies surveyed above suggest, a combination of economic, political and cultural factors influence the salience of countries in the news. Of these, the economic aspect is the easiest to ascertain, and we therefore selected countries with high GDPs including, aside from the US, China, Japan, Germany, the UK and France. Finally, in addressing the role of the Palestinian-Israeli nexus, it is important to study countries to which the conflict carries varying degrees of relevance, ranging from Egypt, to which the conflict is highly relevant, to China that could be expected to be indifferent.

In each of the countries selected for analysis, three popular news sites were chosen for tracking. Two of them were the digital affiliates of well-established traditional news sources, such as the US's *New York Times* or the UK's *BBC*. The third news source was the *Google News* site of each country, a news aggregator of several thousands of popular country-specific news sources.[2]

Five main topical categories were traced in each news source: (a) top news (b) world news (c) business and economy (d) technology, and (e) entertainment and culture. These categories were chosen because they were included in all news sites, and thus enabled cross-national comparison.

The news of each of the chosen sites was sampled over a period of 22 months, from February 1, 2009 to November 14, 2010, every other day at 12:00 UTC. We used data mining software specially developed for this study. The procedure yielded a total of 562,060 news items from 37 news sites.[3] The scale of this database is between two and three orders of magnitude greater than the news samples employed by traditional studies employing frequency analysis. More of a study of the actual population than of a sample, the validity of results can therefore be assumed to be much higher than those of traditional sample-based procedures.

The proprietary software identified and documented for each news item its date, title and content, category of the article, countries mentioned in it, and its source. From the title and content of each news item the software extracted automatically all the country names mentioned. For this purpose, we built a database of 195 country names in 10 different languages.[4] Two native speakers of each language were employed as research assistants, to translate each country name into their native tongue. We had the research assistants provide all the common and alternative names of each country (e.g. "United States", "USA", and so

on). Omitted were any alternative country names that might be ambiguous and therefore yield irrelevant results (e.g. "US" which can refer both to the United States of America and to us, the objective case of we).

Country Salience Index

The nearly two-year data mining process employing our particular set of tools, made it possible to count the number of news items mentioning foreign countries in the news sites studied. It also allowed us to focus on specific countries or categories. For example, we could ascertain the number of news items in the "business" category of American news sites mentioning Israel.

On the basis of these functionalities we designed a Salience Index (SI) to measure how prominent individual countries are in the news sites of the countries under study. The SI of a country is defined as the percentage of news items that mentioned it (not including items from its own news sites) out of all news items that mentioned any country by name (e.g., the percentage of news items mentioning the US in non-American news sites). The SI ranges from 0 to 100, 0 indicating that the country was not mentioned in any of the sampled news items of other countries, and 100 that all news items of other countries mentioned the country. This definition yields a simple formula for calculating the SI of a country.

Definition 1. Salience Index

SI_i = (Number of news items that mentioned a certain country) / (Number of all news items that mentioned any country) X 100
Note: i is country indicator. The SI of a county reflects only news items from other countries and not news items from its own news sites

Network Analysis

We used network analysis to understand the international context in which countries were mentioned. This provided us with the relational aspect of the geosophy reflected in online news sources. A series of previous studies (Barnett, Jacobson, Choi, and Sun-Miller, 1996; Chase-Dunn and Grimes, 1995; Maoz, 2011; Maoz, Terris, Kuperman, and Talmud, 2007; Nemeth and Smith, 1985) demonstrated the benefits of network analysis in understanding the world's political and economic systems, the relative position of countries in that network and transnational interactions between them. Network analysis has also been used to chart and display the structure and flow of international and intercultural communication (Barnett, 2001; Barnett, Danowski, and Richards; 1993; Barnett and Lee, 2002; Barnett and Sung, 2005; Kim and Barnett, 1996; Monge and Contractor, 2003; Park, 2003). Many of these studies point to the centrality of North America and Western Europe in the production and dissemination of information, particularly of international news.

Unlike previous network studies surveying the diffusion of international news, in the present study network analysis emerges not from the flow but from the actual content of news. To uncover the web of relations linking countries of the world to Israel and Palestine, we studied news items that mentioned the protagonists with other countries in the same item. For example, a *New York Times* news story from February 4, 2009 entitled "Gaza war creates rift between Israel and Turkey," mentioned Israel, Turkey, and one of the two Palestinian entities in the same item. A cumulative international network emerges when countries are considered as nodes, and news items about them provide a descriptive map of the links between them (hereafter: "news-links"). Constructing the cumulative relations between nodes

as an international network helps demonstrate the standing of Israel and Palestine in the international news environment, as well as the countries with which they are more frequently engaged. It should be noted that the analysis that follows is not necessarily a representation of actual political relations between countries, but rather a representation of the geographies of the journalistic mind: the shape and contours of the international network as reflected by popular news sources.

In order to limit biases of self-reporting, we only counted in this analysis news-links that did not mention the country in which the news was posted. For instance, we did not count news-links between the US and Israel from American or Israeli news sites, but we did count news-links between the US and Israel from British, French, German, Iranian or Chinese news sites. We used Visone software for network analysis (Brandes and Wagner, 2004), in order to produce visual representations of networks of news-links between Israel, Palestine and other countries, and demonstrate their relative position in the network.

Results

Salience Index

The Salience Index of the ten most prominent countries in the news from around the world is portrayed in Figure 1. It shows that Israel and Palestine are ranked fifth and sixth most prominent countries, with about 4% of news items mentioning them. Discounting mentioning of the US—the uncontested world news hegemon—Israel and Palestine are close contenders for leadership in the news of the world.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The varying salience of Israel and Palestine in news sites of different countries is portrayed in Figure 2. It demonstrates three levels of news attention. The first level includes news sites from the Middle East: Egyptian sites and news sites in Arabic that mentioned Israel and Palestine in 34.9% and 16.4% of their news stories, respectively. The second level includes news sites from Iran (5.9%), the US (4.9%), and European countries, including France (5.7%), Germany (4.1%), Spain (4.1%) and the UK (3.6%). The third level includes news sites from Asian and East European countries: Japan (2%), Russia (1.9%) and China 1.6%) that mentioned Israel and Palestine the least.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

News Topics

Figure 3 displays the salience of Israel and Palestine in different news topics. It shows that aside from the US, Palestine is the most mentioned entity in the "top news" of the world, with Israel following closely (6.3-6.7%). Palestine and Israel are also very high in the "world news" category (5.1-6.4%). They are mentioned least in the business news section (0-0.5%)—a category in which Palestine was not mentioned even once in our sample.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

There are gaps between the salience of Israel and of Palestine across news topics. In world news Israel has a higher salience score than Palestine, as it is mentioned also in other contexts such as its conflicts with Iran or Turkey. It is also mentioned in the technology and business sections, while Palestine is not mentioned in those sections at all. Palestine, on the other hand, has a higher salience score in the culture and entertainment section. A closer reading of the content of these news items reveals that Palestine and its conflict with Israel is a subject for theater plays, films and books.

But the most striking statistic concerning the stature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the world's online news is the extent of top stories that it produces. "Top news" reflects a combination of the extent and intensity of interest in the conflict, as well as of the importance attributed to it. The position of Israel and Palestine among other countries in the top news category is shown in Figure 4. Beside the world's hegemon—the United States—Palestine and Israel are the world's top headline makers, with more than 6% of news items mentioning each one of them.

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

Temporal Patterns

In analyzing the news salience of all countries over the two-year sampling period, Israel on the one hand, and China on the other, displayed opposing trends: the more you get of one, the less you get of the other. A Pearson correlation test of the changes in the news prominence from one month to another reveals a significant negative correlation between the two countries ($r = -.428$, $p < .05$). Put differently, China and Israel seem to take turns in dominating world news. Immediately after the Gaza War that took place in the beginning of 2009, Israel's news salience declined (Figure 5). But at the same time the riots in Xinjiang, attracted considerable international attention. China made further headlines following Obama's visit there. In 2010, however, events featuring Israel (Dubai plot and the Flotilla) drew intensive international attention at the "expense" of China.

While news trends of China were negatively correlated with news trends of Israel, news trends of Palestine were positively correlated with those of Israel ($r = .83$, $p < .001$). The very strong positive correlation between the two suggests that they are almost always mentioned together. In other words, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the main context in which each one of them is mentioned in the international news. Apart from China and Palestine, news trends of other countries were not significantly correlated with those of Israel.

[Insert Figure 5 about here]

Networks

In support of the previous finding, the international news-link network of Israel (Figure 6) clearly shows that Israel is mostly mentioned in relation to Palestine (730 news-links out of 1010), and to a lesser extent to the US (210 news links). But beyond these dyads there is a well-connected cluster of news-links focused on the Middle East, that also includes the US, the UN and Russia. The connection to these other players would appear to reflect the traditional deep impact and involvement that external powers had on Middle Eastern affairs. Some European entities, such as the UK, France, Germany, and the EU are mentioned in relation to both Israel and Palestine, possibly reflecting their more specific role as would-be mediators in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Other countries such as India and Brazil are mentioned in relation to Israel alone without an apparent regional context.

There is no significant correlation between how often a country mentioned Israel in its news sites, and the extent of its news links with Israel or its network centrality. For example, Iran has more news links with Israel (95) than with France (36), Germany (17) or the UK (16), but it mentioned Israel in its news sites less than the latter countries. This suggests that news attention given by country A to country B does not necessarily reflect the actual relationship between those countries, but rather a particular interest in country B. In our case, the interest of European news sites in Israel cannot be explained by the actual relationships between Israel and European countries, but rather by the particular interest of Europe in

Israel, due to—we presume—historical, religious and journalistic reasons, as will be discussed below.

[Insert Figure 6 about here]

Discussion

The particularly high prominence of Israel and Palestine in online news worldwide cannot be explained by the intensity of their conflict, simply since there were no major conflagrations between them during the period of our analysis. Surely, it cannot be explained by their size, population, or economic power. We are inevitably left with explanations from the ideological, cultural, and religious fields, charting a particular geosophy, as it interfaces with practices of foreign news reporting by the media. It is well beyond the scope of this study to systematically survey and operationalize the geosophy that gives Israel and Palestine their anomalous salience in news coverage worldwide. However, by way of a shorthand scheme, the classic journalistic queries of "who," "what," "when," and "where" may direct us to further investigate the "why" (Manoff and Schudson, 1986).

The simplest may be "where"—a land and a capital city that are household words in numerous national cultures, the cradle of monotheistic religion and the wellspring of Judeo-Christian culture. But Jerusalem (let alone Tel Aviv) also happens to be a place in which journalists can roam freely and comfortably, without the threat of being restricted or interfered with, let alone beheaded. In Israel, journalists would appear to experience more lavish freedom (as well as physical comfort) than in any other conflict zone around the world today.

But "when" is also a key: in a world experiencing deep and bewildering change, the veteran Middle Eastern conflict provides a sense of orientation and closure—a newsy, hyperactive, stability—in which journalists are proficient enough to ever find a hot new twist in the comfortably familiar old story. Moreover, as demonstrated by journalist Thomas Friedman (e.g., 1999, 2007), this island of irrational coherence is repeatedly used as a key, even a model, for trying to understand deep-going transformations that a globalizing world is experiencing.[5] Our findings regarding the temporal patterns clearly show that news about Israel and Palestine systematically appears at the "expense" of news about China. Certainly, both Israel and Palestine in the Middle East and China in Asia have a very significant geopolitical impact. But since they very often compete on the same news slot, another possible explanation would be that high media covered might divert the attention from current local events. The exceptionally high prominence of 35% given to Israel in Egyptian news sites during the two years preceding the Arab Spring provides an initial support for this assertion.

The ultimate focus of the "who" factor seems to be on the Jewishness of (most) Israelis and the Arabness of the Palestinians. To the Western world Arabs and Jews represent exceptionally intriguing, perhaps even thrilling "others". Orientalism has preoccupied western culture for centuries (Said, 1978; Said, Bayoumi and Rubin, 2000), and ever since September 11, and the west's harsh military response to the presumed "War on America," this awareness and wariness has been heightened, achieving further salience with the turbulence of the 'Arab Spring'. Similarly, the complex and tragic relationship between Jews and Christians over the past two millennia is too obvious and too well documented to require a detailed discussion. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict enables westerners to focus on these captivating protagonists as they engage each other, and allows them to choose their saints and sinners, christ and antichrists, from among them with some detachment. Indeed our findings show that the attention to the conflict is much higher among westerners—European countries and the US—than among Asian countries.

The "what" of the conflict is surely poignant to observers worldwide, and may be seen as an extension of "who." As noted, the conflict may be a convenient, fashionable proxy for the overall encounter between the orient and the occident, North and South. To some it is the story of colonialism and orientalism playing itself out, to others it is foreplay for the clash of civilizations, in a globalizing world. But to all it may serve as an anchor for penetrating the complexities of our troubled contemporary world and for speculating on its future. It seems to serve media as a parable for that which is essential, whether the world is facing salvation or an Armageddon.

Given these answers to the journalistic Ws, the ungainly salience of Israel and Palestine, particularly in the top news section of various news sites around the world, seems to have deep and complex reasons, inviting further studies and operationalization. But at the same time this significantly high media attention may also have some drawbacks. So heavily laden with history, symbolism, emotion, and soul-searching, it may in fact be an unfortunate diversion from urgent and costly conflicts that happen to take place at the less flat areas of our supposedly flat world.

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Elad Segev is a senior lecturer of Media and Communications at Tel Aviv University, the Department of Communication. He obtained his Ph.D. from the Research Institute for Law, Politics and Justice at Keele University in England. His research interests include online news bias, search engines, trends of Americanization and cultural diversity, social networks, and new applications and methodologies for utilizing data mining in new media research. His studies are published in books and leading journals in the field of communication and new media, such as the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication (JCMC) and the Information Society Journal (TIS).

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Table 1
Countries and news sites included in the study (Feb. 2009 – Nov. 2010)

Country	News sites
USA	Google News, CNN, NYTimes
UK	Google News, BBC, Guardian
Israel	Google News, Ynet, Haaretz
Germany	Google News, Bild, Spiegel
France	Google News, Le Monde, Le Figaro
Spain	Google News, El Mundo, El Pais
Russia	Google News, Gazeta, Pravda
Arabic	Google News, Al Jazeera
Egypt	Al Ahram, Al Masry Alyoum
Iran	PressTV, Tabnak, Aftab
China	Google News, Sina, People Daily
Japan	Google News, NHK, Yomiuri, Yahoo
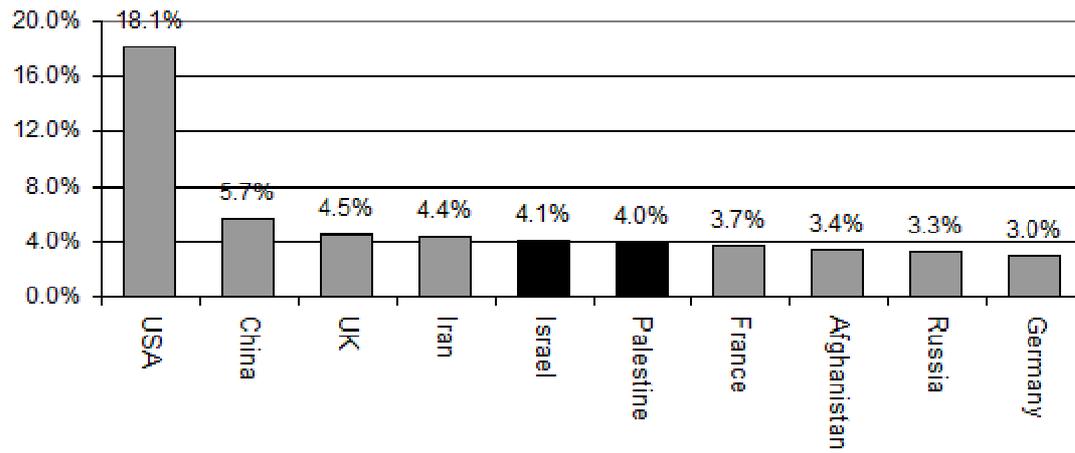
Figure 1. Salience Index of the leading ten countries
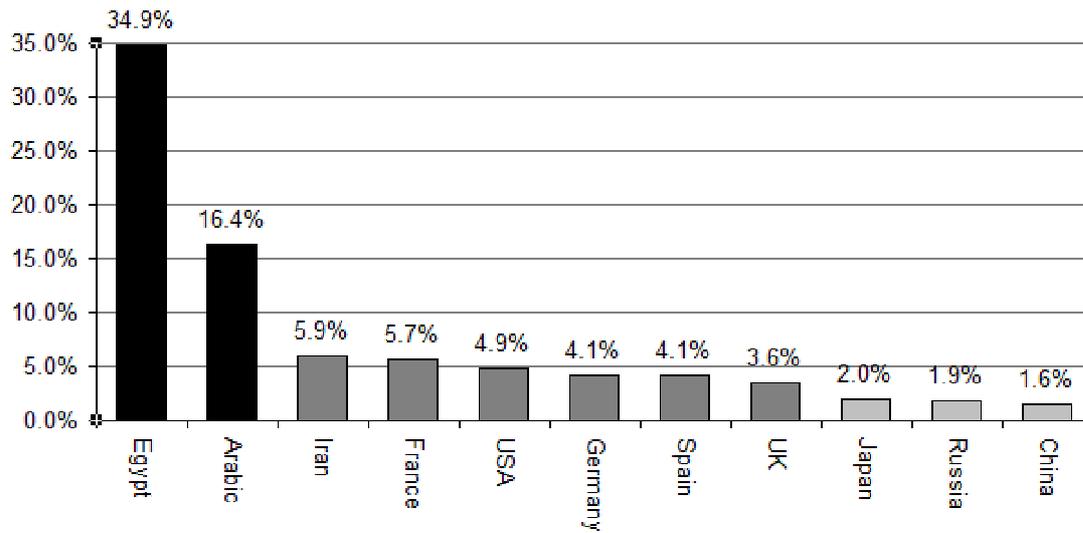
Figure 2. The salience of Israel and Palestine in the news of 10 leading countries
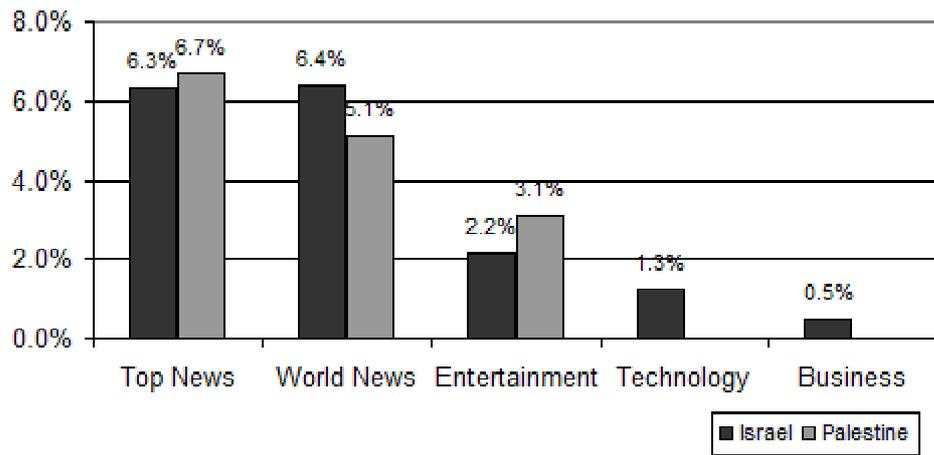
Figure 3. The salience of Israel and Palestine across different news sections
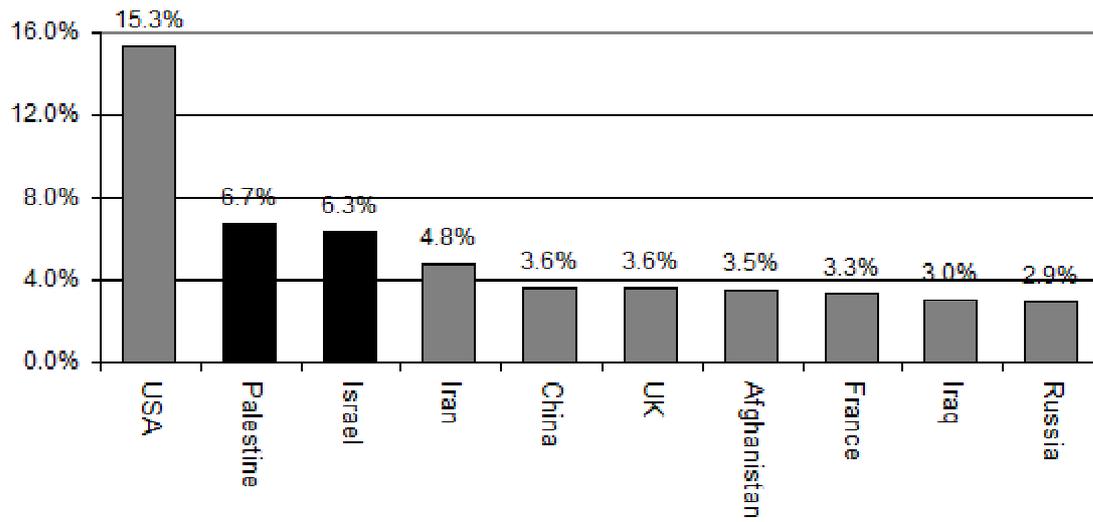
Figure 4. The salience of the ten leading countries in the "top news" category
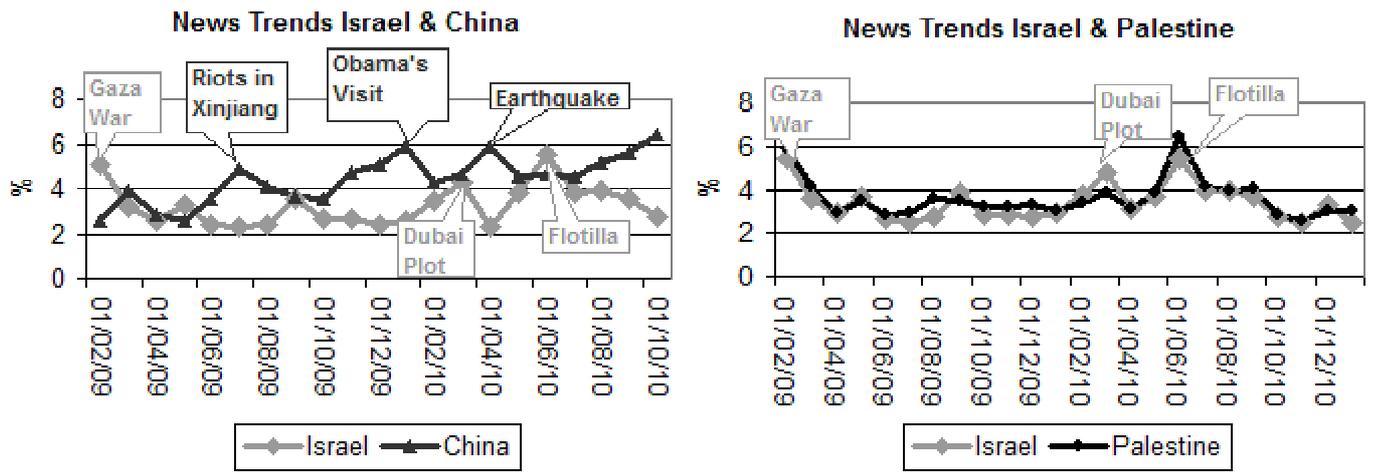
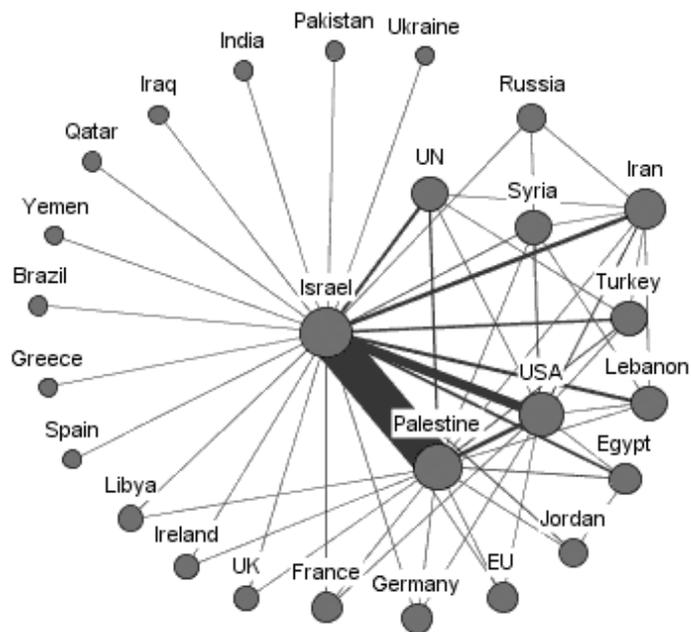*Figure 5*. Trends in the news salience of Israel, China and Palestine

Figure 6. The network of Israel's news-links in news sites from around the world
Note. The size of the nodes reflects their centrality-level, based on their eigenvector values.
The width of the links reflects the number of news items mentioning each pair of countries.

Footnotes

[1] The Palestinian Authority is not strictly a country, and the study also includes the UN and the EU.

[2] The popularity of news sites was determined by cross referencing of several indicators and sources, including the recent statistics provided by the World Association of Newspapers (http://www.wan-press.org/worldpresstrends/articles.php?id=18), the State of the News Media in 2008 (http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2008/narrative_yearinnews_online.php?cat=2&media=2), Nielsen online (http://www.nielsen-online.com), IVW (Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V.), news rating surveys in Russia (http://www.superjob.ru/research/articles/613/), BBC News (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5334828.stm) and direct surveys among media scholars from different countries. The list of popular news site was further supported and validated by online tools such as Alexa, Google Trends and Google Insights for Search.

[3] Google News did not include special Egyptian or Iranian editions in the course of our study, but we used its Arabic edition as well as Al Jazeera as more general and popular news sources in the Arab world.

[4] Based on the most complete list of country names available from ISO (International Organization for Standardization). For Palestine we used "Gaza" and "West Bank" as possible synonyms. This list was translated into the following languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese (Mandarin), Japanese, Persian, Arabic and Hebrew.

[5] This reliance on the veteran conflict may account for Friedman's initial discussion of the dramatic upheaval in Egypt as a mere backdrop for developments in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: B.E., Before Egypt. A.E., After Egypt. *New York Times*, 1 February 2011.