International Journal of Communication 15(2021), 2136–2155 1932–8036/20210005

Covering Populist Media Criticism: When Journalists' Professional Norms Turn Against Them

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Various countries have seen a rise in populist rhetoric used by politicians, parties, and movements to discredit journalists, news outlets, and "The Media." Research indicates that such rhetoric affects the public's perceptions of the news media, posing a real challenge to professional journalism. Unlike other targets of populist criticism, journalists find themselves required *to mediate that criticism to the public,* which puts them in a particularly awkward position. Drawing on thematic analysis of 40 semistructured interviews with Israeli journalists who have been publicly scrutinized by Israel's prime minister, this article suggests that journalists' interpretation of traditional journalistic norms, and particularly the ethos of objectivity, leads them to amplify the accusations against them, while refraining from refuting them. As journalists confuse objectivity with passivity, the populist criticism turns into a sophisticated form of "soft" censorship, which uses imagined audiences to manipulate journalists' professional norms against them.

Keywords: journalism, populism, professionalism, objectivity, Israel, censorship

Various countries have seen the rise of populist rhetoric targeting professional journalism. Politicians, parties, and movements—mainly, but not solely, on the right—have turned anti-media rhetoric into a dominant feature of their political agenda, aimed at discrediting and delegitimizing journalists, news outlets, and the "fake news media" (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Farhall, Carson, Wright, Gibbons, & Lukamto, 2019; Van Dalen, 2019). The potential consequences of anti-media populism[2] range from affecting the public's perceptions of the news media (Ladd, 2011; Smith, 2010; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999) to inciting violence against journalists (Siddiqui & Washington, 2018). International organizations, media scholars, and practitioners have already expressed their concerns regarding the phenomenon, which

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Date submitted: 2020-04-29

[1] The author thanks Prof. Aeron Davis, Dr. Ella McPherson, Daniel Mann, Yonatan Levi, and Shai Agmon for their valuable input.

[2] This article uses the term *anti-media populism*, although populist leaders and movements target mostly journalists. This choice is far from trivial: As Nolan (2016) details, the Nixon administration purposefully shifted the terminology around journalism from *the press* to *the media*, because the latter was less associated with democratic virtues like "freedom of the press" (p. 74). The term *media* is employed here because it is the one often used by journalists, politicians, and scholars to discuss criticism of and attacks on journalism (Bhat & Chadha, 2020; Cimaglio, 2016).

they claim endangers contemporary journalism, and hence democracy itself (Reporters Without Borders, 2017). Unlike other targets of populist criticism, journalists and news outlets find themselves required *to mediate the populist criticism to the public,* which puts them in a particularly awkward position. By mediating the populist criticism to their audiences, journalists may be advancing their own vilification; by ignoring or debunking it, they may confirm their alleged bias against the populist.

How do journalists approach this complicated challenge? Which coping strategies have they developed to report on the populist allegations against them, their colleagues, and their profession? And what role do professional norms and routines—and especially the ethos of objectivity—play when journalists cover those who seek to discredit them? These questions will be addressed here through a thematic analysis of 40 semistructured interviews with Israeli journalists who have been publicly criticized by Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel presents a compelling test case for this research, primarily because Netanyahu, an acknowledged right-wing populist (Filc, 2010; Talshir, 2018), preceded many of his global counterparts in his expressed hostility toward the news media (Peri, 2004; Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020). A closer look at the encounter between Netanyahu and journalists who cover him could enrich our understanding of similar phenomena elsewhere, especially given that the limited research on journalists' responses to anti-media populism has so far been conducted almost exclusively in Germany and the United States (Koliska & Assmann, 2019; Koliska, Chadha, & Burns, 2020; Krämer & Langmann, 2020).

Drawing on interviews with Israeli journalists who experienced public populist criticism, this article outlines three strategies that they adopted when reporting on anti-media populism: (1) covering the populist allegations against the media; (2) trying to counter the allegations *indirectly*; and (3) applying different professional standards to cover the anti-media populist himself, in an attempt to disprove his claims and prevent further criticism. In light of these findings, I suggest thinking about populist anti-media rhetoric as a "soft" form of censorship, with two aims and two target audiences: sowing distrust among news audiences while also encouraging self-censorship among journalists. I find that these are the very norms and practices attacked by populist politicians, that render reporters especially vulnerable when facing this line of criticism. I therefore conclude by proposing that journalists rethink their interpretation of traditional professional norms when encountering anti-media populism.

Journalism in Times of Anti-Media Populism

Over the past decade, populists around the world have devoted considerable efforts to discredit journalists and "The Media" (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). While they often combine the hostile rhetoric with methods like access restriction and libel suits, this study focuses on the populist *discourse*, which addresses both journalists and their audiences simultaneously. The public condemnation of journalists and "The Media"—as a code word for critical journalism—derives from the populist logic, which contrasts "the real people" with "the enemies of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; Müller, 2016). For populists, legitimate journalists are those loyal to the uniform stance of "the people," embodied in the populist representative (Krämer 2018b). Any criticism of the populist is therefore perceived as an attack on the will of "the people." The political incentive is hardly a mystery. As Donald Trump reportedly told a CBS correspondent, "You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so when you write negative stories about me, no one will believe you" ("Trump Admitted Mission," 2018, p. 4).

Like many critics of the media before them, present-day populists have made journalists' professionalism—and particularly their claim for objectivity—the focus of their criticism, accusing the media of failing to meet its own standards (Krämer & Langmann, 2020). In the populist context, this professional failure is framed as part of the media's grand conspiracy against the populist as the representative of *the people*, portraying journalists not only as flawed professionals, but also as malign *enemies of the people*. The media's unprofessional conduct is not explained in the populist argument as the outcome of innocent negligence, laziness, or incompetence. Rather, it warns against an intentional distortion of the news, deriving from the media's bias against the populists and their supporters. This bias is the focal point of the populist media critique, sometimes developed into elaborated conspiracy theories involving foreign agents and "the deep state" (Krämer, 2018b). Consequently, journalists are required not only "to sustain their cultural image as journalists" (Schudson, 2019, p. 155), but also, by so doing, to retain their legitimacy as members of society.

The 2016 U.S. elections and the Brexit referendum stimulated a renewed interest in the relationship between media and populism. Over the years, various studies have explored the role of (news and social) media in advancing populist politicians. The news media has been accused of promoting populists, whether intentionally or unwittingly, through normalization or overexposure (Mazzoleni, 2014; Wodak, 2015). Social media has created a new arena that is exceptionally favorable to populist rhetoric because it benefits simplistic, emotional messages and suits the underdog image that populists strive to project (Gerbaudo, 2018). For media-hostile populists, social media is a convenient platform on which to condemn the media because provocative attacks online are frequently covered in the mainstream media. Anti-media populists thus skillfully use a hybrid media strategy (Wells et al., 2016) to weaponize social media against legacy media.

But while abundant literature has tackled the media's influence on populist politics, the reverse effect has yet to be explored, and "little is known of how news organizations effectively counter populist rhetoric" (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017, p. 10). This article considers the first challenge that anti-media populism poses to journalists, namely, how to cover it. Initial studies, conducted in the United States and Germany, have pointed at journalists' tendency to adhere to professional conventions when facing populist criticism. These studies form a useful starting point for the research of anti-media populism, which still has to disentangle, theoretically and empirically, how journalists negotiate their position as both targets and mediators of populist rhetoric. This article seeks to integrate these studies into the literature on journalistic norms and news values (Gans, 1979; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Tuchman, 1978) and the burgeoning research on media and populism (Esser et al., 2017; Mazzoleni, 2014). Key arguments regarding journalists' professional norms—like their role in both amplifying populism and defending journalism—are examined here within a new political context in which amplifying populism and defending journalism appear to be incompatible.

Journalistic Norms and Routines: Weapon or Shield?

Given that professional norms and routines have long served to justify journalistic authority (Carlson, 2017), it is unsurprising that they stand at the heart of the populist rhetoric aimed at discrediting "The Media" (Krämer & Langmann, 2020). Pioneering studies on journalists' response to anti-media populism demonstrate the major role of the journalistic professional ethos, not only in the populist media critique but also in journalists' reaction to it (Koliska et al., 2020; Krämer, 2018a). German journalists, bashed by Pegida and the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD), have been found to respond by emphasizing "long established

professional norms, roles and practices" (Koliska & Assmann, 2019, p. 14), calling for a more "professional and neutral" journalism (Krämer & Langmann, 2020). Their American counterparts, lambasted by Trump, have sought to reaffirm institutional norms to counter the populist critique too (Koliska et al., 2020).

Although professionalism in journalism is neither universal nor fixed (Waisbord, 2013), certain paradigms and practices have come to rule the West-centered literature on journalism over the years. In cultures influenced by the American tradition—including Israel—journalistic professionalism has been typically associated with the notion of objectivity, to the extent that the two have become almost synonymous (Schudson, 2001). Truth-seeking, monitoring power, giving voice to the people, and providing a forum for public discussion have become the classic professed roles of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Inclinations toward negativity, conflict, and powerful elites have all been regularly identified as prevalent news values, which determine journalists' judgment of stories' newsworthiness, thus shaping their media coverage (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

This study explores journalistic ideals and practices and focuses on the norm of objectivity for several reasons. First, the ethos of objectivity is used by populists to exclude journalists from "the people," with journalists' alleged bias portrayed as stemming from ill intentions rather than mere incompetence. Second, objectivity remains one of the most prominent values through which journalists and audiences alike evaluate journalistic professionalism in multiple cultures. Third, as will be demonstrated later, journalists themselves link their wish to perform objectivity to their commitment to other journalistic practices because they fear that any diversion from familiar professional conventions (such as the right of reply) might be viewed by their audience as affirming the populist claims of media bias.

A famously disputed term, journalistic objectivity has been interpreted differently at different times and places (Maras, 2012). Norms such as balance, impartiality, and fairness were studied by some as components of objectivity (e.g., Dennis & Merrill, 1984) and by others as distinct norms that could even replace it (e.g., Boudana, 2015). This article follows Ryfe's (2016) conceptualization of journalistic objectivity as "a repertoire of justification" (p. 110): a cluster of terms, often used interchangeably, underpinning the dominant normative account of journalism. This broad conception risks losing some of the nuances expressed in the literature, but it (1) highlights the role of objectivity in legitimating journalism and (2) correlates with the way journalists, politicians, and citizens discuss objectivity, often confusing it with balance or fairness, roughly meaning nonbias (Bennett, 2012).

Since the mid-20th century, journalistic objectivity has been often deemed unfeasible, misleading, or even destructive (Maras, 2012). It was blamed for advancing elitist agendas, masking the media's flaws, and clashing with journalism's commitment to democracy, justice, and diversity. Alternative ideals, such as transparency and care, have been suggested as potential substitutes (e.g., Hayashi, 2016; Phillips, 2010). Nevertheless, despite the fierce (and often justified) critiques, none of the proposals have succeeded so far in replacing objectivity as the leading concept whereby audiences in many countries assess the news media's performance (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Nielsen, 2020).

The research on professionalism in journalism sheds light on the dilemmas facing journalists covering anti-media populism. First, journalistic professional norms, and especially objectivity, have been described in

the literature as benefitting high-ranking officials and members of the elites (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Because elite figures and institutions are considered legitimate sources of knowledge, quoting them becomes a convenient way for journalists to create the impression of neutrality and evade accountability. Traditional news values, which determine the level of "newsworthiness" that journalists apply to certain stories, have also been regularly identified by scholars as favoring the elites, thus combining with journalistic norms to advance the agenda of powerful social actors (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

Professional norms and routines have also been depicted by scholars as encouraging the news media to amplify extremist and populist politicians. Ideals such as balanced reporting, it has been argued, encourage even-handedness and false equivalences, thus guaranteeing unjustified attention to marginal actors (Bennett, 2012). News values such as drama, conflict, and unexpectedness, magnified by the media's commercial incentives, have also long been seen as benefiting populist politics (Mazzoleni, 2014; Wodak, 2015). The rise of populists to power thus combines both liabilities of journalistic norms and news values—advancing the powerful on the one hand and advancing the populist on the other—and enables populist leaders to take over the news cycle. The news media is therefore expected to amplify hostile populist leaders both as outrageous provocateurs and as members of the powerful elite.

At the same time, professional norms and values have been considered a valuable shield that defends journalists against external pressures and criticism. The idea of professionalism as empowering journalists has been mainly expressed by two groups. For liberal-pluralists, journalistic professionalism has been aimed at guaranteeing journalists' autonomy, allowing them "to protect themselves against pressure and intrusion from external actors" (Waisbord, 2013, p. 24). For critical scholarship, journalistic norms were a "defensive strategic ritual," shielding journalists against (well-deserved) criticism, embarrassment, and lawsuits (Tuchman, 1972). From both perspectives, however, professional norms and practices have been considered a safeguard protecting journalists against those who seek—justifiably or not—to question their credibility and legitimacy. What happens, though, when populists in power turn against the media? Do journalistic norms serve as a shield, defending journalists' reputation and independence, or as a weapon, promoting journalists' provocative and powerful critics?

While the existing literature has already noted the importance of professionalism when discussing journalists' responses to populist criticism (Koliska et al., 2020; Krämer & Langmann, 2020), this article goes further to examine which strategies the commitment to professionalism stimulates. How do journalists' abstract calls to cover hostile populism "professionally" translate into actual decision-making considerations? Clearly, professionalism or objectivity cannot be taken as unambiguous concepts that naturally turn into a series of inevitable practices. Studying how journalists operationalize these notions is therefore crucial for understanding how journalists cope (or fail to cope) with current political challenges. The empirical contribution of this article thus illustrates the complicated role of journalistic professionalism in journalists' attempts to defend themselves against the populist challenge. Its theoretical contribution is the suggestion to conceptualize anti-media populism as a form of discursive censorship. By approaching this topic through the Israeli case, this article also purports to expand the scope of the research, demonstrating the different faces that the intersection of populism and journalism may take in different societies.

The Israeli Context

Initially aligned with political parties, the Israeli media discovered the American ethos of journalism in the 1970s and 1980s, embracing objectivity as the cornerstone of "good journalism" (Tsfati & Meyers, 2012). Commercialization and professionalization in the following decades have situated the Israeli media around the liberal model of Hallin and Mancini's media systems, although regular violent conflicts have restricted press freedom regarding national security matters (Peri, 2011). Today, the reemergence of ideological media, hyperconcentration, and strong clientelist ties to political actors (Markowitz-Elfassi, Sheafer, Tsfati, Weimann, & Wolfsfeld, 2018) have driven the Israeli media closer to the "polarized liberal model" of the United States, where "news markets are becoming fragmented and unequal" and "news contents and funding are increasingly politicized" (Nechushtai, 2018, p. 193).

Many consider Netanyahu's electoral victories to have been won despite—or thanks to—his negative media coverage over the years. Initially, the relationship between Netanyahu and the media seemed promising: His oratory skills and media savviness were widely applauded (Pfeffer, 2018). By the late 1990s, however, Netanyahu started lashing out at "The Media," accusing journalists of running a left-wing "brainwash," conspiring to oust his government, and siding with Israel's enemies (Peri, 2004). At the opening of his corruption trial, Netanyahu accused the "leftist media" of conducting a "tendentious court martial with a Soviet aroma" against him (Staff, 2020, p. 13), and "plotting to commit a coup against the will of the people" (Staff, 2020, p. 29). In another speech, Netanyahu claimed that "the left and the media, which is the same thing, run an obsessive, unprecedented witch-hunt against me and my family" (Netanyahu, 2017). The last time the media got its way, Netanyahu (2017) continued, "the disaster of the Oslo accords and exploding buses" resulted. Netanyahu leveled similar accusations against most Israeli mainstream news outlets, and many of the journalists who cover him.

Israeli journalists describe Netanyahu's rhetoric as having tangible impact on their lives. At least three journalists who were condemned by Netanyahu had to use bodyguards after receiving death threats; others were pushed and spat on at Netanyahu's rallies. The most common accusation by Netanyahu and his supporters is that the media is biased against Netanyahu and the right. Nevertheless, the journalists Netanyahu targeted are not necessarily left-leaning, but rather those who criticize him or cover his alleged corruption, regardless of their ideological inclinations (including right-wing journalists who were targeted by Netanyahu and interviewed for this study). It should be noted that association with the left is particularly damning for Israeli journalists today. Over the past decade, the populist right, led by Netanyahu, has conducted an efficient delegitimization campaign, portraying the Israeli left as anti-Israeli, anti-Zionist, and auto-anti-Semitic (Levi & Agmon, 2020). This is why, in the Israeli context, the particular affiliation with the left is worse than mere accusation of political bias.

Despite becoming a widely held belief among Israelis, the idea that the news in Israel leans to the left is generally refuted by research (Markowitz-Elfassi et al., 2018; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005). Regarding Netanyahu himself, the case is less clear; many of Netanyahu's supporters, as well as scholars and journalists, maintain that he has always been resented by journalists (Peri, 2004). Recent analyses, however, have found biased reporting in favor of the right and Netanyahu himself in the run-up to the 2015 and 2019 elections (Bein-Lebovitch, 2019; Tsfati, 2017). Furthermore, Netanyahu's donors and allies hold

shares in several news outlets today, including *Israel Hayom*, the most widely circulated daily in Israel. Currently, Netanyahu faces trial in two corruption scandals in which he allegedly promised regulatory benefits to media owners in exchange for positive news coverage.

Methodology

This study explores journalists' response to the challenge of mediating populist media criticism, while also maintaining the public's trust. Using the Israeli case, it tackles the following questions: How do journalists approach the challenge of covering anti-media populism? Which coping strategies have they developed to report on the populist allegations against them, their colleagues, and their industry? And what role do professional norms and routines—and particularly objectivity—play when journalists cover those who accuse them of bias? By addressing these questions, this article aims to contribute to (1) the literature on journalistic norms and practices and the changes applied to them when new challenges and pressures arise; (2) the scholarly work on media and populism, and particularly the emerging research on newsrooms' responses to hostile populists; and (3) the underexplored case of Israeli right-wing populism in power.

This research is based on a thematic analysis of 40 semistructured interviews with Israeli journalists who have been publicly scrutinized, either personally or as part of a specific newscast, by Netanyahu. Participants were chosen according to several criteria: working for a mainstream national news outlet; covering politics or related beats (i.e., investigative reporters); and having been publicly condemned by Netanyahu, either by name (12 of them) or as workers for a certain newsroom (28). My sample includes reporters, commentators, investigative journalists, hosts, and news editors who work for News 12, News 13, Kan, Galatz, Yedioth Ahronoth, Ynet, Walla!, Kan Bet, and Maariv. I interviewed 28 men and 12 women, which reflects the underrepresentation of women in senior roles within the Israeli news industry (Lachover & Lemish, 2018).

The interviews, lasting between 45 minutes and three hours, were semistructured and conducted mostly in person (a few were held via phone because of technical constraints). The first part of the interviews included questions regarding journalists' thoughts on Netanyahu's anti-media rhetoric, its impact on their lives and work, the coping strategies they adopted or found compelling, and their evaluation of the media's response. Because the ethos of objectivity lies at the heart of the populist critique, in the second part of the interviews, journalists were asked more specifically what they mean when they refer to journalistic objectivity in these times. Thematic analysis was chosen as a flexible method, suitable for exploratory qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998). After the initial familiarization with the data, a search for meaningful repeating themes began. The themes were established using both data-driven codes (anything indicating a coping strategy) and theory-driven codes (anything related to professional norms; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This process ended with the classification of three strategies, which match three professional dilemmas for those covering populist media criticism: whether to cover the claims, whether to debunk them, and how to cover their source.

Findings

The vast majority of my interviewees saw what they called "business-as-usual" as the appropriate approach to Netanyahu's condemning rhetoric. Their efforts to stick more strongly to the rules of the game were aimed at disproving his accusations that they were biased against him, the right, and "the people." When asked about concrete dilemmas and decision-making, however, it became clear that despite the business-as-usual discourse, my interviewees have in fact made certain adjustments in face of the populist critique and its (real or imagined) impact on their audience.

I present next three dominant coping strategies alluded to by my interviewees. I then discuss the implications of these findings, suggesting that (1) anti-media populism should be thought of as a sophisticated form of censorship, (2) when under populist scrutiny, journalists' professional norms and routines fail (rather than empower) them, and (3) traditional guidelines, particularly the value of objectivity, should be reconsidered—or at least reinterpreted—in times of anti-media populism.

Covering Anti-Media Rhetoric: Spread the Word

When condemned by Netanyahu, journalists first had the dilemma of whether to report on his allegations at all. Ignoring populists is difficult because their provocations coincide with both traditional news values and commercial incentives (Mazzoleni, 2014; Wodak, 2015). Populists in power enjoy a double privilege: They generate drama and conflict as populists, while also benefitting from their position as part of the ruling elite (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Tuchman, 1978). On top of these "newsworthiness" considerations, my interviewees mentioned Netanyahu's manipulation of news values and norms as preventing them from simply ignoring his media criticism. These methods included the use of the *right of reply*, *live speeches*, and *social media* to accuse journalists and "the media" of bias and misconduct.

> When Netanyahu used his right of reply, my interviewees felt obliged to cover his anti-media rhetoric to maintain their professional image, since it was considered an accepted journalistic norm: "When Netanyahu sends us vilifying five-paragraph replies, journalistic guidelines force us to publish them. Otherwise, we've just handed him a great excuse to bash us once again," explained a veteran print editor, "but if we publish them word-for-word, we've just given massive exposure to our defamation in our own newspaper. Sticking to objectivity makes it harder for us in this sense." (personal communication, June 11, 2017)

This quotation demonstrates a relatively broad interpretation of the right of reply. For many interviewees, the prime minister's right of reply trumped other criteria, like veracity, relevance, or public value.

A similar dilemma arose when Netanyahu lashed out at the news media on Facebook, leaving it to journalists to follow up. Ignoring his rhetoric online, interviewees said, might portray them as unprofessional and self-interested: "If it's already on Facebook," explained a reporter for a popular news website, "you don't want people to get the sense that we're hiding it from them" (personal communication, June 11, 2017). "It's out there," agreed a digital news editor. "When you 'censor' it, it reinforces their argument . . . It's a cruel war, and I don't think we can win it" (personal communication, January 7, 2020).

The extensive use of social media by populists has been acknowledged before; the preceding quotations stress that these platforms are effective not only for spreading media-bashing, but also for compelling the media to cover it, as a form of intermedia agenda setting.

Netanyahu's speeches, timed for the evening newscasts, were the third factor narrowing journalists' editorial leeway. Again, journalists explained that the combination of Netanyahu's high-ranking status and the drama of live broadcasting generates a newsworthy media event that they cannot resist. Very few interviewees contended that Netanyahu's media criticism should not be covered at all; most believed that ignoring it would frame them as biased, thus confirming Netanyahu's media criticism.

Over the professional conventions that Netanyahu manipulates so well looms the shadow of journalistic objectivity. In the interviews, journalists repeatedly expressed their fear that any divergence from "ordinary" routines and practices could be perceived as a confirmation of their bias against the prime minister and "the people." Their goal in adhering to common practices was thus twofold: (a) to preempt Netanyahu's complaints about being censored by "the lefty media" and (b) to deliver what they believed their audience expected from objective reporters. Content moderation was considered a diversion from "objective reporting." The outcome was a passive approach that led newsrooms to delegate their editorial autonomy to Netanyahu, thus allowing him to set the agenda. Their desire to be seen as neutral agents had paradoxically enabled Netanyahu to further spread the claim that they were not. My interviewees' dilemma was therefore not *whether* to cover Netanyahu's anti-media messages, but *how*.

Spreading Netanyahu's rhetoric as is may contribute to journalists' discredit and delegitimization (Ladd, 2011; Smith, 2010). But as Marc Deuze (2005) stresses, journalism is always in the state of *becoming*. Recently, voices in the Israeli news industry called for ignoring, or at least significantly editing, Netanyahu's smearing replies, conveying a more active approach toward his media-bashing. Last year, Raviv Druker—a renowned investigative reporter—exposed incriminating recordings related to Netanyahu's legal entanglements. Netanyahu's party responded wrathfully: "In an ideal world, Druker would be in jail today . . . but when the media strives to oust the right-wing leader at all costs—everything goes" (Lis, 2020, p. 7). This time, News 13 chose not to air the reply. In 2017, when Druker was interviewed for this study, he had already believed that "we shouldn't air this crap," but his bosses disagreed (personal communication, June 6, 2017). This might be changing now. Additional incidents from the past couple of years demonstrate that some news editors may be more open to editing Netanyahu's replies or cutting from his live speeches; future research could reveal how and why the media coverage of anti-media populism evolves over time.

Countering Media-Bashing: Best Defense Is No Defense?

My interviewees were more ambivalent regarding the right way to cover anti-media allegations, but most of them preferred not to refute them directly. When journalists, who would normally feel required to counter false or defamatory claims, were targeted themselves, they believed that using their right of reply would breach their impartial image. Some interviewees were hesitant to become the story themselves or to appear to be using the network's airtime for their own good. Others were simply skeptical regarding the potential impact of such confrontations. Above all, they repeatedly expressed their concerns that contending Netanyahu's critique would confirm their characterization as partial actors, part of "the

opposition party"—a concern that was expressed by American journalists who faced Trump's smear as well (Koliska et al., 2020). "Responding only serves [Netanyahu's] campaign, which delineates a war between him and the media," said a senior news editor (personal communication, January 7, 2020). "You could say that covering his accusations dryly . . . is a way of defending the profession," suggested a print correspondent, "because it shows that we cover ourselves and our colleagues professionally" (personal communication, June 11, 2017).

Notably, the right of reply was not invoked as a reason to reply to Netanyahu's comments, although it was considered a factor when journalists chose to air his replies. I would argue next that this divergence derives from the interviewees' interpretation of objectivity as a passive, neutral form of journalism in which journalists serve as mere vessels, connecting their audience to the leaders, rather than active gatekeepers or adversarial watchdogs. Some interviewees went so far as to argue that not only should journalists avoid defending the media, but politicians should do likewise: "When you defend journalists it only hurts them," said a journalist for News 13. "Each defense is dismissed as politically motivated. For journalists, there is no better response than saying nothing" (personal communication, May 28, 2017).

Overall, my interviewees preferred to aim at debunking Netanyahu's rhetoric *indirectly* instead. His allegations might thus achieve phenomenal resonance, while the counterarguments are hardly heard. Empirical research demonstrates that news coverage of anti-media rhetoric—particularly by political elites—has the power to affect the public trust in the media (Watts et al., 1999). Preliminary evidence suggests that countering anti-media arguments is crucial for maintaining the public's trust (Pingree et al., 2018). By avoiding replying to populists' provocative accusations, journalists may become complicit with the debilitation of their own status and authority. Paradoxically, their attempts to protect their professional objective façade may contribute to the public's belief that they are biased. When asked what, in their view, the consequences of their strategy would be, some interviewees acknowledged this risk: "People might get the false idea that we are all biased lefties," said one TV commentator, "but what else can you do?" (personal communication, December 12, 2019).

In November 2016, the same dilemma has generated a memorable moment in the history of the Netanyahu–media relationship. Ilana Dayan—one of Israel's most renowned journalists—aired an investigative report in her acclaimed TV show, *Uvda* ("Fact.") The report exposed the inner workings of Netanyahu's office, including his wife's alleged involvement in appointments of senior officials. It was what happened next, however, that sparked public turmoil: In a six-minute segment, Dayan slowly read out Netanyahu's belligerent response. "The time has come to unmask Ilana Dayan," said Dayan, looking straight at the camera (Pfeffer, 2016, p. 8). "Dayan leads a concerted frenzy against Netanyahu, aimed at toppling the right-wing government," Netanyahu's reply continued, labeling Dayan a left-wing extremist and accusing her of persecuting Israeli soldiers (Pfeffer, 2016, p. 8). "Dayan has a problem not only with Netanyahu," she kept reading, "but with the Israeli people." Finally, Dayan concluded in her own words, "What can we say? Nothing really" (Pfeffer, 2016, p. 20). The unusual segment quickly went viral, turning Dayan's final remark into a catchphrase. The length and boldness of Netanyahu's response, together with Dayan's public gravitas, created a powerful televised moment that became a news item itself.

This incident, in which a senior journalist read on air a long list of smears aimed at herself, illustrates the challenge faced by journalists when trying to cover their populist critics. In an interview conducted for this research, Dayan elaborated on the decision-making process that led to this exceptional media event:

> It was all lies . . . but we had no doubt that I should read it. We were only wondering whether we should debunk them or not. We shot short videos for social media, where I refute each of Netanyahu's allegations. . . . Eventually, we didn't post the videos. If I started replying, I'd be entering his battlefield. It's exactly what he wants—to mark me as his opponent! (personal communication, June 12, 2017)

Like many of her colleagues, when Netanyahu framed her as enemy of "the people," Dayan preferred to allow his accusations to be heard, without defending herself or her crew, keeping silent her side of the story. Her strategy was based on the hyper-amplification of Netanyahu's allegations, hoping that the audience would realize how "deranged" they were. Dayan's case presents a fascinating instance where journalists' passivity was extended to the extreme, becoming an act of quiet dissent: Dayan's passive reaction to Netanyahu's loathing was so staggering that it turned into a bold statement. But despite her efforts to break from the routine coverage of Netanyahu's anti-media allegations—by dramatizing and highlighting them—Dayan's attempt still coincides with journalists' *best defense is no defense* strategy. When I asked if she had concerns that she might leave her viewers with Netanyahu's message in their minds, Dayan admitted that she cannot tell if her audience got the irony or not, but she would not have acted differently.

Interestingly, although she chose not to confront Netanyahu's claims, several of my interviewees found even Dayan's expressive delivery a departure from the detached tone that "good journalism" requires: "I'm uncomfortable when journalists become part of the story," said a senior print editor, ". . . it's a diversion from our mission" (personal communication, June 5, 2017).

Israeli journalists' hesitancy to reply to populist media criticism corresponds with a content analysis indicating that Australian journalists avoid responding to populist accusations too (Farhall et al., 2019). My interviewees' discourse provides a potential explanation for this avoidance. American journalists, however, were found to be more likely to reply to Trump's rhetoric by "attacking the accuser" (Koliska et al., 2020; Lischka, 2019). This distinction requires further examination. One explanation might be the increasing polarization of the American media; there, ideological affiliation has become less harmful than in the Israeli mainstream media, which still aims to target both left-wing and right-wing audiences. Another explanation may be the asymmetrical political situation in Israel, where the long-standing delegitimization of the left (Levi & Agmon, 2020) has made the media's portrayal as "lefty" far more damaging.

Covering Anti-Media Populists: Self-Censorship as Self-Defense

The mainstream media has covered Netanyahu critically for years, particularly on issues of corruption (Peri, 2004), and continues to do so. This is not unprecedented in Israeli journalism, which has exposed scandals involving politicians for decades (Tsfati & Meyers, 2012). Although some argue that Netanyahu's media coverage was exceptionally negative, evidence on the issue remains ambiguous, with recent analyses indicating otherwise (Bein-Lebovitch, 2019; Tsfati, 2017). My interviewees' accounts

suggest that as Netanyahu's media-bashing intensified, journalists' calculation of risk when covering him changed. Journalists' belief that Netanyahu's fans were influenced by his rhetoric has affected their approach. Interviewees expressed concerns that criticizing Netanyahu too frequently or too harshly might encourage further media-bashing and confirm his claim that the media is partisan and out to get him. Consequently, although large parts of Israel's news media retain their adversarial nature, the considerations of mainstream journalists reveal an apparent chilling effect. This is not to say that journalists avoid criticizing Netanyahu altogether; they simply calculate their risks more cautiously: "You don't change your views, but it's in the back of your mind," said a pundit for News 12. "If I don't have to enter this alley, I won't" (personal communication, December 24, 2019). "When you constantly face baseless claims, you're naturally busy proving they're false," explained another reporter and commentator:

> There's the question of what opens the newscast, do you return to the story the next day. . . . It's not "censorship." But yes, the more a senior politician undermines our credibility, the more we go into defense mode. You attack less. (personal communication, December 12, 2019)

A few interviewees laid out these changes more explicitly, with overcautiousness sometimes going as far as burying stories: "We won't publish a critical story about Netanyahu's wife, unless we're certain that any rational person would say: 'Wow! This is outrageous!'" reflected a parliamentary correspondent. "We're more careful there" (personal communication, May 28, 2017). "There were stories that I didn't run, and if I hadn't been branded as Netanyahu's enemy, I would have," said one of Netanyahu's main targets. "I had documentation of Netanyahu's bank accounts abroad, but I figured that if I publish it, it might seem petty. . . . Netanyahu's fans would say—see, you're going after him" (personal communication, June 6, 2017).

Journalists explained these incidents either as moments of weakness, or, more often, as an undesirable solution to a no-win situation. This finding suggests that among other considerations, *protecting their professional façade* has encouraged journalists to practice the ultimate journalistic failure: self-censorship. In other words, journalists chose to practice self-censorship rather than self-defense—or, in fact, self-censorship *as* self-defense. In the Israeli context, journalists' strategic use of self-censorship when covering Netanyahu adds another, markedly political, layer to the existing conditions that enhance state- and self-censorship in relation to national security matters (Peri, 2011).

Discussion: Objectivity-Driven Self-Censorship in Times of Anti-Media Populism

The three coping strategies delineated earlier are closely linked to journalists' interpretation of their professional ethos. As a recent study showed, one way in which German journalists responded to right-wing populism was to "urge their colleagues to be 'more objective,' 'more balanced,' and so on" (Krämer & Langmann, 2020, p. 5648). Journalistic guidelines, however, can be interpreted in various ways. The question now is, how do these general conventions translate into coping strategies?

By delivering the populist message without debunking it, Israeli journalists have adopted a naïve, somewhat anachronistic conception of objectivity, presenting themselves as mere flies-on-the-wall (Maras, 2012). In their mission to maintain a professional image, they have sought to appear neutral even when it has

meant spreading their own slander or burying otherwise valuable news stories. This approach emphasizes journalists' role as pipelines connecting citizens to their leaders, rather as than gatekeepers that filter populist messages, or watchdogs that scrutinize the powerful. By refusing to perform greater agency, journalists were hoping to signal to their audience that there was no media bias against Netanyahu, his party, or his supporters.

The findings mentioned have several theoretical and empirical implications. First, while journalistic objectivity has been understood as a means to protect journalists from external criticism and political pressures (Tuchman, 1972), Israeli journalists' adherence to *what they believe their audience would interpret as objectivity* appears to limit their professional autonomy when they are required to cover anti-media populism. Second, the themes laid out earlier support previous accounts, according to which professional norms and practices compel journalists to serve both powerful and populist political actors (Mazzoleni, 2014; Wodak, 2015). This study suggests that journalistic values and routines may advance those in power even when they themselves turn against the media. In particular, journalists' aspiration to manifest their objectivity encourages them to promote the elites and provocateurs at the expense of their own interest.

Finally, I suggest studying anti-media populism as a form of censorship: a discursive mechanism that uses (imagined) audiences as a lever to manipulate journalists' professional norms against them. By framing journalists as biased "enemies," any future negative coverage becomes an asset that "confirms" the media's alleged hostility toward the populist and "the people." Journalists, who fear the potential negative effects on the news audience's trust, are then trapped in a lose-lose situation: covering anti-media populism "objectively" against their seeming interest, or covering it negatively, thereby confirming the populist accusations. The populist chilling mechanism operates in two stages: First, populists address the public directly to erode the general trust in journalism; next, journalists adjust their professional decision-making processes, in light of the perceived impact that the populist rhetoric has on their audience. The shift from the first step to the second is facilitated by journalists' professional ethos, particularly their desire to signal impartiality when facing allegations of bias. Ironically, journalists' devotion to objectivity is used to erode the public's trust in that very same objectivity.

Conclusion

This exploratory study indicates that mainstream journalists often prefer indirect strategies in response to populist criticism: mediating anti-media rhetoric; refraining from disputing it; and applying different standards when covering the hostile populist. Over the years, several observers have argued that under exceptional circumstances, such as in asymmetrical political spheres or when confronted with authoritarian movements, journalistic objectivity should be abandoned. In light of the findings mentioned earlier, anti-media populism could be considered one of these circumstances in which objectivity is unwelcome. This article does not suggest that objectivity, as a professional ideal, is inherently harmful. One could easily imagine a world where journalistic objectivity would not translate into a passive surrender of editorial control. Rethinking journalists' shared interpretation (Zelizer, 1993) of this journalistic norm is therefore essential for better coping with populist media bashing. Instead of renouncing objectivity altogether, journalists could reinterpret it in ways that align with the normative expectations of journalism in democracy, or at least balance it against other valuable norms.

I suggested here conceptualizing anti-media populism as a form of soft censorship, which simultaneously attacks journalists' professionalism and manipulates it against them. Under these circumstances, aspiring to objectivity compels journalists to amplify their smearers, serving as a weapon rather than a shield—as opposed to scholarly accounts that perceive objectivity as protecting journalists from intervention, criticism, and censorship. Objectivity as a professional value should therefore be thought of not as a solid defender of the media's autonomy or as a cynical myth, but rather as a relational factor that can operate in different ways depending on the political and social conditions. The influential claim that journalistic objectivity further empowers those in power is reinforced by these findings, given that it appears to occur even at the risk of journalists' own reputations.

The main limitation of this study is the difficulty of isolating the impact of Netanyahu's hostile rhetoric from other phenomena. Israeli society is deeply divided and the political debate extremely heated, and Netanyahu, like other populists, plays on existing tensions to mobilize his supporters and undermine his critics (Levi & Agmon, 2020; Rogenhofer & Panievsky, 2020). Yet, Netanyahu's turbulent decade in office cannot be distinguished from these trends, which facilitated his campaign to discredit critical journalists and news outlets. The second caveat is that journalists' coping strategies keep changing. Alongside an apparent chilling effect and escalating harassment, voices in the industry have recently begun questioning their coverage of Netanyahu's populist rhetoric. A promising path forward has not yet been found—but the pursuit itself is encouraging.

Over the past few years, there have been calls for revising—or "resetting"—the ethos of professional journalism when covering populism (Zelizer, 2018). Media scholars have proposed that in the current hostile environment, journalists should explain more clearly why they matter and how they work (Krämer, 2018a; Usher, 2018). Based on this study, I believe that reinterpreting journalists' professional ethos is needed for such steps to be possible, given that journalists' understanding of their professional guidelines is one of the barriers to such transparency and reflexivity. An alternative reinterpretation of journalistic objectivity could be based on a withdrawal from notions such as neutrality, balance, and detachment, and the embrace of contextualized factuality or social truth instead. These are, of course, contested concepts themselves. However, this does not necessarily disqualify them as useful professional ideals.

Certain scholars believe that in view of the current populist surge, journalists should maintain their commitment to objectivity, while also undertaking the mission of defending democracy (Sehl, 2020; Ward, 2018). This article joins the calls for democratically engaged journalism, which could be thought of as an evolution of the public journalism movement (Rosen, 1999) in that it reemphasizes journalists' commitment to *actively* advancing democracy as players rather than observers. This time, instead of advancing civic participation, the mission is to provide a stronger defense when journalism is under rhetorical fire.

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