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Deride and Conquer: Solidarity and Competition When Journalists are Challenged by Populist Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, journalists have faced intensifying pressures from anti-media populist leaders, parties and movements. Evidence shows that solidarity and collaboration are incredibly significant resources for journalists to fight back against political attacks on the media. This study uses interviews with Israeli journalists who were targeted by Benjamin Netanyahu's government to examine what enables – and prevents – journalists from joining forces to protect their independence and reputation. Based on thematic analysis of 45 semi-structured interviews (2018–2020), this study indicates that targeted journalists have experienced a *decrease* in solidarity and collaboration following the populist media bashing, rather than an increase. The article highlights how a fragmented media environment, rising political polarisation, weakened professional associations, and changes to the journalistic culture allow the populist anti-media campaign to discourage potential collaboration among journalists under attack. Furthermore, the article suggests that competition became ingrained in the US-oriented journalistic ethos in the country – as a professional value rather than economic obstacle that should be overcome. This strong notion of competition as a defining feature of journalism has seemingly contributed to the “deride and conquer” effect of the populist media bashing.

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Three decades ago, in 1996, there were only two national TV networks in Israel – and their journalists were forced to confront a novel dilemma. Israel's incoming Prime Minister, one young and charismatic Benjamin Netanyahu, refused to answer journalists' questions in televised media gaggles (Peri 2004). Instead, Netanyahu scheduled what he called “press conferences” but were actually podium addresses, which corresponded with the timing of the evening newscasts, hoping to thus “force” the TV networks to air his remarks live – leaving them no space to ask questions, fact-check, or edit his remarks. Netanyahu was aiming to bypass journalists' editorial considerations, speaking straight to the Israeli people, decades before the rise of social media (which he would later use extensively, see Yavetz 2022). At the first orchestrated podium statement, the TV networks

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complied and broadcast Netanyahu's remarks live. But when the heads of both networks realised that the PM was playing a crafty game to narrow their editorial independence, they joined forces and decided to no longer broadcast his speeches live – at least unless reporters were allowed to ask him questions. This was not a quiet agreement reached behind closed doors: In an unusual public appearance, the two TV networks' heads officially announced their decision to their audiences, explaining that surrendering to Netanyahu's PR tactic would violate the foundations of journalism (Peri 2004, 242–243).

It was not a one-time incident of solidarity among journalists in the region. In his article on the relations between Palestinian and Israeli journalists back in the 1980s, Orayb A. Najjar (1996) describes how — despite the deep animosity between the nations, which were already amid a bleeding conflict — some Israeli and Palestinian journalists managed to collaborate and support one another, becoming colleagues rather than enemies. Najjar detailed several forms of collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian journalists in the West Bank (which, by then, Israel had already occupied for over a decade). Israeli journalists, Najjar wrote, “increasingly turned to Palestinians for their news about the occupied territories”, establishing a quiet form of working relationship (1996, 118). In 1982, when three Palestinian editors were under house arrest, Israeli journalists paid a visit in solidarity. A few years later, the Jerusalem branch of the Israeli Journalists' Association protested the planned expulsion of Akram Haniyyeh, then head of the Association of Arab Journalists, from his home.

However, three decades after the leading TV networks teamed up against the populist attempts to manipulate them, collective action sounded to Israeli journalists like science fiction: not a reasonable path of action, but more of a joke. Two competing newsrooms collaborating? Journalists working together, expressing collegiality against powerful politicians? Something had clearly changed since the TV newscasts decided to stand up to a prime minister who tried to obstruct their work and escape public scrutiny back in the 1990s.

This article explores the conditions for solidarity when journalism is under intensifying attack through the case of the Israeli media. It draws on 45 interviews with targeted journalists – Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel – who were targeted by Netanyahu's government and allies. The interviews preceded October 7th and the war in Gaza that followed, during which the lack of solidarity among journalists was particularly striking (as will be discussed in the conclusion). The question this study poses is: has media bashing increased solidarity among journalists, and if not, what discouraged journalists from collaborating when facing an intensifying political campaign aimed at discrediting them, undermining their profession, and sabotaging their work? This is an attempt at illuminating the road not taken, asking questions about alternative histories, alongside those that eventually materialised (Skocpol 1984). Studying what has not happened, or was not articulated, is not a trivial methodological issue. Interviewees' silences, however, are no less meaningful than journalists' recorded quotes and actions. They highlight the contour of the journalistic state of mind in a particular time and place, the mental boundaries which — alongside other conditions — limit what journalists can imagine and do, and hence, what journalism can be (or become, to cite Deuze and Witschge 2017).

This article argues that, rather than pushing journalists and newsrooms to collaborate, the populist campaign against the media has substantially *decreased* the sense of solidarity and collaboration among Israeli journalists in 2018–2020. After reviewing evidence

from other global contexts and analysing interviewees' testimonies, the article outlines potential explanations for the declining solidarity following Netanyahu's anti-media campaign. The contributing factors reported as obstacles to solidarity were: (1) the changing political landscape: fragmentation, polarisation and politicisation; (2) the changing economy for news: hyper-concentration, cross-ownership, and precarious working conditions; (3) the changing professional culture: with competition becoming journalistic ideal rather than external obstacle; and finally, (4) the populist campaign itself, and how it turned any attempted collaboration into suspicious "cartel" conspiracy. Implications for journalists, researchers, and media advocates are discussed.

Literature Review

Why Solidarity?

Collaboration among journalists and newsrooms is rare, as journalism has long been framed — particularly in the Anglo-American ethos of journalism — as a competitive profession, with reporters and media outlets fighting over scoops, exclusives, leaks, sources, subscribers, and attention (e.g., Juntunen 2010; Phillips 2013; Usher 2014). However, as populist campaigns to undermine journalism accelerate (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020), one cannot help but wonder: have the attempts to delegitimise journalism encouraged solidarity and collaboration among journalists? Or has it drawn them apart?

To answer these questions, what constitutes solidarity in this context should be discussed. There is a range of documented actions and expressions that rest under the general notion of solidarity and collaboration in journalism. In Venezuela, for instance, journalists have been sending stories they cannot publish in their own country to journalists abroad, who publish them as international news (Pain and Korin 2021, 82). In the Philippines, targeted journalists expressed solidarity with colleagues through community building and crowdfunding when targeted by Duterte (Macaraig and Hameleers 2022). In Slovakia, independent journalists supported each other through public statements, and in Poland, journalists organised mass protests and general strikes when targeted by the PiS government (Benazzo 2025, 3319–3320). Solidarity among journalists might also include providing shelter for reporters who flee for their lives. Journalists in Kosovo, for instance, welcomed a group of Ukrainian correspondents following the Russian invasion, an act they called "functional solidarity" (Hoxha, Andresen, and Mulliqi 2024).

Generally, however, solidarity and collaboration *among* journalists remain underexplored in journalism studies. Solidarity has been discussed in the literature mainly in the context of solidarity with local communities (Varma 2026), or cross-national collaborations between investigative reporters around specific leaks (e.g., Carson 2019). The most significant work on solidarity in journalism refers to the potential solidarity between journalists and the communities they cover – their sources and audiences – seeking to define solidarity as a news value and journalism for change (Varma 2022, 2026). Solidarity among *journalists*, I argue, deserves further scholarly attention at this historical moment for at least three reasons.

First, solidarity among journalists — and the lack thereof — has been repeatedly cited by journalists under pressure as a determinant factor to their well-being and professional

lives. This has been particularly true when physical threats to journalists' lives are involved. In Venezuela, for instance, journalists have attested to "an all-time high" in solidarity due to violence by the authorities, with solidarity playing "a key role in ensuring that journalists do not feel alone when fighting against powerful interests" (Pain and Korin 2021, 82). In some regions of Mexico, journalists report working as collectives to minimise the physical and sometimes deadly threats by local mafias (Bustamante and Relly 2016). In Pakistan, journalists have found themselves relying on group solidarity when facing death threats and state violence (Ashraf and Brooten 2017, 157). Finnish journalists consider collegiality one of the most helpful practices against anti-press harassment, as it provides journalists with much-needed emotional — and sometimes practical — support (Kantola and Harju 2021).

In other cases, journalists under pressure complained about the *lack* of solidarity. Journalists in Central and Eastern Europe defined the lack of collaboration in the news industry as one of the main threats and hindrances to press freedom (Selva 2020). A study conducted in Pakistan, India, Mexico, Bulgaria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo has similarly concluded that targeted journalists consider the lack of solidarity a leading contributor to feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and helplessness (Harrison and Pukallus 2021, 309). In Brazil, under former President Bolsonaro, targeted journalists repeatedly called for collaboration within the media to advance resilience (Ozawa et al. 2023).

It is perhaps not surprising that references to journalistic solidarity and collaboration are easier to find in countries like Venezuela, Mexico, and Pakistan, despite the limited attention these countries receive within journalism studies. Journalists' work, freedom, and lives tend to be intimidated in these countries in ways rarely found in WEIRD countries. Therefore, the need for defensive collaborations becomes a matter of life-and-death rather than well-being or prestige. When journalists' lives or freedom are under such tangible threat, other considerations seem to be pushed into the background.

Furthermore, despite the pervasiveness of the US journalistic ethos worldwide (Waisbord 2013), the social norms within which this ethos takes root vary significantly. Thus, terms like "collective action" resonate differently in societies immersed in the "free market" neoliberal ethos. As I will argue below, beyond their views on journalism, my interviewees' approach to solidarity has reflected their views on society and the economy more broadly. These views would probably differ significantly if my interviewees worked in contexts where concepts like "competition" trigger less favourable sentiments than they do in vast parts of the Global North.

Second, cultural studies that frame journalism as a professional identity and journalists as "an interpretive community" (Zelizer 1993) suggest that solidarity should be expected when journalists are under attack. The prolific research on the psychology of group identification indicates that external threats increase in-group solidarity and unity (Huddy 2013). Although existing research on in/out-groups tends to focus on partisan rather than professional identities, the understanding that perceived threats to groups trigger a greater sense of belonging — as well as increased hostility towards out-groups — supports the intuitive hypothesis that external threats to a professional community would increase solidarity among its members.

Another support for such expectation is found in Zandberg and Neiger's (2005) description of journalists as members of two, sometimes conflicting, communities — the *national* and the *professional*. Zandberg and Neiger demonstrate how, when the

nation is under threat, journalists' national identity trumps their professional identity: "They prefer their national component and "suspend" their professional loyalty during the first stages of the threat, and revert to it after the situation calms down" (2005, 139). In other words, different aspects of journalists' identities are triggered at different times, according to perceived threats to the group(s). Hence, when journalists' professional identity is threatened by populist media bashing, it is reasonable to expect their loyalty to their professional community to rise, making collective action more likely.

Certain media scholars and practitioners have reached similar conclusions, particularly around Donald Trump's first presidency. David Karpf (2018, 228), for example, called for US news associations to organise in response to Trump's hostile rhetoric:

It is time for American press organisations to take their shared social role and responsibility seriously, and to act collectively to defend it. Journalists will need to abandon their prideful resistance to collective action. They will need to stand together if they want to avoid falling apart.

Others called for journalists and newsrooms to make collective efforts to share information and speak out against prosecution and harassment of reporters (Fadnes, Krøvel, and Larsen 2020). This article hopefully contributes to these calls.

Journalism in Israel Toward the 2020s

In the first decades following the establishment of Israel (1950s–1960s), the Israeli press was mostly partisan and loyal to party ideology (Meyers 2005). Since the 1970s, journalistic ideas prevalent in American media have penetrated the Israeli press, forming a new journalistic ethos (Markowitz-Elfassi et al. 2018; Peri 2011; Tsfati and Meyers 2012), which favours private over state/public ownership, assuming the competition between commercial actors will create the best outcomes (Curran 2011). The turn to neoliberalism in the economy and the media, in a country that had a socialist tendency, turned journalists' working conditions more precarious (Tsfati and Meyers 2012).

The Israeli news industry has gone through an extraordinary transformation in the 1990s (Peri 2004). The proliferation of offline and online media outlets, and the rise of social media, have fragmented what used to be a centralised media environment. In the 2000s, a new national TV network was introduced, as were regional radio stations, the first satellite TV service, and multiple news websites (Caspi 2010, 3–4). The boom in digital journalism was accompanied by instability and interruption to the previous business model, particularly in the print news market (Caspi 2010, 5; Tsfati and Meyers 2012, 445). In the 1990s–2000s, Israel was considered closest to the "liberal model" of Hallin & Mancini's media systems, despite strict state censorship on national security (Peri 2011).

However, Israeli journalism has been under intensifying attack by the populist right ever since, mainly under Netanyahu's governments (Levy and Agmon 2021; Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020). Moreover, alongside legacy media, a series of media outlets friendly with the government were founded, establishing a universe of right-wing media which follows different norms – and often joins the populist campaign to bash the media (e.g., Grossman, Margalit, and Mitts 2022). This is not uncommon, globally, that partisan media attacks mainstream media and critical reporters as biased "enemies of the people" (e.g., Bauer, Nadler, and Nelson 2022; Bhat and Chadha 2020; Figenschou and

Ihlebaek 2019). Existing research maps certain coping strategies adopted by Israeli journalists, from self-censorship and strategic bias to embracing the military to signal national belonging (Panievsky 2022, 2023). This article goes further to examine the strategies that were neglected by targeted Israeli journalists in 2018–2020, despite being proven useful in other places and times.

Methodology

This study seeks to explain why Israeli journalists have reported a decline in solidarity and collaboration, despite the increasing threats to their professional community. It stemmed from a research project examining journalists' responses to hostile populism, based on 45 semi-structured interviews with journalists under attack. The interviews combined a phenomenological approach, which emphasises journalists' meaning production (e.g., "What do you think is the best way to counter anti-media populism?"), with a post-positivist approach, which seeks factual details regarding journalists' daily work (e.g., "Have you ever held newsroom meetings on how to counter media bashing?") (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Using interviews as a research method is not free of shortcomings, but since I am interested in the impact of anti-media populism on journalists' experiences and views, the strategies they develop and the factors they consider, interviews are an optimal method (Davis 2008). To explore norms, which Chadwick (2017, 184) defines as "contestable, shared meanings that are socially sanctioned and which inform legitimised and regularised patterns of thought and behaviour", it is vital to understand "how people make sense of their daily practice as actors in the hybrid media system".

After several interviews, in which my interviewees described their chosen strategies vis-à-vis the populist media bashing and evaluated those of their colleagues, I realised that solidarity had never been mentioned as an option. Hence, once my interviewees had finished bringing up their own ideas about anti-media populism and how to counter it, I directly raised the question of solidarity and potential collaboration. Adopting a proactive stance, I asked questions like: Have you had any discussions with your colleagues about the dilemmas you are discussing with me? Has the anti-media campaign affected your relationship with colleagues? Have you considered collective action? In your experience, has the hostile rhetoric drawn you closer together? My interviewees' responses have strengthened my impression that their silence on this matter was not a signal of insignificance, but rather a meaningful repetitive (if latent) pattern. Several interviewees shrugged in response, almost mocking me for asking. For them, collaborating with colleagues or competitors was almost unfathomable.

The sample of interviewees includes political and legal correspondents, commentators, news anchors, investigative journalists, and senior news editors who work for leading national media and have been publicly condemned by Netanyahu and his allies, either by name or as members of a specific newsroom. Some were attacked on Netanyahu's Facebook page; others were cast as villains in his speeches or election campaigns. Those who were not targeted personally have seen their newscast labelled " Hamas supporters" or "Bolshevik propaganda". The sample consists of journalists who work for all the leading mainstream media in Israel at the time: TV (*News 12, News 13, Kan*), radio (*Galatz, Reshet B*), newspapers (*Yedioth Ahronoth, Maariv, Haaretz*), and websites (*Ynet, Walla!*). The highly circulated free daily *Israel Today* and TV channel 14 were not included in the

sample, as they serve as a political investment and propaganda outlet rather than journalistic organisations (Dahan and Bentham 2017; Grossman, Margalit, and Mitts 2022; Panievsky 2025). The gender balance (32 men, 13 women) reflects the underrepresentation of women in senior news roles (Lachover and Lemish 2018). Palestinian/Arab citizens of Israel were underrepresented in this sample, in line with their modest representation in the news industry (1–2%) (Massalha and Jamal 2011). The interviewees' average age was 44.2, slightly older than the average Israeli journalist (Reich, Barnoy, and Hertzog 2016). This could be because (1) these journalists cover prestigious beats for national media, which tends to come later in journalists' careers; or (2) public bashing by the PM is rarely directed at junior reporters.

This sample consists of high-profile journalists who enjoy working conditions, job security, and established status that junior reporters often lack. Their coping strategies may therefore be shaped by their status. Nevertheless, two rationales justify the selection of this sample: (1) journalists smeared by political elites tend to be famous and influential; and (2) this sample offers a glance into the state of mind of journalists with considerable power to shape the public debate.

The interviews took place in 2018–2020, lasted between 45 min and three hours, and were conducted mostly face-to-face (a few were held via phone due to technical restraints and last-minute changes to journalists' schedules). They were approved by the Sociology Ethics and Risk Assessment for Research (SERAR) Committee at the University of Cambridge. The first part of the interviews included questions regarding journalists' views on populist anti-media rhetoric, its impact on their lives and work, their personal experiences and responses, and their evaluation of the Israeli media's coping tactics. In the second part of the interviews, journalists were asked more specifically about issues and concepts that existing literature suggests are relevant to the situation, like collective action (e.g., have they considered collective action as a measure to mitigate anti-media populism). During the interviews, journalists rarely refused to respond, but sometimes sought to confirm that their answers would be anonymised.

The interviews were manually transcribed, translated from Hebrew to English, and analysed using thematic analysis and applying a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Thematic analysis was chosen as a flexible method (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2012), which facilitates the detection of repeating patterns in interviewees' responses to come up with meaningful themes (Braun and Clarke 2021). After initial familiarisation with the interview recordings and transcripts, the themes were developed and refined, with Nvivo software facilitating the process of coding, re-coding, collapsing and renaming the themes. As Braun and Clarke stress (2012, 2019, 2021), thematic analysis has often been overused and under-justified. In this study, it was chosen as a method "to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (2012, 57). Thematic Analysis (TA) can be applied alongside various theoretical frameworks and approaches; Since this research focuses on journalists' experiences, it takes a primarily *experiential* approach. The coding and analysis were mainly – although not exclusively – *inductive*, that is, data-driven rather than theory-driven, in line with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). After the initial inductive coding (e.g., "we are no elders of Zion"), a few theory-driven concepts were applied to turn the codes into meaningful themes (e.g., "accepting the populist premise").

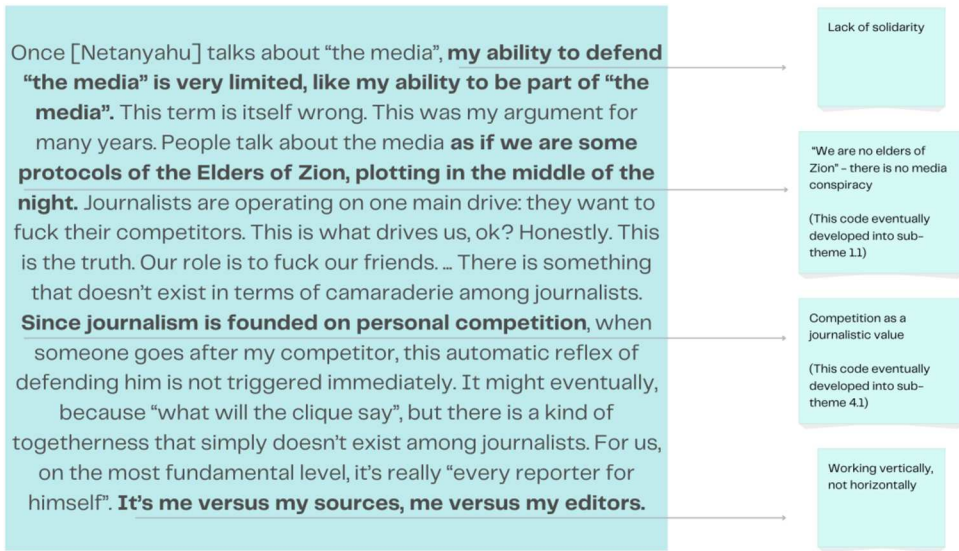


Figure 1. Extract of preliminary coding.

The analysis process was recursive and iterative, following the six steps of TA (Braun and Clarke 2012): 1. familiarisation with the data; 2. generating initial codes (see Figure 1); 3. generating themes; 4. reviewing potential themes; 5. defining and naming themes; and 6. finalising report (see Figure 2). Across the steps, Nowell et al.’s (2017)

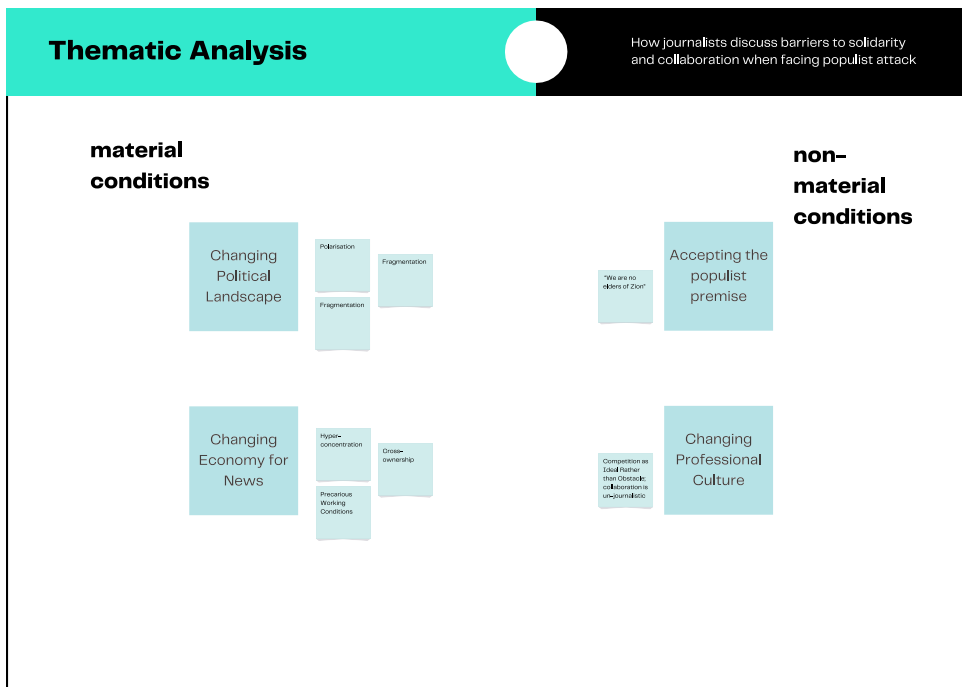


Figure 2. Finalised thematic map.

recommendations were advised to enhance trustworthiness: peer debriefings were conducted regularly and informally during steps 2–5 to increase credibility and enrich the analysis; rich descriptions and historical context were included to enable informed transferability; the research process was documented as clearly as possible to ensure readers can judge dependability; and records of the raw data (recorded interviews), field notes (hand-written), and transcripts (digital) were kept securely to safeguard interviewees' anonymity.

Findings

“Quite the Contrary”: Perceived Decline in Solidarity

According to most of my interviewees, they experienced no rise in solidarity or collaboration following the populist media bashing. “There has actually been a decrease in solidarity”, said an investigative reporter. A veteran print editor agreed: “It’s quite the contrary — there is no solidarity whatsoever. None. [...] It’s frustrating because news outlets could have so much power together. And these struggles weaken us all”. “It’s a profession of assholes”, summed a print reporter, “so instead of increasing solidarity, these attacks have the contrary effect”. Those of my interviewees who found the lack of solidarity a problem, often blamed it on others – an act that expresses little solidarity in itself. But interestingly, not all mourned the lack of collaboration. In fact, some carried it as a badge of honour, stating, for instance: “We haven’t had newsroom meetings to discuss this issue, and I’m proud of it!”, or: “It’s always been an extremely individualistic profession, and honestly, I don’t think solidarity helps anyone”.

Since collective action seems to be a reasonable strategy, which may have emboldened journalists’ power to mitigate the populist campaign against the media, it is unclear why it has not become a viable possibility in the minds of my interviewees. Journalists’ testimonies point to several changes that might have limited their approach to solidarity and collective action. The first is the *increasing political polarisation* in Israeli society (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss 2020), which penetrated newsrooms and divided journalists into two antagonistic groups, triggering their contrasting partisan identities rather than their common professional identity. The second is the *financial constraints* forced on news outlets due to the rise of social media as a competitor over economic capital (ad revenues) and cultural capital (the public sphere). My interviewees felt that this unfavourable environment, which worsens their working conditions and job security, aggravated the competition among reporters and newsrooms. The third factor was *journalists’ media criticism*, which is distinctly different from the populist one. Despite the difference between the lines of criticism — with journalists mostly criticising their competitors’ breach of professional practices and populists criticising them for conspiring with foreign agents to topple the government — journalists’ willingness to support their colleagues was compromised by frustration with their professional conduct.

Apart from their verbal testimonies, journalists’ individualistic, competitive, and isolated approach to handling media bashing was evident implicitly during the interviews in at least two ways. First, most interviewees expressed harsh criticisms of colleagues and competitors. One radio host complained that “I feel like the media has become far less professional than we hoped. Instead of saying: “I’ll do the best journalism possible”

– it becomes unserious and sloppy, with cases like [criticised journalists]”. It was one of the myriad media criticisms expressed by my interviewees. In most cases, when interviewees asked that certain segments of our interview be kept confidential, it was those parts in which they had levelled fierce criticism at fellow reporters.

Second, while prestigious and well-connected, my interviewees seemed very isolated when it came to coping with the hostile environment surrounding them. During our conversations, a few mentioned they had never discussed these matters before. “This is actually the first time I’m discussing this dilemma out loud”, said one popular political reporter. Moreover, at least one of the interviewees broke into tears during our conversation, and five others described their experiences in terms of “trauma”. “This episode remained a traumatic emotional experience”, said one news host, “I haven’t digested it yet”. Keeping their thoughts and feelings to themselves, in other words, was not the outcome of indifference. My impression was that in many newsrooms, loneliness was a real part of the daily lives of journalists under pressure.

Accepting the Populist Premise: “We Are No Elders of Zion”

The first motivation to avoid any form of cooperation with other journalists derived from the nature of the populist rhetoric. First, on an **emotional** level, the fear of attracting further flak discouraged solidarity. Such emotional effects were also prevalent in countries that rank higher on press freedom (Kantola and Harju 2021; Miller and Lewis 2020). This type of fear was often accompanied by emotional fatigue — an attempt to spare oneself further emotional labour. One print reporter explained that “today most journalists who cover Netanyahu are weak, very young, with no backup – so they are scared of his Facebook posts, I see it every day. The fear. The number of journalists who can fearlessly stand up to him and support a colleague is tiny”. Another explained she feels emotionally “drained” by the need to handle the fallout of every clash with Netanyahu’s office.

Second, on the **strategic** level, several journalists saw any form of collaboration as a risk of proving the populist argument against them. “It’s a problem”, explained one news editor:

We hold regular meetings where all the editors and reporters sit down together, and once in a while, someone asks what we should do about it. At the peak of Netanyahu’s attack on our newscast, someone raised the question: “What do you think we should do? Should we launch a campaign? Try to refute his lies?” [...] There were no conclusions. Because if the media goes on a campaign to defend itself, it won’t go down well. It might miss the point and fan the flames because **it labels us as those who indeed want to topple the government.**

Another news host expressed a similar distaste for confirming populist conspiracy theories by joining forces. “There are no ‘Protocols of the Elders of the Lefty Media’; there’s no such animal”, he insisted. “Everyone competes against everyone; there is no orchestrated effort to work together”. The implicit assumption is that a joint effort to battle political pressures would somehow confirm the infamous anti-Semitic conspiracy theory regarding the Jewish plot to take over the world. In other words, certain journalists believed that by collaborating with other reporters, they would be perceived as a “cartel”, a “junta”, a “closed elite”, or “Elders of Zion” — just like the populist right claims they were. According to another interviewee, this was the motive behind the Union of Journalists’

inaction at the time. “They, too, were attacked more than once, labelled as an illegitimate force which tries to safeguard ‘the guild’”, she said. Therefore, they were cautious not to respond as a group.

In a way, this indicates that targeted journalists have either embraced the populist definition of journalists’ collaboration as “collusion”, or came to believe that their audience has embraced it. Thus, *by accusing journalists of collaborating and plotting, the populist right has discouraged them from acting together*. But this populist strategy thrived on a particular set of conditions — economic, political, technological, and cultural — that made it particularly powerful.

Changing Political Landscape: Fragmentation, Polarisation and Politicisation

My interviewees described the proliferation of online media as a blessing – but also one that made it harder for them to collaborate. While in the 1990s, it was enough for two TV networks to agree on a joint declaration for them to make an impactful move and lead the PM to surrender — in the 2010s, such an effort would have to include many more news outlets, with varied routines and priorities. “Organising the Israeli media today would be impossible”, explained one interviewee:

It just wouldn’t work. There is no forum for journalists trying to deliberate together about anything. Before each general election, we have a meeting within our network, but it always deteriorates quickly into questions like “Where should we screen the exit polls?” or “What colour should the election studio be?”. So journalists are thinking strategically about the increasing attacks on the press, but this is being done individually, in isolation.

It is not only the structural fragmentation of the previously centralised media environment that has made it difficult for journalists to collaborate. Since the 2000s, several partisan outlets have been launched, making any collective action far more complex (Panievsky 2025). In 2007, Sheldon Edelson, then Netanyahu’s most generous donor and a prolific campaign contributor to the US Republican Party, founded *Israel Today*, a free daily that supported Netanyahu unabashedly, to the extent that it was accused of breaching the campaign finance laws (Dahan and Bentham 2017; Grossman et al., 2022). In 2014, Yitzhak Mirilashvili, the son of a Georgian-Israeli billionaire with alleged ties to Netanyahu, established a TV channel, Channel 20 (today Channel 14), that grants Netanyahu and his supporters sympathetic media coverage. Some of these new outlets prioritise their partisan inclination over their professional identity, expressing greater loyalty to political figures than to journalistic norms. “The media is now divided into camps”, explained one TV correspondent:

There is right-wing media that is decent and a genuine partner for dialogue [...] and there is right-wing “journalism” that never discusses factual evidence in good faith [...]. So no, it doesn’t feel like solidarity has increased over the past few years.

Since professionalism has become the source of journalistic identity, it is clear why members of the news industry who break from professional guidelines make solidarity and collaboration more challenging.

Apart from diverging from the dominant ethos of legacy media, these partisan outlets adopted the populist approach to journalism, gleefully joining — and sometimes leading — the public campaign against “the leftist media”. Naturally, these media outlets do not

share their colleagues' concerns regarding the surge in populist media bashing — quite the contrary, they *are* the media bashers. Even worse, some supporters of the populist anti-media movement were integrated *into* the mainstream media — now voicing their opposition from within. As one radio journalist put it:

When editors-in-chief don't take the side of traditional investigative journalism, but rather the side of the attackers, the inciters, the media bashers – then the forces that seek to undermine the trust in what we broadcast infiltrate our newsrooms.

Some journalists believed incorporating such figures into the media would help reduce the impact of these hostile voices, or tame their critique, as part of their “strategic bias” tactic: intentional efforts to lean rightwards to prevent accusations of bias (Panievsky 2022). It is difficult to assess this strategy's efficacy; so far, there is no indication that it worked. The populist right continues to echo government propaganda about the “leftist media”, using the airtime granted to them to amplify the message. Introducing anti-media figures into mainstream media has created an us-vs-them environment within the newsroom. Regardless of the impact on the audience, it has generated a particularly toxic working environment for journalists.

Changing Economy for News: Hyper-concentration, Cross-ownership, and Precarious Working Conditions

Another major change to the news industry, which was mentioned by my interviewees as a barrier to collaboration, was the economic reality of journalism. Like many news industries, the rise of social media forced financial constraints on established news organisations (Cagé 2016; McChesney 2013). According to my interviewees, the budget cuts and layoffs — which began before social media took over but accelerated since — created an unfavourable work environment, turning journalists' working conditions more precarious. Israeli journalists were complaining about low wages and unstable employment years earlier (Tsfati and Meyers 2012, 445–446).

Consequently, the competition between journalists has become even fiercer. Since the Israeli, Hebrew-speaking media market is small, the existential threat to journalists' careers and newsrooms' survival is particularly palpable. Generally, the big national media in Israel target the mainstream rather than niche audiences, so most outlets compete for the same eyeballs. The combination of these conditions, interviewees claimed, made collective action even less likely. A print journalist reflected:

The entire industry has been weakened for 20 years now. It's a war of attrition. The immune system is compromised, and all our capabilities are undermined. Given the collapse of the business model for journalism, each of us fights to hang on to his job.

A younger TV correspondent agreed: “Look, the financial fragility, the thin legs upon which this industry stands — this is the problem. Amid this existential threat, fostering some industry-wide journalistic solidarity is not easy”. A radio host gave a similar account: “Because of this kind of privatisation, everyone is now fighting their little ratings wars instead of fighting the big war”. A print correspondent agreed: “Each person smells their colleagues' blood, thinking how to snatch their jobs”.

There was no significant difference between journalists who worked for various media (broadcast, print, online) or media ownership (public, commercial) – which means that the

competition was *not purely about financial considerations*. If the obstacle to solidarity among journalists was indeed the economic competition over ratings or traffic, public media should have responded differently. In the interviews, however, there was no indication that public media journalists find it easier to join forces or express solidarity with others. “When do you get strong alliances? When news outlets are powerful”, one news editor summarised. “In vulnerable organisations, the survival instincts, ego issues, and existential fears prevent alliances of this sort”.

These feelings of weakness and instability are not unrelated to Netanyahu’s anti-media agenda. As documented by local commentators and biographers, one of Netanyahu’s goals as a prime minister was to weaken the major news outlets he perceived as hostile (Peri 2004). He has spearheaded a regulatory process of splitting the most popular TV channel and redesigning the public broadcaster. Understanding power as a prerequisite for solidarity, however, is paradoxical: If news outlets need to be powerful to join forces, then when they need it most — solidarity is not an available option.

Some journalists saw the deteriorating conditions and unstable environment as bolstering the de-professionalisation of newsrooms. Interviewees had harsh criticism for their colleagues, which seemed to allow them to distance themselves from the populist criticism (“it’s not me, it’s them”), placing themselves on the side of “the people” rather than “the media” — but also made it harder to imagine collective action. “Ethically, shit happens all the time”, said an online news editor. Journalists’ personal frustration with the ethical standards of the media was brought up by my interviewees as a driver to *avoid supporting* colleagues when they were smeared. One investigative reporter said angrily:

I will not defend a journalist who thinks he can publish whatever he wants at the expense of my own profession, in which I invest a lot of time and energy, and which has rules and guidelines. I don’t ask journalists or the public to defend me when I’m bullshitting. Making a symbol out of such a journalist harms journalism and gives Netanyahu very powerful ammunition.

This sentiment was expressed by interviewees as a general reason to avoid defending “the media” — not only in cases where the smeared reporter misbehaved. In other words, journalists’ own resentment and discontent with the state of the profession seemed to have made it harder for them to proudly and confidently defend it.

Changing Professional Culture: Competition as Ideal Rather Than Obstacle?

When my interviewees were directly questioned about solidarity, it was clear that they had not considered this option; it was beyond the scope of tactics they could envision. This powerful, creative, and stirring group of people could not come up with any collaborative strategies to defend their public standing and professional authority. The most visceral response by interviewees did not refer to the political or economic transformations that took place since their predecessors stood up to Netanyahu in the 1990s, but rather to the concept of competition as a value in and of itself. When asked about the possibility of responding to political pressures by collaborating with others, most interviewees were either uncomfortable, doubtful or fully against it. They associated their sentiment with the profession itself — claiming that it was inherently antithetical to any collective action. “It is a profession that has always been extraordinarily individualistic”, said a political correspondent. When asked whether he felt the urge to express

solidarity with other journalists when they were targeted by the populist right, a senior broadcaster said:

Well, why should I go there? I'll give you an example. What [a well-known journalist] is going through now is really difficult. They are killing him. [...] Now, I've known him for many years, from our time working together some 15 years ago. And he's a journalist like me. He's enduring a very harsh and ugly attack, but I haven't defended him. To me, it seems weird to think of protecting reporters from another TV network, my competitors; I don't know.

In the past, competition was mentioned in journalism studies mainly as a practical obstacle with which journalists are forced to cope (e.g., Juntunen 2010; Phillips 2013). Competition has been contrasted with journalistic norms and high standards, being cast as an external material force that constantly challenges journalists' ability to adhere to professional standards. The fact that for-profit news outlets compete over scoops, exclusives, and deadlines was considered a hindrance to "good journalism", something that leads reporters to stray from their journalistic practices.

In the last decade, this dynamic has been chiefly associated with the rising competition with online news and social media, which are portrayed as pushing journalists to prioritise immediacy and clickbait over accuracy and fact-checking (Usher 2014). Based on my interviews, however, competition seems to have become *part and parcel of the journalistic ethos* in Israel. It has been idealised and embraced, and it is (at least partially) what makes collective action a non-starter for many. My interviewees' repulsion to the notion of collective action was visceral, as was their pride in their ability to outcompete their rivals. They do not consider competition an inevitable outcome of a specific market design forced upon them. Rather, they see it as part of their professional identity, not a necessary evil but a signal of journalistic excellence. It is therefore not a source of regret, but of pride:

Since journalism is founded on personal competition, when someone goes after my competitor, this automatic reflex of defending him is not triggered immediately. It might eventually, because "what will the clique say", but [...] there is a kind of togetherness that simply doesn't exist among journalists. For us, on the most fundamental level, it's really "every reporter for himself". It's me versus my sources, me versus my editors.

There is no cooperation. Whenever people say "the" media, I find it really amusing. Because if there's a profession where there's no team spirit whatsoever, it's our profession. You are willing to lose a kidney if it means your competitor will lose both kidneys. There is no getting together to plan how to react. It's a very independent profession, built of an assemblage of soloists.

The idea of competition is valorised, becoming an integral part of journalists' conceptualisation of "good journalism". In this respect, there is little or no difference between those working for commercial media and public media. This similarity indicates that the superiority of competition does not originate from a particular business model, but from a shared journalistic culture, inspired and shaped by neoliberal presumptions.

The liberal turn in Israeli journalism, which took place in the 1970s and the 1980s (Markowitz-Elfassi et al. 2018; Peri 2011; Tsfati and Meyers 2012), carried with it the underlying assumptions at the core of neoliberalism, which favours private ownership, assuming that the competition between commercial actors will magically create the best news product possible (Curran 2011). The basic assumption was that competition is essentially good —

not only between news organisations over economic capital, but also between individual journalists over cultural and social capital. This was seen as a way to produce independent, excellent journalism that serves the public good and safeguards journalism from becoming subjugated to state propaganda. This is not a surprising outcome for the liberal tradition of modern journalism, which was shaped by the trauma of journalism serving fascist and Nazi regimes earlier in the twentieth century (Schudson 1981).

The populist attacks against the Israeli media have triggered this negative sentiment by labelling journalists as a “cartel” with a “monopoly” over the public conversation, secretly operating together to manipulate public opinion (Panievsky and Benbaji 2025). This has apparently percolated into journalists’ consciousness and affected their coping strategies. When asked about a potential collaboration with her colleagues, one news host said: “We haven’t had strategic newsroom meetings to discuss this issue, and I’m proud of it! We should not bring about policies to counter populist media bashing. We are not a *junta*. I wouldn’t want us to hold such meetings”. The use of the term “*junta*” is telling. It reflects the populist rhetoric, associating any collaboration between professional journalists — and even any *discussion* of such potential collaborations — with anti-democratic, exclusionary, and illegal practices of a small, violent elite. Collaboration equals conspiracy. Solidarity is collusion.

This sentiment was reflected in journalists’ rhetoric regarding journalist unions and associations, too. Israel has famously transformed from a fledgling socialist enterprise to a neoliberal state, which cut most public funding, encouraged privatisation of public services and broke labour unions, in large part due to the “free market” policy reforms steered by Netanyahu in his role as finance minister in the 2000s (Filc 2009; Mandelkern 2015, 285–287). The Israeli news industry has shifted from collective agreements to individual contracts, increasing inequality among journalists and jeopardising their working conditions (Tsfati and Meyers 2012). This shift was not purely technical; it involved a cultural and discursive shift toward a libertarian approach that trusts in competition to deliver optimal journalistic outcomes (Curran 2011; Marzolf 1990; Wyatt 2007). One online reporter told me that she had “a very serious beef” with the idea of journalists’ associations intervening in the confrontation between populists and the media:

The entire idea of unions and associations [is defunct]. They create jobs for a few unemployed journalists but are irrelevant in a period of individual contracts. Because, you know, I would not sacrifice anything for the sake of the junior editor on the news desk. [...] So, to me, these are really archaic organisations.

A TV news editor, himself a member of the Israeli Press Council, agreed:

What can we do about it? Nothing really. Publish a statement? If people stop trusting the news and people bash the media — what can the Press Council do? It’s a problem; it really is.

In other countries, the weakness and incompetence of professional journalistic associations have led to increased individual-level solidarity, at least in journalists’ experiences. Researchers in Venezuela, for instance, documented how professional associations “seem to fall somewhat short in their defence of journalists, and because of this, solidarity among journalists is at an all-time high” (Pain and Korin 2021, 12). This was not the case in Israel. Paradoxically, adhering to an unbounded competition was my interviewees’

shared way of expressing belonging to their professional community. In her seminal article, “Journalists as Interpretive Communities” (1993), Barbie Zelizer proposes to think about journalists not only as professionals but as members of an interpretive community:

Journalists as an interpretive community are united through their collective interpretations of key public events [and] come together by creating stories that contain certain constructions of reality, certain kinds of narratives, and certain definitions of appropriate practice (pp. 223–224).

In other words, journalists’ stories about themselves and their profession are their way of *uniting discursively* as an interpretive community. Interestingly, what united my interviewees as an interpretive community was, to a large extent, the same vicious competitiveness that prevented them from working together as a community. Their collective identity as journalists was based on their hostility towards solidarity and collective action. The lack of solidarity was a substantial part of what united them as a community. Yet it prevented them from capitalising on their community membership through joint efforts to defend their well-being and social status. Competition united them — yet drew them apart.

Outliers and Change

Importantly, there were cases over the years when journalists were viciously attacked personally, and certain colleagues felt bad enough to comfort them personally or text their support – but not as eager to express solidarity in public, and certainly not to collaborate around the intensifying climate of hate. Some journalists attended emergency protest events when the public broadcaster was threatened with closure. A few interviewees explained that when the populist attack targets an individual and goes exceptionally personal, they do feel like supporting them, more often privately (via text messages) rather than publicly.

It was also easier for journalists who were not direct competitors to express support or solidarity with one another: journalists from the same newsroom, for instance, or journalists working for different media (i.e., one working for print and the other for radio), or different news beats (i.e., a legal correspondent and a political commentator). The more direct the competition was, the more difficult it was for my interviewees to express support. This may sound petty and discouraging; nevertheless, it also opens new horizons for future collaborations. If networks of solidarity are easier to establish between non-direct competitors, this could be one short-term goal.

In July 2023, the three leading national TV newsrooms in Israel came out with a rare joint statement. At the time, hundreds of thousands of Israelis marched in the streets in mass demonstrations against the government’s attempts to conduct a judicial overhaul, castrating any potential restraint on executive power — including the media. As the minister of communication floated a new regulation favouring media outlets loyal to the administration (and throttling those that are not), the three competing TV news-casts have finally come together to state:

The minister’s plan is another step in the overall move to crush the free media in Israel. The implementation of the destructive plan, which includes government supervision and government censorship of news as is customary in dictatorships, will result in serious damage to

Israeli democracy and freedom of expression and the press (“The Commercial Networks and the Public Broadcaster Kan Respond to Karai’s Plan”, *TheMarker*, 17 July 2023).

This may have come too late. Later that month, Netanyahu’s government already raced to pass legislation that would subordinate the media to the government. Three months later, the Israel-Gaza war broke out. Behind the fog of war, the government’s war on the media continued and escalated. Beyond the killings of hundreds of Palestinian journalists in Gaza, and over two years of banned access to the Gaza Strip, *Al-Jazeera* was outlawed from broadcasting in Israel, *Haaretz* was threatened with financial sanctions, and the public broadcaster was (again) threatened with closure (Panievsky 2025).

Why have journalists who found collaboration and solidarity either futile, harmful, or unimaginable, finally chosen to join forces against the populist media bashing? One of the factors at play was the existential threat. When the populist threat came closer to old-fashioned state censorship, with attempts to run down newsrooms rather than publicly intimidate them — journalists felt a greater urge to speak up on behalf of journalism, media freedom, and democracy. The media reform declared by Israel’s minister of communication, is expected to hurt both commercial and public newscasts, their ratings, impact, and revenues in the most direct and short-term manner — while also promoting their right-wing, pro-government competitors. Old, traditional threats are easier to mitigate; journalists are trained to identify them. It was the more implicit, democratic-seeming populist campaign that found them baffled.

Conclusion

This study examined whether the intensifying attacks on Israeli journalists had increased the levels of solidarity among them and found that, according to targeted reporters, the levels of solidarity had only declined due to the populist media bashing. The article maps the challenges journalists found to be isolating and alienating: heightened political polarisation that made it harder to collaborate with journalists on the other side of the aisle; a fragmented media environment that complicated any attempt at joint action; the decline of working conditions, professional associations and unions; and the populist rhetoric itself, which labelled the media a “junta”, a small clique of corrupt elitists, convincing journalists that any potential collaboration might be seen as a form of “collusion”.

Of course, the state of journalism in Israel, and particularly in Palestine, has deteriorated dramatically since this research took place, with hundreds of Palestinian media workers killed and foreign reporters banned from the Gaza Strip for over two years. The trajectory, however, remains similar. Despite increasing attempts to capture the media in Israel, while destroying any infrastructure for journalism in the West Bank and Gaza, Israeli journalists have not yet transformed their approach to solidarity and collaboration.

Is there reason to be hopeful about the future of solidarity among journalists under populist attack? Based on research conducted elsewhere, more tangible risks to journalists’ lives and freedoms might, eventually, give rise to solidarity. In countries where journalists were facing severe threats to their safety – like physical violence and imprisonment – solidarity and collaboration appeared to grow (for example, in Mexico, Bustamante and Rely 2016; in Pakistan, Ashraf and Brooten 2017; and in Venezuela, Pain and Korin 2021). However, while Israel’s government led the most lethal war for Palestinian reporters and

prevented foreign correspondents from entering Gaza – Israeli journalists have not seen these steps as relevant to their lives or profession. The unprecedented death toll of reporters in Gaza, which drew little attention from Israeli newsrooms (Panievsky and Benbaji 2025), demonstrates that they were not considered part of the same professional community. Unlike hopeful examples from Najjar’s research in the 1980s, where Israeli and Palestinian reporters found ways to collaborate against all odds, in the 2020s, such solidarity was extremely difficult to find (Panievsky and Benbaji 2025). For now, the hopes for future solidarity among journalists under attack seem limited to the professional community within the national or ethnic boundaries – if at all.

It is possible, however, that as the situation deteriorates for Israeli reporters – and particularly Jewish Israelis, who used to enjoy relative freedom in the past – big newsrooms would awake to the threat. In Poland, for instance, as media freedom declined, “an unprecedented wave of solidarity thus emerged between traditionally rival media” (Benazzo 2025, 3319–3320). As of 2026, there are first signs of such a dynamic, with major TV channels sharing a lobbyist in an effort to block the government’s attempted media overhaul. The solidarity does not yet extend to Palestinian journalists in Gaza, the West Bank, or even within the acknowledged borders of Israel. Further fieldwork is required to explore these potential futures.

This article seeks to advance our understanding of the range of conditions – political, financial, cultural – which encourage/discourage journalists and newsrooms to collaborate in the face of populist media bashing. While future research might expand on the dynamic nature of this phenomenon, the current study’s contribution already highlights several lessons which may be relevant elsewhere: (a) the heightened need for strong professional associations and unions for journalistic solidarity in face of anti-media populism; (b) the detrimental effect of affective polarisation within newsrooms on potential collaborations; (c) the role the populist rhetoric, condemning the “media cabal”, in discouraging journalists from joining forces; and (d) the importance of emphasising solidarity as part of the journalistic ethos – not just with sources or audiences of news, but also with fellow reporters.

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