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# The Rise of Pandemic Pundits: Constructing Expertise on TV News During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Germany, Israel, and the United States

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During the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, people relied heavily on national TV news for essential information. This study examines early pandemic coverage in Germany, Israel, and the United States, focusing on salient actors from journalism, politics, and science. Through content analysis, we found that journalists outnumbered scientists in pandemic reporting across all countries, though the journalistic beats and scientific fields involved varied. Furthermore, a trend emerged where many salient actors provided expertise blended with commentary. We named these actors *Pandemic Pundits* and classified them into 6 types: *Prudent Officials* (in Germany and Israel), *Scientific Officials* (mainly in the United States), *Sober Scientists* (exclusive to Germany), *Reckless Leaders* (namely, U.S. President Trump), *Dominant Journalists* (prevalent in Israel), and *In-House Experts* (particular to the United States and Israel). We conclude that U.S. television news *politicized* the pandemic by framing scientific expertise within a political context; German news *scientified* the coverage, emphasizing autonomous scientific voices; and Israeli news *journalized* the pandemic, relying primarily on journalists and semi-experts.

*Keywords: COVID-19, expertise, journalism, media systems, pundits, television news*

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted societies worldwide. First identified in China in 2019, SARS-CoV-2 spread rapidly, prompting nations to respond swiftly and prioritize effective communication. The news media sought to fulfill their democratic duty by informing the public about the novel virus and supporting efforts to mitigate the crisis. Audiences particularly turned to television news for timely and credible information, resulting in a 5% increase in TV ratings globally between January and April 2020 (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Kleis Nielsen, 2020).

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COVID-19 posed unique challenges for public communication, requiring collaboration among media, science, and politics to disseminate practical information and promote behavioral changes such as handwashing and mask-wearing. Amid uncertainties such as fluctuating infection rates, evolving policies, and emerging scientific findings, television news relied on actors with diverse professional backgrounds (Eisenegger, Oehmer, Udris, & Vogler, 2020), aiming to guide the public through the *infodemic*. Boyce (2007) explains that journalists traditionally rely on experts to provide context on complex scientific or technical issues. Such expert sources are valued for their ability to "provide facts, add credibility, and present objectivity"—while sometimes also offering opinions (p. 890).

Focusing on the early months of the pandemic outbreak (January–March 2020), we studied television news in Germany, Israel, and the United States. We identified not only traditional experts who discussed the pandemic credibly and objectively but also a broader trend of journalists, politicians, and scientists—with diverse credentials—who provided information interwoven with commentary and opinion. We labeled these actors *pandemic pundits*.

Pundits are perceived experts in specific fields who frequently appear in the media to provide analysis and commentary. In recent years, the term has gained a negative connotation, as many lack de facto relevant expertise or are perceived as biased despite claiming neutrality (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008). As the lines between facts and opinions become increasingly blurred, scholars scrutinize the rise of "media punditocracy" (Hopmann & Strömbäck, 2010) and describe pundits as "media babblers" (Nimmo & Combs, 1992).

To examine the rise of pandemic pundits and their construction of expertise during COVID-19, we analyzed TV news coverage from January to March 2020 in Germany, Israel, and the United States and asked:

*RQ1: Which professional actor types were most salient in each country?*

*RQ2: What kinds of pandemic pundits emerged in each country?*

## Pandemic Responses

This early pandemic period encompassed a swift transition from routine news to "crisis mode"—a fragile condition that can reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the news media. In the United States, COVID-19 initially appeared as a niche story at the end of news programming (e.g., CNN, 2020a, 00:57:12), but coverage surged as global cases surpassed 10,000. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. At the time, Germany had 3,062 cases, the United States had half that, and Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories had 135 cases. Meanwhile, global attention focused on Italy's escalating crisis, with 17,660 cases and 1,268 deaths—evoking fears of health system collapse and other "nightmare scenarios" (Horowitz, 2020).

In its pandemic response, Germany's federal system coordinated national, state, and local efforts. Chancellor Merkel and the Ministry of Health played a central role in policymaking, alongside the federally funded (yet independent) Robert Koch Institute (RKI), which provided scientific advice (Robert Koch Institute, 2023). Germany's response seemed broadly effective (Behnke & Eckhard, 2022), though it faced

criticism for poor preparedness—for example, inadequate staffing and outdated IT systems (Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2021).

In Israel, the pandemic response was primarily state-led, with Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Ministry of Health collaborating closely in the first months, supported by the military (IDF Editorial Team, 2020). Magen David Adom (like the Red Cross) and local health care providers delivered services while authorities enforced measures. Amid repeated elections (2019–2021) and political instability, the Israeli pandemic response faced stark criticism for incoherent internal authority communication—as well as public communication—which led to public trust issues (Muhsen et al., 2024; Salzberger, Neufeld, Mizrachi, & Crop, 2022).

In the United States, President Trump set the governmental response tone, supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), which provided scientific guidance, and by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which managed logistics. State governments implemented lockdowns and other measures quite autonomously; however, the federal government was criticized for a lack of cohesive leadership (Schiff & Mallinson, 2023).

## Media Systems

The three countries represent distinct media systems, as per Hallin and Mancini (2004). Germany exemplifies the Democratic Corporatist model, characterized by strong public broadcasting, journalistic professionalism, and regulatory safeguards for press freedom. Germany upholds "information-oriented journalism" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 74), emphasizing objectivity and neutrality. Its steady welfare state supports organized social groups, while strict regulatory frameworks ensure media ownership transparency and independence from state influence.

The United States primarily represents the Liberal model, characterized by market-driven, privately owned media—with minimal state intervention—traditionally focused on fact-based journalism. However, as journalistic professionalism has weakened in the United States (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014) and political parallelism has risen—incorporating more partisan reporting, commentary and dramatization—the U.S. media system has increasingly shifted toward a "polarized liberal" model (Nechushtai, 2018) or a "hybrid" model—placed between democratic-corporatist and polarized-pluralist clusters (Humprecht, Castro Herrero, Blassnig, Brüggemann, & Engesser, 2022). Among other things, these features challenge the traditional journalistic separation of fact and opinion.

Israel's media system blends the Polarized Pluralist model with Democratic Corporatist traits, later incorporating Liberal elements (Peri, 2011). It includes a state-regulated public broadcaster, military-owned media, and strong private commercial media. Like other polarized pluralist systems, the Israeli media have developed a strong tradition of commentary-oriented journalism. Liberal traits are most evident in the competitive media landscape and its market-driven approach. However, Israeli media have evolved amid a prolonged state of emergency since the state's founding in 1948. Thus, journalism in the "national security state" tends to be less professionalized and less pluralist—incorporating "pro-administration bias" while "suppressing political differences and emphasizing consensus" (Peri, 2011, p. 21).

## Science Communication

Science communication has developed differently in these three countries. In Germany, modern science was largely shaped by Prussian higher education ideals of humanitarianism and autonomy, advocating that science remained free from political influence. This strong scientific foundation may have supported the continuous professionalization of science communication in the country since the 19th century. Science journalism, in particular, expanded in (West) Germany during the 1950s, as major news outlets and public broadcasters began covering Russian and American spaceflight programs, along with other emerging scientific and environmental topics. Since the 1980s, German science journalism has followed a broader trend of increasing professionalization in science communication, largely adopting American models (Peters, Lehmkuhl, & Fähnrich, 2020).

Science in the United States developed within a framework of Enlightenment ideals and democratic citizenship but was later instrumentalized for nationalist interests during World War II and the Cold War. Also growing significantly since the 19th century, science communication in the United States has evolved in response to various sociopolitical needs. Science journalism, in particular, has gradually adapted to serve economic growth, social advancement, technological development, education, nationalism, and later, public relations (Bevan & Smith, 2020).

Israel, a relatively young nation, has made significant advances in modern science, particularly in innovation and high-tech development, often aimed at national security and quality of life. However, scientific institutions face limited government funding, and unlike the well-established science communication scholarship in Germany and the United States, Israel has only begun developing this field in the last two decades (Baram-Tsabari et al., 2020). Indeed, Israeli mainstream media provide limited coverage of scientific matters (Barel, Baram-Tsabari, Peleg, Armon, & Raveh, 2015).

Given differences in pandemic responses, media systems, and science communication developments, we hypothesize variations in TV coverage of COVID-19 across these countries. Germany, with its strong public broadcasting, journalistic professionalism, stable government, and well-established science communication tradition, is expected to exhibit predominantly rational, scientific, fact-based news coverage. Israel's political instability, commentary-oriented reporting, and underdeveloped science communication may result in limited scientific coverage and reporting interwoven with commentary. The United States, with its *liberal-polarized* media, increasingly opinionated journalism, incohesive leadership, but well-developed science communication, is expected to present solid scientific reporting in a politically charged environment.

## State of the Research

Studies have shown an increasing reliance of news media on experts as news sources. Soley (1994) found that the presence of experts in U.S. newspapers doubled between 1978 and 1990. Similarly, Albæk, Christiansen, and Togeby (2003) reported a sevenfold increase in scientific experts featured in Danish newspapers between 1961 and 2001.

However, the quality of expertise has deteriorated, with more appearances by pundits and semi-experts. Hopmann and Strömbäck (2010) identified a *rise in media punditocracy* during Danish election periods (1994–2007)—incorporating pundits such as journalists and former "spin doctors." Soley (1994) claimed that TV news tended to prefer semi-experts over genuine experts because of their ability to deliver concise, digestible sound bites that align with the demands of broadcast media. Nimmo and Combs (1992) named political pundits "media babblers"—journalists, retired politicians, or entertainers who offer their opinions without necessarily being experts in the subject matter.

Researchers have also examined the interplay between journalists and experts. Boyce (2007) analyzed how British journalists created a distorted debate over the MMR vaccine and its alleged link to autism by juxtaposing experts and nonexperts—for example, professional scientists versus concerned parents—ultimately influencing vaccination rates in the United Kingdom. Briggs and Hallin (2016) examined U.S. mainstream media coverage of the 2009 Swine Flu pandemic (H1N1), asserting that close relationships between journalists and health officials shaped a pandemic narrative that was both alarming and reassuring. In contrast, Bjørkdahl and Carlsen (2019) found that the Norwegian media exaggerated the severity of the 2009 Swine Flu, as media practitioners uncritically followed the political elite.

Research on scientific expertise in the media illustrates the role of scientists who engage publicly, navigating the intersection of science, media, and politics. Peters (2021) highlighted the challenge of "public experts"—scientists who communicate in public—not only to provide specialized knowledge but also to communicate effectively in line with media logics, such as appearing presentable on camera and speaking eloquently. Joubert et al. (2023) examined leading scientists who publicly communicated during COVID-19 across 16 countries and found that some scientists lacked a sober scientific appearance and communication style—diverging from the traditional "visible scientist" prototype termed by Goodell (1977, as cited in Joubert et al., 2023).

Various international studies have shown that the representation of science in the news media during COVID-19 was scarce. Specifically, scientific expertise often played a secondary role, with political actors and topics dominating pandemic reporting in many countries (e.g., Catalan-Matamoros & Elías, 2020; Eisenegger et al., 2020; Leidecker-Sandmann, Attar, Schütz, & Lehmkuhl, 2022; Mellado et al., 2021; Rebolledo, González, & Olza, 2021; Tejedor, Cervi, Tusa, Portales, & Zabotina, 2020).

Despite these important contributions, the current body of research is largely lacking in qualitative approaches that explore the backgrounds, credentials, content, and context in which actors from media, politics, and science appear on TV news. Although quantitative analyses of actors remain valuable, complementary qualitative examinations can offer deeper insights into not only who shaped the pandemic narrative but also how it was constructed across different media systems.

## Methodology

To address our research questions, we conducted quantitative and qualitative content analyses of the COVID-19 outbreak in 27 TV newscasts from Germany, Israel, and the United States. To ensure comparability, we selected three common key events from January to March 2020: (a) the first confirmed

infection case (January 21 in the United States, January 28 in Germany, and February 27 in Israel); (b) the WHO's declaration of a pandemic (March 11); and (c) the first major lockdown decision (March 19 in Israel, March 20 in the United States, and March 22 in Germany).

To represent each country's media landscape, we selected central news broadcasts airing on major TV channels with the highest viewership ratings (see Table 1). German newscasts were retrieved from the public broadcasters ARD and ZDF, as well as the private channel RTL. The American channels included nationally distributed networks spanning the political spectrum: CNN (liberal-leaning), Fox News (populist-conservative), and ABC News (centrist). We excluded the publicly funded broadcaster (PBS) because of its limited audience reach. Israeli media are primarily dominated by the private commercial channels Keshet 12 and Reshet 13, while the public broadcaster Kan 11 is slightly more committed to pluralist representation.

***Table 1. Data Corpus: Channels and News Broadcasts.***

| *Channel* | *Ownership* | *News Shows* | *Total Airtime* |
|---|---|---|---|
| ARD | Public | *Tagesschau [Looking at today]* (ARD, n.d.) | Germany: 84 minutes |
| ZDF | Public | *Heute Journal [Today Journal]* (ZDF, n.d.) | |
| RTL | Private | *RTL Aktuell [RTL Current]* (RTL, n.d.) | |
| Keshet 12 | Private | *Hamahadura Hamerkazit [The Central Edition]* (Keshet 12, n.d.) | Israel: 95 minutes |
| Reshet 13 | Private | *Hamahadura Hamerkazit [The Central Edition]* (Reshet 13, n.d.) | |
| Kan 11 | Public | *Chadshot Ha'erev [The Evening News]* (Kan 11, n.d.) | |
| ABC News | Private | *World News Tonight* (ABC News, n.d.) | United States: 70 minutes |
| Fox News | Private | *Special Report with Bret Baier* (Fox News, n.d.) | |
| CNN | Private | *New Day* (CNN, n.d.-b)<br>*Newsroom* (CNN, n.d.-c)<br>*Situation Room* (CNN, n.d.-d) | |

The format and duration of newscasts varied significantly across countries and channels; for example, *Tagesschau* in Germany (ARD, n.d.) airs for 15 minutes, while *The Central Edition* in Israel (Keshet 12, n.d.) lasts roughly 90 minutes. To standardize our analysis, we selected an excerpt from each newscast focusing on the first items related to the key event, totaling approximately four hours of video material. Each excerpt was segmented into individual spoken statements—commonly known as *sound bites*—serving as the primary units of analysis. We dissected each segment for the speaker's official title, professional credentials (from background research), location of appearance, and the spoken statement transcribed in German, Hebrew, or English, alongside its English translation.

We measured actor salience using two methods: (1) *count*—the number of times an actor appeared (each actor was counted once per newscast) and (2) *airtime*—the duration of appearance (in seconds). To address RQ1 and determine the most salient professional actor types, we coded all actors appearing in each newscast excerpt. We inductively categorized the main actor types as *journalists*, *politicians*, *scientists*, *citizens*, and *others*. Subcategorization was based on specific roles; for instance, *journalists*

included beat reporters and anchorpersons, *politicians* comprised political or governmental figures such as health ministry officials and heads of government, and *scientists* included physicians and virologists, among others. For reference, we also subcategorized *citizens*, individuals not representing any organization such as COVID-19 patients, as well as *others* which included business and civil society actors. A reliability test conducted between two coders yielded Cohen's Kappa scores of 0.9 for actor types and 0.89 for subactor types.

To address RQ2 and identify the types of emerging pandemic pundits, we measured actor salience based on the combined airtime and count. Anchorpersons were excluded from this analysis, as their prominence primarily reflected standard news reporting rather than pandemic-specific insights. For each country, we identified the most salient actors who provided substantive pandemic-related information, commentary, and interactions, ensuring the inclusion of at least two representatives from each main actor type (journalists, politicians, and scientists). Extracting a symbolic sample of seven actors per country, we qualitatively analyzed their 167 statements and 65 locations where they appeared.

Each statement and location were categorized thematically using Kuckartz's (2019) approach, assigning them to primary social domains, such as *political* or *scientific*. For example, the Bernhard Nocht Institute for Tropical Medicine was categorized as a *scientific* location, while a press conference was classified as *political*. We conducted reliability tests in two rounds. The second round, conducted by two coders, yielded Cohen's Kappa scores of 0.79 for statements and 0.73 for locations, indicating a reasonable level of agreement—given the challenges of working with translated material and coder familiarity with the political and media systems of all three countries.

Finally, alongside the collected data on each actor, we conducted a qualitative analysis of on-screen actor interactions and inductively categorized them into distinct types of pandemic pundits. In the final section, we present case studies that illustrate the nuanced appearances and observed patterns in the construction of expertise in each country.

## Findings and Discussion

### *RQ1: Actor Types*

Our first research question (RQ1) explored which professional actor types were most salient in pandemic reporting in each country. Table 2 summarizes actor types by country in terms of count ($N_c$ = 291 appearances of 217 unique actors) and airtime ($N_a$ = 14,936 seconds). *Journalists* were the most salient actors across countries, accounting for 43% of all appearances and 71% of the airtime. *Politicians* were the second most salient, making up about a quarter of all appearances and 16% of the airtime. *Scientists* were less represented, comprising roughly 12% of appearances and 7% of airtime, ranking fourth in count (after *citizens*) and third in airtime. Thus, during the initial COVID-19 outbreak, TV newscasts in Germany, Israel, and the United States devoted, on average, 10 times more airtime to journalists than to scientists.

This trend was especially pronounced in Israel, where journalists accounted for more than half of all actor appearances and 75% of airtime—reflecting an "interventionist" journalism style, to adopt the

definition by Esser (2008). Political actors appeared most frequently in the United States (35%)—yet received the least airtime (10%). This suggests American newscasts featured frequent but *brief* politicians' statements, aligning with studies on U.S. election coverage and the shortening of politicians' sound bites (Esser, 2008; Hallin, 1992). In contrast, German political actors received the highest airtime (20%)—indicating a strong political presence in German media during COVID-19, similar to findings by Leidecker-Sandmann et al. (2022) and Maurer, Reinemann, and Kruschinski (2021).

Scientists appeared with similar frequency across the countries—slightly more often in U.S. and German newscasts (14% and 13%, respectively) than in Israel (10%). However, in terms of airtime, U.S. scientists received about twice the exposure (11%) of their Israeli (5%) and German (6%) counterparts—making them the second most salient actor type in the United States. Compared to citizens, U.S. newscasts featured more scientists in both count (14% vs. 8%) and airtime (11% vs. 4%)—highlighting the prominence of scientific sources vis-à-vis a limited role for public participation in shaping the narrative. In contrast, German media featured the highest share of citizen voices (18%), alongside a greater share of civil society actors, categorized under "others"—indicating stronger public engagement in the pandemic discourse.

While these findings offer initial insights into COVID-19 coverage—with Israel showing journalistic dominance, Germany a strong political presence, and the U.S. high scientific visibility—a deeper look at subactor types reveals further patterns.

***Table 2. Main Actor Types in Each Country.***

| | | *Count (%)* | | | | | *Airtime (%)* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Actor type* | *Nc* | ***All*** | *DE* | *IL* | *US* | *Na* | ***All*** | *DE* | *IL* | *US* |
| Journalist | 125 | **43** | 36 | 57.1 | 37.2 | 10566 | **70.7** | 67.1 | 74.9 | 69.5 |
| Politician | 71 | **24.4** | 24.6 | 14.3 | 34.9 | 2322 | **15.5** | 20 | 15.8 | 9.9 |
| Scientist | 34 | **11.7** | 13.2 | 9.9 | 14 | 1068 | **7.2** | 6.4 | 4.6 | 11.4 |
| Citizen | 39 | **13.4** | 18.4 | 12.1 | 8.1 | 605 | **4.1** | 4.5 | 3.8 | 3.9 |
| Other | 22 | **7.6** | 7.9 | 6.6 | 5.8 | 375 | **2.5** | 2.1 | 0.8 | 5.3 |
| Total | 291 | **100** | 100 | 100 | 100 | 14936 | **100** | 100 | 100 | 100 |

The following results focus on subactor types by airtime. Figure 1 shows the distribution of different journalist types across countries. *Anchorpersons* (newscast moderators) were the most prominent overall, averaging 33% airtime. However, beat reporters (specializing in particular topics, namely health, politics, and economics) and *other correspondents* (mostly reporting locally) received the most airtime in the United States (56%) and Israel (61%). German coverage, in contrast, relied far less on beat reporting (2%) or other correspondence (27%) and mostly incorporated *general reporters* (38%)—journalists not affiliated with an explicit news beat.

*Health reporters* were especially prominent in Israel (21%). This does not mean that U.S. and German reporters avoided health topics, but rather that they were not explicitly designated as health (or science) reporters. *Political correspondents* were most salient in the United States (19%)—suggesting a

politicized framing of the pandemic, consistent with Briggs and Hallin's (2010) portrayal of U.S. health coverage as primarily political.

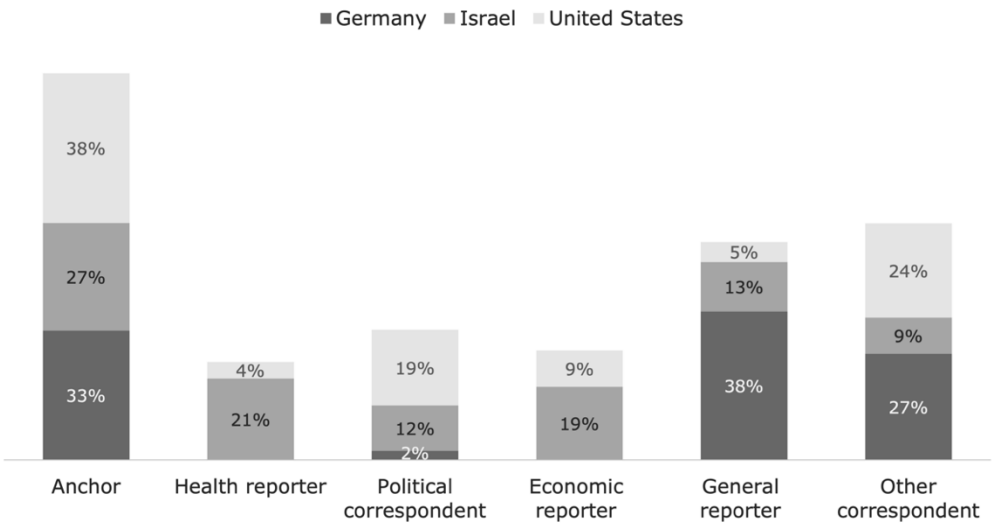


***Figure 1. Types of journalists in airtime (n = 10566).***

Figure 2 displays the airtime share of political actors. German and U.S. newscasts both featured a steady presence of *heads of government*—the German Chancellor and the U.S. President—each occupying about a third of political airtime. In Israel, the Prime Minister appeared less often in the sample (11%), though he was reportedly highly visible during these months (e.g., Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020). A key difference among countries was the visibility of *health authorities*, who were far more prominent in Israel (87%).[2] Still, the *Health Minister* himself was only visible in Germany (Jens Spahn), whereas his U.S. counterpart, the Secretary of Health and Human Services (Alex Azar) appeared only briefly, and the Israeli Health Minister (Yaakov Litzman) did not appear at all in our sample.

Figure 3 presents the different scientist types by country. Germany showed the broadest diversity of scientific fields, particularly *virology* and *microbiology* (50%)—relevant to pandemics. In contrast, Israeli scientists were mainly inactive scholars (e.g., former health officials with management backgrounds). Across countries, significant airtime went to *advisors to the government*—those officially advising governments on medical and public health matters. Most notable were U.S. scientific advisors, who accounted for 89% of scientist airtime. Yet, *medical physicians* (hospital doctors) were much less visible in the United States (2%) than in Germany and Israel (14% and 16%, respectively). This suggests that U.S. health coverage leaned toward a top-down perspective, rather than a ground-level view.

[2] The subcategory *health authorities* did not include, for example, the German RKI or the U.S. NIAID, as these are external research agencies—not governmental offices.

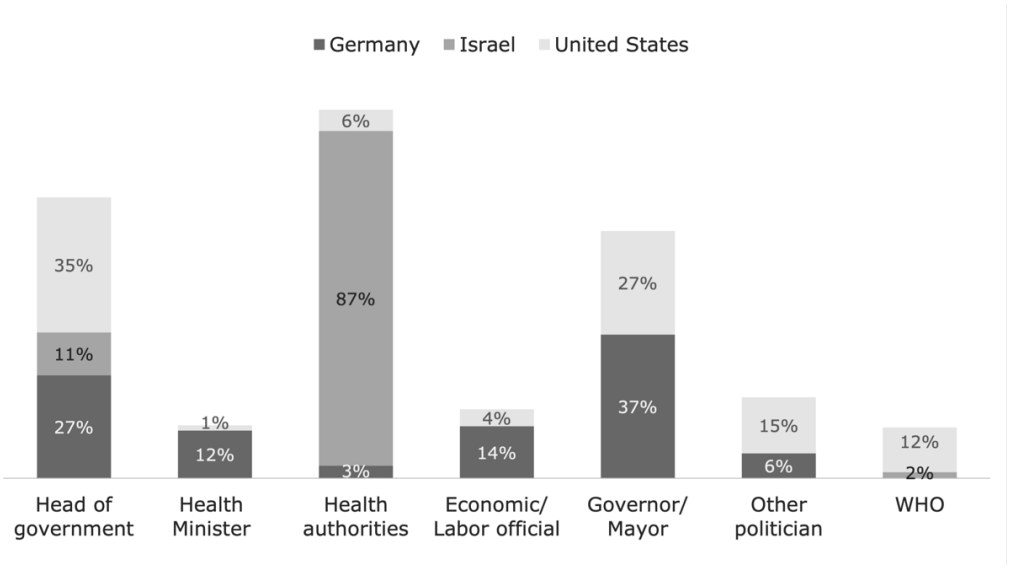


***Figure 2. Types of politicians in airtime (n = 2336).***

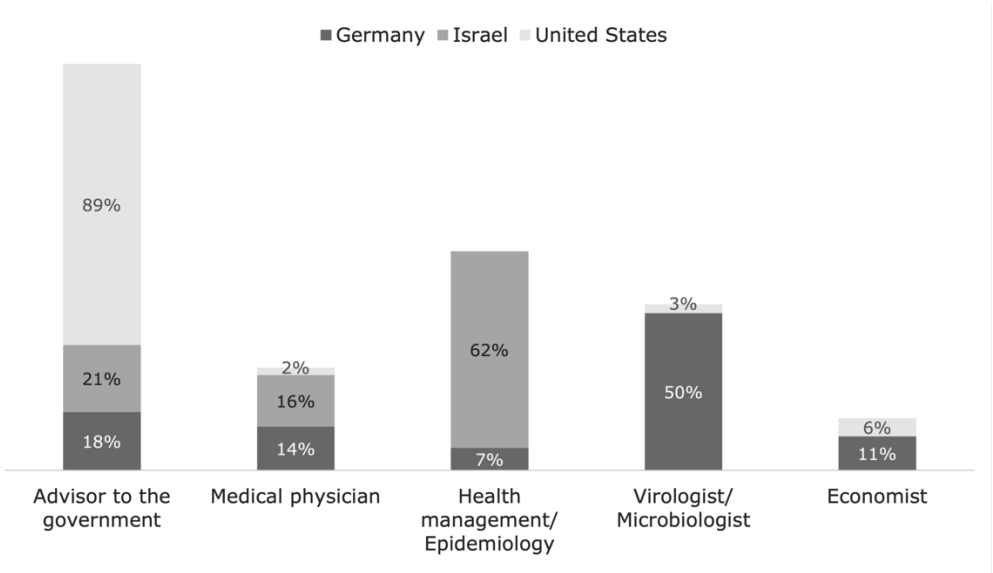


***Figure 3. Types of scientists in airtime (n = 1054).***

These findings reflect a strong political presence and focus on relevant scientific expertise in German newscasts but limited journalistic beat diversity. Israeli coverage emphasized health journalism and varied beat reporting alongside high visibility of health authorities yet limited scientific representation. The United States also featured varied beat reporting but minimal health authority presence—offset by the strong visibility of scientific advisors. But where did these actors appear, what

topics did they address, and how did they interact? The next section explores these questions and contextualizes actor appearances.

### *RQ2: Pandemic Pundits*

Our second research question (RQ2) examined the types of pandemic pundits that emerged during the initial outbreak. Figure 4 presents a combined scale of count and airtime share of actor appearances. The colors represent the respective countries, and the shapes indicate the actor types. Salience is emphasized by size; for instance, the political actors Angela Merkel and Jens Spahn both appeared in six newscasts (Y axis), with Spahn receiving 2.5% airtime and Merkel 5.4% (X axis). We selected a representative sample of seven salient actors per country—ensuring at least two from each actor type. The named actors in Figure 4 were included in the analysis (except for the international *WHO*, which appears in brackets for reference). We analyzed the 21 actors based on the topics they addressed, the locations in which they appeared, and their interactions with other actors.

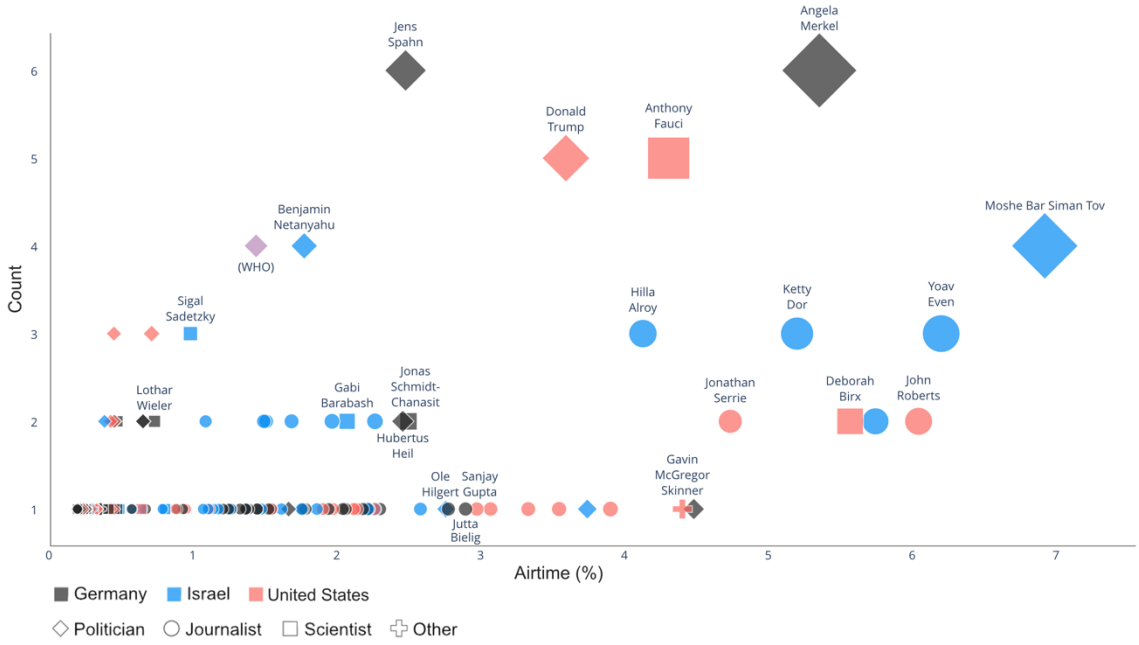


***Figure 4. Salient actors distributed by airtime and count.***

Table 3 presents the frequency of topics discussed by each actor type. Overall, *health* emerged as a particularly prominent topic in Israel (28 out of 63 segments), while *politics* was especially salient in the United States (21 out of 61 segments). The distribution of actor types, however, varied across countries. In the United States, health was primarily discussed by scientists; in Germany, by political actors (including health authorities); whereas in Israel, health matters were largely led by journalists. Similarly, science-related topics (e.g., medicine) in Israel were almost exclusively covered by journalists—compared with scientists in the other countries.

Furthermore, while scientists in all three countries engaged with topics related to health and science, those in the United States and Israel also discussed political topics. *Economic* issues were more frequently addressed in the United States than in the other countries, whereas *civic* topics (i.e., public matters unrelated to health) were most prevalent in Germany.

***Table 3. Topics of Statements, by Country and Actor Type.***

| | *Germany* | | | | *Israel* | | | | *United States* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Topic* | Journalist | Politician | Scientist | **Total** | Journalist | Politician | Scientist | **Total** | Journalist | Other | Politician | Scientist | **Total** | **TOTAL** |
| Health | 1 | 5 | 3 | **9** | 13 | 11 | 4 | **28** | 1 | 3 | 2 | 9 | **15** | **52** |
| Politics | 2 | 6 | | **8** | 3 | 8 | 4 | **15** | 8 | | 8 | 5 | **21** | **44** |
| Science | 1 | 2 | 4 | **7** | 7 | | 1 | **8** | 3 | | 2 | 4 | **9** | **24** |
| Civic | | 9 | | **9** | 5 | 1 | | **6** | | | 1 | | **1** | **16** |
| Economy | 1 | 3 | | **4** | 1 | 1 | | **2** | 4 | | 5 | 1 | **10** | **16** |
| Law | | 1 | | **1** | 1 | | | **1** | | | 1 | | **1** | **3** |
| Culture | 1 | 1 | | **2** | | | | | | | | | | **2** |
| Other | | | | | 2 | | 1 | **3** | 1 | | 3 | | **4** | **7** |
| **Total** | **6** | **27** | **7** | **40** | **32** | **21** | **10** | **63** | **17** | **3** | **22** | **19** | **61** | **164** |

Table 4 presents the types of locations in which each actor type appeared. The data indicate that political actors most often appeared in *political* settings across all countries, while Israeli journalists were frequently situated in TV studios (*media*). Notably, while scientists appeared in political contexts in all three countries, they did so most frequently in the United States. Conversely, scientists appeared in *scientific* settings exclusively in Germany.

***Table 4. Location Types, by Country and Actor Type.***

| | *Germany* | | | | *Israel* | | | | *United States* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Location type* | Journalist | Politician | Scientist | **Total** | Journalist | Politician | Scientist | **Total** | Journalist | Other | Politician | Scientist | **Total** | **Total** |
| Political | 1 | 12 | 2 | **15** | | 6 | 3 | **9** | 2 | | 9 | 10 | **21** | **45** |
| Media | | 1 | | **1** | 7 | | 2 | **9** | 1 | 1 | | | **2** | **12** |
| Health | | | | | 2 | 2 | | **4** | | | | | | **4** |
| Scientific | | | 2 | **2** | | | | | | | | | | **2** |
| Civilian | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | **1** | **1** |
| Other/VO* | 1 | 1 | | **2** | 2 | | | **2** | 2 | | | | **2** | **6** |
| **Total** | **2** | **14** | **4** | **20** | **11** | **8** | **5** | **24** | **5** | **1** | **10** | **10** | **26** | **70** |

**VO*—voice-over (no location).

These findings will be further analyzed in the following sections, alongside descriptions of actor interactions and explanations of the different pandemic pundit types.

*Pandemic pundits* refer to actors who appeared prominently on TV newscasts during the COVID-19 outbreak, providing information and opinions on various aspects of the crisis. Their *punditry* varied depending on the context in which they appeared and the divergence of their statements from their credentials, ranging from "prudent" to "blabbering" pundits. The following case studies illustrate six types of pandemic pundits: *Prudent Officials*, *Scientific Officials*, *Sober Scientists* (as "prudent" pundits); *Dominant Journalists*, *Reckless Leaders*, and *In-House Experts* (as "blabbering" pundits).

*Prudent Officials*

Prudent officials were politicians or high-ranking authorities who communicated regularly on national television, typically from political locations (e.g., press conferences). These actors centrally include Chancellor Angela Merkel and Health Minister Jens Spahn in Germany, as well as Health Ministry Director General (D.G.) Moshe Bar Siman Tov and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. They primarily addressed government policies and public health issues, discussing national strategies for managing the crisis while maintaining a realistic yet morale-boosting tone.

For example, in an interview on Keshet 12 (Israel), anchor Yonit Levi criticized the Health Ministry for shortages of protective equipment (see Figure 5). In response, D.G. Bar Siman Tov stated:

> We [the Health Ministry] are of course fully committed to the [health] teams; the teams must feel safe. This is our responsibility toward them, . . . [T]his is a very complex and big event, and for sure there will be times we will miss, there will be times we will be wrong. We will not hesitate to correct that immediately when necessary. (Keshet 12, 2020a, 00:14:46)

This response exemplifies a prudent government official who effectively addresses criticism, acknowledges responsibility, and remains transparent about the challenges faced by his office.

Although Prime Minister Netanyahu is also included as a Prudent Official, Gesser-Edelsburg and Hijazi (2020) criticized both him and Bar Siman Tov for their lack of transparency and the use of an "apocalyptic narrative." In our sample, Bar Siman Tov, with an academic background in economics, adopted a rather pragmatic approach to crisis management; this was more pragmatic than Netanyahu's approach, who used rhetoric such as "external threat" to refer to the virus (Kan 11, 2020, 00:08:56), and certainly more pragmatic than that of his superior, Health Minister Yaakov Litzman (not appearing in our sample), who, inter alia, earnestly stated that the Messiah would hopefully redeem Israel from the virus (Ahituv, 2020).


***Figure 5. Yonit Levi interviews Moshe Bar Siman Tov, March 11, 2020 (Keshet 12, 2020a, 00:14:51).***

*Scientific Officials*

In all countries, the most prominent scientific actors were advisors to the government. We categorized them as *Scientific Officials*—scientists who worked within political contexts, primarily discussing health and medical issues. They appeared exclusively in political settings, which visually and thematically framed their conduct as political rather than purely scientific. Unlike Prudent Officials, they were not government representatives per se, nor were they "lab" scientists. Instead, they conveyed scientific knowledge to political leaders and the public while operating within governmental structures. These actors included the Israeli Head of Health Services Prof. Sigal Sadetzky, U.S. Coronavirus task force coordinator Dr. Deborah Birx, and, most notably, Head of NIAID Dr. Antony Fauci, a specialist in medicine and viral diseases who had served as an advisor over the tenures of seven U.S. presidents.

Fauci's interactions with President Trump revealed stark contrasts between their rhetoric and professionalism. During one press briefing, for instance, Trump endorsed an antimalaria drug as effective against COVID-19, based on the assertion, "I feel good about it, it's all it is, just a feeling" (Fox News, 2020, 00:04:07)—despite the absence of scientific evidence. Fauci, while maintaining his scientific integrity, carefully navigated the political landscape:

> We need to do it in a way, as while we are making it available for people who might want the hope that it might work, you also are collecting data that will ultimately show that it is truly effective and safe under the conditions of COVID-19. (Fox News, 2020, 00:04:20)

This example highlights how scientists must balance political diplomacy with scientific responsibility. Although Fauci adhered to science, Trump applied his typical political style to the pandemic—ignoring scientific facts and processes. This characteristically divergent approach earned Trump a separate pundit classification, which will follow.

*Sober Scientists*

*Sober Scientists* were active scientists with appropriate academic credentials in pandemic-related fields such as virology and microbiology. They were exclusive to Germany, appearing typically in scientific locations (e.g., research institutions). They provided clear, nonpolitical explanations of the medical aspects of the pandemic and the health care system's preparedness, practicing science communication in its ideal form (following Peters, 2021): transparent knowledge (explaining what is known, unknown, and assumed), cause-and-effect explanations, and public health advice.

Virologist Prof. Jonas Schmidt-Chanasit was the most salient scientist to illustrate the communication style of Sober Scientists, appearing a few times in our sample—always in scientific settings. In one appearance, he discussed the transmission of COVID-19 in relation to public health guidelines (see Figure 6):

> We assume that it is passed on via droplet infection . . . This means that if you are coughed on or have direct contact with someone who is ill, transmission is likely. The further away I am from sick people (. . .)—the probability of becoming infected also decreases dramatically. (ZDF, 2020, 00:12:47)


***Figure 6. Interview with Jonas Schmidt-Chanasit, January 28, 2020 (ZDF, 2020, 00:12:50).***

Moreover, by analyzing all scientists in our sample, we found that German scientists demonstrated similar communication styles and settings, identifying Sober Scientists as a uniquely German phenomenon. This finding aligns with research showing that German institutions excel at maintaining scientific autonomy (Peters et al., 2020). Another potential example of a Sober Scientist is Dr. Christian Drosten, a virologist from the Charité Institute who became a prominent science communicator of COVID-19 in Germany. Though not appearing in our sample, Drosten regularly made appearances across all media, including in a biweekly public podcast *Das Coronavirus-Update* (Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, n.d.).

*Reckless Leaders*

President Trump uttered various reckless statements and regularly downplayed the risks associated with the pandemic. He was thus labeled a *Reckless Leader*—an extremely unreliable pundit, acting as an authority on topics he was not specialized in. During a press briefing on March 20, for example, with 273 COVID-19 deaths reported in the United States (The COVID Tracking Project, n.d.), Trump was pressed by reporters to deliver a *meaningful* message to the public. He responded, "My message to the American people is that there is a very low incidence of death" (CNN, 2020b, 00:03:36). Several days later, the United States recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases worldwide, with death toll surging exponentially, surpassing 2,300 by March 28 (Anderson, 2020).

This communication style of a political actor was exceptional in our sample. In contrast to Prudent Officials, who mainly demonstrated accountability to the public and adherence to science, Trump frequently acted in opposition to science, hindering effective crisis management (Schiff & Mallinson, 2023). A comparable example of a Reckless Leader would be Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who also constantly downplayed the risks of the pandemic (Paraguassu, 2020).

*Dominant Journalists*

Generally, journalists in our sample appeared in only one or two broadcasts. Israeli newscasts, however, featured a handful of prominent health reporters who appeared in all broadcasts, dominated the TV screen, and delivered most of the information on the virus, the health care system, containment measures, and political developments. These *Dominant Journalists*, namely, Ketty Dor (Kan 11), Hilla Alroy (Reshet 13), and Yoav Éven (Keshet 12), mostly blended news reporting with commentary in alarmist tones.

For example, in one newscast, Reshet 13's anchor asked health reporter Alroy about COVID-19 testing capacity at the time. Instead of acknowledging the lack of data, Alroy criticized the Health Ministry, repeatedly stating, "I did not receive an exact answer, . . . no one was willing to answer, . . . we have not received any answers," finally adding speculative data on the testing capacity (Reshet 13, 2020, 00:05:01).

Indeed, Israeli commercial channels (more than the public broadcaster) displayed strong journalistic commentary—aligning with the *polarized pluralist* features of the media system. Moreover, since scientific communication from actual experts was scarce in Israel, we assume that Dominant Journalists filled the gap by acting as authoritative voices on pandemic-related matters. In our study, this was observed as an exclusive Israeli phenomenon.

Journalists in the other countries acted differently. For example, Jutta Bielig (RTL) and Ole Hilgert (ARD) covered political, medical, economic, and cultural issues in sober, non-alarmist tones; this informative, objective style of COVID-19 reporting in Germany was also found by Maurer et al. (2021). In contrast, U.S. White House correspondent John Roberts (Fox News) could be classified as a Dominant Journalist because of his occasional commentary and somewhat alarmist tone. However, unlike Israeli journalists, he neither dramatized the stories nor "stepped in" for scientists; Instead, he focused primarily on the political and economic aspects of the pandemic.

*In-House Experts*

The most striking phenomenon in our study is the rise of *In-House Experts*—pundits with various professional backgrounds, chosen by commercial news channels as their ultimate pandemic experts. These pundits appeared recurrently on TV news exclusively in Israel and the United States, offering assessments on public health and medical issues. Although all had some academic or professional background in medicine or health, none were active scientists.

Interestingly, In-House Experts often responded to Dominant Journalists and anchors—acting as a counterbalance to their alarmist rhetoric. For example, Gabi Barabash, a former professor of medicine and former Israeli Health Ministry D.G., recurrently appeared on Keshet 12 as a trusted expert on the pandemic—introduced as "Professor Barabash, who accompanies us these days" (Keshet 12, 2020b, 00:05:46). In one broadcast, with six severe COVID-19 cases in Israel, Dominant Journalist Yoav Éven reported a "scary scenario," warning that *thousands* of patients would soon require intensive care. He quoted a geriatric health official—not a typical expert on the issue—and dramatized the statement, referring to it as an "Italian nightmare" scenario (Keshet 12, 2020b, 00:05:07). When asked to respond, Barabash bluntly rejected the prediction, asserting it was "exaggerated even in the most severe scenarios" (Keshet 12, 2020b, 00:06:06).

It remains unclear what expertise Barabash relied on to make such a definitive statement. Joubert et al. (2023) observed that in Israel, stepping beyond one's area of expertise was often a direct response to demands for policy advice. We assume that Barabash's governmental experience shaped his communication style. Ultimately, this dynamic created a dramatic news formula: a Dominant Journalist sets up an alarmist scenario, and an In-House Expert counters it—even stepping beyond his expertise to do so.

This formula can be further exemplified in a CNN appearance of Sanjay Gupta, a neurosurgeon acting as Chief Medical Correspondent—also the host of CNN's health/lifestyle podcast *Chasing Life* (CNN, n.d.-a). Although technically a journalist, Gupta functioned as an In-House Expert—not engaging in field reporting but instead appearing on demand to provide medical expertise. In one early pandemic broadcast, amid the first U.S. infection case, Gupta explained the human-to-human transmission of the virus in a factual manner (see Figure 7). Yet, anchor Camerota, appearing visibly concerned, responded: "Really scary. At least it sounds scary to the layperson" (CNN, 2020a, 00:58:51). This illustrates a dramatized interaction: The anchor played the naive layperson and the In-House Expert played the knowledgeable authority. Thus, the exchange heightened emotional engagement, especially in the absence of concrete scientific information at the time.

We assume that In-House Experts were cost-efficient choices for networks. Their credentials and media-friendly demeanor made them attractive to producers, who sought experts capable of delivering clear, compelling narratives under tight time constraints. Unlike external scientific experts, who might be difficult to recruit, In-House Experts were readily available, well-dressed, and articulate—able to speak fluently in semi-scientific jargon about issues of public interest. This strategy aligns with observations, such as by Soley (1994), that television reporters prioritize experts who are entertaining, poised, and witty, and capable of providing short, dramatic sound bites. This can be explained by the general shift of journalism from conventional and "event-centered" (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997) to "contextual" (Fink & Schudson, 2014) and "interpretive" (Brüggemann & Engesser, 2017). We thus conclude that the Israeli and American In-House Experts were primarily deployed to co-construct a dramatic televised effect rather than to offer purely scientific insights.


***Figure 7. Alisyn Camerota interviews Sanjay Gupta, January 22, 2020 (CNN, 2020a, 00:58:55).***

The emergence of pandemic pundits in each country reflects communication tendencies within the different societal, political, and media landscapes. Journalistic punditry was most prevalent in Israel. Political pundits tended to communicate mostly prudently in Germany and in Israel, while recklessly in the United States. Scientists were professional and autonomous in Germany, scarce and replaced by semi-experts in Israel, and professional though politically-entangled in the United States.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study does not allow for easy conclusions about which country offered the most effective COVID-19 coverage. Given the limited sample and an analytical focus on qualitative aspects rather than quantitative assessments, the findings instead illuminate distinct patterns in news coverage during a global health crisis across different national contexts. Importantly, the sample concentrates on the early

phase of the outbreak—a period marked by uncertainty, rapidly changing realities, and the need for decisive action.

Our analysis revealed that the German coverage, navigated by information-oriented reporting, was led by central government officials and qualified—though few—scientists of relevant fields. These features reflect the stability of political institutions alongside the reliability of the media, underpinned by strong journalistic professionalism. At the same time, German news tended to lack journalistic specialization, often relying on general reporters rather than beat-specific journalists—a trend that appears to be more typical of German media in contrast to, for instance, the British press (Esser, 1998). Notably, German scientists represented a broad range of scientific fields and retained high independence from political influence—reflecting the country's longstanding tradition of autonomous science communication.

Although science communication is also well-developed in the United States, it is often embedded within a political framework—thus tending to be nonautonomous or politicized. Consequently, the U.S. coverage conveyed an ambivalent communication style, marked by visible tensions between prudent scientific advisors and reckless leadership. Moreover, the high level of journalistic professionalism in the United States was often overshadowed by the dramatization and politicization of news reporting. These dynamics reinforce observations that the U.S. media system has evolved into a "hybrid" model, combining elements of polarization and partisanship (Humprecht et al., 2022; Nechushtai, 2018).

In Israel, the prudent public officials who initially led the pandemic response did not retain long-term visibility. Within a few months into the pandemic, each of the leading Health Ministry officials had resigned—reportedly due to internal disagreements regarding the management of the crisis (Efrati, 2020). This development may reflect not only Israel's unstable political environment but also a broader marginalization of "sober," evidence-based communication. Correspondingly, the lack of firsthand scientific expertise vis-à-vis a dominant journalistic culture, including a blurry line between fact and opinion, may contribute to semi-reliable reporting, with limited distinction between evidence-based information and interpretive commentary.

In conclusion, each media system and its approach to science communication left a distinctive imprint on COVID-19 TV news coverage. Germany *scientified* the pandemic, foregrounding professional and autonomous scientific voices alongside prudent political actors. The United States *politicized* the pandemic, intertwining politically influenced science with reckless leadership. Israel *journalized* the pandemic, relying on semi-experts and journalistic interpretations in the absence of firsthand scientific expertise.

Future research should explore how COVID-19 coverage compares with media responses to other crises, including long-term global challenges such as climate change. Such comparisons could further illuminate the evolving interplay among journalistic, political, and scientific communication on an international scale. While linear stimulus-response models may fall short in capturing these dynamics, it remains clear that TV news does more than report on crises—it actively shapes the societal narratives and public responses that emerge in their wake.

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