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Journalism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and democracy in Israel

Kurzfassung: Basierend auf Interviews mit 32 führenden israelischen Journalisten wird in diesem Aufsatz der Diskurs israelischer Journalisten untersucht, die über die COVID-19-Pandemie und ihre Auswirkungen auf die israelische Demokratie berichten.

Hauptergebnis der Studie ist eine große Lücke zwischen dem, was die Journalisten geschrieben und gesendet haben, und dem, wovon sie meinten, dass es hätte geschrieben und gesendet werden sollen. Diese Lücke impliziert, dass ein bedeutender Teil der Medien nur "taktisch" regierungskritisch war und keine tiefere "strategische" Analyse der Pandemie und der damit verbundenen politischen Krise – einschließlich der Fragilität der israelischen Demokratie – hatte. Aus dieser Lücke folgt unserer Ansicht nach, dass die israelische Demokratie einen gefährlichen Scheideweg erreicht hat.

Abstract: Based on interviews with 32 leading Israeli journalists, this paper intends to probe the discourse of Israeli journalists reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on Israeli democracy.

The main outcome of the study is a major gap between what the journalists said had been written and broadcasted and what they said should have been written and broadcasted. This gap implies that a significant segment of the media was actually only "tactically" critical of the government and lacked any deeper "strategic" analysis of the pandemic and its related political crisis   including the fragility of Israel's democracy. What follows, in our view, from this gap is that Israel's democracy has reached a dangerous crossroads.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Israel has faced a deepening crisis both with regard to its governability and its democracy. None of the three successive elections held in Israel over a very short period of time (April 2019, September 2019, March 2020) had clear outcomes, so that it was impossible to form a reasonable and stable majority government. In 2020 the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic hit Israel hard, adding to its political and constitutional crisis. The outcome was an ongoing series of tensions between the political establishment and many journalists. There were continuing clashes with regard to freedom of the press — for instance concerning governmental corruption. Since we were simultaneously facing a political-constitutional crisis and a pandemic, we decided it was the right time to approach Israeli journalists in order to inquire about their handling of the crises, and to explore the research question:

> "What did the journalists we interviewed think about the COVID-19 crisis and, retroactively about its coverage by the press and the media, and how did it impinge on Israel's democracy?"

This project is pertinent to the basic theoretical discourse about journalism and politics: In what sense do journalists and editors reflect the major opinion trends in the political and social elites, even when they are aware that their reporting is flawed, unprofessional and uncritical?

Accordingly, the questions we raised in the interviews were varied and related to the following issues: Is the overall cover of the pandemic in the press conformist or critical? Is it similar to the coverage in times of war? Does it — as one often sees in wartimes — develop from a conformist to a more critical coverage of the government? Is the criticism one sided, that is, left or right, or do we discern criticism on both sides? Is it mainly tactical or strategic? On the whole, does the press coverage strengthen or weaken the political establishment? Does it uncover cracks in Israel's democracy? Are the journalists, like in times of war, torn between their loyalty to state and nation and their professional ethics? [1]

2. Research method

The research intended to deal with how the journalists viewed what was being written and broadcast about the pandemic and its effect on democracy, as well as on their views on these issues. As such, it was only through a qualitative-phenomenological approach that we could pursue our objectives.

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[1] On state-press relations in times of war see Lynch & McGoldrick (2005); Shinar (2003); Wolfsfeld (2004).

According to the phenomenological approach, people's day-to-day lives are structured by their social knowledge and experience. This structure remains coherent — even in the face of new experiences, which cannot be absorbed intuitively and spontaneously — since it leads to reflection on changed realities. This means that human experience is rooted in the individual's thoughts, feelings, memories, reflections, and intuitive responses. People's perceptions of the self and the environment are hence in constant flux, dependent on their interaction with the environment and on interpersonal relations.[2]

The strength of phenomenological research is its representation of an authentic point of view of human reality, which the interviewee experiences during his talks with the interviewer at a given time and place.[3]

In order to accomplish this, we conducted in-depth interviews with open-ended questions, bringing together a rich narrative of reality as perceived by the journalists who took part in the research, and enabling us to present as broad an interpretation as possible of the interaction between the three elements discussed here: journalism, COVID-19 and democracy.

The standard sample size in qualitative research is somewhere between 8 and 15 subjects, but we tended to interview a larger number of journalists from different backgrounds in order to cover a wider range of newspapers, media and individuals (men and women, Jews and Arabs, secular and religious, editors and journalists).

It was quite difficult to get the journalists cooperate on this research project. The main reason for their reluctance was the sensitivity of the research topic and the journalists' fear that we would not respect their anonymity. We approached 60 people active in the media, but only 32 agreed to be interviewed, and that only after we assured them their anonymity would be strictly protected. One interviewee, for instance, insisted to see our IDs in order to verify our identity, while another demanded to be presented only with apolitical questions about the pandemic. In short, the conditions under which Israeli journalists are forced to work, mainly their fear of losing their jobs, was clear from the outset.

Between April and June 2020, at the height of the first COVID-19 wave in Israel, we finally conducted interviews with 32 leading Israeli journalists, all of whom write, edit, and broadcast, or are otherwise active in Israel's major newspapers, radio stations, and television networks. 21 interviewees were male, and 11 were female. Most of them were relatively young (13 in their thirties or forties, and 16 in their fifties and sixties; only 3 were over 70). The majority were Jews (29 Jews and 3 Arabs). Half the interviewees wrote for private newspapers, while the other half were broadcasting on public radio and television stations.

The interviews were carried out in Hebrew, over Zoom and lasted between one and one and a half hours per interview. The participants preferred to be interviewed in their natural surroundings (usually at home) at a time of their own choosing, so that they would feel comfortable to express their views freely. The journalists covered a wide array of subjects: health, politics, military affairs and culture. They, as well as their employers, were from the Left and the Right of the political map, supporters and opponents of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and its policies. All the participants asked for anonymity during the interviews — as we shall see further on — in their eyes for good reasons.[4]

Although there was a fixed set of straight questions, the interviewer also addressed related issues raised by the interviewees themselves.[5] According to the phenomenological approach, a half-structured interview does not assume the existence of "objective truths," but aims to assess the phenomenon under observation — in our case the effect of a pandemic on journalistic reporting and, ultimately, on the resilience of democracy.

The questions we raised in the interviews were the following:

- To what extent do you think there is reason to be concerned about the state of Israel's democracy?
- In what way is there a connection between the handling of the health crisis and the democratic-political crisis?
- Was the governmental decision-making process with regard to the corona crisis objective-professional or was it tainted by the prime minister's personal and political interests?
- According to you were the journalists who reported most professionally on the COVID-19 crisis in the media and the press necessarily those who usually cover health problems?
- To what extent was the media coverage free and pluralistic and to what extent did it follow the prime minister's statements in his daily press conferences?
- How were different outsider communities (e.g. the *Haredi* Ultra-Orthodox or the Arabs) covered in the press?

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[2] See Shkedi (2009); Hill, Thompson & Williams (1997).
[3] See Heikkien (2002).
[4] On qualitative research in general, see Shkedi (2009); Hill, Thompson & Williams (1997); Berg & Lune (2004).
[5] Berg & Lune (2004).

- Did the coverage in the press contribute to the widespread public hysteria about the pandemic or did it have a calming influence — and if so, how?
- What do you think about the government's use of emergency regulations and the secret service during the health crisis?
- If the infringement on civil liberties continues after the end of the health crisis, in what way will these measures will have a lasting impact, posing a real danger to Israel's democracy?
- Did the discourse on the media offer real alternatives on how to deal with the COVID-19 crisis?

We specifically asked the interviewees to avoid short, "yes-no" answers, and to expand and clarify their thoughts.

3. Interviews and analysis

3.1 A balanced coverage?

The majority of journalists we interviewed were deeply divided, on the question whether the coverage of the pandemic in the media and the press was balanced and non-partisan, or not.

A good part of them thought that it was indeed fair, that it covered basic facts as presented by supporters of the government and its policies, and by other, more critical voices. Interestingly, many thought that journalists specializing in health affairs tended to be less open to a variety of views and were inclined to go along with what they were told by governmental agencies. In their view, the "better" coverage was by "generalists," that is, by experienced journalists who deal not only with health issues, but also with politics and economics. Some of the journalists we interviewed criticized the press for not doing enough in-depth research, what we may call investigative journalism, for not questioning what they were told by government spokesmen.

> The corona crisis is not only a problem of public health, but one that closely affects other fields, such as economics, science, politics, foreign affairs, governance and administration, law and policing, the periphery and minorities. It is therefore clear that seasoned reporters and journalists who had covered national crises in the past would do a better job in covering the COVID-19 crisis. Even sports journalists started writing about a pandemic that led to the postponement of the Olympic Games, and the basketball and soccer leagues.
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> (Interview 3, 14/4/2020)

A good part of the journalists was also highly critical of the press and the media coverage of the crisis.[6] They considered that there was insufficient reporting on the politics of governmental decision making, that the coverage was too conformist and hegemonial, that the experts interviewed were mainly establishment experts (and always the same experts) who did not question the theories and explanations offered by the government. It is well-known phenomenon that the views expressed by editors and journalists in the media reflect only the range of opinions current among the elite.[7] As a result, the director of Israel's largest hospital, for instance, was more or less boycotted by the media because of his highly critical views of government policies. Nor was there sufficient coverage of antigovernment demonstrations with regard to the government's handling of the crisis.

> News reports clearly emphasized the shortage of testing. This was seemingly a decision of the editors. The problematic decisions taken by the government were hardly mentioned. One such example was the imposition of a general lockdown on *all* the towns and cities, regardless of whether morbidity was exceptionally high, as was the case in cities with a mainly ultra-Orthodox population [subjected to the authority of leading rabbis who decided to ignore the medical establishment's recommendations]. The rationale behind this policy was quite clearly a political one.
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> [Interview 2, 12/4/2020]

3.2 Political manipulation?

Some of the journalists interviewed differentiated between professional, balanced and fair reporting of the majority of journalists and the highly politicized and non-professional coverage of the crisis as reflected in some of the newspapers, and on radio stations and television channels, known for their strong support of Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Likud Party.

When asked whether they think that the government's handling of the pandemic crisis involved political calculations, or even personal interests of the major decision-makers, such as the prime minister himself and the minister of health, nearly all journalists, independently of their political sympathies, agreed that the decisions were highly politicized and were not taken solely against the background of professional medical or economic

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[6] On criticism and the media see Neiger, Zandberg & Meyers (2010).
[7] Bennett (1990).

considerations. They all thought that Netanyahu was manipulating the presentation of and decisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in order to pressurize the main opposition party to join a "national unity and emergency government," and thus to weaken any serious challenges to his rule. He conveyed the message through daily, hysterical speeches in which he warned of "tens of thousands possible COVID-19 pandemic deaths," and by presenting himself as the country's savior, meanwhile accusing the opposition of dealing in "petty politics." The vast majority of the journalists we interviewed agreed that the prime minister and his Likud party effectively used the crisis to divert the public's attention from the criminal proceedings against Netanyahu and prevent the opposition from challenging Netanyahu. In order to reinforce this message, Netanyahu emphasized that it was he who was in charge of all decision making — major or minor (even to the extent of deciding which factory was to be closed and which not).

> I don't think that there was overreporting of the pandemic crisis because it is truly an unprecedent crisis. However, one must admit that most journalists did not relate to anything connected with politics or democracy.

> [Interview 2, 12/4/2020]

The reporters also accused the ministers of health and of the interior (both from the Ultra-Orthodox coalition parties) of clear, partisan political manipulations of the decision-making process. Thus, after declaring a lockdown when nobody was allowed to enter Israel, an exception was made for thousands of Ultra-Orthodox American *yeshiva*s (religious schools of higher education) students, who did enter the country. It turned out that many of the U.S. students carried the COVID-19 virus and thus significantly worsened the pandemic situation in Israel. Similarly, the Ultra-Orthodox coalition parties insisted that different rules should apply to their constituencies. As a result, the government was quite lax when imposing lockdowns in Ultra-Orthodox towns and neighborhoods. They also insisted that the rules about crowd gathering did not apply to Ultra-Orthodox places of worship and religious ritual baths (*mikveh*, in Hebrew).

Most journalists agreed that Netanyahu has effectively used the pandemic to destroy the main opposition party "Blue and White" by enticing part of it to join the coalition. He did so by offering nearly all their members of parliament ministerial positions in a bloated, so-called "emergency government" of 36 ministers. At the same time, he also used the pandemic to postpone his trial by closing the courts for a month, and this despite the fact that there was general agreement that there were no genuine health reasons to do so. He used the pandemic the same way to weaken a legislature that could have threatened his ability to stay in office.

> Netanyahu put on a daily reality show on television, including a daily press conference where no one was allowed to ask any questions. Even Trump answers questions of journalists. The Israeli prime minister thus appeared in the media as the tutor and father figure of the nation, disintegrating the opposition in a very sophisticated manner. His public relation skills were extremely effective as he used the pandemic to advance his personal and political agenda — while at the same time cornering the opposition. For example, by repeatedly talking of the emergency situation, he managed to impel the main opposition party, Gantz's "Blue and White" party into joining a so-called "emergency government" — a coalition he almost totally controls. He thus neutralized any possible effective opposition.

> [Interview 6, 19/4/2020]

> Netanyahu's tactics were very effective in disarming his opponents. There is no doubt that at every stage of the corona crisis he had his eye mainly on his own political standing.

> [Interview 15, 3/5/2020]

According to nearly all journalists the prime minister used the crisis to manipulate the public by staging daily "press conferences" in which reporters were not allowed to ask any questions — a highly unwonted procedure in any democracy. He mobilized his base by urging them to demonstrate against the courts, and thus probably preventing the latter from deciding that it was illegal for a prime minister indicted with serious corruption charges from remaining in office. Some journalists furthermore noted that once the prime minister had achieved his political goals, the handling of the crisis had become more professional.

> "Emergency government," "emergency," "emergency laws" — each of these was misused for political aims under the cover of the COVID-19 crisis. They were mere justifications and excuses. Basically, all knew that they were being manipulated. But I won't give grades. One must understand it as consumer policy by the press and the other media. If one wants to understand, one understands, because the unfolding picture is basically very clear. But people tend to believe what they want to be true. That's how the herd instinct works. In stressful situations, people don't want to hear about democracy or about constitutional issues.

> [Interview 18, 5/5/2020]

When asked how in their view the media and the press were dealing with the serious political and constitutional crisis that faced the country, concurrently with a worldwide pandemic crisis, almost *everybody* claimed, like the major experts on Israeli politics in academia, that the government's doing amounted to a major threat to Israeli democracy. By and large, they said, the media and newspapers did not deal seriously enough with the deepening politicization of the courts, the police and the state comptroller — with the exception of one major daily, Ha'aretz. As to the question whether this reflected a right-wing, pro-Netanyahu trend of the majority of journalists, the answer was that the media was in fact imposing self-censorship and covered only what was considered a popular viewpoint amongst the wider population. The media bowed to pressure not only from above, namely the government, but also from below, that is, the public's media ratings.[8] One of the interviewees explained the possible gap between the political views of many journalists and how they covered the democratic crisis in the country by the government's effective manipulation by way of what he called the "psychology of the masses" or, in other words, the herd instinct. The journalists worded serious complaints about the fact that pluralism in the media was in short supply and that most journalists had adjusted to a nationalist-rightist discourse — without being aware that they were doing so.

Another question addressed the question as to whether the media coverage was similar to that in times of war. Did it spread fear and panic? Did it truly reflect the messages of the government? The interviewees agreed that the government encouraged, mainly for political self-serving reasons, an hysterical overreaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. The media and press agendas urged them to follow suit. And, indeed, ratings went up abruptly whenever the pandemic covered most of the news. The prime minister's daily speeches to the nation were beneficial to him and to his party, as well as to the media and its ratings. In no other country was there such an excessive reaction to the crisis by the government, nor was there such a clear reflection in the media of this governmental hysteria.

> A quality press should cover *all* aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the "holes in the Swiss cheese" and what the government is misleadingly trying to sell to the public. The public only sees the daily, orchestrated appearances of the prime minister on television, but journalists are supposed to look beyond this, to report the truth, to criticize and uncover the lies, to ask questions.

> [Interview 23, 7/5/2020]

According to prevalent communication theories, war reporting is characterized by sensationalism, personalization, and excessive patriotism. And indeed, the common interest shared by the Israeli prime minister and the media led to a warlike 24/7 coverage of the daily pandemic news.[9] The journalists interviewed justified the overblown coverage by saying it was not their task to calm down the situation and that the depth of the medical crisis, and even more so of the economic crisis, was as yet unknown. Broadly speaking, reporting on pandemics, like wartime reporting, inclines to simplistic descriptions, without any in-depth analysis of the causes and consequences of the disease.

> The pandemic means fear, and then even more fear. The media need ratings, and fear increases ratings — especially if it is spread by politicians through means of mass communication. Though the media now put the blame on politicians, in fact they were equally responsible for fomenting fear — if not more so. Journalists did not put pressure on the prime minister, demanding to be allowed to ask questions. In the USA, if the president does not answer questions, he pays a price for it. In Israel, the prime minister is given the freedom to talk, without having to answer questions, and he is not penalized for it. Even worse, journalists think there is nothing wrong with it. In this sense, too, it is possible that the media are even more at fault than the politicians — first by spreading a message, then by spreading fear, and finally by not allowing other voices to be heard.

> [Interview 26, 10/5/2020]

3.3 Coverage of the major minorities

One important question we asked the interviewees related to the coverage of two "outsider populations" in Israel — the Israeli Arabs (both Muslim and Christian) and the Jewish religious *Haredim* (i.e. the Ultra-Orthodox). With regard to the Haredim, the journalists divided into two groups. The more secular group said that the coverage was highly critical, and justifiably so since it uncovered the high infection rate in the Haredi neighborhoods and towns. They blamed the rabbis for calling on their flocks to disregard lockdown instructions and the prohibition to attend large gatherings of people. Some rabbis were quoted as ordering yeshiva students to continue gathering, even in closed spaces, for their religious studies, thus countermanding clear directives by the Ministry of Health.

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[8] On press-state relations in the United States, see Bennett (1990).
[9] On coverage of the press in times of war and peace, see Hanitzsch (2005); Wolfsfeld (2004); Shinar (2003); Lynch & McGoldrick (2005).

The same applied to religious ritual baths. Many journalists argued that the press's criticism of the Haredi health minister (a leader of the Ultra-Orthodox *Tora Judaism* party) was far too lenient and politically correct.

> The Haredi population was not reported accurately in the media. In reality, Haredi behavior was outrageous throughout the pandemic, and has led to a superfluous increment in the number of people infected. Overall, they were given far too lenient coverage.

> [Interview 17, 3/5/2020]

Some said that no logical explanation was given in the press for the minister's behavior, and that there was nearly total silence why the selfsame health minister moved to become housing minister when the unity government was formed. One explanation thereof is that this would serve the housing needs of the Haredi community, which means he would act politically about housing as he had in matters of health.

The other group consisted of Haredi, and some non-Haredi, members of the press: they claimed almost the exact opposite. They attacked the media for its "unfair treatment" of the Haredi community. The coverage, they said, was outrageous, even antagonistic. According to them, the Haredi population was, overall, following the rules, and the press "incitement" against them was mainly politically motivated.

> With regard to the Haredi population, initial coverage was very good, but as soon as it became clear that there was a high infection rate among this population, the discussion became highly emotional and intemperate — as is wont to happen in Israel. The media started reporting on a cataclysmic disaster that was coming, so that the dialogue became demagogic and defamatory towards the Haredi population.

> [Interview 28, 10/5/2020]

A third group of journalists regarded the coverage of the Haredim as basically fair and sensitive.

The journalists' evaluation of the coverage of the Arab minority was similar in that it lacked unanimity. Most reporters thought that the Israeli-Hebrew media had largely underreported on the situation in the Arab sector, for instance; that there was almost total silence on the importance of the life-saving role played by the Arabs throughout the health system — their direct involvement in the crisis as doctors, nurses, pharmacists and paramedics. Similarly, what Arab leaders had to report or say was largely ignored. Most interviewees emphasized that the reporting, especially in the rightist press and media, was unfair, degrading and deeply prejudiced. Some, however, claimed that the overall coverage in the Israeli media was fair, and that, unlike in the Haredi case, the Arabs were not accused of causing or spreading the pandemic.

> With regard to the Arab population, there has always been underreporting in Israel. This has remained so. They were simply ignored.

> [Interview 28, 10/5/2020]

Altogether, there was almost general agreement that there was underreporting and relatively negative coverage of the two outsider populations, the Haredim and the Arabs, at the outset of the pandemic, but that in both cases the situation improved gradually later on.

> Reporting on both "outsider communities," the Haredi and the Arab populations, was very shallow. Here and there one could find reporting of some event, but basically there was no consistent in-depth coverage to help the wider population understand what was going on.

> [Interview 29, 11/5/2020]

We may conclude that the media are subjected to two major constraints: the one is connected to a society's social structure, the other to the way we adjust to changing social conditions.[10] Clearly, there is no doubt that reporting on the two "outsider" groups mentioned here is very much connected to their place in the social structure of Israel's society.

3.4 On the deterioration of democracy

As to the critical question about the stability of Israel's democracy, *all* the interviewees thought that it was in deep crisis. All but one (who refused to speak about democracy and agreed to talk only about the COVID-19 pandemic) devoted much of the interview to this question. They spoke of their "deep concern," the "blatant dangers" and of "gliding along a slippery slope towards fascism." Though most linked the crisis to Netanyahu's more than 10-year-long stay in office, *all* agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has sharply increased the antidemocratic trends — the "populist" policies of the prime minister, his tendency to rule as a "one-man show,"

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[10] Althaus, Edy, Entman & Phalen (1996); Livingston & Bennett (2003); Livingston & van Belle (2005); Bläsi *(*2004).

his "monarchical rule," and "tyranny," the Likud's incitement against the Arab minority (seen as "terrorists") and against "leftists" and "liberals" (seen as "anarchists," or even "traitors"). Some journalists thought Israel's polity was "a handicapped and restricted" democracy, similar to that of Poland and Hungary. One journalist even compared it to Ceausescu's Romania ("I know what tyranny looks like — from personal experience"). Most of them did not doubt that the prime minister was exploiting the pandemic by sowing panic and thus increase his power and incite his base against his opponents. He created a warlike situation in order to use the secret services to spy on the citizens — something not done in any other democracy worldwide. He succeeded in silencing his critics, temporarily shutting down the courts, and postponing his trial, for apparent "reasons of health — all without any apparent justification. He even tried to use the crisis to annex the West Bank (which for now was prevented by strong opposition by Israel's security establishment, the European Union, the Israel-friendly Arab countries (e.g. Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain), the Democratic Party in the U.S., and even by large sections of world Jewry).

> I think that the political leadership used the situation created by the pandemic in a cynical way. Its approach was apparently democratic as the message was implanted through a continuous mention of "the people" and of "the good and the welfare of the people." The leader [Netanyahu] behaved like an emperor — when the emperor decrees, his subjects obey without questions asked, and no clarifications being offered. Confusion is total, which is part of the process. In this sense, what happens with Trump and Netanyahu, and other leaders in more countries, is very similar. It is interesting, that in all such countries the population is utterly bewildered and disoriented.

[Interview 11, 1/5/2020]

> Many steps that violate democracy have been taken lately. The fear of the government paralyzes many people in the press and the media. Their dependence on the government and the latter's constant threats is not good, not right, and detrimental to the freedom of the press. There is constant threat of closure, of privatization. On the whole, many Israeli politicians don't believe in freedom of the press. They don't tolerate any form of criticism.
>
> Our democracy is indeed flawed.

[Interview 31, 11/5/2020]

> I think there is an ongoing deterioration of democratic citizen rights. At times the steps towards the abyss are small; at times they are much bigger. But they always follow the same route. Last year we faced a major political crisis: three elections held in one year, the parliament's inability to form a government and, finally, the formation of a shaky, so-called unity government, which led to more infighting and less unity. The COVID-19 pandemic was misused as a political tool, which increased the chaos that pervaded the political and the health system. The pandemic was managed (and often mismanaged) by consecutive governments, and always under the same leadership, which lacked legitimacy and lost the confidence of the public. They also implemented critical, economic (and other) decisions, without having the mandate to do so.

[Interview 19, 6/5/2020]

> For nearly a decade there has been a slow, but consistent, erosion of democratic principles, values, customs, and institutions. What surprised me was that until recently, when in the USA people wrote about "illiberal democracy" they meant Poland and Hungary, not Israel. Meanwhile, however, Israel has definitely joined the club. It is crystal clear that democratic processes are only too frequently violated, that the prime minister increasingly takes control of the media, that he directs huge efforts towards the weakening of professional bodies. He continuously endeavors to impose conformity and indoctrination. This has been a ten-year-long development in the Likud Party, as all members who believe in democracy have left in disgust. They were replaced by people who don't understand anything about democratic norms. The government has used the pandemic to strengthen its non-democratic practices. Examples thereof are the guidelines given to the secret services to encroach on the privacy of Israel's citizens. Initially, the Secret Service was reluctant to do so, but it was forced by the government to implement its policy.

[Interview 32, 26/4/2020]

Many journalists compared the situation with the 1990s, when a well-organized hate campaign led by Netanyahu (at the time the leader of the opposition) led to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. His aim then had been to derail the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords. They were also critical of the press, which this time failed to offer an alternative, and to a large extent took refuge by simply reporting (or even supporting) the government's policies. Basically, they said that Netanyahu was trying, and to an extent succeeded, to use the situation to take over the main radio and television channels, as well as most of the daily press. In a way, the

journalists disparaged themselves for being cowed by the government. They admitted to being afraid. Some of them lambasted their colleagues, calling them "court journalists" who spread Netanyahu's "fake news."

Without exception, all the journalists who were willing to be interviewed expressed their concern about the widespread use of the secret services to quell the COVID-19 pandemic. They spoke in very strong words about the government's emergency regulations, which had been enacted in the middle of the night without the approval of or consultation with the courts or with parliament. They emphasized that no democratic country used such daunting measures, which endangered the citizens' civil liberties and right to privacy. In general, they feared that even well-intentioned measures could later on be misused for political interests. Journalists, they said, could easily be intimidated (e.g. through threats that intimate information about them would be made public) to prevent negative reporting about the prime minister and the government. At the same time, they also indicated that the crisis showed that the secret services, while efficient when fighting terrorism, were totally ineffective in the fight against the pandemic. Very few people infected by COVID-19 were located by the secret services. Most journalists interviewed predicted that the government would continue to use these emergency powers even after the emergency situation was resolved. Some of them even saw the use of the secret services as part of the slippery slope syndrome on the way to authoritarianism, as was happening today in Hungary and Poland, or even to fascism, as in interwar Europe.

> What happened is very bad. I understand the pressure, but no democratic country has done so, and that raises one's suspicions. There was no reason for the Secret Service to follow innocent citizens as if they were criminals. There was hardly any criticism in the media to protest this very dangerous move. I fear that the practices of the Secret Service have now become the norm and are here to stay.

> [Interview 32, 24/6/2020]

> I think the decision to deploy the secret services in an epidemiological context was disastrous. No democratic country has done so to fight COVID-19. All papers warned that this would be directed against innocent civilians. Most Israelis view the secret services as the diamond in the crown when it comes to fighting terrorism. I don't understand why the Knesset [Israel's parliament] agreed to use it in the pandemic. The fear is that from now one it will be used regularly for other, more sinister goals. You don't use such methods against your own citizens. It's like opening a Pandora box. Once you've opened it, you cannot close it again.

> [Interview 19, 6/5/2020]

> I think that the decision to use the Secret Service was superfluous and has become a slippery slope syndrome. It was also totally ineffective [as far as the COVID-19 pandemic goes]. It is worrisome to think about how this decision was taken. The Knesset was not consulted; there was a clear-cut decision to continue using the Secret Services; and the explanations offered by the government did not make any sense at all. All in all, the purpose was to convince the ordinary citizen that he was being spied on "for his own good."

> [Interview 25, 10/5/2020]

It is quite ironic that the only optimistic voice was that of a female Arab journalist, who said that "there are many educated, strong and good people [in Israel] who will well know how to protect democracy" [Interview 24, 24/8/2020]. Nevertheless, by talking about the need "to protect democracy," she indirectly hinted that democracy was indeed in danger.

4. Conclusion

In final analysis, we have seen that there is quite a gap between what the journalists say and think and how they assess their own media and press reports. Nearly all discerned a clear governmental manipulation of the COVID-19 crisis aiming to further both the government's political and Netanyahu's personal interests. On the other hand, however, they depicted the press and the media as being only "tactically" critical, and as neglecting the necessary and deeper "strategic" analysis of the pandemic and the related political crisis — predominantly the fragility of Israel's democracy. Reporting of COVID-19 by the media confirms the widespread view that in times of crisis the journalist's first loyalty lies with the national community, rather than his or her professional ethics. The journalists were clearly concerned about the safety of their working surroundings and their chances for promotion. In this sense — as is so often the case in times of war — they did a disservice to the genuine interests of the public, mainly because they were not committed to being perceived as balanced and objective in their reporting.[11] Just as in wartime situations, most people in the media seem to feel torn between their supposed duty to support the nation and their true beliefs. All in all, most of them turned out to be profoundly pessimistic and highly critical of the government's handling of the situation and for its destabilization of Israel's democracy. It would be quite

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[11] See Hallin (1986); Neiger & Zandberg (2006).

interesting to contact the journalists again and confront them with our conclusion that they may have contributed to the deterioration of Israel's democracy. This, however, would require another research project.

In brief, our research has clearly demonstrated the instability of Israel's democracy, which was exacerbated even further during the COVID-19 crisis.[12] Though it was unstable and only partly democratic even before the recent health crisis — mainly because of its political culture and tradition (which are democratic only to some extent) and its highly polarized population — the journalists we interviewed mostly agreed that the government's handling of the situation had made matters worse by eroding the people's trust in the decision-making process in a situation that called for an objective, professional policy-making process. Instead of bearing in mind the welfare and health of the people, the prime minister's (and his government's) main objectives seemed to focus on the prevention of his trial for corruption, breach of trust and fraud, and on pandering to his populist base. In short, on his staying in power. Authoritarian tendencies increased during the pandemic: meaningful opposition was scuttled, the courts were weakened, the media constantly thrashed, as were other so-called elites in academia, in the judiciary, and even in the security establishment. Even though nearly all the journalists we interviewed were pessimistic and highly critical of the government's handling of the pandemic situation and its destabilization of democracy, only a handful demonstrated enough civil courage to report on this and express their views openly in the press.

All in all, our interviews have confirmed our own pessimism with regard to the slippery slope towards authoritarianism of Israeli politics — as we have seen happening in only too many other countries.

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[12] Neuberger (2020).