"Bash the Expert": Expertise Amid the Covid-19 Crisis Conference Summary

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Alongside the escalating Covid-19 crisis, another crisis with a widespread effect poses a major challenge in the post-truth era: the diminished public and political trust in experts. On September 8, 2020, the question of the status and role of experts was discussed in an online conference held in the framework of the INSS Lipkin-Shahak Program on National Security and Democracy in an Era of Post-Truth and Fake News. The discussion focused on two main concerns: the role that experts play in decision making processes, and their status among the general public. The conference speakers included researchers, senior experts, and decision makers in the fields of national security, economy, and public health, as well as figures from the traditional media and representatives of social media. This article summarizes the main ideas raised in response to the principal issues discussed: What changes have occurred in the concept of the "expert" and the perception of expertise in today's world? What are challenges and opportunities to the inclusion of experts in the decision making process on various issues – whether regarding national security in general, or in the management of a concrete crisis, such as the Covid-19 crisis in particular? What role do media outlets and social networks assign to experts in the public discourse, and how is this affected by various considerations, including viewer ratings and personal preferences?

The shifting status of expertise, along with the crisis in political and public attitudes toward experts, is reflected in many and varied phenomena, both in Israel and worldwide. These include the rise of "Google experts" who are increasingly showcased in the public eye and media discourse as a substitute for other established, knowledgeable sources; efforts made by deliberate disinformation campaigns that challenge institutionalized agencies regarded as "professional"; systematic undermining of experts' authority and exclusion of professional staff from decision making processes; and eroding public confidence in experts and the epistemic communities they represent.

On September 8, 2020 the questionable status and role of experts was discussed in an online conference held in the framework of the Lipkin-Shahak Program on National Security and Democracy in an Era of Post-Truth and Fake News at the Institute for National Security

Studies (INSS). The discussion focused on two main issues of concern: the role that experts play in decision making processes, and their status among the general public. Conference speakers included researchers, senior experts, and decision makers in the national security, economic, and public health fields, as well as figures from the traditional media and representatives of social media. INSS Deputy Director for Research and Analysis Brig. Gen. (ret.) Itai Brun moderated the discussion. Speakers included Columbia University Professor of Sociology Gil Eyal; Knesset Covid-19 Committee chairperson MK Yifat Shasha-Biton (Likud); former head of the National Security Council Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland; former Governor of the Bank of Israel Dr. Jacob Frenkel; Channel 12 political commentator and news anchor Dana Weiss; *Haaretz* military commentator Amos Harel; Dr. Zipi Israeli of INSS; and Facebook Head of Policy for Israel and the Diaspora Jordana Cutler.

This article summarizes the main ideas raised in response to the following issues: What changes have occurred in the concept of "expert" and the perception of expertise in today's world? What are challenges and opportunities to the inclusion of experts in the decision making process on various issues – whether regarding national security in general, or management of a concrete crisis, such as the Covid-19 crisis in particular? What role do the media and social networks assign to experts in the public discourse, and how is this affected by various considerations, among them viewer ratings and personal preferences?

The Concept of "Expert" and the Current Status of "Expertise"
The meaning of the concept of expertise itself is controversial, and thus the starting point of the discussion began with questioning what is expertise and whether a crisis has developed concerning the role of experts and their inclusion in decision making processes as well as in the public discourse.

In his book *The Crisis of Expertise*, Prof. Gil Eyal outlines the social context needed in order to understand these questions. He argues that a crisis of expertise has been underway for many years, present before the Covid-19 pandemic, but has now worsened. Although modern society depends to a great extent on experts and expertise, this dependence has generated a crisis in public confidence, which with time increases the dependence on these experts, and that in turn further aggravates the crisis. Thus, Eyal argues that concerns regarding the "politicization" of science are sounded mainly by those who perceive expertise as an objective quality and who wish to delineate a clear boundary between science and politics. In practice, however, these borders are less clear than they seem, because the debate on expertise mainly involves its effects on policy, also known as "regulatory science," which is actually a scientific and political hybrid. The expertise crisis is therefore not solely a result of politicization, as some believe; it stems from the ongoing erosion and destabilization of the mechanisms that were supposed to recruit scientists for

political tasks, while at the same time keeping them isolated from political considerations, as neutral parties who make fact-based claims and act with professional authority. Instead, the exact opposite has occurred; the experts involved in political processes are perceived as politically biased, resulting in a loss of public confidence in them.

Another emerging challenge involves identifying the relevant field of expertise in crisis management and decision making processes. In the Covid-19 crisis, for example, difficulty lies in establishing the nature of the crisis – whether it is perceived as primarily a medical crisis, or as a more complex and broader national crisis with social, economic, and political aspects. This complexity heightens the uncertainty regarding relevant experts whom the public and the politicians can and should trust, because no one is an expert in all fields.

Furthermore, including appropriate experts in crisis management proves challenging also due to the rise of phenomenon such as the "cacophony of commentators" and "lay expertise," in which many demand the right to speak on issues previously reserved for experts. At the same time, this poses a convenient opportunity for those profiting from undermining expert authority, whether through disinformation campaigns or based on "Dr. Google," in order to present their views as an alternative to authoritative sources of information.

The Inclusion of Experts in Decision Making Processes
The growing tension between professional and political ranks was reflected recently, in events such as the resignation of Shaul Meridor as Head of the Ministry of Finance Budget Division; in the public criticism of the guidelines issued by National Coronavirus Project Coordinator Prof. Ronni Gamzu; and in the obviously inconsistent decision making process in imposing the second lockdown, whether partial or full, in the current holiday season. The speakers at the conference were asked how these developments can be understood, and what challenges and opportunities are involved in the inclusion of experts in decision making processes.

Common failures associated with inclusion/exclusion of experts in the decision making process can be linked to a lack of clarity regarding the advisory role that the expert fulfills and the limits of his/her influence – in other words, whether experts should push for the adoption of a single, particular policy, or rather present several alternatives and assess them, so that decision makers can make an informed decision based on the professional recommendations. In addition, the speakers at the conference warned against "a euphoria of ignorance," which is typical of politicians, and is reflected in diminishing the value of experts and their staff work. This poses an extremely significant challenge to any proper decision making process based on facts. Finally, there are built-in biases between politicians, who are interested in short-term goals and in solving immediate problems in a

crisis, and their professional staff, who are interested in the long-term goals and consequences of a selected policy.

All speakers warned against a dichotomous notion of these tensions between decision making ranks that divide these groups into good and bad, such as the romanticization and glorification of the professional rank and the demonization of the political rank. In an ideal world, a balance is struck between the alternatives displayed, their costs, and a broad range of possibilities provided by experts on the one hand, and a political and hierarchal decision making process that should include an open discussion, culminating in a policy decision, on the other. Finally, based on a range of experts, selecting those able to speak beyond a "position," together with wise and critical use of data, can help decision makers make sense of the situation in the current crisis, which features great uncertainty.

Informing the Public and Assessing the Extent of Public Confidence in Experts
Public confidence in general and attentiveness to experts in particular has undergone a steady process of erosion over time. Regarding to the Israeli case, Dr. Zipi Israeli contended that early in the Covid-19 crisis, it appeared that there was a positive change; the value of the experts rose, and public confidence in them was high. In the so-called second wave, however, the morbidity rates were published daily in the media, generating background noise, and directly and indirectly created difficulties, for all of which there is no single expert. The public therefore began to demand more certainty and authoritativeness from their policymakers and experts.

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The media and the social networks are among the stakeholders that have reflected and exacerbated the crisis of expertise, namely due to their mediating role to "translate" what the experts say for the general public. According to the conference speakers, the pandemic has generated great interest in experts in the public sphere; however, the considerations in choosing certain experts over others are often banal and related to the demand for experts with a less conventional opinion likely to attract viewers' attention (and television ratings), or for "house experts" already familiar to the public and the media networks. For example, news anchor Dana Weiss emphasized the immense social responsibility of news editors in bringing a variety of experts and assembling balanced and diverse panels, in order to overcome at least some of these biases.

The social networks have also responded to the public's need for expert knowledge, and take responsibility for their mediating role in conveying information to their users. For example, Facebook is taking action by removing potentially harmful disinformation, reducing false information, and making reliable, professional knowledge accessible. For this purpose, Facebook has been cooperating with integrative teams of experts, and turning

to local and international institutions, such as the World Health Organization. One pertinent conclusion raised discussion in this context is that fact-checking services for social networks such as Facebook both in Israel and worldwide are still scarce, and must undergo major growth and development processes in order to assist these networks in effectively favoring reliable sources and knowledge based on expertise over false information.