

Lessons From Senior Journalists' Coverage of the First Wave of COVID-19: The Significance of Professional Expertise and Hybrid Work

AZI LEV-ON*
JUDITH YEHEZKELLY¹
Ariel University, Israel

Numerous articles have explored the media coverage of the COVID-19 crisis in mainstream and social media. However, research examining journalists' experiences is still missing. This study is based on a thematic analysis of 20 interviews with prominent journalists from various media outlets—print, Internet, television, and radio—who served as field reporters, health journalists, or editors during the first wave of the pandemic in Israel, about their observations on how the pandemic influenced and transformed the journalistic profession. The study revealed two key findings. First, there was renewed appreciation for basing journalistic reporting on consultations with experts. Second, there was a growing recognition of the importance of hybrid work, acknowledging that future journalistic work would increasingly include broadcasts and other activities from reporters' homes or locations in close proximity to them.

Keywords: journalism, COVID-19, professionalism, hybrid work

The year 2020 will forever be etched in the memories of Israel and the world as "The Year of COVID-19." The onset of the COVID-19 epidemic in Israel caught everyone off guard. Each evening, the Prime Minister, ministers, and heads of the Ministry of Health made regular appearances on major news broadcasts, disseminating crucial instructions and messages to the public. Media outlets, drawing on information provided by political figures, meticulously augmented it through their own investigative efforts. This coverage spanned alarming statistics and accounts of hospitals, particularly emergency rooms, teetering on the edge of collapse; shortages of respiratory machines; and concerns about widespread infection and high mortality rates. The prevailing atmosphere mirrored that of an emergency and crisis situation (Avekasis, Shalem-Rabinovich, Yehezkelly, & Lev-on, 2023).

Journalists found themselves immersed in the same anxiety that gripped the general public. Many felt exposed and helpless when leaving their homes, which had become their work sanctuaries, to gather the

Azi Lev-On: azilevon@gmail.com

Judith Yehezkelly: judykelly@walla.com

Date submitted: 2023-06-14

¹ The authors thank Almog Tepper, Jordan Zeidenberg, and Esther Mark for their assistance in preparing the article for publication.

Copyright © 2024 (Azi Lev-On and Judith Yehezkelly). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

necessary information from potentially hazardous public spaces. Their concerns extended beyond their well-being; they also worried about the safety of their family members, both young and elderly, who could potentially be exposed to the disease brought home by journalists. In this altered reality, the traditional physical boundaries of journalistic work became blurred, and the workspace was transformed into a hybrid model.

This study aims to explore journalists' perceptions of how COVID-19 has impacted the journalistic profession. Their impressions were twofold. First, there was a revitalized appreciation for grounding journalistic reporting in solid scientific expertise and evidence. Second, there was an emerging acknowledgment of the significance of hybrid work. This article explores how the fear of contracting the virus influenced reporters' decision to adopt a hybrid work-from-home model, which may persist, in their opinion, after the pandemic subsides.

Health reporters have always consulted with various experts when uncertain about the information they receive, especially if it has significant public health implications. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a unique scenario. The initial phase was marked by unprecedented uncertainty about the virus's origin, transmission mechanisms, preventive measures, and treatment protocols, leading to fragmented information. Consequently, experts from the Ministry of Health, health insurance funds, and both national and international medical organizations became crucial sources for a more accurate understanding. Our findings demonstrate that this crisis, with its extensive potential impact on both transmission rates and long-term patient health, heightened journalists' sense of responsibility toward the precision of their reporting. This shift underscored a more pronounced reliance on expert consultations, reflecting a collective commitment among journalists to ensure the dissemination of reliable and factual information in a period of global health emergencies.

This research contributes to our understanding of journalism in the face of global health crises. Focusing on the lived experiences of senior journalists during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, it illuminates the evolving character of journalistic work under crisis conditions. Such insights are invaluable, offering a roadmap for navigating the complexities of future crises, thereby enhancing the resilience and adaptability of the journalistic profession.

Health Communication in Times of Emergency

In times of global health crises, the public seeks information that can help them comprehend the significance and underlying causes of events to tackle uncertainty (Feinberg, 2001). People perceive the media as an entity responsible for providing this information (Weimann, 2000). However, the pursuit of information does not always lead to an accurate or correct understanding. Crises and emergencies frequently foster the emergence of erroneous conclusions, as individuals tend to prioritize signs of danger and negative perceptions over positive reports and announcements (Feinberg, 2001).

News networks play a crucial role, even a mission, in providing accurate news reporting and delivering information that can be easily understood by readers, listeners, and viewers, particularly during a health crisis (Patterson, 2013; Ward, 2018). However, it is crucial for newspapers to uphold a balanced approach to reporting information, especially when the news is not optimistic. News articles should

accurately convey the events while also ensuring that the public can comprehend the information effectively. Indeed, newspapers not only report on deaths and tragedies but also emphasize efforts to curb the pandemic, actions to safeguard public health, the shift to hybrid work, and the quest for scientific information about the pandemic (Lev-On & Yehezkelly, 2024).

Journalists must remain vigilant about news that has the potential to induce anxiety, sow doubt, or propagate fake news (Basch, Kecojevic, & Wagner, 2020). Unreliable information may manifest as rumors and conspiracy theories, exacerbating the complexity of discussions on public health matters. This is particularly relevant for people who express fears, suspicions, and skepticism, sometimes incorporating unrelated issues or incorrect data into their commentaries on events (Alkhodair, Fung, Ding, Cheung, & Huang, 2021).

Coverage of medical issues often poses a challenge, as journalists may lack the requisite professional knowledge and training to deliver comprehensive and accurate reports (Boyce, 2006; Donsbach, 2014). Reporting on health-related matters demands a specific skill set and understanding. Despite their professional education and commitment to ethical standards, journalists may not possess the extensive medical training required to accurately cover complex health issues such as diseases or coping strategies during health crises (Andsager & Powers, 1999).

Moreover, journalists often rely on sources that may have their own interests, such as pharmaceutical companies and public relations professionals. This becomes particularly problematic when journalists who are not accustomed to reporting on medical matters venture into this domain without a comprehensive understanding of the various interests at play. During a medical crisis, journalistic coverage can be based on reliable professional facts, sometimes revealing failures that were previously unknown to the public. However, despite the intention to provide the most accurate information possible, situations can arise where journalists who lack expertise in health issues report on unfamiliar subjects. This can lead to a disproportionate emphasis on certain issues perceived as significant by journalists but deemed minor by medical professionals, resulting in an inaccurate portrayal of the situation (Kitzinger, 1999).

Journalists and Expertise

The literature suggests that as journalists gain on-the-job experience, their reporting increasingly incorporates their own opinions and expertise (Patterson, 2013; Ward, 2018). While this can bring valuable insights, it also introduces the potential for biased reporting. Journalists may be influenced by their personal beliefs, experiences, and networks, which can impact the objectivity and accuracy of their work. As stated above, journalists may also lack the necessary background or knowledge to accurately report on complex or technical topics (Albaek, Elmelund-Præstekaer, Hopmann, & Klemmensen, 2011; Manweller & Harvey, 2013; Schultz, 2007).

To address this limitation, proponents argue that journalists should increase their reliance on academic and professional experts, as well as consult professional organizations and academic literature. This approach can ensure that journalists have access to accurate and reliable information from experts in relevant fields. It can also enhance journalists' understanding of complex topics, enabling them to report in

a more objective and informative manner. Using expert sources and referencing academic literature, journalists can uphold the integrity of their reporting and provide audiences with a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand (Boyce, 2006; Donsbach, 2014; Ekström, 2002; Nisbet & Fahy, 2015).

Studies on the character of journalism in Israel reveal a trend where journalists increasingly embody traits of being "obsessive-activistic," marking a notable departure from traditional journalistic models. This contemporary journalist profile is characterized by four distinct attributes:

1. A profound sense of justice motivates them to champion specific agendas pertaining to issues that deeply engage their attention. They actively advocate for these agendas through both their professional work and personal involvement in the public sphere (see also Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2011).
2. They adhere to traditional professional norms and practices not only within their areas of interest but also in their routine journalistic pursuits.
3. They pursue extensive knowledge and professionalism in their specialized fields of interest, often surpassing the typical requirements of routine reporting.
4. Their passionate involvement in certain subjects often propels them to become prominent public figures or even celebrities (Ginosar & Reich, 2020).

The framework of obsessive-activistic journalism serves as a foundational lens through which the study examines the experiences and perspectives of journalists covering the COVID-19 crisis. This framework guides the analysis by providing insights into the motivations, behaviors, and challenges faced by journalists in their coverage of this unprecedented event. Revisiting this framework in the conclusion will allow for a comprehensive reflection on its relevance and implications for understanding contemporary journalism in Israel and other contexts.

The First Wave of the COVID-19 Epidemic in Israel

The COVID-19 epidemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, originated in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. It quickly spread to numerous countries worldwide, including Israel, where the first cases were detected in February 2020. The majority of people infected with the virus experienced mild symptoms or were asymptomatic. However, severe cases resulted in respiratory insufficiency, requiring the use of mechanical breathing equipment and intensive care treatment. Unfortunately, the virus has led to a significant number of fatalities (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020).

In Israel, the then-Minister of Health Yaakov Litzman issued a decree on January 27, 2020, adding the COVID-19 virus to the list of internationally significant diseases requiring immediate reporting of outbreaks. The first wave of COVID-19 cases began in March 2020. In that month, 4,466 new COVID-19 cases were reported. The number of new cases exceeded one hundred per day on average, reaching 628 per day by the end of the month. To curb the epidemic, restrictions on movement and public gatherings were implemented. On March 14, 2020, the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Health announced the cancellation of all entertainment and cultural events, as well as the closure of the education system from preschool to higher education levels.

On March 16, 2020, lockdown measures were imposed on localities with high infection rates, and the government sector began operating in emergency mode. On March 19, 2020, the government authorized emergency regulations to limit the mobility of citizens. These regulations specified the permitted times for leaving one's home and the distance allowed from home, with the police granted the authority to enforce them. On March 20, 2020, the first death from COVID-19 in Israel was recorded. The 25th of that month marked the beginning of the first nationwide lockdown, with a restriction on movement beyond a distance of 100 meters from home. Additionally, temperature checks were implemented in workplaces and public places. Toward the end of the month, participation in weddings and funerals was prohibited.

Health Reporters and the Coverage of COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, health reporters took on a significant role as headline providers in news outlets across different platforms, such as newspapers, the Internet, television, and radio. Their coverage of the pandemic turned into a real campaign, aiming to provide accurate and reliable information to the public (Lev-On & Yehezkelly, 2024). Recognizing the challenges posed by unclear reports from the Ministry of Health, the lack of certainty from the Ministry of Finance, and the proliferation of fake news on social media, health reporters cooperated closely to ensure the dissemination of trustworthy information. This collaborative effort helped counter misinformation and provided the public with reliable updates about the ongoing health crisis (Avital, 2020).

Health journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic in major U.S. newspapers faced numerous challenges, including the battle against misinformation and defamation on social media platforms. In a conference on the media and COVID-19, Jayawardhana highlighted the concerns of journalists who were hesitant to accept reports from reputable sources, such as the CDC and the WHO, because of the perceived political pressures surrounding the pandemic-related information they provided. To navigate this situation, health journalists began to rely on anonymous sources within these official channels, which leaked information that appeared to be accurate and trustworthy about the virus (Hovis, 2021). They aimed to ensure the dissemination of reliable information while navigating the complex landscape of the pandemic.

Hybrid Work During COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak marked the beginning of a new era in the media landscape. Within a short period, bustling newsrooms and broadcasting studios were deserted as journalists transitioned to hybrid work, relying on digital platforms like Zoom from the comfort of their homes. Initially, working from home was driven by concerns about contracting and spreading the virus. However, as time progressed, many journalists found that hybrid work became a preferred method, not solely due to COVID-19 restrictions but for various other reasons as well (Gruber, 2021).

The term 'hybridism' originated in biology in the 19th century, where it described the intermingling of different species. It represents the concept of two distinct entities being connected while maintaining their individual characteristics, resulting in a heterogenous reality. In the context of work, the hybrid model combines different work environments. During the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, journalists were prompted—and in some cases mandated by their news organizations—to adopt a hybrid

approach by working both from the newsroom and remotely from home. This measure aimed to minimize the risk of contracting or spreading the virus.

A survey by the Reuters Agency involving 132 prominent media professionals from 42 countries, along with in-depth interviews with journalists, revealed that hybrid work is set to become the favored mode of work for a majority of journalists worldwide. 89% of the journalists who participated in the survey expressed their preference for this hybrid way of working (Cherubini, Newman, & Nielsen, 2021). Hybrid work was found to have several advantages compared with traditional in-house work arrangements. The survey revealed that 70% of the participating journalists recognized hybrid work as being more efficient. Additionally, working from home eliminated the need for commuting, thereby saving travel time and allowing for more focused work. However, 48% of those surveyed expressed concerns about the negative impact of hybrid work on creativity. This suggests that some journalists perceive limitations in maintaining a high level of creativity while working remotely (Cherubini et al., 2021).

Media systems worldwide are currently undergoing technological adjustments to adapt to hybrid work models. These adjustments include reconfiguring newsrooms to accommodate a reduced number of staff members and enhancing the flexibility of communication equipment on journalists' desks. However, there are concerns within the media industry that these systems have not adequately prepared themselves for hybrid work, potentially leading to negative cultural implications. This concern stems primarily from the perceived lack of personal connections between office staff and journalists working remotely. There are worries about the possibility of closer relationships forming among in-house workers, which could result in discrimination and unequal attention given to remote workers by editors. In-house workers may benefit from the sense of camaraderie and public recognition that remote workers lack due to the absence of face-to-face interactions (Cherubini et al., 2021).

Numerous studies have extensively examined various aspects of media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic, including coverage in mainstream media outlets, niche channels, and the role of social networks in spreading rumors and misinformation. However, *this particular study takes a unique approach by focusing not on the content itself but on the creators of the content, namely the journalists who were at the forefront of covering the COVID-19 crisis*. This study aims to explore the firsthand experiences of these journalists during times of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Additionally, this study seeks to identify the novel aspects that emerged in the field of journalism as a result of the pandemic and to highlight the trends that are likely to shape the work of reporters in the future. It is evident that the pandemic had a significant impact on the media landscape, particularly in terms of health-related reporting for the public's benefit. The journalists who played a crucial role in providing professional coverage often put their own health at risk, leading to anxiety and trauma among many of them (Casero-Ripolles, 2020).

Based on the studies surveyed above, two key areas emerged as significant in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the importance of professionalism, scientific background, and data reliance: Journalists recognized the criticality of relying on accurate scientific information and data to provide reliable coverage of the pandemic. This emphasis on scientific research and basing reports on proven facts was seen as crucial in combating misinformation and rumors surrounding the pandemic. Second, the shift to hybrid work: The COVID-19 crisis accelerated the adoption of hybrid work practices among journalists. This

transition was driven by both health concerns, as journalists aimed to minimize their exposure to the disease, and advancements in technology that made hybrid work more feasible than before. Working from home became a prominent feature during the first wave of COVID-19 coverage, and its implications for journalism were explored in the interviews. These two areas—enhanced emphasis on expertise and the move to hybrid work—became focal points of the interviews conducted with journalists during the initial wave of COVID-19 coverage (Backholm & Idås, 2024; Tameez, 2020).

As we transition to the core of our investigation, it is crucial to acknowledge the broader contribution of this study to the journalistic field and crisis communication. Through an in-depth analysis of senior journalists' experiences, this research highlights a paradigm shift toward a more expertise-based and flexible reporting framework. These insights not only enrich our academic understanding of journalism during crises but also serve as a practical guide for media practitioners, emphasizing the importance of scientific accuracy and the innovative potential of hybrid work environments in ensuring responsible and effective news dissemination.

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent did the coverage of COVID-19 influence the recognition of the importance of relying on professional expertise in journalistic practice?

RQ2: How did the coverage of COVID-19 impact the adoption and emphasis on hybrid work arrangements within the journalistic profession?

Research Expectations

Based on the literature surveyed above, we expect to find the following:

1. The coverage of COVID-19 is expected to be characterized by a heightened recognition of the importance of relying on professional expertise.
2. The coverage of COVID-19 is anticipated to underscore the significance of hybrid work arrangements within the journalistic profession, with the expectation that remote work among reporters or from nearby locations will continue to increase alongside traditional broadcasting from studios.

Method

We interviewed 20 notable reporters and editors who played a pivotal role in covering the initial wave of COVID-19. The interviewees were selected from a curated list of health reporters provided by Ifat, a company specializing in Israeli media monitoring. Our sampling strategy was designed to ensure a thorough and inclusive representation of reporters and editors across diverse media platforms, such as print, radio, television, and online journalism, who actively contributed to reporting on the early stages of the pandemic. Participant recruitment leveraged the esteemed reputation of one of our team members as a prominent journalist, resulting in the inclusion of influential figures from all approached media outlets.

We sought out reporters and editors specializing in health topics across all leading media platforms in the country, including the top three TV channels (11, 12, 13), four leading newspapers, two news websites, and two radio stations. In addition to mainstream media targeting the general public, there are also media outlets catering to niche audiences: the Haredi community, the Arab community, and local newspapers focusing on specific residential areas. We approached four journalists from such niche media outlets. Among the 20 interviewees, there were 12 men and 8 women, with ages ranging from 30 to 60. Most had been covering the health sector for many years (over 10), although some had been in the field for just over a year. None of the journalists had covered the health sector for less than a year.

The study focused on the first wave of COVID-19, which was characterized by heightened uncertainty, fears, and administrative challenges, making it particularly significant compared with subsequent waves when familiarity and coping mechanisms had become more established. The interviews were conducted 2–3 months after the conclusion of the first wave to ensure that the experiences and insights of the interviewees remained fresh in their minds. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the interviewees for their convenience.

The interviews covered a spectrum of topics, delving into the practical aspects of journalists' work, their roles in the coverage, the locations where the coverage occurred, and the specific characteristics of their COVID-19 reporting. Participants were queried about their experiences in navigating the crisis and the consequent impact it had on both their professional duties and personal lives. Moreover, the interviews explored the participants' level of interest and curiosity about the pandemic during its initial wave.

The interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis with the assistance of two research assistants. Initially, the first five interviews were conducted collectively by two researchers and two research assistants until the research directions became clear. Following this, the research assistants and one of the researchers collaborated on subsequent interviews and analyses to ensure a comprehensive consensus on the findings. After the initial interviews, we conducted an initial analysis and identified some themes that were refined and expanded upon over time until the findings reached a level of solidity and coherence (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Tracy, 2020).

Findings

Through multiple rounds of analysis, we identified key themes that emerged from the interviews and focused on two central themes:

1. The significance of recognizing and relying on expertise during the coverage of the initial wave of COVID-19.
2. The importance of hybrid work during the first wave of the pandemic, along with the expectation that this significance will endure in the future.

Theme 1: The Importance of Recognizing and Relying on Expertise

The interviewees highlighted the dearth of scientific information they experienced during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argued that health reporters traditionally seek guidance from diverse

experts when faced with uncertainties in the information received, particularly when it carries significant public health implications. Nonetheless, according to the interviewees, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a distinct scenario. Interviewees argued that this crisis, given its profound potential consequences on transmission rates and long-term patient well-being, intensified journalists' dedication to the accuracy of their reporting. This transition emphasized an increased dependence on expert consultations, highlighting a shared determination among journalists to uphold the dissemination of trustworthy and evidence-based information amid a global health crisis.

The significance of reliable scientific information became more pronounced due to the prevailing uncertainty that characterized this phase and the journalists' need for a solid foundation while reporting on the situation. For example, Interviewee 1 said, "I believe that the most central aspect is undoubtedly uncertainty. As journalists, we are tasked with covering a medical event that has profound scientific implications."

The anchor found amid the uncertainty was reliable scientific information. However, many reporters expressed their difficulties in obtaining information and reports from various sources, including relevant government offices.

During the first wave of the pandemic, journalists faced unprecedented challenges in acquiring information. Obtaining even the most basic information proved to be extremely difficult. This was particularly true when it came to accessing information from the various ministries involved in decision-making during the crisis. (Interviewee 2)

Not all scientific publications were accurate and rigorous, and this was acknowledged by science and health reporters. For example:

I had to start from scratch and bring the information myself. The expectation from the system was that I would be the one to do so, as I was the only health reporter in the organization, leaving no other means to access the data. (Interviewee 3)

Interviewee 4 said, "I maintain contact with numerous scientists from around the world, allowing me to stay up-to-date with the latest developments and insights [and] ensuring that I have access to a wide range of perspectives and expertise." According to Interviewee 5:

We observed numerous scientific publications, often referred to as "preprints" or "instant publications." However, it became evident that there was a significant amount of what is commonly referred to as "junk science." . . . Additionally, there were contradictory studies and evolving findings as more information became available. While this is a natural part of the scientific process, during the first wave, it became apparent that studies could be found to support almost any claim, further contributing to the confusion surrounding the pandemic.

From the quotes provided, it is evident that the reporters made an effort to exercise judgment and discernment in evaluating the scientific and supposedly scientific information they encountered. They were cautious not to quote or promote pseudoscientific information and instead employed a semi-scientific process of screening and assessing the materials they were presented with.

Furthermore, some interviewees expressed their personal curiosity and interest in the crisis, which extended beyond their professional obligations. They actively engaged in researching the crisis, reading articles, and educating themselves about the subject matter in their free time. This demonstrates that their interest in the crisis transcended their professional roles and became a personal pursuit, enabling them to navigate the scientific material surrounding the crisis more effectively.

Yes, I believe I did a much better job because the COVID-19 crisis interested me personally, and there was also a sense of necessity. . . Ultimately, by providing the details and facts, I believe I am offering added value to my viewers, enabling them to better understand and navigate this unprecedented situation. (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 6 also said, "I am incredibly curious about it, and I don't say this lightly. I have a genuine obsession with staying informed about the topic. There is no publication or article related to the COVID-19 crisis that I don't read."

With all that being said, it is evident that the curiosity expressed by most of the interviewees was not solely driven by the pandemic itself but also by the magnitude of the crisis it generated, as well as the prevailing uncertainty and lack of information during the initial wave. The unprecedented character of the situation compelled these journalists to dig deeper and seek out reliable sources to uncover the truth and provide accurate information to the public. For example, according to Interviewee 3, "As a journalist, I have a natural aversion to uncertainty, especially considering my role as someone expected to be well-informed and knowledgeable about various scenarios."

The health reporters and editors, particularly in the studios, expressed a sense of becoming personal encyclopedias when it came to reporting on COVID-19. They felt a responsibility not only to provide information for their respective media platforms but also to serve as additional sources of information for the public. The extensive knowledge they acquired about the pandemic allowed them to go beyond what was presented on television screens and newspapers, offering additional insights and clarifications to help the public navigate through the complexities of the situation. Interviewee 7 said, "I personally became a go-to source for people, serving as an address for their questions about COVID-19. At a certain point, people began reaching out to me for information and guidance even before consulting their family doctor."

Theme 2: The Importance of Hybrid Work

The second theme centers on the transformation of journalistic work during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in terms of the blurring boundaries between home and work. As the pandemic unfolded, a new era emerged in the media landscape. Instead of working in traditional newsrooms, journalists began operating from their homes through platforms like Zoom. During the first wave of COVID-

19 and subsequent lockdown measures, reporters' homes essentially became makeshift studios or ad hoc newsrooms with the support of media organizations.

Despite their fears of contracting the virus and concerns about their loved ones' well-being, all the reporters interviewed for this study persevered in their work. They acknowledged the unique journalistic challenge posed by COVID-19 coverage, surpassing even the coverage of disasters and conflicts due to its prolonged duration, ongoing nature, and unpredictable outcomes and implications. The pandemic presented a continuous and evolving situation that required adaptability, resourcefulness, and a commitment to delivering accurate information to the public.

As a news reporter, I covered various catastrophes and incidents that occurred in my area. However, I always maintained a certain level of detachment, observing events from a distance. For example, I would arrive at a hospital after a terror attack with numerous casualties, conducting interviews and reporting on the situation . . . [Still,] I remained an onlooker in those circumstances. However, the COVID-19 . . . penetrated my home and personal life, blurring the boundaries between my professional and personal realms. Suddenly, I was not just reporting on the crisis from a distance; it directly affected me and those around me. (Interviewee 8)

The character of work for the majority of reporters during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic became hybrid, characterized by the blending of professional and personal spheres. This transition was encouraged and sometimes mandated by employers. Journalism as a profession has already seen a significant number of reporters working from home for many years. Therefore, some reporters who were already accustomed to hybrid work experienced only minor changes in their day-to-day operations. However, regardless of their previous work arrangements, all interviewees had to navigate the professional challenges of covering COVID-19 while simultaneously grappling with personal concerns. The fear of contracting the virus themselves and potentially infecting their loved ones, especially elderly parents or other vulnerable individuals at home, added an additional layer of complexity to their work.

Suddenly, I found myself broadcasting from home, with a makeshift studio set up in my house . . . My wife took on the role of my producer, and there were even days of winter and rain when I had to broadcast from the living room. Broadcasting from home was a completely novel endeavor for most of us prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Interviewee 9)

The editorial boards actively encouraged reporters to work from home. However, this transition to working from home brought about new challenges in the personal sphere. Reporters had to adjust to working alone without the presence of editors in the office. They had to create a professional environment within their homes and navigate the demands of work while balancing family responsibilities. Working from home meant isolating oneself and conducting interviews without the usual contact with colleagues and the support of the newsroom. It also meant adapting to the presence of parents and children in the background, which added an additional layer of complexity to their work. For example, according to Interviewee 11, "The

children are exposed to unusual telephone conversations . . . and experience constant media exposure.” Finally, according to Interviewee 12:

I had to ensure a quiet background before starting my broadcasts, which was particularly challenging as I had small children at home. Managing the technical aspects of creating a suitable broadcasting environment amidst the presence of active children proved to be quite demanding.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examines the profound impact of COVID-19 pandemic coverage on journalists, particularly those reporting on the first wave, amid institutional uncertainty and the absence of a cure or vaccination. Reflecting on the distinctive traits of Israeli journalists—their obsessive activism, profound sense of justice, adherence to professional norms, pursuit of extensive knowledge, and emergence as public figures—this research uncovers how these attributes influenced their reporting during the pandemic. Studies on Israeli journalism, such as those by Ginosar and Reich (2020) and Wiesslitz and Ashuri (2011), have previously highlighted the evolving nature of journalists as advocates and experts within their domains. This investigation extends these observations into the realm of health crisis reporting, where journalists’ inherent characteristics became instrumental in navigating the complexities of the pandemic.

Our findings illuminate the critical role that health reporters assumed in guiding the public through the crisis. They became *de facto* scientific communicators, translating complex health information into accessible language, a responsibility underscored by the urgent need for credible information (Cirruzzo, 2021; Perreault & Perreault, 2021). The pandemic’s challenges, marked by the scarcity of reliable data and the proliferation of misinformation, compelled journalists to delve deeper into the scientific discourse, transforming them into authoritative figures in public health communication. This evolution reflects the described traits of Israeli journalists, particularly their commitment to justice and professionalism, as they sought to provide not just news but also guidance and reassurance to the public.

The study further reveals how the pandemic prompted a hybrid work model among journalists, a shift that resonates with their adaptability and pursuit of professionalism. This model not only addressed the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic but also hinted at a lasting transformation of the journalistic profession. The transition to remote work, while born out of necessity, showcased journalists’ flexibility and their unwavering commitment to their role as information providers, even in the face of personal risk and the unprecedented challenge of covering a health crisis more daunting than war.

This research, conducted within the Israeli media landscape, has several intrinsic limitations that may influence its broader applicability. First, the structural composition of media and government relations varies significantly across countries, with some regions experiencing more freedom or government dependence in journalism. Such variations can substantially affect journalistic perceptions and practices. Additionally, the staggered global onset of COVID-19 meant that journalists in different countries faced varying levels of preparedness, with some caught off guard and others benefiting from the foresight gained from observing international developments. Technological and Internet capabilities, which differ globally, also impact the

feasibility of remote work for journalists, potentially altering their experiences compared with those detailed in our study. Given such factors, the experience of consulting with experts and hybrid working arrangements may differ among journalists worldwide. This study's limitation lies in its focus on Israel; future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding by exploring these aspects in different global contexts where media structures, the timing of the pandemic's arrival, and technological capabilities vary.

This study enhances our comprehension of journalism's response to global health emergencies. Through an examination of the firsthand experiences of veteran journalists amid the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it sheds light on the changing dynamics of the journalistic profession amid crises. These findings provide invaluable insights, serving as a guide for maneuvering the intricacies of upcoming crises and ultimately strengthening the resilience and flexibility of the journalistic field.

This study not only contributes to the understanding of journalism in times of crisis but also highlights the need for further research into the personal and professional impacts of such coverage on reporters themselves, an area that remains underexplored in both Israeli and global contexts.

References

- Albaek, E., Elmelund-Præstekaer, C., Hopmann, D. N., & Klemmensen, R. (2011). Experts in election news coverage. *Nordicom*, 32(1), 45–58. doi:10.1515/nor-2017-0104
- Alkhodair, S. A., Fung, B. C. M., Ding, S. H. H., Cheung, W. K., & Huang, S. (2021). Detecting high-engaging breaking news rumors in social media. *ACM Transactions on Management Information Systems*, 12(1), 1–16. doi:10.1145/3416703
- Andsager, J. L., & Powers, A. (1999). Social or economic concerns: How news and women's magazines framed breast cancer in the 1990s. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76(3), 531–550. doi:10.1177/107769909907600309
- Avekasis, H., Shalem-Rabinovich, A., Yehezkelly, J., & Lev-on, A. (2023). What characterize the rumors circulating on social media in Israel in the first wave of COVID-19? *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 13(4), e202352. doi:10.30935/ojcm/1368
- Avital, T. (2020, April 14). HaKrav Al HaEmet BeTzel HaMagefa: Kach Nirim Chayehem Shel Ktavei HaBriut BeIdan HaKorona [The battle over truth in the wake of the epidemic: This is what the lives of health reporters look like in the COVID-19 era]. *Shakuf*. Retrieved from <https://shakuf.co.il/11946>
- Backholm, K., & Idås, T. (2024). Journalists and the Coronavirus: How changes in work environment affected psychological health during the pandemic. *Journalism Practice*, 18(6), 1560–1576. doi:10.1080/17512786.2022.2098522

- Basch, C., Kecojevic, A., & Wagner, V. (2020). Coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the online versions of highly circulated U.S. daily newspapers. *Journal of Community Health, 45*, 1089–1097. doi:10.1007/s10900-020-00913-w
- Boyce, T. (2006). Journalism and expertise. *Journalism Studies, 7*(6), 889–906. doi:10.1080/14616700600980652
- Casero-Ripolles, A. (2020). Impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of news consumption during the outbreak. *El Profesional de la Información, 29*(2), e290223. doi:10.3145/epi.2020.mar.23
- Cherubini, F., Newman, N., & Nielsen, R. K. (2021). *Changing newsrooms 2021: Hybrid working and improving diversity remain twin challenges for publishers*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/changing-newsrooms-2021-hybrid-working-and-improving-diversity-remain-twin-challenges-publishers>
- Cirruzzo, C. (2021). *One year into the pandemic, how are health reporters doing?* Nieman Reports. Retrieved from <https://nieman.harvard.edu/articles/one-year-into-the-pandemic-how-are-health-reporters-doing/>
- Donsbach, W. (2014). Journalism as the new knowledge profession and consequences for journalism education. *Journalism, 15*(6), 661–677. doi:10.1177/1464884913491347
- Ekström, M. (2002). Epistemologies of TV journalism: A theoretical framework. *Journalism, 3*(3), 259–282. doi:10.1177/146488490200300301
- Feinberg, T. E. (2001). *Altered egos: How the brain creates the self*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ginosar, A., & Reich, Z. (2020). Obsessive–activist journalists: A new model of journalism? *Journalism Practice, 16*(4), 660–680. doi:10.1080/17512786.2020.1816488
- Gruber, M. (2021). *Journalists working from home? A labour right perspective for a hybrid future*. European Federation of Journalists. Retrieved from <https://efj.gitbook.io/journalists-working-from-home>
- Hovis, K. (2021, April 30). *Science journalists on the pandemic: 'We couldn't trust our regular sources'*. Retrieved from <https://as.cornell.edu/news/science-journalists-pandemic-we-couldnt-trust-our-regular-sources>
- Kitzinger, J. (1999). Researching risk and the media. *Health, Risk & Society, 1*(1), 55–69. doi:10.1080/13698579908407007

- Lev-On, A., & Yehezkelly, J. (2024). Covering a health crisis as a military crisis? The Israeli media coverage of the first COVID-19 wave crisis. *Israel Affairs*, 30(3), 462–481. doi:10.1080/13537121.2024.2342140
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Manweller, M., & Harvey, K. (2013). Do political reporters need to be political scientists? *Journal of Political Science Education*, 9(3), 255–272. doi:10.1080/15512169.2013.796232
- Nisbet, M. C., & Fahy, D. (2015). The need for knowledge-based journalism in politicized science debates. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 658(1), 223–234. doi:10.1177/0002716214559887
- Patterson, T. E. (2013). *Informing the news*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Perreault, M. F., & Perreault, G. P. (2021). Journalists on COVID-19 journalism: Communication ecology of pandemic reporting. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(7), 976–991. doi:10.1177/0002716214559887
- Rothan, H. A., & Byrereddy, S. N. (2020). The epidemiology and pathogenesis of COVID-19 virus disease (COVID-19) outbreak. *Journal of Autoimmunity*, 109, 102433. doi:10.1016/j.jaut.2020.102433
- Schultz, I. (2007). The journalistic gut feeling: Journalistic doxa, news habitus and orthodox news values. *Journalism Practice*, 1(2), 190–207. doi:10.1080/17512780701275507
- Tameez, H. N. (2020). *Newsrooms can prosper with remote work- but they have to make the right adjustments*. Nieman Lab Foundation at Harvard. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/08/newsrooms-can-prosper-with-remote-work-but-they-have-to-make-the-right-adjustments-first/>
- Tracy, S. J. (2020). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Ward, S. J. A. (2018). Epistemologies of journalism. In T. P. Vos (Ed.), *Handbooks of communication science: Journalism* (pp. 63–82). Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.
- Weimann, G. (2000). *Communicating unreality: Modern media and the reconstruction of reality*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wiesslitz, C., & Ashuri, T. (2011). 'Moral journalists': The emergence of new intermediaries of news in an age of digital media. *Journalism*, 12(8), 1035–1051. doi:10.1177/1464884910388236