



# The Israeli Mossad and the media: Historical and theoretical perspectives



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## ABSTRACT

This essay presents for the first time an integrated and comprehensive historical analysis of the relationship between the external intelligence service in Israel, the Mossad, and the media. The theoretical framework of this research demonstrates the significance of analyzing the relationship through the lens of a challenge–response model, based primarily on public relations literature. Since different changes have taken place in society, culture and media, it is crucial to define what issues the Mossad faced during each era in order to accurately evaluate its strategic communications. The Mossad's ability to cope efficiently with crisis situations was majorly influenced by the proportions between the challenges and the responses.

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## 1. Introduction

This study aims to shed light on a rather neglected dimension of Western intelligence services: the public dimension. It suggests broadening the perspective on intelligence–media relations through the theoretical fields of public relations and crisis communication. Crisis communication is defined as, “the dialogue between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during and after the negative occurrence” (Fearn-Banks, 2011). It is considered a domain within the field of public relations (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Coombs, 2001). Presented here is a review of the evolution of the relationship between the external Israeli intelligence service (the Mossad) and the Israeli media. These unique developing relations are analyzed through the lens of a proposed model in which the intelligence services' crisis communication is evaluated according to the challenges the service faces.

In several well-known cases, such as the War in Iraq, Western intelligence services played a central role not merely in the shadows but in the public sphere as well (Hastedt, 2005; Hewitt & Lucas, 2009; Kessler, 2003; Tenet & Harlow, 2007). The intelligence community helped influence public opinion and was a major factor in justifying the decision to use force against Saddam Hussein's regime (Diamond, 2008; Lowenthal, 2009). The increasing interest of the global media in the Iranian nuclear weaponry development, led to a certain extent by intelligence services, is an additional example of the centrality of their present role. It is therefore essential to explore these relations and understand the methods utilized by intelligence services when addressing the public via the media.

Despite the growing importance of the relationship between intelligence services and the media, existing research about the topic is scarce and fragmented. There are several significant studies that contribute to the understanding of these unique relations, but the literature survey reveals a few lacunas. Firstly, some of the studies focus on how media cover intelligence communities, providing insight on merely one side of the relationship (Alloush-Levron, 2000; Gup, 2004; Hillebrand, 2012; Sultz-Landau, 1999). Secondly, the vast majority of the existing studies discuss the relations from intelligence and national

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security perspectives and not from public relations perspectives (Katz, 2006; Shapiro, 2001). Dover and Goodman's edited book, *Spinning Intelligence*, focuses on how intelligence services and the media use each other for their own interests and objectives (Dover & Goodman, 2009). It contributes to the discussion of various perspectives of the unique relations, such as: balancing national security and the public's demand for transparency, the US intelligence community and the media following 9/11, the British D-notice system, etc. Hulnick (1999) deals with the media strategies of the American intelligence community and claims it can open itself to a larger degree. He concludes his essay with concrete recommendations for improvement, such as extending the scope of public appearances of CIA officials, collaborating with film and TV producers, among others. Johnson (1986) discusses the dilemmas and ethical issues related to the use of journalists for the purpose of gathering intelligence information, shedding light on the phenomenon. Several studies focus on the gradual process of releasing classified information to the public as part of an altering approach of intelligence services toward the media (Bennett, 2002; Thurlow, 2000).

All the aforementioned studies clearly expand our knowledge. Nevertheless, they do not suggest a comprehensive methodological analysis of strategic communication applied by intelligence services, based on public relations and crisis communication literature. In this sense, Gibson's studies are a rare exception. In Gibson's essay, *The communication dilemma of CIA*, published in this journal, the author depicts the CIA's objective difficulties with opening itself to the public sphere (Gibson, 1987). In a later study Gibson suggests a quantitative description of the FBI's public relations over a 50-year period, focusing on Edgar Hoover's public relations methods applied in magazines, newspapers, books, movies, etc. In the study Gibson (1997) demonstrates how the FBI maintained a positive and firm reputation by aggressive public relations led mainly by the director. Generally, existing research lacks an in-depth discussion or even a detailed description regarding the services' communication strategies and the utilization of PR tactics.

A reasonable explanation for the lack of studies regarding the relationship between intelligence communities and the media (specifically through the field of public relations) may stem from the apparently wide gap between the two worlds. While public relations are by nature extroverted, intelligence services operate within the shadows, away from publicity. Relating the fields of intelligence and public relations may therefore seem contradictory. Moreover, within the intelligence milieu, it may seem insulting to combine the world of intelligence with public relations. However, the lack of studies from a PR perspective leads to a paradox: issues that are mainly about strategic communication and PR are analyzed without the relevant theoretical grounds. *De-facto*, intelligence services apply public relations strategies and tactics, even if they refuse to portray it as such. If we aspire to deeply grasp the dynamics of these relations it is critically important to combine the relevant theoretical fields of public relations and crisis communication. The following study aims to fill this void. It reveals how Israel's external secretive agency, the Mossad, confronted and is still confronting the challenge of "selling" itself to the public, based on analysis of categories derived mainly from the fields of public relations and crisis communication.

## 2. A challenge–response model

Several studies in crisis communication discuss the necessity to correctly evaluate crises in order to respond to them properly (Cho & Gower, 2006; Fearn-Banks, 2011; Kim, Kim, & Cameron, 2009; Schultz, Utz, & Glocka, 2012). This study suggests a further step. Within the framework for analysis not only is there a depiction of the strategies and tactics, but also a detailed description of the social and media contexts in which the crises occurred. Since major changes have taken place in society, culture and media, it is important to define challenges that the organizations faced in each era in order to accurately evaluate their crisis communication in the relevant context. Identifying the correct level of challenge is essential because it assists in determining whether a proportional response was applied. For this reason the following study is developed from a model that consists of a cluster of categories including both the challenges that confronted the organization in crisis situations, as well as the responses provided to these challenges.

The challenge cluster provides categories for understanding the social context and conditions under which the intelligence services operated in the different crises. It includes four categories: crisis type, media environment, media functions and organizational communication culture. The response cluster presents both routine and crisis categories designed to assess the responses the intelligence services provided to the challenges. The response categories include the agency director's approach to the media, PR capabilities, new media utilization and strategies, tactics and contingency planning.

The model suggests evaluating each category in both the challenge and response clusters on a scale of three levels: minor, moderate, or major. A moderate score reflects a case that lies between the major and minor evaluation. The database indicates the dominance of the crisis type category in the challenge cluster, and the dominance of the director's approach category in the response cluster. Therefore, both categories were given dominance in the evaluation process (see Table 1). The different categories create a general evaluation of both the challenges and the response clusters. The final phase of the model is to evaluate the relationship between the challenge and response clusters. Fine weighing of strategic communication, strategies and tactics is difficult or even impossible. The above method was designed mainly to assist scholars to *evaluate* the relationship on a minor–major axis. This may suggest a simplification of the topic, but it also translates as an advantage, for it allows a clear view of the strategic communication and its relevance to the context in which the crisis occurs (Fig. 1).

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