

# Media coverage of COVID-19 state surveillance in Israel: the securitization and militarization of a civil-medical crisis

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## Abstract

Israel, traditionally known as a nation-in-arms, has been undergoing processes of securitization and militarization from its inception to the present day. While several countries have employed surveillance technologies to tackle the spread of coronavirus, Israel was the only country in the world to authorize its internal security agency to track citizens' cellphones to deal with this civil-medical crisis. Employing a reflexive thematic analysis to news media outlets, this study examined coverage of Israel Security Agency (ISA) surveillance by four leading Israeli news sites, inquiring into the socio-cultural imageries, and motifs that informed their reports. While two of the sites were mostly supportive and the other two were critical, the coverage as a whole was informed by national security imageries reminiscent of Israel's nation-in-arms tradition. Our discussion contextualizes these findings within a three-decade tension that has prevailed in Israeli society and culture between securitization/militarization and democratization/demilitarization.

## Keywords

COVID-19, coronavirus, media coverage, Israel security agency, surveillance, thematic analysis

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## Introduction

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared ‘a public health emergency of international concern over the global outbreak of novel coronavirus’ (WHO, 2020) and declared it a pandemic 2 months later. On 14 March 2020, Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu held a press conference announcing his intention to authorize Israel Security Agency (ISA, the *Shin Bet*) to track citizens’ cellphone geolocations to tackle the spread of COVID-19 (Halbfinger et al., 2020). Two days later, the government approved emergency regulations to realize this plan.

This was an exceptional step, first, because Israel was the only country in the world to use its internal security agency – normally responsible for thwarting terrorism and espionage – to resolve a civil-medical crisis (Amit et al., 2020); and second, it was approved by the government, thereby demonstrating an anomalous bypass of primary legislation by the *Knesset* (Israel’s parliament). Responding to several petitions submitted by human rights organizations and activists against ISA surveillance, the Supreme Court ruled that such measures require primary legislation (Adalah, 2020), resulting in a new bill that permits such surveillance under parliamentary supervision (Staff, 2020).

This study examines the coverage of ISA surveillance by four leading Israeli news sites, by inquiring into the socio-cultural imageries and motifs that informed their reports. This examination responds to three notable scholarly lacunas. First, several recent studies have already analyzed the complex interplay between state surveillance, civil liberties, and public health during the COVID-19 pandemic (French and Monahan, 2020; Kitchin, 2020; Ram and Gray, 2020), and some even focused on the unique Israeli case (Amit et al., 2020; Kahana, 2021; Shpiro, 2021). However, the role of the news media in communicating this program to the public has yet to be studied. This is particularly important because much of this crisis management relied on advancing public understanding and cooperation, in which the media play a significant role (Falagas and Kiriaze, 2006; Veil and Ojeda, 2010).

Second, over the past decade, a growing body of knowledge about media coverage of surveillance has been evolving. However, literature in the field is still limited in quantity and commonly focuses on surveillance aimed at tackling security threats such as terrorism and espionage rather than civic-medical challenges (Kroener, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017). The Israeli case, in which state surveillance is implemented by an internal security agency for a medical purpose, invites a close look at how the media function within such tension.

Third, Israel is a developing surveillance society whose surveillance policy has received little scholarly attention so far, particularly in the contexts of controlling Palestinian populations and territories (Zureik et al., 2011) and the recent establishment of a national biometric database (Marciano, 2019a). The current study illuminates another layer of Israel’s surveillance policy.

Combining these points, the current study aims to understand how the Israeli media have rationalized and communicated a controversial program implemented by one of the country’s most trusted security services (Israeli, 2020) in times of enhanced public awareness of state surveillance and privacy violation. This inquiry, as the following

section suggests, acknowledges the interplay between the securitization and militarization of Israeli society and the medical context of coronavirus.

## Theoretical framework

### *Media coverage of surveillance: superficial, supportive, and episodic*

Over the past dozen years, a growing yet limited body of knowledge about news media coverage of surveillance has evolved (Marciano, 2019b). This development was encouraged by famous leaks that exposed controversial state surveillance practices conducted by Western countries, thereby attracting extensive media attention (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hunt, 2012).

Edward Snowden's 2013 leak of classified information from the US National Security Agency emerged as a significant juncture in this development: prior to this, only a few studies had examined media representations of surveillance (Barnard-Wills, 2011; Greenberg and Hier, 2009); the majority were published afterwards. Most of these studies focused on UK media (Barnard-Wills, 2011; Branum and Charteris-Black, 2015; Kroener, 2013; Lischka, 2017; Salter, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017), and several examined coverage in other countries such as New Zealand (Kuehn, 2018), Norway (Eide and Lånkan, 2016), Finland (Tiainen, 2017), and Germany (Möllers and Hälterlein, 2013).

Influenced by Snowden's revelations, the study of news media coverage of surveillance focused primarily on whistleblowing (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hunt, 2012), from the coverage of Wikileaks (Handley and Ismail, 2013) to the portrayals of key figures such as Chelsea Manning (Thorsen et al., 2013), Julian Assange (Luther and Radovic, 2014), Glenn Greenwald (Salter, 2015), and, as mentioned, Edward Snowden (Branum and Charteris-Black, 2015; Di Salvo and Negro, 2016).

Overall, this evolving literature offered three main conclusions. First, coverage of surveillance usually conveyed two competing stances – supportive or critical – with slight (Barnard-Wills, 2011) or definite (Kroener, 2013; McCahill, 2014) predominance of the supportive stance. Far fewer studies found the critical stance to be slightly (Marciano, 2019b) or significantly more predominant (Eide and Lånkan, 2016). Second, media coverage of surveillance practices and policies tended to be superficial (Lischka, 2017), generally overlooking the profound social and ethical implications of these practices (Kroener, 2013) while decontextualizing them through episodic rather than thematic framing (Greenberg and Hier, 2009). Third, the media commonly framed state surveillance through the lens of national security rather than as a civic issue (Kuehn, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017). Even critical accounts used national security as a central reference point to evaluate surveillance practices (Spektor, 2020; Tiainen, 2017).

The current study aims to add to this evolving body of knowledge by exploring different contexts: media coverage of surveillance implemented by ISA for civic-medical purposes. Israel's unique security climate, particularly in regard to its state of emergency (as we discuss later), makes it an intriguing case.

### *Militarized Israel: winds of change?*

Israel was born as a nation-in-arms and has existed ever since under challenging geopolitical circumstances that have facilitated continuous securitization and militarization (Ben-Eliezer, 1995, 2019). These processes have been markedly fueled by the major role that the Israeli security forces play in Israeli society and culture (Kimmerling, 1993), based on their construction as a protective shield of the Jewish people, which had suffered traumatic events of persecution in exile (Almog, 2000).

Numerous terms have been coined to describe the securitization and militarization of Israeli society and culture, including militaristic politics (Ben-Eliezer, 1995), civilian militarism (Kimmerling, 1993), militaristic nationalism (Ben-Eliezer, 2019), and more. Scholars examining the impact of militarization on Israel have shown, for example, how military service facilitates the masculinization of Israeli society (Klein, 2002; Sasson-Levy, 2006), or builds life-worlds of Israeli men that constitute a 'definer of Israeliness' (Helman, 1999). Furman (1999) demonstrated the depth of Israeli militarization by inquiring into the socialization of kindergarten children to future military service through educational rituals that stress the importance of sacrifice.

However, the militarization of Israel has been abating since the mid-1980s, following the 1973 and 1982 wars (Helman, 1999; Levy et al., 2007). Levy et al. (2007) identified a motivation crisis, which they conceptualized as a shift from a 'subjected militarism' (military service as an unconditional national duty) to a 'contractual militarism' (military service as fulfilling individuals' ambitions). Helman (1999) pointed out moral explanations, according to which soldiers refused to take up reserve duty during the 1982 war because they considered it a 'war of choice'. Peri (2001) further claimed that since the late 1990s, civil-military relations in Israel have reached a critical crisis state because of structural changes in Israeli society as well as increasing Western trends of individualization, democratization, and demilitarization.

These trends have resulted in the establishment of several social movements aimed at promoting conscientious objection to protect civil and human rights (Zemlinskaya, 2008). Today, anti-militarist activists in Israel explicitly describe their motivation as a patriotic effort to save Israel from the destructive influence of militarization (Weiss, 2019). And yet, numerous studies point to the revival of militaristic nationalism in Israel in the post El-Aqsa Intifada era (Sheffer and Barak, 2010; Ben-Eliezer, 2019) and to the high public trust in the country's security forces, including the IDF, the ISA, and the *Mossad* (Israeli, 2020; Tiargan-Orr and Eran-Jona, 2016). This tension between the securitization and militarization of Israel is characteristic of the current Israeli political climate. This climate should serve as a framework for understanding and evaluating the emergency regulations enacted in Israel during the COVID-19 crisis.

### *State of emergency: theoretical roots and the Israeli case*

Over the past century, state of emergency as a political act received considerable scholarly attention. Schmitt (2005/1922) opened his 1922 famous essay *political theology* with the statement 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception' (p. 5). In this work, Schmitt criticized the liberal state and the rule of law as discouraging and weakening the

sovereign, identifying state of emergency as a solution that allows him to suspend the law, tighten his command and improve governmentality. State of emergency, according to Schmitt, is a ‘case of extreme peril [or] a danger to the existence of the state’ (Schmitt, 2005/1922: 6).

The notion of emergency was further theorized by Italian philosopher Agamben (1998, 2005), who dedicated much of his scholarship to analyze the conditions that allow democratic regimes to exert institutionalized violence on their citizens. A state of exception reflects a suspension of law that occurs during states of emergency. When legal order is suspended by the sovereign, the order is ‘in force without significance’ (Agamben, 1998: 51) and applies only by no longer applying. Therefore, within a state of exception – which according to Agamben (1998) has become the norm in contemporary politics – the subject is abandoned and left unprotected by law, and ultimately turns into *bare life*. Agamben (1999) circles back to Schmitt’s political background by arguing that the Nazi concentration camps can be seen as a historical example in which bare lives were subjected to the normalization of exception (see also 1998: 171).

Agamben applied these theoretical observations to state surveillance in democratic regimes, suggesting, for example, that biometrics turn human bodies into instrumental objects (Agamben & Murray, 2008) while video surveillance ‘transforms the public space [. . .] into the interior of an immense prison’ (Agamben, 2009, p. 23).

These theoretical observations are particularly pertinent to Israel, which has been in a permanent state of emergency since its inception. The original 1948 decision to allow a state of emergency and promulgate emergency regulations (clause 9) was intended to help the new, small country deal with substantial security challenges. But the authority to initiate emergency was ratified twice in later legislation (Basic Law: The Government, 1992, 2001), allowing the *Knesset* to declare a state of emergency (clause 38) while authorizing the government to issue emergency regulations with ‘the capacity to change every law, suspend it temporarily or set new conditions to the law’ [. . .] in order to ‘protect the country and the public safety’ (clause 39).

Israeli scholar Yehouda Shenhav claimed that Israel’s permanent state of emergency is reminiscent of totalitarian regimes because democratic states commonly declare emergency ad hoc to deal with specific threats under strict public oversight (Shenhav, 2006). In Israel, the state of emergency has become part of the country’s political culture, reflecting the securitization and militarization of Israeli society (Kimmerling, 1993).

## Method

This study examines coverage of ISA’s COVID-19-motivated cellphone tracking by four leading, mainstream news sites in Israel: *Ynet*, *Ha’aretz*, *Walla*, and *Mako*. We selected these four sources because they are the most popular news sites in Israel (as rated by *Alexa* and *SimilarWeb*) and because they differ in ideological orientation, target market, and funding structure (see Semetko et al., 1991; Yadlin & Shagrir, 2021), thus providing a broad perspective on the coverage of the topic.

*Ynet*, *Walla*, and *Mako* work under bigger corporations (*Yediot Ahronoth*, *Bezeq*, and *Keshet*, respectively). They rely on advertising revenue, provide free access, and accordingly express mainstream political ideologies aimed at reaching the widest audience

possible. A report examining the scope of product placement in Israeli news sites has criticized their journalistic quality, defining Ynet as ‘the most commercialized news platform’ that gradually loses its journalistic character, and identifying a similar yet moderate tendency among Walla and Mako (Balint, 2015). As part of PM Netanyahu’s corruption trial, Walla’s former CEO has confirmed accusations of biased reporting in favor of Netanyahu, describing his direct and immediate involvement in editorial decisions. By contrast, *Ha’aretz* is considered an elite, liberal, left-wing broadsheet based on paid subscriptions and known for its critical approach toward PM Netanyahu (Handley and Ismail, 2013). The report mentioned above credited *Ha’aretz* for ‘excelling in maintaining editorial independence’ relative to the other three (Balint, 2015).

These different factors, from ideological orientation to funding structure, were organized in Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) Hierarchical Influences Model, according to which five macro-to-micro interrelated forces determine the tone of the coverage: social systems (the broadest ideological level, including international circles), social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals (journalists and editors’ personal and professional characteristics).

*Walla* and *Mako* publish exclusively online content while *Ynet* and *Ha’aretz* also issue printed editions. We focused on the online editions, primarily because the circulation numbers of the printed newspapers are constantly falling (Mann and Lev-On, 2016).

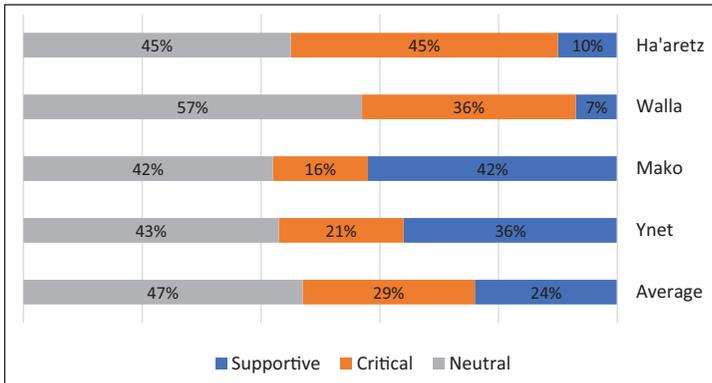
### Corpus

The data corpus analyzed in this study consisted of 118 news articles that covered ISA surveillance (op-eds and commentaries were excluded). We defined the corpus according to two key events/dates within the first wave of the pandemic. The first item was published on 14 March 2020, following PM Netanyahu’s announcement about the implementation of ISA surveillance, and the last article was published on 8 June 2020, following the decision to discontinue the surveillance as the first outbreak abated and the Supreme Court ruled that ISA surveillance must be regulated by parliamentary legislation.

We applied two complementary search strategies to establish a comprehensive corpus. First, we entered various keywords (e.g. the Hebrew words for surveillance, tracking, monitoring, ISA, etc.) into each of the news sites’ local search engines. Second, we entered the same keywords into Google’s search engine using strings that allow for retrieval from a specific website (e.g. ‘site:Ynet.co.il surveillance’). We included in the corpus only those items with headlines and/or subheadings directly focused on ISA coronavirus surveillance.

### Reflexive thematic analysis

Thematic analysis refers to an array of different approaches aimed at identifying, organizing, and classifying insights into patterns (‘themes’) across qualitative datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2012). In this study, we applied Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012) approach of reflexive thematic analysis, which consists of six phases. *Familiarization* refers to an initial search for intriguing features and connections that might add depth to subsequent,



**Figure 1.** News sites' approach to ISA surveillance.

more systematic coding. *Generating codes* involves closer engagement with the data in which the researchers tag different units systematically to identify initial meaning throughout the dataset. We used inductive-dominant coding, a bottom-up strategy in which the analytic process originates in the data, but at the same time acknowledges researchers' previous conceptions and knowledge. In the next phase, *constructing themes*, the researchers merge related codes into clusters of meaning that illuminate a particular part of the dataset. In the next two phases, *reviewing* and *defining themes*, the researchers 'test' existing themes against the research questions and refine their boundaries by providing clear definitions and titles. The final phase, *producing the report*, is intended 'to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 93).

Our findings below are supported by examples from the journalistic items analyzed. References to the articles consist of the first letter of the news site (Y, M, H, or W) followed by the articles' ordinal numbers. To avoid complication, the full list of news items, including titles, names of journalists, dates of publications, and URLs is available as Supplemental Material (in Hebrew).

### Analysis and findings

The coverage of ISA coronavirus cellphone surveillance was distributed unevenly among *Ynet* (30%), *Ha'aretz* (26%), *Walla* (24%), and *Mako* (20%). As Figure 1 suggests, the general approach to ISA surveillance was slightly more critical than supportive (29% vs 24% of the articles, respectively), although most articles were neutral (47%). This evaluation is based on our assessment of the headlines and overall tone, according to which we defined each article as exclusively or mostly supportive, entirely or primarily critical, or neutral. For example, some of the headlines framed the initiative positively or negatively by emphasizing its beneficial/adverse implications (e.g. 'ISA: more than 500 Israelis were diagnosed with the virus thanks to us', Y18; 'ISA will track confirmed patients: it's a slippery slope', Y7). Articles were defined as neutral if they were completely or chiefly

informative (e.g. 'ISA tracking of coronavirus patients has begun', M7). Therefore, a specific news site can be equally supportive and critical, depending on how we classified its news items. A high level of inter-rater reliability (96%) was found between the two authors (Uebersax, 1987).

The four news sites differed significantly, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in terms of their approach to ISA surveillance. While *Ynet* and *Mako* were more supportive than critical (39% vs 18.5%), *Ha'aretz* and *Walla* were far more critical than supportive (40.5% vs 8.5%). This division between the two groups was further evident in the quantitative representation of advocates and opponents mentioned in the articles. A simple headcount suggested that in *Ynet* and *Mako* advocates outnumbered opponents (117 vs 78) while *Ha'aretz* and *Walla* demonstrated the opposite trend (99 opponents vs 81 advocates).

In line with these quantitative trends, the four news sites employed different strategies to rationalize and communicate their critical or supportive stances. Based on our thematic analysis, we elaborate below on central trends in the coverage, showing that *Ynet* and *Mako* legitimized ISA surveillance by using militaristic terminology and by focusing on regulative restraint imposed on ISA, respectively. By contrast, *Ha'aretz* and *Walla* criticized ISA surveillance and the securitization of the crisis by contextualizing them within Israel's state of emergency and by highlighting their potential implications for human rights and democracy.

### *Ynet: use of militaristic terminology*

*Ynet*, which published the largest number of articles, was the second most supportive and least critical, after *Mako*. Although several *Ynet* articles took a critical stance toward ISA surveillance (i.e. Y4, Y7, Y11, Y16, Y21, Y31), the coverage was generally dominated by militaristic terminology that legitimized the securitization of the civil-medical crisis. In fact, a quarter of the articles in *Ynet* (24%) included explicit militaristic terms compared with an average of 4% on the other three news sites.

The first article published in *Ynet* cited PM Netanyahu's announcement verbatim:

It is hard to locate this enemy because it is evasive, but we are [ . . . ] using everything we have including digital tools whereby we fought terrorism, but which I refrained from using on civilians so far. But we have no choice, we are fighting a war that necessitates special means. [ . . . ] It provides us with a highly effective tool to locate the enemy, to locate the virus (Y1).

This quote portrays the medical situation as a war and the virus as an evasive enemy that has to be located, thereby legitimizing the use of 'digital tools' and 'special means' on civilians through a 'no-choice' rationale. While recent studies have shown that militaristic metaphors are common in the coverage of COVID-19 (Semino, 2021; Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020), the Israeli case is quite unique because no-choice militaristic rhetoric is often employed by Israeli leaders (Gavriely-Nuri, 2014; Yariv, 1985) and the press (Leibovits and Katriel, 2010) as a discursive strategy to construct going to war as a legitimate and even necessary step, consequently justifying aggressive policy.

Against a possible claim that *Ynet* simply cited Netanyahu's statement, a comparative look at the other three news sites revealed that all of them edited this quote to avoid militaristic rhetoric by eliminating specific words such as 'war' and 'enemy'. Both *Ha'aretz* and *Mako* focused on a more neutral part of the announcement: 'It provides us with an effective tool to locate the virus' (H1, M1) while *Walla* replaced 'fighting a war' with 'facing the virus' (W17).

*Ynet* articles also cited other ministers who used similar terminology, according to which 'To stop the spreading of coronavirus [. . .] we have to constantly initiate and change our regular modus operandi to win this critical battle' (Y3), or: 'We have to remain on high alert with all the instruments available to us' (Y34).

Interestingly, medical personnel and even privacy advocates adopted similar militaristic terminology that *Ynet* chose to emphasize in its coverage. For example, the head of public health services at the Ministry of Health was cited as saying 'We must not underestimate the enemy in front of us as the battle has yet to be won' (Y33). Even social organizations that appealed to Israel's Supreme Court against the surveillance have written in their petition: 'Indeed, we are fighting a war, not against an external enemy but against an internal virus. Such a war does warrant use of special means' (Y10).

Overall, *Ynet's* militaristic terminology described the civil-medical crisis as a 'war' and as a 'critical battle', the virus as an 'evasive enemy', the goal as 'victory', and the warranted actions to achieve this goal as 'location', 'initiation', and 'change of modi operandi' – all of which echo tactical maneuvers on the battlefield. Use of such terminology by and across different parties presumably drew on the profound militarization of Israeli society, which is familiar with and accustomed to the militaristic language that dominates Israeli culture (Ben-Eliezer, 2019; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari, 1999; Sheffer and Barak, 2010).

### *Mako: a focus on regulative restraint and other countries' policies*

Coverage by *Mako* was highly supportive of ISA surveillance: 42% of the articles were supportive compared with 16% that were critical. The supportive line relied on two main themes: emphasis on regulative restraint imposed on ISA surveillance and a comparative look at other countries.

Half of the articles published in *Mako* mentioned restraint and restrictions imposed on ISA surveillance, mostly to legitimize it. Many headlines and subheadings were dedicated to such restraint and restrictions, including those published on the very same day as PM Netanyahu's first announcement. The headline of the second article published in *Mako* read 'ISA: "tracking cell phones – not to impose quarantine duties"', and its subheading was 'The state's Attorney General clarified: "surveillance will be restricted to achieve balance"' (M2). Similar headlines included: 'Surveillance of those testing positive: a group of ministers will impose restrictions on ISA' (M3); 'The state's Attorney General clarifies: "these are the restrictions on using ISA's tools"' (M6); 'Head of ISA: "we will not monitor quarantine breakers; data will not be stored"' (M9); 'ISA will not invade cell phones or collect data from calls and messages' (M11).

These quotes and others raised two important points. First, *Mako* introduced ISA surveillance to its readership through headlines emphasizing restraint imposed on ISA rather

than its potential ramifications (e.g. on citizens' privacy), thereby providing the readers with an initial supportive framing to interpret this initiative. Second, most of these headlines included direct quotes from ISA personnel and other government representatives (e.g. M2, M6, M9), reflecting a broader trend of reliance on the authorities' perspectives.

Similarly, the following article's subheading demonstrated a typical form of using restrictions discourse as a strategy to support ISA surveillance:

Passing emergency regulations during the night attracted considerable public criticism and fear of privacy violation. Nir Dvori [the journalist] explains that ISA does not intend to eavesdrop on citizens' calls and messages, but only to locate those nearby who had tested positive. The goal: assisting the Ministry of Health to stop the spreading (M11).

The journalist began this report by introducing public criticism and fear of privacy violation, but then immediately rejected both by explaining that ISA will not extract content from citizens' devices. However, such a threat was never on the agenda. By refuting an imaginary threat, the journalist refrained from presenting and discussing more relevant threats and then reframed the goal of ISA surveillance more positively to support it.

Along with emphasis on restrictions, references to other countries were made to imply that Israel's surveillance policy is not uncommon and is therefore legitimate. In his first announcement about the plan to track citizens, PM Netanyahu mentioned Taiwan's use of digital tools to eradicate the virus. This part of the announcement received disproportionate attention in *Mako's* first article, the subheading of which read: 'The prime minister mentioned Taiwan, which uses technological means to fight the virus, and it does so with success' (M1). The main part of the article provided a comprehensive review of the actions taken by Taiwan, explaining that 'According to all predictions, Taiwan was expected to experience a tremendous outbreak of the virus [ . . . ] but to date there are only 50 confirmed cases and a single death'. It then proceeded to detail the country's actions: 'Those returning from Wuhan were under state surveillance'; 'Authorities classified incoming citizens according to different levels of risk to decide who should be monitored'; 'Taiwan completed integration between [different] databases', and finally, 'Authorities surveilled citizens by locating their mobile phones'. References to these actions aimed at linking state surveillance to successful eradication of the virus.

While Taiwan was mentioned as an exemplar that should be followed, most articles that mentioned Italy referred to its failure to demonstrate the consequences of not using intrusive surveillance (e.g. M8). One article that supported ISA surveillance through a comparative look was fully dedicated to reviewing other countries' surveillance practices, emphasizing that surveillance of citizens 'sparked public outrage across the country, but Israel is not alone in this'. This article's headline was: 'Not only ISA: security services that will track citizens to locate coronavirus' (M15).

### *Ha'aretz: Israel's state of emergency as an interpretive framework*

*Ha'aretz* was the most critical of ISA surveillance (45%) compared with the other news sites (36%, 21%, and 16%), and the second least supportive after *Walla*. *Haaretz's*

critical stance was reflected, among others, in several investigative journalism articles that were wholly dedicated to examining and revealing systematic problems in law, policy, and applications regarding ISA's surveillance and tools (notable examples were H7, H8, H14, H15, H20).

The most prominent trend in *Ha'aretz* was a focus on Israel's state of emergency and its potential implications for management of the crisis. Quantitatively, this topic received considerable attention both compared with the attention it was given on the other news sites and with that given to other topics in *Ha'aretz*. Ninety percent of the articles referred to the state of emergency, slightly more than *Walla* (82%) and considerably more than *Ynet* and *Mako* (41% on average). Other prevalent topics in *Ha'aretz* were much less significant: 19% of the articles referred to lifesaving, 16% to restrictions, and 13% employed militaristic terminology. Qualitatively, the state of emergency constituted a central theme through which ISA surveillance and other government practices were addressed and evaluated. While the other three news sites referred to emergency regulations in one way or another, *Ha'aretz* addressed Israel's state of emergency as a common thread that informed the coverage as a whole.

Nearly half (42%) of the articles in *Ha'aretz* had headlines or subheadings that were dedicated to emergency. References to a state of emergency conveyed two main points. The first suggested that emergency regulations allowed the government to bypass the Knesset, which normally supervises its work. This resulted in a lack of parliamentary oversight, which lies at the heart of Israeli democracy.

Typical headlines were: 'The government bypasses the Knesset: by sanctioning cellular location-tracking of confirmed cases through emergency regulations' (H4); 'Against the promise: stricter rules of surveillance of the public have been hastily passed' (H8); and 'The Knesset demanded clarifications for the current version of surveillance rules but the government ignored it' (H7). These articles also emphasized that this move was confirmed 'before dawn', 'in a phone call' (H8), 'against the position of the Knesset's Secret Services Committee' (H7), while explicitly pointing to 'The implication: the Knesset will be unable to supervise the monitoring' (H4).

Articles' headlines and subheadings are particularly important because they function as interpretive frameworks through which readers approach and judge succeeding content. As Pan and Kosicki (1993) put it, headlines are 'the most powerful framing device' because they 'activate certain semantically related concepts in readers' minds' (59). For example, 3 days after Netanyahu's announcement, *Ha'aretz* published an article aimed at explaining the new situation by answering several hypothetical questions. Its headline was: 'Who will be able to track us and what will happen with our information? *Ha'aretz* explains', and the subheading further detailed:

Last night the government passed emergency regulations to allow for locating those who test positive and supervising those who are quarantined, while bypassing the Knesset and leaving oversight of these regulations vague. How will the tracking be performed, who can avoid it, and how did the ministers bypass the Secret Services Committee? (H9).

This implicative framing is particularly important in such explanatory articles because it contextualizes the depicted situation in terms of an undemocratic manipulation (i.e.

bypassing Israel's legislature). Bypassing the Knesset as a result of emergency regulations was mentioned and discussed throughout the coverage by *Ha'aretz* (H3, H4, H12, H14, H17, H19, H20, H24, H29).

The second point conveyed by references to Israel's state of emergency explicitly referred to its implications for Israeli democracy. One such explicit headline was: 'The Knesset to the Supreme Court: use of emergency regulations to track confirmed patients severely harms democracy' (H10). Another article cited the former deputy director of the *Mossad* saying, 'I trust ISA but not the Prime Minister. We all watch him destroying democracy. Surveillance must be done according to the General Security Services Law-2002 under parliamentary supervision, not in the dead of night through emergency regulations' (H11). This article also cited the former director of the *Mossad*, who claimed that 'Use of emergency regulations may lead to a slippery slope [. . .], today we are using ISA's special means, tomorrow we will approve a government budget through emergency regulations. No government, no cabinet, no courts. Democracy collapses' (H11).

To emphasize the potential influence of ISA surveillance on Israeli democracy in the context of emergency, *Ha'aretz* covered PM Netanyahu's announcement verbatim ('Israel is a democracy, we must keep the balance between individuals' rights and collective needs', H4) but recontextualized it by citing the Association for Civil Rights immediately afterwards: 'For years, the association warns that keeping the state of emergency in force since the establishment of Israel posits a severe threat to human rights while granting unlimited power to the government. Netanyahu's announcement [. . .] realizes this threat' (H4). This strategy allowed *Ha'aretz* to criticize, even ridicule Netanyahu's message about Israeli democracy.

Throughout the coverage, the presumed harm to democracy as a result of bypassing the Knesset was framed in terms of deprivation of rights. It began in the first article, which discussed the 'critical harm to privacy and to basic civil rights' (H1) and continued with headlines such as 'A complete halt to civil liberties' (H14).

### *Walla: criticizing securitization and its implications for Israeli democracy*

Coverage by *Walla* was far more critical than supportive (36% vs 7% of the articles, respectively). Relative to the other three news sites, it was the least supportive and the second most critical, after *Ha'aretz* (43%). The most prominent trend in *Walla* was a critical look at ISA surveillance through the lens of securitization. This trend focuses on the use of security tools for civil purposes and its implications for democracy and human rights.

Typical articles in *Walla* cited experts, politicians, and other public figures criticizing 'use of ISA for civil activities' (W15) because 'ISA was meant to work within the security realm only' (W16), and more specifically, 'to fight terror rather than diseases' (W3). These articles suggested that because 'citizens of Israel are not terrorists, ISA's radical and dangerous moves cannot be justified' (W5). They also contended that 'the government is not legally authorized to use ISA to track citizens' (W24) and therefore 'using ISA for purely civil affairs should be stopped' (W15, W16, W17) and 'employing secret services to monitor citizens has to be avoided' (W24). One article cited ISA's former director, Yaakov Peri, according to whom 'We never used ISA's anti-terror tool as a civil

application. This is unprecedented' (W3). Several articles raised concerns that this precedent might also lead to the normalization of surveillance (e.g. W3, W6, W10).

Many articles in *Walla* addressed the potential implications of such securitization, mostly by referring to threats to human rights, civil liberties, and democracy. For example, one article cited the president of the Supreme Court, who stated: 'This decision [. . .] severely violates the right to privacy [. . .]. Using tools that were developed to fight hostile entities against Israeli citizens should worry every democracy advocate' (W24). Other articles claimed that 'The draconian decision to allow the ISA and the police to track us all is a critical threat to human rights' (W8), suggesting that 'The government has to find alternatives to ISA surveillance and must not be the only democracy using its secret services against coronavirus' (W24). These articles generally discussed ISA surveillance in terms of 'make-or-break for Israeli democracy' (W18).

*Walla's* critical stance toward the securitization of the crisis and its potential implications for democracy were often contextualized in relation to Israel's current unique political situation stemming from its political instability (three consecutive legislative elections in one year, resulting in a provisional government) and PM Netanyahu's trial. The first article, which covered Netanyahu's announcement regarding the plan to use ISA surveillance, also cited the Minister of Strategic Affairs saying 'Those who criticized us when we warned that Israeli could become Erdogan's Turkey should acknowledge the cynical exploitation of the coronavirus crisis for personal and political interest by a defendant before trial' (W1). Another article cited a Member of the Parliament claiming: 'It was done by theft [. . .] through bypassing the Knesset. Just as he stole the postponement of his trial in the dead of night. It does not serve the battle against coronavirus, it serves Netanyahu [. . .]' (W5). A third article cited the Association for Civil Rights, according to which 'narrow political interests prevent [. . .] parliamentary oversight of the government' (W8). These quotes, along with many others, framed ISA surveillance as a biased decision reflecting Netanyahu's politics of self-interest.

The following examples demonstrate the use of Israel's political instability to interpret the potential implications of securitization: 'All those measures [. . .] are taken by a provisional government with no public trust [. . .]. Therefore, we are facing an unprecedented situation of severe violation of human rights [. . .]' (W3); 'The main problem is that most decisions are taken by the PM alone, because the government was not approved by the Knesset. The whole system of checks and balances of Israeli democracy does not function' (W3). Another article cited a Member of Parliament who called the decision 'a coup in the shade of coronavirus', asking 'How come the prime minister of a provisional government approves ISA tracking of citizens in the dead of night, with no parliamentary oversight [. . .]? It resembles dark regimes, toward which we are heading' (W5).

*Walla's* critical focus on securitization stood in sharp contrast to *Ynet* and *Mako's* supportive approaches. While *Ynet* used militaristic terminology to legitimize securitization, *Walla's* critical line toward securitization delegitimized militaristic terminology. For example: 'The state of emergency declared for security purposes prior to the establishment of Israel is now being exploited to handle a crisis that has nothing to do with danger from an external enemy, and it is simply wrong' (W19). This quote and others demonstrate *Walla's* attempt to dismantle the linkage between the medical crisis and militaristic imageries (which appeared in only 1% of *Walla's* articles).

## Concluding discussion

This study examined the coverage of Israel's coronavirus surveillance of its citizens by four leading news sites and inquired into the socio-cultural imageries and motifs that informed their reports.

The findings showed that two of the news sites (*Ynet* and *Mako*) were mostly supportive toward ISA surveillance while the other two (*Ha'aretz* and *Walla*) were mostly critical. More specifically, *Ynet* legitimized ISA surveillance by using extensive militaristic terminology that is central to Israeli culture, and *Mako* legitimized it by emphasizing the restraint imposed on ISA and by providing a comparative look at other countries, demonstrating excessive reliance on the authorities' perspectives. By contrast, *Ha'aretz* focused on Israel's permanent state of emergency and *Walla* criticized the use of security tools for civil purposes, both pointing out the potential implications of ISA surveillance for Israeli democracy and human rights.

These findings show that Israeli online news media have provided readers with a vivid and profound debate about ISA surveillance, which was rarely the case in previous studies of media coverage of surveillance (e.g. Lischka, 2017). However, against the backdrop of a three-decade tension in Israeli society between securitization/militarization and democratization/demilitarization, this study suggests that securitization and militarization are still deeply imprinted on Israeli society and culture. This does not mean that securitization and militarization are explicitly embraced or endorsed, as was the case with *Ynet* and *Mako*. Rather, we suggest that these motifs were the main vocabulary from which journalists borrowed to frame ISA coronavirus surveillance as it unfolded. Even *Ha'aretz* and *Walla's* critical accounts were articulated and portrayed through a national security conceptual framework reminiscent of Israel's nation-in-arms tradition (Ben-Eliezer, 1995).

The interrelations between Israeli militarization and media systems are complex (e.g. Peri, 2012). Considering the increasing demilitarization of Israel since the 1990s and the development of a civil-individualistic culture (Peri, 2001; Weiss, 2019), one would expect that both the Israeli authorities and the media would eschew the militaristic tradition when dealing with and covering a civil-medical crisis. A promising step in this direction was taken only recently, when Israel inaugurated its biggest surveillance enterprise so far – the national biometric project. This project relied on purely civil infrastructure and administration and was covered by the Israeli media relatively critically and profoundly (Marciano, 2019a, 2019b). But Israel missed this opportunity by authorizing its security agency to track its citizens for medical purposes (Marciano, 2021), and our findings show that the media also failed to detach itself from those imageries of national security that have traditionally dominated Israeli culture. The construction and narration of a medical crisis through a national security framework revalidate the tension between securitization/militarization and Western trends of democratization/demilitarization, pointing out the symbolic importance of national security in Israel. While a discussion of how different groups (e.g. Israeli Palestinian citizens) are positioned in relation to such media coverage is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the centrality of the national security framework in the coverage of state surveillance highlights how the

Israeli media function within a socio-cultural climate that has been developing partly in response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

*Ynet* and *Ha'aretz's* supportive and critical stances, respectively, were not surprising, generally reflecting two opposing ends of a spectrum: *Ynet*, as a mainstream and commercialized media organization, employed a militaristic line that Israeli society and culture are accustomed to and value. *Ha'aretz*, as a liberal, left-wing organization, employed a critical rationale that various opponents to Israel's policy have been using over the last two decades (Weiss, 2019). By contrast, *Mako* and *Walla's* unexpected stances can be explained by the major roles that individual journalists played in the coverage. *Mako's* supportive approach seems to be shaped by its war correspondent (Nir Dvori), who covered one quarter of the articles through the relatively narrow perspective of national security. *Walla's* critical approach was led by its legal correspondent, Daniel Dolev, who covered nearly 70% of the articles (the remaining 30% were covered by five different journalists) and who is presented on *Walla's* website as responsible for covering topics related to good governance (e.g. Israel's Ministry of Justice and the Department for Internal Investigations). It should be noted that journalists' expertise (e.g. medical vs war correspondents) is crucial for thorough, evidence-based reporting on health issues (Corbett and Mori, 1999).

The coverage of ISA surveillance as a whole was shaped by multiple factors, including the centrality of national security in Israel and its consequent militaristic character, the news organizations' general orientation, journalists' individual approaches, and more. However, a nuanced look at each of the four outlets in terms of Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) Model suggests that coverage by *Ynet* and *Haaretz* was determined predominantly by a meso force – their established orientation as news organizations. In contrast, the coverage by *Mako* and *Walla* was heavily influenced by the micro factor of the individual journalists. While the five forces in the model are interrelated, it is the im/balance between them that determines the tone.

Beyond its consequences for the de/militarization tension mentioned above, the journalistic reliance on a national security framework raises questions about the media's role as a fourth estate or as a watchdog, particularly in times of crisis.

News media and journalists are able to shape the magnitude and consequences of health crises (van der Meer et al., 2017), inter alia, because they create or reduce public fear of infectious diseases (Lewison, 2008; Ungar, 2008), for example, by emphasizing risks and uncertainties (Kilgo et al., 2019). Using a national security framework – let alone explicit militaristic terminology – to mediate the Covid-19 crisis to the public may foster intimidation rather than calmness.

Studies suggest that despite the globalization of news practices, a national perspective continues to inform newswork (Handley and Ismail, 2013) to the extent that journalists often self-regulate criticism during a crisis (Sosale, 2010). In Israel, crises often encourage journalists to rally around the metaphoric flag at the cost of professional norms and values (Liebes, 1992), so the national overpowers the professional (Zandberg and Neiger, 2005). In this study, it was reflected in the press' failure to detach itself from the country's nation-in-arms tradition that eventually informed most of the reporting.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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