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Citation: Panievsky, A. (2023). Strategic Rituals of Loyalty: When Israeli Journalists Face Digital Hate. *Digital Journalism*, 11(10), pp. 1940-1961. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2022.2118144

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2118144>

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To cite this article: Ayala Panievsky (2023) Strategic Rituals of Loyalty: When Israeli Journalists Face Digital Hate, Digital Journalism, 11:10, 1940-1961, DOI: [10.1080/21670811.2022.2118144](https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2118144)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2118144>



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Strategic Rituals of Loyalty: When Israeli Journalists Face Digital Hate

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how and why Israeli journalists use their military service as a shield in response to online violence and digital hate. This practice, termed here the *military-as-alibi strategy*, is highly consequential. First, it excludes Israeli citizens who are exempt from military service (mostly Palestinian citizens of Israel and ultra-orthodox Jews). Second, it affirms the presumption that “good journalists” are not to be measured by their reporting, but rather by external loyalty tests that allegedly demonstrate their commitment to the national cause. Drawing on analyses of interviews with 20 Israeli journalists, media coverage and social media content, this article frames the military-as-alibi strategy within the local context of a militarised society, but also as part of journalists’ global struggle to win the hearts of their audiences in challenging times. Building on Tuchman (1972), the article labels journalists’ references to their military backgrounds as a *strategic ritual of loyalty*. The article proposes an alternative strategy to counter anti-press attacks: if journalism is indeed a public good (Pickard 2019), then “good journalism” should be considered “good citizenship”. This approach could free journalists from surrendering to nationalist loyalty tests, and lay better foundations for journalists–audiences relationships in the future.

KEYWORDS

Digital hate; online harassment; anti-media populism; militarism; nationalism; journalism under attack; professional identity; Israel

Introduction

In the last decade, the press in Israel has come under increasing attack from populist politicians (Levi and Agmon 2021; Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020), ranging from media-bashing to excessive state intervention. Due to the nature of the digital public sphere, this hostile political environment gave rise to what Waisbord (2020a) termed “mob censorship”: unprecedented levels of online harassment and violence, aimed at disciplining and silencing journalists. The early utopian vision, according to which social media would lead to enhanced dialogue and audience engagement in news production, has been soured by the grim reality of cyberbullying, doxing, and smears directed at journalists online (Lewis and Molyneux 2018; Waisbord 2020b). Journalists

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from various countries attested that digital hate has introduced emotional harm and physical threats to their lives and well-being, particularly for women and people of colour (Gardiner 2018; Lewis et al. 2020). Beyond the personal toll, the anti-press attacks had implications for journalism itself, with journalists around the world admitting to practising self-censorship in response, avoiding social media, or even leaving the profession (Miller 2021b). Israel is no exception: online violence and threats, fuelled by hostile populist rhetoric, have had a chilling effect on Israeli journalists' work (Panievsky 2021a). Some of them, for example, mentioned then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "army of trolls" as a factor compelling them to moderate their criticism of Netanyahu and his allies (Panievsky 2021b). What happens, though, when journalists choose not to censor themselves but rather to actively defend their reputation and profession in the face of online hate?

This article contributes to the rapidly growing literature on online harassment by exploring one consequential line of defence that Israeli journalists frequently employ when facing online smears: the *military-as-alibi strategy*, namely, journalists' use of military service to burnish their journalistic work and professional integrity against digital hate. For example, when a leading TV pundit was labelled "a traitor," his colleagues invoked his past as a war hero to defend him (e.g., Walla!, July 30, 2014). Within the dominant Zionist ideology, serving in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has been traditionally perceived as signalling loyalty to the collective and a sacrifice for the public good (Livio 2017, 2608). Journalists' military service has thus become a badge of honour, worn to deflect citizens' aggressive accusations of anti-patriotism. Drawing on thematic analyses of media coverage, popular tweets, and interviews with 20 Israeli journalists who experienced online harassment, this article examines how and why Israeli journalists utilise the military-as-alibi strategy against digital hostility.

In Israel, this strategy is consequential for three main reasons. First, using military service as a source of journalistic legitimacy excludes substantial portions of the Israeli society – from Palestinian citizens of Israel (who do not normally serve in the military) to ultra-orthodox Jews (who are exempt from mandatory service).¹ The exclusion of these groups, which are marginalised to begin with, is an endemic feature of the militarised public discourse in Israel (Kimmerling 1993). Associating military service with legitimate journalism therefore further discourages members of these groups from practising journalism, and reinforces their exclusion from the sphere of legitimacy more generally. Second, this strategy reaffirms the claim that "good journalists" should not be measured by the quality or value of their reporting but rather by certain loyalty tests, which allegedly demonstrate their commitment to the national cause. Journalists' authority is thus conditioned on factors external to their professional practice. Third, reinforcing Israeli militarism has implications that go beyond journalism: judging all areas of life through the lens of security risks undermining civil society, by prioritising security needs, values and institutions over civic ones. In the Israeli case, since the IDF symbolises and exercises Israel's authority in the Occupied Territories, embracing it as a badge of honour provokes further ethical difficulties.

Coping with media-bashing online is not a challenge unique to the Israeli news industry, nor is journalists' wish to signal their belonging to the collective. While the military plays a foundational role in the construction of the Israeli national identity,

other institutions play a similar role elsewhere. The Israeli case thus provides a reference point for studying journalistic loyalty rituals worldwide. Despite emerging in the specific context of Israel's highly militarised society (Kimmerling 1993), the military-as-alibi strategy raises broader questions regarding the future of journalism in general: What should be the source of legitimacy for journalists and news organisations when political forces, fortified by an ever-powerful online audience, undermine their authority? Can journalists build a shared sense of community with their audiences in non-exclusionary ways? And how can media scholars help them do that? These questions are most urgent in an age characterised by a growing anti-media sentiment, expressed more immediately and ruthlessly than ever.

This study contributes to the literature in five key ways. First, it sheds light on an underexplored feature of online harassment: its susceptibility to nationalism and militarism. Second, it explores the discourses that online violence prompts as part of the ongoing negotiations regarding the role of journalism in society (Carlson 2017). Third, it shows that even when journalists under attack choose to publicly defend themselves rather than resort to self-censorship, the outcome may not be favourable for democracy. Fourth, it advances a new concept – the “strategic ritual of loyalty” – by combining aspects of Tuchman's seminal work on objectivity as a strategic ritual (1972) and Zandberg and Neiger's distinction between journalists' professional and national identities (2005). Finally, it proposes an alternative legitimisation strategy based on the idea of journalism as a “public good” (Pickard 2019).

The article begins by reviewing recent digital attacks against Israeli journalists, while highlighting the close relationship between online violence and toxic nationalism. It then examines how journalists elsewhere have responded to online violence and populist media-bashing. Next, the article provides context to the unique relationship between journalism and militarism in Israel, and links the military-as-alibi strategy to broader challenges to journalism today. An analysis of semi-structured interviews with journalists targeted on social media, supported by analyses of media coverage and tweets, is applied to outline how and why Israeli journalists use their military backgrounds to counter anti-press accusations. The implications for democracy, equality, and journalism are discussed. The article concludes by proposing an alternative strategy to counter digital hate, in which patriotic journalism and uncompromising journalism merge rather than collide.

Literature Review

From “Biased” to “Traitors”: Digital Attacks against Israeli Journalists

During the past decade, Israel – like many other countries – has become an increasingly hostile environment for journalists. A wave of right-wing populism, led by long-time prime minister and now opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu, has made the mainstream media a primary target, accusing journalists of anything from biased reporting to Bolshevik anti-Israeli propaganda (Levi and Agmon 2021; Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020). Similar attempts to delegitimise journalists and their work are increasingly commonplace around the globe nowadays (Carlson et al. 2022), with offensive rhetoric and conspiracy theories against “the media” inciting violent behaviours

towards reporters worldwide (Waisbord 2020b). As with media elsewhere, this recent wave of public antipathy directed at the media in Israel has taken place predominantly online, exposing journalists to unprecedented levels of trolling, cyberbullying, and threats (Berl Katznelson Foundation 2020). Research demonstrates that the online flood of harassment and scolding takes a toll on individual journalists, but also on journalism as a social institution, since it encourages self-censorship (Waisbord 2020a) and affects the public trust in journalism (Naab et al. 2020).

In Israel, anti-press hostility was instigated by right-wing politicians and partisan media, translated into waves of online smears, then percolating back to the streets in the form of verbal and physical violence directed at targeted journalists (e.g., Walla!, July 30, 2014). This process is neither fixed nor linear but changes and reverses over time. Mob censorship is thus simultaneously a top-down *and* bottom-up phenomenon rather than a purely grassroots movement (Relly 2021). The targets of anti-media attacks vary. In Sweden, crime reporters face the most heat, particularly when covering stories that involve immigration (Nilsson and Örnebring 2016), while in South Korea, journalists who cover politics and gender are most likely to become targets (Kim and Shin 2022). However, in Israel, political and legal journalists are the primary victims of digital offence (HaAyin HaShevi'it, September 17, 2019). This reflects the narrative of the Israeli populist right, which portrays journalists as biased against the right and its leader, Netanyahu. The media's alleged left-wing bias is attributed to journalists' ill intentions, subversive tendencies, and anti-patriotism. Consequently, some of the journalists ambushed online received death threats and were assigned security details. Right-wing activists have used online forums, Facebook groups, and WhatsApp chats to organise physical attacks on journalists as well. One post, for example, called for citizens to gather around the studios of TV channel News 12, saying: "Today we burn the place down. Today we show the traitors what we really think of them" (Times of Israel, May 19, 2021). Following a steep increase in violent discourse against journalists online, multiple Israeli news organisations approached Facebook and Twitter, demanding that they end the incitement on their platforms (Globes, May 25, 2021).

While the digital hostility and populist anti-media rhetoric against Israeli journalists were essentially similar to what journalists are facing elsewhere – namely, charges that the media are "the enemy of the people" (Carlson et al. 2022) – their content was uniquely securitised since Israeli populism is mainly security-driven (Levi and Agmon 2021). The assault on the press involves frequent accusations of treason and support for Israel's enemies. One renowned journalist was accused by Netanyahu of harassing IDF soldiers (Haaretz, November 8, 2016). Netanyahu's party broadcasted an election TV ad comparing the country's public broadcaster to Hamas terrorists (Ynet website, May 3, 2015). Another campaign equated two leading journalists to the Hezbollah chief and the then-Iranian president (Makor Rishon, September 8, 2019; Figure 1). These delegitimation tactics incited popular online smears that cast doubt on these journalists' loyalty to the state, as well as death threats (Globes, May 18, 2021). Within the securitised public sphere in Israel, anti-media discourse centres heavily on the military, with journalists often portrayed as hounding Israeli soldiers and thus weakening Israel's national security.

The Israeli case highlights the propensity of online harassment to nationalistic discourses. So far, studies on digital violence against journalists have focused



Figure 1. Likud Party campaign posters comparing two leading journalists to the Hezbollah chief and then-Iranian president. The slogan: “They don’t want you to vote Likud. We’ll show them at the ballot box!”.

predominantly on misogynist and sexist offences (Koirala 2020; Tandoc et al. 2021), with some (albeit less) referring to racist harassment (Gardiner 2018; Nilsson and Örnebring 2016). As Miller writes, “Harassment of journalists cannot be explored without understanding the role being a journalist interplays with the reality of other identities” (2021a, 11). Examining digital attacks against the Israeli press suggests that journalists’ national identity should also be considered as an intersecting identity that plays a role in online harassment and journalists’ response to it.

Digital harassment cannot be understood outside its political context either (Waisbord 2020b). Nationalistic discourse accusing journalists of treason takes different forms in different countries. For example, in South Korea, still haunted by memories of the Japanese colonial era, social media users accuse journalists of being “anti-national traitors practising pro-Japanese activities” (Shin et al. 2021, 13). In Germany, recent prominent accusation against the so-called *Lügenpresse* (“the lying press”) has been that it produces “pro-West, anti-Russian reporting” (Koliska and Assmann 2021, 8). Harassers have also accused German journalists of prioritising the welfare of foreign immigrants over that of their fellow native citizens (Krämer 2018). Thus, the media’s purported betrayal is defined differently depending on local histories and connotations.

Nevertheless, the idea that journalists are undermining the national cause through biased reporting cuts across national borders. The difference between allegations of unbalanced reporting and accusations of treason is significant. While the first could be considered a healthy media criticism aimed at improving the quality of news, the latter is intended to provoke not only distrust but also hostility, turning journalists into illegitimate “objects of hate” (PressThink, April 4, 2019). Instead of dialogue and

improvement of professional journalism, it advocates for censorship – after all, there is no room for dialogue with traitors. The nationalistic angle of online harassment is therefore significant due to its potential to prompt violence against reporters, as well as its deep delegitimisation of journalism as an institution.

Of course, none of these phenomena is entirely new, as politicians have been leveling accusations of treachery against journalists forever (Caspi 1981). Moreover, online harassment of journalists “is not radically different from offline harassment” (Relly 2021, 183). However, the nature of online communication encourages this type of toxic discourse, turning it into a constant presence in the daily lives of journalists. The digital sphere allows abusive messages to travel quicker and farther, with vocal users able to express extreme language, baseless slander, disinformation and conspiracy theories that they would scarcely resort to face-to-face (Waisbord 2020a). Accusations of treachery and disloyalty are therefore more likely to emerge online rather than in the mass media environment, challenging journalists to demonstrate their commitment to the national cause. In the next section I will review journalists’ responses to online harassment before turning to Israeli journalists’ choice to turn their military service into a flak jacket.

Fighting Back? Coping with Anti-Press Violence Online

Existing studies on the impact of digital hate have emphasised its *chilling effects on reporting* and its *emotional toll for reporters*, which are detrimental to press freedom. Journalists’ documented coping strategies could be classified as avoidance strategies like self-censorship or resignation (Miller 2021b; Binns 2017; Waisbord 2020a) and emotional strategies like talking to friends (Holton et al. 2021; Kantola and Harju 2021). In Israel, initial research suggests that, faced with populist demonisation and online hate, Israeli journalists have been reluctant to respond to the attacks launched against them and prefer avoidance strategies like self-censorship (Panievsky 2021a, 2021b). In this article, however, I would focus on the cases in which online harassment did *not* silence journalists but challenged them to publicly justify their legitimacy. I suggest thinking about online harassment and digital hostility as producing moments of forced reflection, where journalists are challenged to justify their work, exposing their view of the societal value of journalism. This has been observed in several countries where journalists under attack adopted discursive strategies to try and restore their reputation against media-bashing (e.g., Koliska et al. 2020; Koliska and Assmann 2021).

Making a public argument against anti-press attacks may be crucial when journalists face accusations of bias, corruption, and betrayal. Studies suggest that such responses may mitigate the impact of media-bashing on the public’s trust in the media (Neo 2022; Pingree et al. 2018). When journalists choose to confront or debunk online smears, this might not be directed at the harassers themselves but rather to the broader audience that is exposed to the online slander and might accept it as accurate. There is also evidence that discussing online harassment publicly, for instance, has helped journalists cope with the emotional toll of digital hate (Chen et al. 2020).

However, it is not always clear *how* should journalists reply. What could journalists possibly say to defend their reputation when accused of anti-patriotism? This article examines how Israeli journalists chose to reply to nationalistic harassment and trolling. To understand why they turned to militarist discourse, one needs to understand the intimate relationship between media, society and the military in Israel.

“The People’s Army”: Militarism and Journalism in Israel

The Military

Since Israel’s foundation, military service has been mandatory for all 18-year-old men and women, except for mainly Palestinian citizens of Israel and ultra-orthodox Jews.² Founded in 1948, the IDF was dubbed “the people’s army” and followed the People’s Army Model, a doctrine that, apart from addressing Israel’s military needs, was intended to create social cohesion and build a national identity among citizens from different socio-economic and ethno-cultural backgrounds (Gorny 2001). The military was therefore foundational to the consolidation of the popular imaginary of “the Israeli people” – which, importantly, excludes entire segments of the Israeli population. For decades, the IDF served as “the prime signifier of membership in the imagined Israeli civic community” (Livio 2017, 2609). However, since the 1980s, economic, social, and cultural trends have led to a decline in military participation and calls to end the mandatory service (Levy 2009; Livio 2017). In addition, civilian casualties in the Occupied Territories ignited critical voices challenging the legality and efficacy of the operations by the IDF, which was traditionally perceived as “the most moral army in the world” (Eastwood 2017, 8). Nevertheless, the IDF has largely maintained its key role as “a decisive standard by which rights were awarded to individuals and groups”, including the right to speak and to be heard (Levy 2009, 136). Therefore, it is no wonder that the military question has become one of the loyalty tests posed to journalists by those seeking to undermine them.

Interestingly, in the public debate in Israel, the IDF has long been associated not only with war and militarism, but also with inclusion and equality. From its foundation, the military was constituted as an inclusive and moral societal project aimed not only at protecting the nation’s security but also at advancing equality and solidarity within a divided, fragmented society (Eastwood 2017; Gorny 2001). In the Zionist vision, the IDF was supposed to be the place where Jews arriving in Israel from diverse cultures, ethnicities and life experiences would become one nation. To this day, it is considered by a significant portion of Israelis as the ultimate symbol of loyalty and sacrifice, a precondition for participation in the social and political world.

The conceptualisation of the IDF as an agent of equality and an emissary of high morals is, of course, questionable. Apart from excluding Palestinian citizens of Israel and dominating Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, the IDF has not become a true equaliser, even among Jewish Israelis. With increasing exemptions and lower rates of middle-class participation in field units, risks and privileges are distributed unevenly between different classes (Levy 2009). Despite these cracks in the previously taken-for-granted status of military service in Israel, the IDF retained its status as an essential component of Israeli citizenship (Livio 2017).

The Media

Following decades of political parallelism, the Israeli news industry began embracing the American ethos of objective, balanced, and adversarial reporting around the 1980s (Meyers 2005; Tsfati and Meyers 2012). In the following decades, the Israeli media system moved closer to what Hallin and Manchini termed “the Liberal Model” due to processes of privatisation and professionalisation. However, state censorship has always eclipsed press freedom concerning national security issues (Peri 2011), and Palestinian journalists suffer from increasing state violence in recent years. Currently, the Israeli mainstream media suffers from various challenges common to other news industries worldwide: collapsing business models, crumbling local media, intensifying clientelist ties between media owners and political actors, and more (Markowitz-Elfassi et al. 2021). It operates in a highly polarised society, with a narrowing sphere of consensus and low levels of trust in democratic institutions. These conditions nurture an unaccommodating environment for journalism to carry out its declared aspirations to inform citizens, enable public deliberation, construct common identities, or hold those in power accountable. Yet, Israeli journalists sustain a level independence that allows them to criticise the government, expose corruption scandals, and, to some extent, exert their watchdog role. In recent years, this tamed freedom has been under unprecedented attack by the populist Right.

Despite the allegations regarding the media’s adversarial approach to the IDF, the media and Israel’s military are deeply intertwined. As a dominant source of censorship (Peri 2011), one would expect the IDF to become a villain in the eyes of journalists. However, most Israeli journalists have been soldiers themselves due to mandatory military service, likely colouring their judgement of the organisation. Moreover, the IDF operates one of Israel’s most listened-to radio stations. Initially serving as a mouthpiece, the station has evolved into a semi-independent, popular news outlet. Since soldiers doing duty at the radio have no previous experience in journalism, the station opened its own journalism school (Peri 2016). To this day, many leading figures in the Israeli media had their journalism training as soldiers at the IDF radio. Finally, during violent conflicts, journalists are prone to align with official military sources (Tumber 2004). The high frequency of such events in the Israeli context draws journalists and officers closer together. Alongside these distinct features, Israel’s media industry shares main features with its counterparts, including structural conditions and professional ideology, thus offering both a unique outlier and a relevant point of reference.

What is the Opposite of “Enemies of the People”? The Military-as-Alibi as a Strategic Ritual of Loyalty

What I call here the military-as-alibi strategy refers to incidents where journalists’ military records are used to counter online harassment and public media-bashing. This practice is visible in Israel, especially in recent years when journalists have often been labelled as “traitors.” In light of the relationship between journalism, militarism and the Israeli society outlined above, journalists’ use of military service as a source of legitimacy should be read as an attempt to reconcile the perceived clash between journalists’ professional and national identities. I draw here on Zandberg and Neiger’s

(2005) observation that at times of war, journalists find themselves trapped between their dual allegiances – namely, to their journalistic community on the one hand, and their national community on the other. While the professional community calls upon journalists to cover violent conflicts in a way that seems *factual, objective, critical, and balanced*, the national community demands that journalists *take sides in the conflict*, showing solidarity with their fellow citizens by avoiding any criticism of the nation's leadership.

Zandberg and Neiger's observation, made 20 years ago in the context of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, offers a useful frame for explaining journalists' tendency to "rally around the flag" at times of national emergency (Tumber 2004; Waisbord 2002). I propose here that this duality is not unique to times of existential threat to the nation but also emerges at times of threat to the journalist's *professional authority*. When journalists face accusations of "treason" and "disloyalty" because of their reporting, being labelled by hostile audiences as "enemies of the people," they find themselves similarly trapped "between the nation and the profession" (Zandberg and Neiger 2005). By emphasising their military service, they signal their online accusers that they are loyal members of the national collective despite the journalistic work they practice. Shielding behind their military service is journalists' attempt to appease angry social media users by foregrounding their national commitment ahead of their professional one.

To locate the military-as-strategy in the broader context of journalists-audiences relationships, I suggest considering it as a *strategic ritual of loyalty*. In her seminal work, Tuchman (1972, 661) explains the practices and discourses associated with journalistic objectivity as a strategic ritual aimed at shielding journalists against challenges to their professional authority. Over the years, scholars added to her work concepts like "strategic rituals of transparency" (Karlsson 2010) and "strategic rituals of emotionality" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013). The military-as-alibi strategy will be conceptualised here as a different form of strategic ritual, which uses signals of loyalty to the collective to legitimise journalistic work.

The nature of the challenges to journalistic authority has changed significantly since Tuchman published her work. First, in the digitised media sphere, journalists are required to defend themselves not only in their reporting but also on their social media profiles. Second, and more importantly, due to the nature of online violence, journalists find themselves required to not only protect themselves as reliable professionals, but also as members of the collective. Thus, while rituals of objectivity serve journalists to shield themselves against attacks on their credibility as professionals, rituals of loyalty shield journalists against attacks on their legitimacy as citizens. Unlike other strategic rituals, which refer to how journalists do their work, the strategic ritual of loyalty concerns journalists' private lives, weaponising their past experiences to claim professional legitimacy.

Methodology

To explore journalists' use and views of the military-as-alibi strategy, I conducted a qualitative analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews with Israeli journalists who

suffered from online harassment. These journalists were thus in a position to give voice to the dilemmas faced by journalists when under attack, who must choose whether to use the military service as a rhetorical shield against digital hate. The sample of interviewees includes journalists who work in senior positions for all leading mainstream national news outlets in Israel, including TV (News 12, News 13, KAN), radio (Galei Tzahal, Reshet B), newspapers (*Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Maariv*), and news websites (Ynet, Walla!). The interviewees included six women and 14 men (on the underrepresentation of female journalists in senior roles in the Israeli news industry, see Lachover and Lemish [2018]). The interviews were held in 2019–2020, lasted 45–180 min, and were conducted in person. They were approved by the Sociology Ethics Committee at the University of Cambridge.

The first barrier to interviews with elite professionals is typically lack of access (Davis, 2008). I used my personal contacts as a former journalist to overcome this obstacle. After discussing anti-media populism and interviewees' strategies to mitigate it, the journalists were questioned directly about cases where they or their colleagues used military backgrounds to respond to online media bashing. They were asked how they viewed this strategy, when and why they chose to use it, what they thought about other journalists using it, and so on.

This sample has its limitations: it is modest in size and consists of high-profile journalists who enjoy working conditions, job security and established status that junior reporters lack. However, there are two reasons for selecting this sample. First, the journalists most targeted online – and most incited against by political elites – tend to be famous figures with considerable influence and broad audiences (Berl Katznelson Foundation 2020). Second, since I set to find out how journalism is justified in the public arena, it was reasonable to sample those individuals whose public statements and reporting have the power to shape public debate. Using interviews as a research method is not free of shortcomings either. While in-person interviews may provide a first-hand, insider view of journalists' perceptions (Davis 2008), interviewees do not necessarily share their genuine thoughts, and even these might not reflect their actual conduct. However, since journalists' views and strategies are at the core of this study, interviews appear to be the most appropriate method. The conditions of anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to allow my interviewees to freely and sincerely express their feelings and thoughts (Josselson 2013, 10, 14). Only one – who has since left the profession – will be quoted here under her name, with her approval.

The interview data was then supplemented by a review of media coverage and social media references to the military-as-alibi strategy. These indicate what journalists' contribution to the public conversation was. After conducting a thematic analysis of the interviews (Boyatzis 1998), I identified five cases my interviewees referred to when discussing their use of the military-as-alibi strategy. The first two were large-scale scandals in 2019 that attracted considerable public attention. The first involved a journalist whom Netanyahu supporters labelled a traitor, although he got a badge of honour for bravery under fire as a soldier. The second involved a TV anchor labelled a traitor for criticising Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territories; she mentioned her military service in her response to the attacks. Three other cases involved minor incidents. One journalist told me he intentionally posted a picture from his military service in

response to online harassment following a critical report on Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Another interviewee mentioned regretting publishing an op-ed where she defended her colleagues who were attacked online, using their military background as proof of their virtue. Finally, one interviewee mentioned using the glorious military past of his family relative against online trolls who attacked him for reporting what they saw as conflicting with their political beliefs.

After identifying the incidents, I retrieved the news coverage and social media comments on these five cases. The media data was generated from two leading Israeli newspapers: the popular *daily Yedioth Ahronoth* and the influential highbrow *daily Haaretz* (the highly circulated free *daily Israel Today* was not included in the sample, as it serves more as a political investment rather than an independent newspaper, see Grossman et al. 2022). It was retrieved using a search of both newspapers' archives for the names of the journalists involved in the five incidents during the relevant period. The search was conducted in the Periodicals Library in Tel Aviv. The number of items is limited ($N=31$) since the media rarely covers incidents involving journalists, whether because of the competition between news outlets or because of a perception of these incidents as insider talk. The social media data was retrieved from Twitter, which was chosen because it is the most popular social media platform among Israeli journalists. The items were chosen similarly, using the names of the journalists at the centre of the five cases at the time that the particular incident took place, retrieving top tweets to review all the tweets that reached considerable audiences ($N=182$). Combined, these two data sources offer a view of the public expression of journalists' use of the military-as-alibi strategy. After analysing the three corpora of data together, I uncovered several main themes, which I present in detail below.

Findings and Discussion

"But He's a War Hero": Military Records as Shields against Online Hate

One of the most notable, high-profile cases of the military-as-strategy that my interviewees discussed occurred in 2019. Oshrat Kotler, a TV news anchor for the popular newscast Channel 13, was subject to an avalanche of right-wing vilification on social media after saying on air: "You send children to the military, to the [Occupied] Territories, and get them back as human animals. That's the result of the occupation" (Haaretz, February 17, 2019). Her comment followed a news report that documented IDF soldiers assaulting handcuffed Palestinian detainees in the West Bank. Kotler expressed a rare criticism of the occupation, claiming it corrupts young Israeli soldiers. Twitter users flooded her social media accounts in response, alleging that Kotler represented a "fraudulent post-Jewish and post-Zionist doctrine," broadcasted "Palestinian propaganda at its best,"³ and was "a scum of the earth like all the traitorous lefty Israel-haters!"⁴ Kotler's photos were shared online with the caption: "She could have been Hamas' spokesperson" (Figure 2). "I was still on air when I realised that the Web was on fire," Kotler told me.⁵ She therefore tried to clarify her comment, stating: "I want to emphasise that my own children, their friends, my friends, have all served as combat soldiers in the Occupied Territories for years". This argument was reiterated in Kotler's interviews for the media. For example, she said: "I got 10,000 phone calls and



Figure 2. Online post featuring Kotler with the title: “She could have been Hamas’ spokesperson.”

slurs, like ‘Die, bitch,’ ‘I hope you get raped,’ ‘You Hitler.’ Have you all lost it? I was a commander in the IDF! I have two daughters in military service” (Yedioth Ahronoth, February 17, 2019).

By highlighting her and her family’s affiliation to the IDF, Kotler sought to prove to her critics that she was not, in fact, anti-Israeli. This was her way to signal her belonging to her imagined audience in the face of accusations of treason. In other words, Kotler chose to defend her integrity not by explaining that her comment was objectively true, or that it was a legitimate professional commentary. She did not turn to the strategic ritual of objectivity (Tuchman 1972) to excuse herself against online rage; instead, she turned to the strategic ritual of loyalty. This reflects her choice to bring her national identity to the fore, rather than her professional identity, when under attack.

Kotler was not alone. Israeli journalists employed military records as cues for loyalty in various cases – not only when their controversial reporting involved the military, but also when they were marked as “traitors” for other reasons (e.g., for criticising certain politicians). Such was the second case discussed by my interviewees: due to his vocal criticism of Netanyahu, Amnon Abramovich, a senior journalist, was harshly targeted over the years by Netanyahu’s cronies and supporters. Ahead of the heated elections of April 2019, the right-wing anti-media campaign reached unprecedented heights. Billboard signs by the Likud Party featured Abramovich and other journalists who covered Netanyahu’s legal entanglements under the slogan: “They won’t decide” (Haaretz, January 20, 2019). The online rage quickly followed, with users sharing the same image with the inscription: “The Israeli media is the only one that betrays its own people” (Figure 3). This is a typical example of the top-down nature of online harassment and trolling (Relly 2021). Other users shared Abramovich’s fabricated obituary, saying: “I wish that this obituary will come true, for me and for millions devoted Netanyahu fans” (Figure 4). Often targeted as an “Israel-hater” (Ynet, September 20, 2016), Abramovich was, in fact, a decorated war hero – a disabled veteran whose scars are visible to this day. He was awarded the Chief of Staff Citation for continuing to operate his tank after sustaining severe wounds in the Yom Kippur War in 1973. While Abramovich himself refuses to discuss his military past, his colleagues certainly have.



Figure 3. A doctored Likud campaign poster that went viral online. It uses the original image of four famous journalists but with new text that reads: “The Israeli media is the only one in the world that betrays its own people.”



Figure 4. A Twitter post, retweeted here by an Israeli entertainment TV show, featuring the fake obituary of Abramovich, reading: “To Amnon, whose body is scarred and whose soul is spoiled, you are bitter, and I wish from the bottom of my heart that the [obituary] will come true, for me and millions devoted Netanyahu fans.”

On air and on social media, fellow journalists repeatedly invoked Abramovich’s heroic past – particularly the heavy price he paid for the sake of his country, to counter his portrayal as a traitor (e.g., Walla!, July 30, 2014).

"Amnon [Abramovich] never took pride in his military past," one of Abramovich's colleagues told me, "but for us, bringing it up is part of defending him. After all, he's not some communist who sold secrets to the enemy before becoming a journalist. He's a real patriot." This quote demonstrates a sweeping acceptance of the populist axiom that journalists should work to prove their patriotism. Additionally, it demonstrates the perception that the best way to prove one's patriotism goes through one's affiliation with the IDF. Another TV reporter said:

It's reasonable to tell people, "Who are you to say that Amnon Abramovich is an Israel-hater? You can see on his face what he sacrificed for this country." To tell you the truth, I even enjoy it! One time, after Jewish settlers assaulted me, I was doing my routine reserve duty. I posted a selfie in uniform on Facebook, a few popular pages shared it, and other journalists posted: "This is the guy you all called a traitor. Look how he's freezing now serving his country." Does that mean it would be ok to attack me if I wasn't doing reserve duty? No. But it really helps. It helps telling those who call Abramovich a traitor to, like, wake the fuck up. It's a good tool.

The supposed efficacy of the strategy was of high importance to those interviewees who approved of it. Whether the strategy is really effective, though, is questionable. Kotler's appeal to her children's military service, for instance, did not help put out the fire. Then-Prime Minister Netanyahu had harshly condemned Kotler,⁶ instigating another round of online vilification, including petitions calling for Kotler's dismissal. The death threats she received led her employers to assign her with a security detail. "My phone was full of slurs and threats," Kotler told me, "I double-locked my door that night, and at 7 am called my boss and told him that I was too scared to open it. The violence on social media percolated onto the streets. People yelled at me, cursing, spitting." Consequently, Kotler changed her number and quit her opinion segment. Eventually, she left the industry altogether – the ultimate act of self-censorship. "I held on for months because I didn't want to give them the satisfaction," Kotler said. "But I was scared. When it comes to threats to your daughters' lives – fuck the principles." Sadly, Kotler's response is reminiscent of many other journalists worldwide – particularly women – who retreat to self-censorship in response to online harassment (Waisbord 2020a; Binns 2017). Kotler's resignation testifies to the weakness of the military-as-alibi strategy, which, at least in this case, failed to mitigate the attacks against her.

In the second high-profile case discussed by my interviewees, concerning Abramovich, it is similarly hard to determine whether his defenders' recurring attempts to highlight his courage have mitigated the digital incitement or its translation into physical violence. In 2016, years after Abramovich's heroic past had been first revealed, Netanyahu supporters attacked the veteran journalist while he was shooting a news story, yelling: "It's a pity that you weren't burnt to death in that tank."⁷ In other words, at least some of the "haters" and trolls whom the patriotic message was meant to address, have not been convinced by it. In their view, Abramovich's journalistic "sins" (i.e., criticising Netanyahu) were worse than whatever he sacrificed as an Israeli soldier. Years later, at one of the peaks in Netanyahu's anti-media campaign, fake news about Abramovich's military service started spreading online (Globes, July 18, 2019). "Let's put everything on the table regarding this disgusting Quasimodo," wrote one Facebook user in a post shared hundreds of times. "This man was not a hero

whatsoever!!! It's a hoax by Bolshevik lefties who brainwash people with Stalinist lies!" The post goes on to tell "the true story" of the battle, claiming that Abramovich did not save lives but was saved by others, concluding that "If this misanthropic scum would ever see you dying, he won't even hand you a glass of water." These users have clearly heard about Abramovich's citation before. These incidents suggest that apart from its moral flaws and democratic ramifications, the efficacy of the military-as-alibi strategy is debatable on its merits. Why were journalists pursuing it then?

"It's the People You Are Talking to": Justifying the Military-as-Alibi Strategy

Certain interviewees expressed decisive objection to the military-as-alibi strategy. "It's a shame that to defend their reporting, journalists have to evoke irrelevant biographical details from their past," said one TV reporter:

I mean, what's this "war hero" narrative all about? Proving your patriotism, showing that your critical perspective doesn't mean that you're disloyal to the state. It reaffirms the anti-liberal axiom that criticism equals alienation from the Zionist ethos. Even if a journalist manages to find some redemptive biographical detail, and even if it works and people let him off the hook – he remembers. He remembers that certain types of criticism led to violent slurs online.

A political pundit for a competing TV network agreed: "I think the military service is irrelevant. Freedom of speech should allow any citizen – Jewish, Arab, secular, religious, orthodox, man, woman – to express themselves. Even those who did not serve in the military. It's their right."

One veteran news anchor said:

I remember publishing an op-ed where I defended some colleagues who were smeared online. I mentioned their military service in combat units, but later I had second thoughts. I told myself, "Look what you're doing! What if they had served in non-combat units? Couldn't they still be brilliant journalists?"

Others, however, expressed a more ambivalent approach. While acknowledging its pitfalls, they described the military-as-alibi strategy as a necessary evil. "You don't have a choice," explained an investigative journalist. "In such a polarised society, it is important to cherish the common denominators that connect us. One of them is obviously the IDF." Another correspondent added: "In a perfect world, it won't be the right thing to do. But there is a war on journalism now. And the end justifies the means." As mentioned above, though, this common denominator is not common to *all* Israelis. Nevertheless, journalists perceived it as such – and therefore found it suited to their goal of demonstrating comradery with "the Israeli people."

Some of my interlocutors, who felt uncomfortable with the employment of this strategy, shifted responsibility to their audiences, using statements like "That's what people want." "This argument is problematic," Kotler admitted, "but after all, it's *the people, the layperson*, that you are talking to. It's your viewers." Journalists were largely united in believing that "the people" *expected* them to prove their public legitimacy by sharing their military records. The violent, consistent harassment appears to have led my interviewees to believe that the public requires them to be not only balanced or credible reporters but also good patriots (which in the Israeli context means former

soldiers). This assumption, it should be noted, has never been tested. The toxic discourse online is not necessarily representative of the broad public's views; it is often led by hardcore partisans, not to mention fake profiles and bots. It is likely, therefore, that journalists – who tend to use social media extensively – get the distorted impression whereby a vocal minority of anti-press activists somehow reflect public opinion. Previous studies indeed demonstrate that online discourse shapes the way journalists perceive their audience (Coddington et al. 2021).

Beyond Israel and the Military: Online Harassment and the Loyalty Test

The military-as-alibi strategy exposes who mainstream Israeli journalists include in their imagined audience (i.e., the mostly Jewish majority) and whose feelings and expected reactions are not considered when choosing a coping strategy against media-bashing (e.g., Palestinian citizens of Israel). It suggests that journalists comply with the populist loyalty tests, which have nothing to do with the criteria that we are used to thinking of as indicating “good journalism” – namely, credible, fact-checked, informative reporting that facilitates public debate or monitors those in power.

At first glance, it seems absurd that journalists would agree, even implicitly, that serving in the IDF has anything to do with one's legitimacy as a journalist. But this is not entirely at odds with the acknowledged roles of journalism in society. While the dominant strand of scholarship still considers the informative role and the watchdog position as the main functions of journalism, it is by now well established that journalism has a more comprehensive role, which includes constructing common identities and validating social values (Carey, 1989). Considering the media's role as a community-builder, it is easier to see how my interviewees came to believe that employing local cues of belonging is required of them as professional journalists.

While Israeli journalists withdrew to the military alibi due to the particular nature of the public conversation in Israel, similar phenomena might be found elsewhere. As Livio has noted, “Countries differ in their institutional arrangements regarding military service, but republican ideals linking the rights and duties of citizenship to perceptions of contribution to the common good exist in most societies, albeit in different manifestations” (2017, 2617). Different cues, however, can be found elsewhere. In Germany, for instance, Krämer (2018) warned that journalists might express resentment towards immigrants – rather than support for the military – in order to appease populist critics and online trolls. In other cultures, journalists under attack are likely to adopt different culture-based signals to “prove” their loyalty. The militaristic appeal to audiences is consequential; in the Israeli context, where the military is associated with a decades-long occupation of Palestinian citizens, reinforcing the IDF as an attributer of public legitimacy is particularly problematic. Are there better responses to the loyalty tests put forward to journalists online?

At first glance, it seems that in order to replace this coping strategy, journalists need to find another type of loyalty test to counter the anti-press smear – namely, alternative rituals through which they might signal their loyalty to “the people” without excluding, discriminating against, or otherwise undermining the democratic principles at the heart of the profession. The question appears to be: how to establish a

sense of belonging between mainstream journalists and their audiences based on shared values that align with the moral justifications for journalism and democracy? Could journalists apply another ritual of loyalty when facing online harassment, which would replace the militaristic, exclusionary one?

A Path Forward: Journalism as Patriotism

The approach which I wish to propose fundamentally challenges the alleged clash between journalists' professional and national identities. The conviction that journalists' professional and national commitments collide, presumes that the national community requires its members to be unconditionally deferential, while the professional community requires the opposite: objective, neutral, and adversarial reporting (Tumber 2004; Waisbord 2002; Zandberg and Neiger 2005). It presupposes a contradiction between impartial or critical reporting and loyal citizenship. This presumption is not at all trivial. In fact, if one is to take seriously the prolific literature on journalism and democracy – according to which free press, pluralistic media, and unsparing journalism are crucial for the functioning of democratic societies – then professional journalism should be considered, in itself, a public good (Pickard 2019). Hence, good journalists *are* good citizens, as they provide the nation with a crucial public service and make an invaluable contribution to society. Instead of trying to prove that Abramovich or Kotler are legitimate journalists because they served in the army, journalists under attack and their colleagues should work to establish that good journalism – free, adversarial, critical – *is* good citizenship. In other words, journalists' loyalty to "the people" should be expressed through, and not despite, their commitment to the profession.

Journalism as good citizenship could be established by framing journalistic work as an immune system against threats like corruption, discrimination, disinformation and manipulation, moral deterioration, and social disintegration. As such, journalism should be considered a national resource and national priority. Countering propaganda, operational and moral criticism, exposing citizens to other citizens' views are all part of social strength and sustainability, and thus patriotic in a civic, non-nationalistic sense. This approach has a grounding in existing narratives. For example, the Institute for National Security Studies has recently named misinformation a threat to Israel's national security (Brun and Roitman 2020). This argument does not divert dramatically from the traditional justifications of journalism in democracy, but it does emphasise the *defensive* role of journalism as a safety mechanism against threats to the collective. It does not centre on protecting journalists' freedom of speech but rather on the public's collective rights and future. The risks that journalists take to deliver the best journalism possible could replace the idea of sacrificing bodies in war. Concrete steps that could be taken in this direction are, for instance, annual reports where news organisations demonstrate the public good they managed to contribute this year, tying them explicitly to their role as journalists who protect and empower society against various threats. Such practices may also reorient journalists towards their commitment to the public. To pursue this alternative framing of journalism in times of populism and

digital hate, not only will journalistic justifications have to change, but also Israeli journalism itself (which often neglects its public duties).

This alternative approach erases the alleged conflict between good journalism and good citizenship, reconciling journalists' professional and national identities. Such a vision would free journalists under attack from surrendering to external loyalty tests and establish better foundations for journalists-audiences relationships in the future. This approach does not ignore the need of journalists and news organisations to signal solidarity, care, and belonging to the community. Instead, it pins this loyalty to devotion, bravery, and sacrifice *on professional grounds*. In Kotler's case, which was examined above, I could detect the buds of such an alternative approach. In an op-ed titled "Democracy Needs Unsparing Journalism," journalist Orit Lavi-Nashiel defended Kotler, bemoaning her resignation. Kotler's military service was not mentioned, but her *professional* bravery was. "Democracy," Lavi-Nashiel wrote, "requires an independent, open, brave, unsparing media, and not a submissive, sycophant, or loyalist one" (Maariv, April 4, 2019). One radio host told me that Kotler had "real balls." Regardless of the gendered undertone, he was trying to defend her on the merit of her *professional* courage. This is a very different defence tactic than the military-as-alibi strategy, as it marks *journalistic fearlessness*, not martial courage, as a signal of loyalty to the people. The notion of "the Israeli people" that underpins this alternative approach is also more inclusive, implying that journalists should fearlessly serve *all* Israelis rather than a vocal nationalist camp – even if the latter resonates strongly online. The argument for journalism as good citizenship is not easy to make, especially in times of hostile populism and digital hate. However, I believe it is worth pursuing since, unlike the military-as-alibi strategy, it offers a ritual of loyalty which is not exclusionary but aligned with democratic ideals.

Conclusion

This article explored one of the strategies that Israeli journalists have adopted to cope with online harassment and digital hate that questions their loyalty to the nation: the military-as-alibi strategy. This strategy provokes questions regarding the future of journalism, including what its source of legitimacy should be when populist politics, fortified by a vocal online audience, undermines journalistic authority.

This article has sought to contribute to the literature in five key ways.

First, by naming the military-as-alibi strategy, the article sheds light on an important and underexplored feature of digital violence and hate – its susceptibility to nationalistic and militaristic discourses – which trap journalists "between their nation and their profession." The empirical material from the Israeli case was used to demonstrate that alongside blatant expressions of sexism and racism – well-documented in other countries – toxic discourse online provides fertile grounds for nationalistic smears.

Second, in focusing closely on the *public* justifications that journalists make in response to digital harassment, the article highlights the meta-journalistic discourses (Carlson, 2017) that online harassment prompts (alongside its chilling effects and emotional toll).

Third, writing on the harmful implications of mob censorship, Waisbord (2020a) proposes that more freedom of speech may not always advance democratic values. Since journalists often respond to online harassment by self-censoring or limiting their online presence, the exercise of the harassers' freedom of speech, in fact, curbs that of journalists. This article suggests that even when journalists refuse to keep silent and choose more active reactions to online violence (i.e., making public arguments to defend themselves) – the outcome may not be favourable for democracy, and in fact, ends up silencing others.

Fourth, the article advances a more significant claim regarding journalism, loyalty and authority, building on two theoretical frameworks: Tuchman's concept of "strategic ritual" and Zandberg and Neiger's distinction between journalists' professional and national identities. I explain journalists' use of military backgrounds as a strategic ritual of loyalty, reflecting journalists' attempts to reconcile their national and professional commitments. This analysis expands our understanding of both concepts. First, it establishes a strategic ritual based on *loyalty* rather than *objectivity*, on journalists' relationship with their perceived audiences rather than their professional qualifications. Second, it demonstrates that the online war that is launched against journalists by hostile populists and angry audiences, has the power to invoke the same conflict between journalists' conflicting identities – as do real wars.

Finally, the paper puts forward an alternative claim for legitimacy based on the idea of journalism as a "public good" (Pickard 2019). Framing journalism itself as a practice of good citizenship that contributes to the commonwealth and the safety of the collective may be a useful alternative to existing exclusionary strategies journalists practise to cope with digital hate.

Notes

1. Compared with their Jewish counterparts, Palestinian journalists in Israel suffer less from online harassment of the type directed at the mainstream media, mainly because they rarely work for national, Hebrew-language news outlets and are therefore less visible to the general public. They do, however, suffer from other forms of intimidation and censorship, including physical violence from Israeli authorities (International Federation of Journalists, 27 May 2021).
2. While Arab citizens are not barred from joining the military, they are not subject to conscription nor are they particularly motivated to serve, given the military's role in the Occupied Territories (Orgad 2005). Due to an agreement sealed in the 1950s, ultra-orthodox Jews are allowed to skip military service if they declare their occupation as "Torah study" (Stadler et al. 2008).
3. @israeli_falcon on Twitter, 16 February 2019, available at: https://twitter.com/israeli_falcon/status/1096839789557542913?s=20
4. @markolamberto2 on Twitter, 17 February 2019, available at: <https://twitter.com/markolamberto2/status/1097033200768086016?s=20>
5. Kotler, who left the profession since, is quoted here by name with her explicit consent.
6. Benjamin Netanyahu on Facebook, 17 February 2019, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=396613647574508>
7. N12 news on Facebook, 25 October 2016, Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10154148800722523>

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Daniel Mann, Shai Agmon, Yonatan Levi, Avishai Ben-Sasson, and Simon Watmough for their insights and comments, and to all the journalists who generously shared their perspectives and experiences. All remaining errors are mine.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Gates Cambridge Trust.

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