

The Media's Role in Protecting the Security and Safety of Minorities During Covid-19: The Cases of Palestinian-Israelis and ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel

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Theoretical background

COMMUNICATION RIGHTS

“To seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media”

(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19)

CAPABILITIES APPROACH

“What a person is able to do or be”

(Sen, 2005, p. 153)

MEDIA CAPABILITIES

1. To be informed
2. Voicing
3. Identity and belonging
4. Being secure
5. Civil participation
6. Identification and imitation
7. Pleasurable entertainment

(Shomron & Schejter, 2020)

To be secure

- The advocacy for each individual's safety, security and protection of rights (Shomron and Schejter, 2020)
- The most important capability as it pursues the sanctity of life itself (Nussbaum, 2011)

“Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one’s life is so reduced as to be not worth living... being able to have good health... to be secure against violent assault”

(Nussbaum, 2011, p. 33)

Covid-19

- The first case of Covid-19 in Israel was identified on February 27, 2020 in a person who had recently returned from Italy (Hilai and Alon, 27.02.20)
- According to the Israeli Ministry of Health, by July 20th there were 52,003 confirmed cases in Israel and 415 deaths
- The Israeli government implemented social distancing guidelines and hygiene protocols
- The Israeli Health Ministry has not released the social makeup of the confirmed cases in Israel, thus there is no way of knowing how many Palestinian-Israelis or ultra-orthodox Jews have been diagnosed with the disease (*though they have released the numbers of confirmed cases by cities and towns)

Palestinian-Israelis and ultra-Orthodox Jews

- The two largest minority groups in Israel, who together comprise approximately a third of the Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018)
- Both minority groups are characterized by inequalities, exclusion and discrimination (Cohen-Almagor, 2015; Haron, 2013; Kaleb et al., 2016; Schejter, 2008; Yiftachel, 2012)
- These negative characteristics regularly manifests in their media coverage through underrepresentation and negative stereotypical misrepresentation (Barlev, 2007; First, 2016; First and Inbar-Lankri, 2013; Laor et al., 2004, 2006; Shomron and Schejter, 2019, 2020)

Research questions

The media can play an important role in protecting people especially in times of need such as a global pandemic

1. How are Palestinian-Israelis portrayed in Israeli mainstream newspapers in the context of Covid-19?
2. How are ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews portrayed in Israeli mainstream newspapers in the context of Covid-19?
3. How do these portrayals represent both minorities capability to be secure?

Methods and sample

- Qualitative content analysis
- The two leading online news platforms (Ynet and Walla) and the leading daily newspaper (Israel HaYom)
- All newspaper articles (n=70) which discussed Palestinian-Israelis or ultra-Orthodox Jews in the context of Covid-19 (March-April-May)
- Thematic content analysis



Findings: The Israeli media both advocated for the minorities safety and hindered it simultaneously

Advocating security and safety

1. Dispelling negative rumors and accusations (*ultra-Orthodox Jews are spreaders of Covid-19; ultra-Orthodox Jews and Palestinian-Israelis do not adhere to social distancing and hygiene regulations; the separation of ultra-Orthodox Jews from the general public due to Covid-19*)
2. Explaining the unique challenges regarding the minority community and Covid-19
3. Highlighting the minorities positive contributions to the general public during the pandemic

Hindering security and safety

1. Identifying diagnosed individuals as minority members
2. Highlighting incidents of social distancing breaches in minority communities

Examples: Advocating security and safety

The mosques have remained empty during Ramadan... most holiday customs, characterized by family gatherings and meals, are modestly noted this year and with few participants” (Walla, 25.04.20).

“A riot broke out when several worshipers entered a synagogue on the street for morning prayers, and encountered shouts of "murderers, murderers" by city residents from the surrounding terraces, and threats to call the police” (Israel HaYom, 02.04.20)

“"Because many [ultra-Orthodox] people don't have smartphones, TV and Internet ... they didn't understand what was expected of them” (Ynet, 01.04.20).

“The low number of tests allocated to the Arab sector until recently is the reason for the rise in the number of verified cases” (Walla, 22.04.20)

“We applaud the fighting medical teams at the forefront. The medical teams are indeed at the forefront. More than 20% of them are Arabs... they are salt of the earth.” (Walla, 25.03.20)

The ultra-Orthodox have been supplying medicine and warm meals to the needy (Israel HaYom, 20.03.20)

Examples: Hindering security and safety

“An assistant in an ultra-Orthodox kindergarten contracted in Corona” (Israel HaYom, 25.05.20)

““Hundreds of potential contacts”: Fear of outbreak In Arab localities in the north” (Ynet, 15.04.20)

“In [the ultra-Orthodox city of] Bnei Brak, the [central] Rabbi Shach Street was crowded with people. The Itzkovich Synagogue, which is the most active and busy Synagogue in the world, did not get excited over Corona and certainly did not cancel any of the hundreds of prayer sessions held there every day.” (Ynet, 17.03.20)

“The strict regulations on going to public spaces are felt in many cities in Israel, but the Bedouin diaspora indicate the lack of awareness of the spread of the coronavirus in their communities: the children roam outside freely, and many of the residents hardly know the guidelines” (Walla, 22.03.20).

Discussion: hindering security

The negative findings coincide with typical negative and stereotypical media coverage of both minority groups (Bar-lev, 2007; First, 2016; First and Inbar-Lankri, 2013; Laor et al., 2004, 2006; Shomron and Schejter, 2019, 2020)

This can be explained by power relationships between the Jewish-Israeli majority and the Palestinian-Israeli minority (First and Inbar-Lankri, 2013) as well as similar power relationships regarding the secular-religious conflict with regards to secular Jewish-Israelis and ultra-Orthodox “Haredi” Jews (Evans, 2011)

Yet, from a capabilities point of view, policymakers have the responsibility to fairly distribute opportunities in society (Nussbaum, 2011). Consequently, this finding points to their failure in doing so

Discussion: advocating security

The positive findings differ greatly from previous studies (Bar-lev, 2007; First, 2016; First and Inbar-Lankri, 2013; Laor et al., 2004, 2006; Shomron and Schejter, 2019, 2020)

This positive advocacy of both minorities' safety found in our study suggests that perhaps temporarily media organizations are functioning responsibly towards them. This could be a result of the high stakes of the pandemic which has put many lives at risk, thus motivating a change from the norm

This positive coverage can serve as a demonstration of how the media can enable the capability "to be secure" and will thus be beneficial in examining the overall role of the media in society and its role in enabling capabilities

In conclusion

Media serves as one of the most important resources in society, as it is vital for the realization of important capabilities (Couldry, 2019; Dreze and Sen, 1991; Garnham, 1997; Hesmondhalgh, 2016a, 2016b; Jacobson, 2016; Kaushik and Lopez-Calva, 2011; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2005; Shomron and Schejter, 2019, 2020; Shomron and Tirosh, 2020)

The most important of these capabilities is “to be secure” especially during a world pandemic such as Covid-19, and particularly for minorities

This study serves as a **preliminary roadmap for policy makers and media organizations to improve media coverage** of minorities in general and Palestinian-Israelis and ultra-Orthodox “Haredi” Jews in particular, during the Covid-19 pandemic

By identifying the main themes in the current coverage of both minorities, policymakers and media organizations can improve and extend the coverage thus contributing to Palestinian-Israelis and ultra-Orthodox “Haredi” Jews capability to be secure. By adopting the media’s role of enabling capabilities, policymakers can enhance minorities security and safety, contributing to life, quality of life, and human freedom

Thank You!