The Discourse on Antisemitism in the United States as Reflected in the Mainstream Media—Review of 2020

Lior Sirkis | August 1, 2021

The year 2020 was full of tumultuous events in the United States—a presidential election, the COVID-19 crisis, and increasing social tension. All these influenced the way in which antisemitism was expressed in the US during this year. This article presents and analyzes the coverage of antisemitism in the US as presented in online print media in both the US and Israel in light of these events. The premise is that mutual feedback occurs between the media, the general public, and the leadership, such that the media—which makes the perception of reality accessible to its target audiences—largely reflects the prevailing public (and political) views, level of interest, and agenda, while it also simultaneously shapes them. The dramatic events of 2020 enable a complex analysis of this connection between the media and the public on a variety of topics.

This article is based on an analysis of 1,254 news items and articles about antisemitism in the US that were published during 2020 in four kinds of media, as detailed in the appendix: US national media, American Jewish media, and Israeli media in both Hebrew and English.[1] The article analyzes the characteristics of the media discourse on the topic of antisemitism in the US during 2020, examines the main issues of this discourse, and considers the similarities and differences in the coverage between the various kinds of media examined.

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[1] The articles were mapped by searching for the terms "anti-Semitism," "anti-Semitic," and "אנטישמיות" using Google News and Google Alerts. This research does not relate to coverage of the issue in noninstitutional media (social networks, blogs), local media or nonprint media (radio, television, and video services such as YouTube).

An Overview of the Media Discourse

The media discourse on antisemitism in the US throughout 2020 was organically influenced by central events that took place that year. Throughout, the discourse on antisemitism significantly intensified at certain points in time, corresponding to specific events that occurred (see Figure 1). Even if the event did not specifically relate to antisemitism, the media raised the issue of antisemitism in relation to the event.

As 2020 was an election year, the media focused on the topic of antisemitism and politics, beginning with the Democratic primaries at the beginning of the year and continuing until the elections in November. The media's coverage of antisemitism initially focused on two incidents of deadly antisemitic violence that had occurred in December 2019 in New York and New Jersey. In March, the media also centered on the increased antisemitism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the growing antisemitism on social media. The media extensively covered antisemitism within the Black community, following the murder of George Floyd, a Black man from Minneapolis who was strangled by a policeman while being arrested at the end of May and the subsequent demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a result of antisemitic statements made by celebrities following the protests mostly in June and July, the media looked closely at antisemitism in popular culture. Toward the end of the year, the media expanded its discussion of antisemitism and politics, in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential elections.

Figure 1
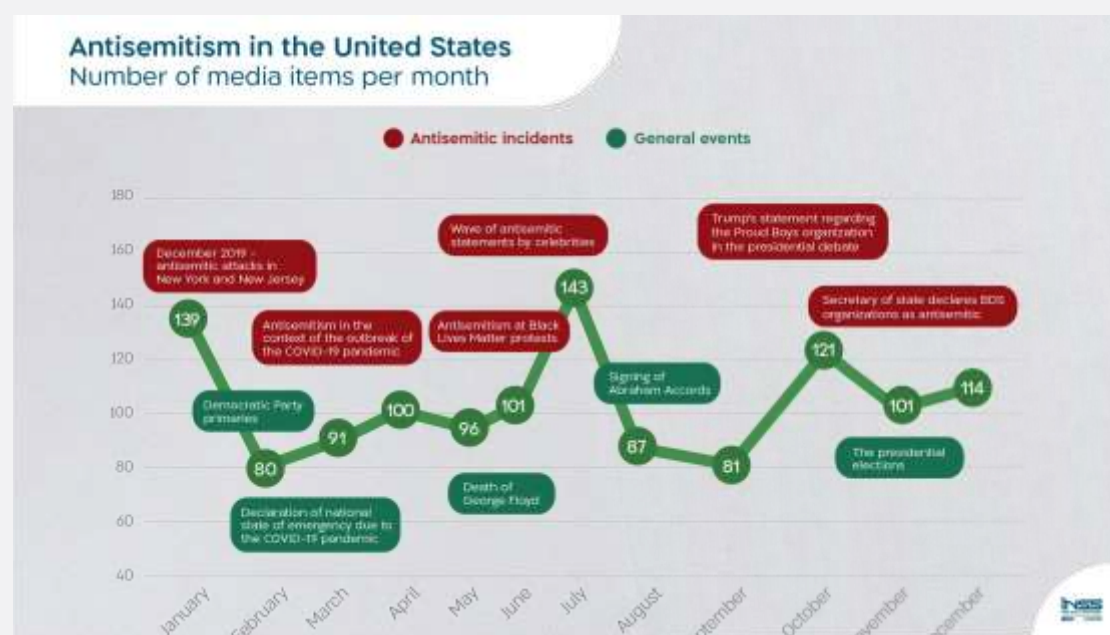
The Media Discourse—Analysis by Topic

In order to analyze the media coverage of antisemitism, the articles were mapped according to the following categories: antisemitism and politics, antisemitic vandalism and attacks, antisemitism in social media, antisemitism in popular culture, antisemitism in academia and on campuses, antisemitism and the COVID-19 pandemic, antisemitism and anti-Zionism, antisemitism in the Black community, antisemitism on the right, antisemitism on the left, Islamist antisemitism, the definition of antisemitism by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), reports on antisemitism, and other topics.

As befits a US election year, antisemitism and politics had the highest percentage of media coverage at 18% (see Figure 2), which also could include antisemitism on the right (4%) and antisemitism on the left (3%). Coverage of incidents of antisemitic vandalism or attacks was also prominent at 11%, along with antisemitism in social media (11%) and antisemitism in popular culture (10%).

Figure 2

Antisemitism in the United States
Distribution of media coverage

18% Antisemitism & politics
11% Antisemitism in social media
7% Antisemitism in academia & campuses
41% Other
11% Antisemitic vandalism & attacks
10% Antisemitism in popular culture

(6%) Antisemitism & COVID-19
(6%) Reports
(6%) Antisemitism & anti-Zionism
(5%) Black antisemitism
(4%) Antisemitism on the right
(3%) Antisemitism on the left
(2%) Islamist antisemitism
(2%) IHRA definition
(9%) Miscellaneous

Antisemitism and Politics

The topic of antisemitism and politics was the most prominent in media coverage throughout the year, with 334 items in total, appearing in both opinion columns and in news coverage (see Figure 3). Both before and during the Democratic primaries election in February, the media extensively covered the opinions and statements of the various candidates regarding antisemitism. For example, in January, the media covered Michael Bloomberg's statements against

antisemitism made during his election campaign (see, for example, Vitali & Jackson, 2020), as well as an antisemitic incident in March at an election rally for Bernie Sanders, in which one of the participants waved a flag with a swastika (see, for example, Chiu, 2020). The media also focused on Congresspersons Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, who on many occasions were accused of antisemitic statements in social media and elsewhere (see, for example, i24NEWS and ILH Staff, 2020).

In April, after the election of Joe Biden as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, the media coverage of antisemitism increased. The discourse on antisemitism on the right intensified, focusing mainly on President Trump's statement regarding the extreme right-wing group, the Proud Boys, in the first presidential debate in September (see, for example, Boigon, 2020). In the debate, Trump was asked whether he would willingly denounce the activity of extreme right-wing organizations, including the Proud Boys. In response, Trump called on the members of the organization to "stand back and stand by." Another focus of media interest was a fundraising event held in August for the presidential campaign of Democratic Party candidate Biden, in which the connection between President Trump's rhetoric and the rise in antisemitism in the US was the focus (see, for example, Kampeas, 2020a).

The coverage of antisemitism and politics took center stage in early November, toward the elections. The main focus then was the announcement by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that the Trump administration would consider Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) organizations as hate organizations that disseminate antisemitism (see, for example, Tharoor, 2020).

The media also addressed antisemitism in its coverage of the two rounds of senate elections in the state of Georgia in November 2020 and in January 2021, elections that were decisive for the two parties. The discussion of antisemitism was relevant in these elections as one of the candidates in the race was Jon Ossoff, a Jewish member of the Democratic Party, who was subject to repeated antisemitic attacks during the year, as well as Raphael Warnock, a pastor and candidate from the Democratic Party, who on more than one occasion had been accused of antisemitism (see, for example, Kampeas, 2020b).

Figure 3

Antisemitism and politics
Number of media items per month
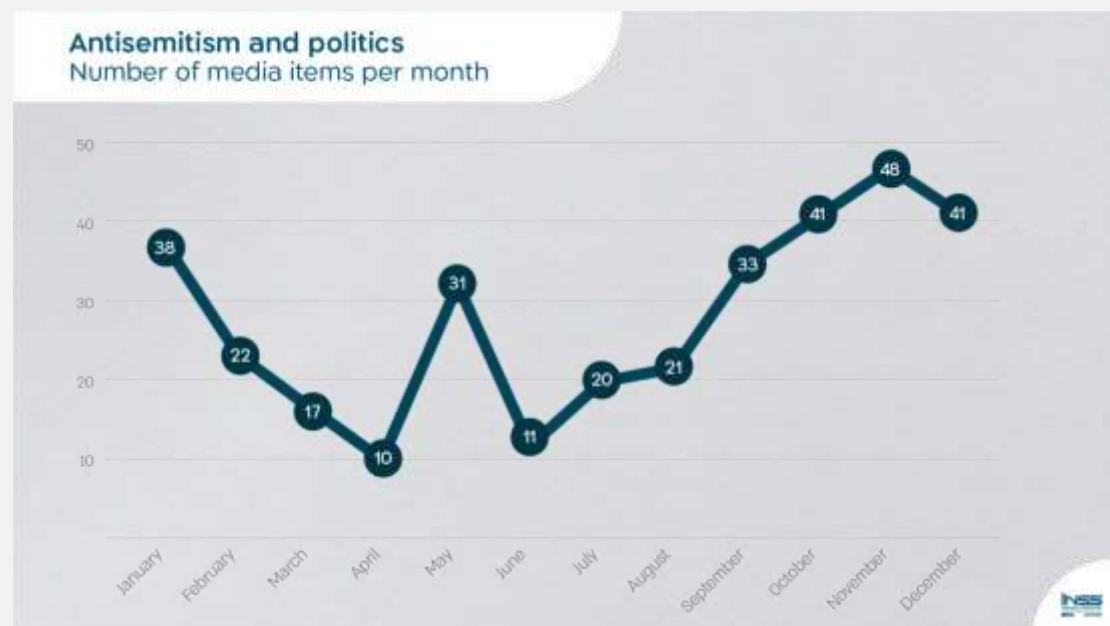
Antisemitic Vandalism and Attacks

Following the antisemitic attacks in New Jersey (see, for example, Israel Hayom editorial staff, 2020) and in New York, in the town of Monsey (see, for example, Kilgannon, 2020) in December 2019, the media coverage of antisemitic attacks and vandalism incidents during the month of January 2020 was considerable, constituting about 31% of all the media coverage about antisemitism in that month. These antisemitic incidents were the most extensively covered from among all the antisemitic attacks and vandalism that occurred in 2020 (see Figure 4). As part of this coverage, the media addressed concerns and security efforts of the Jewish communities (see, for example, Mann, 2020), in addition to discussing antisemitism that originated within the Black community, as both of these attacks were carried out by African Americans (see, for example, Sharon, 2020). From February onward, the coverage of antisemitic attacks and vandalism declined, presumably as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns imposed.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions, media coverage of antisemitic attacks and vandalism again increased in May 2020, following several antisemitic incidents that occurred during Black Lives Matter protests, in which synagogues in Los Angeles, California and Richmond, Virginia were vandalized (see, for example, Oster, 2020b). In December, coverage increased again, partly due to the defacing of a monument in memory of Anne Frank, located in Idaho, with antisemitic graffiti (Kim, 2020). Furthermore, the media also covered the publication of an FBI report on hate crimes. The report presented a 14% rise in

antisemitic crimes in the US in 2019 compared to the previous year (see, for example, Arango, 2020).

Figure 4

Antisemitic vandalism and attacks
Number of media items per month
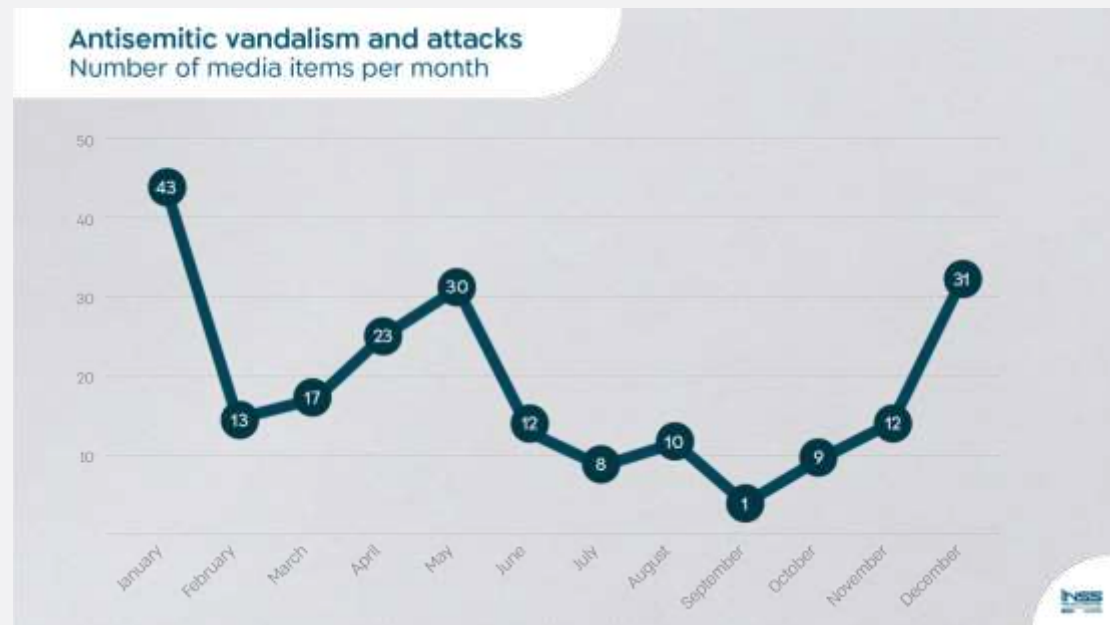
Antisemitism and COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the US in March 2020 and President Trump's declaration of a national state of emergency both were significant in generating antisemitic incidents, leading to extensive coverage of antisemitism within the context of COVID-19 (see Figure 5). At the beginning, the coverage extensively discussed reports by various organizations about the Jews being blamed for the pandemic (see, for example, Nuriel, 2020), as well as the phenomenon of hacking into the livestream video of Jewish community institutions, which was attributed to right-wing white supremacists who used antisemitic symbols and terms (see, for example, The Forward & Boigon, 2020). This phenomenon also gave rise to addressing the phenomenon of antisemitic expression in social media and antisemitism on the right. The media also devoted considerable coverage to confrontations between the mayor of New York and the Jewish community about their defiance of COVID-19 restrictions in the city (see, for example, Bella, 2020).

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Israeli media outlets in Hebrew and English and the Jewish media outlets covered the convergence of antisemitism and COVID-19, with little mention in the US national media. As the pandemic spread, however, the US national media also began to cover this phenomenon (see Figure 5). This was partly related to the expansion of restrictions in various states, which was expressed by antisemitic manifestations toward ultra-

Orthodox communities (see, for example, Roduren, 2020), as well as in protests that took place in May against restrictions throughout the US (see, for example, MacFarquhar, 2020).

Figure 5

Antisemitism and COVID-19
Number of media items per month
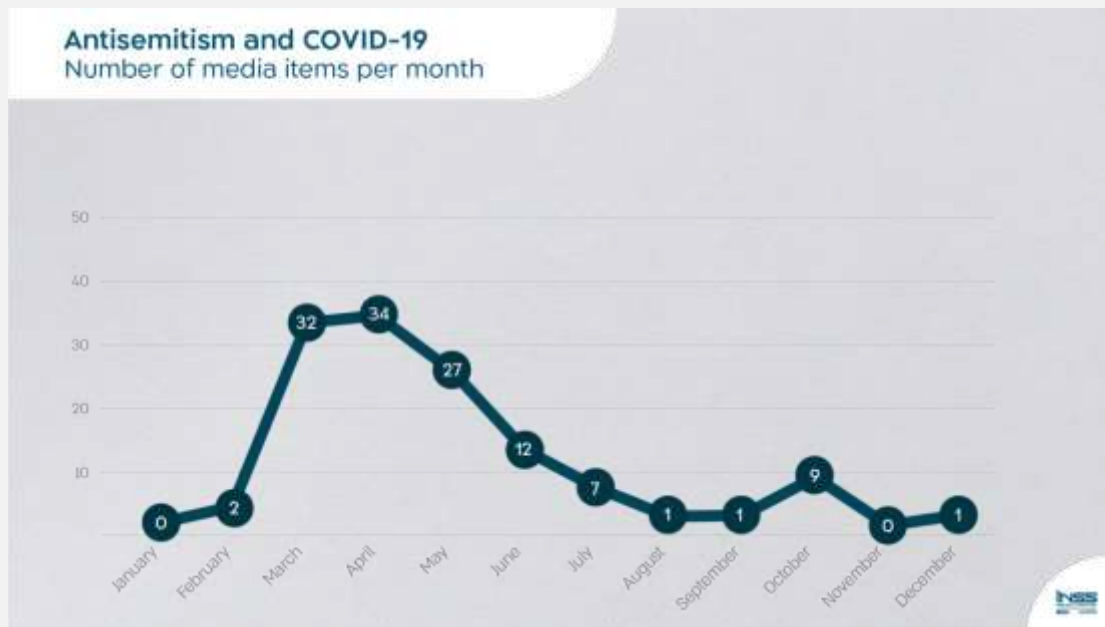
Antisemitism in Social Media

In March and April, 2020, the restrictions imposed as a means of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic led to antisemitic expression on social media, with the media focusing its discourse on antisemitism within social media (see Figure 6). Furthermore, this again increased during July and August, as a result of the antisemitic statements posted on social media by celebrities, in part following the murder of George Floyd. The election year also saw an increase in the hate discourse on social media, contributing to the extensive media discussion of the issue. One issue addressed in this context was the changes to the policies of Facebook (see, for example, Weiss, 2020) and TikTok (see, for example, Berkovitz, 2020), in terms of handling antisemitic content posted on the platforms. Moreover, the media extensively covered the livestream video-hacking incidents of Jewish community institutions that were carried out mainly by white supremacy activists.

Figure 6

Antisemitism in social media
Number of media items per month
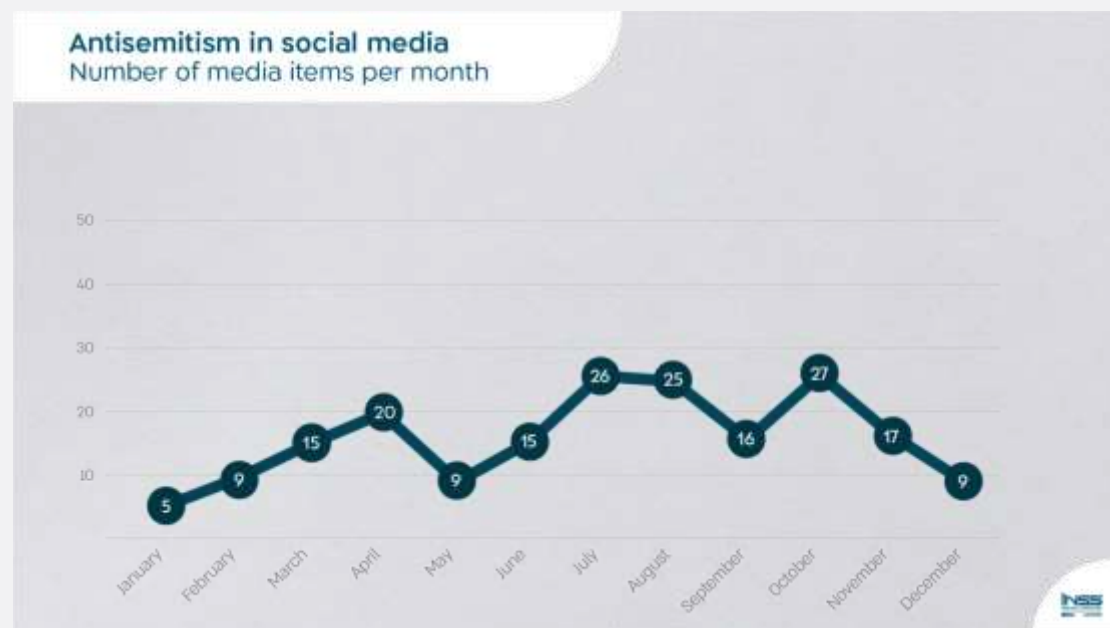
Antisemitism in the Black Community

The media discourse focused on antisemitism within the Black community at two main points during 2020: in January, following the violent attacks in New Jersey and New York, which were carried out by African Americans, and in May and June, following the murder of George Floyd, which resulted in demonstrations throughout the country (see Figure 7). The Israeli media in Hebrew and English and the Jewish media (see, for example, Oster, 2020b) reported extensively on vandalism of synagogues in some of these demonstrations; in contrast, the national media did not report on the antisemitic incidents related to the demonstrations at all. In May, the media also covered the spread of antisemitic conspiracy theories accusing Jewish philanthropist George Soros[2] of funding the demonstrations (see, for example, Swanson, 2020). From May to July, the media also comprehensively covered the antisemitic statements made by many celebrities from the Black community following the Black Lives Matter demonstrations as well as expressions of support for antisemitic statements by the leader of the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan.

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[2] George Soros is a philanthropist identified with many left-wing organizations in and outside of the US. Soros's name has been associated with stories about political intervention attempts around the world, as well as with numerous antisemitic conspiracy theories.

Figure 7

Antisemitism originating in the Black community
Number of media items per month
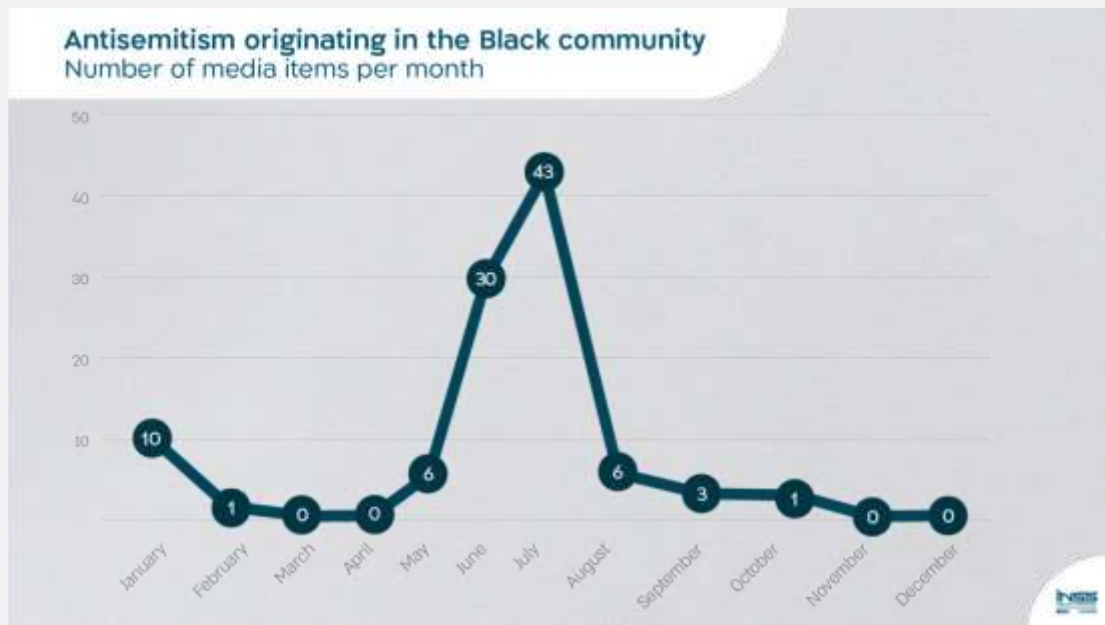
Antisemitism in Popular Culture

In May 2020, subsequent to the murder of George Floyd and the agitation that followed, numerous celebrities, including some from the Black community, made antisemitic statements. These include statements by NBA players (see, for example, Walla Sports editorial staff, 2020) and NFL players (see, for example, Kaur, 2020), comedians (see, for example, Respers France, 2020), rappers (see, for example, Ghermezian, 2020), and others, while other celebrities sharply condemned these statements (see, for example, Bumbaca, 2020). Many celebrities also expressed support for the antisemitic theories of Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam (see, for example, Oster, 2020a), who also gave a speech replete with antisemitic statements on July 4, 2020, the American Independence Day (see, for example, Kerstein, 2020) (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Antisemitism in popular culture
Number of media items per month
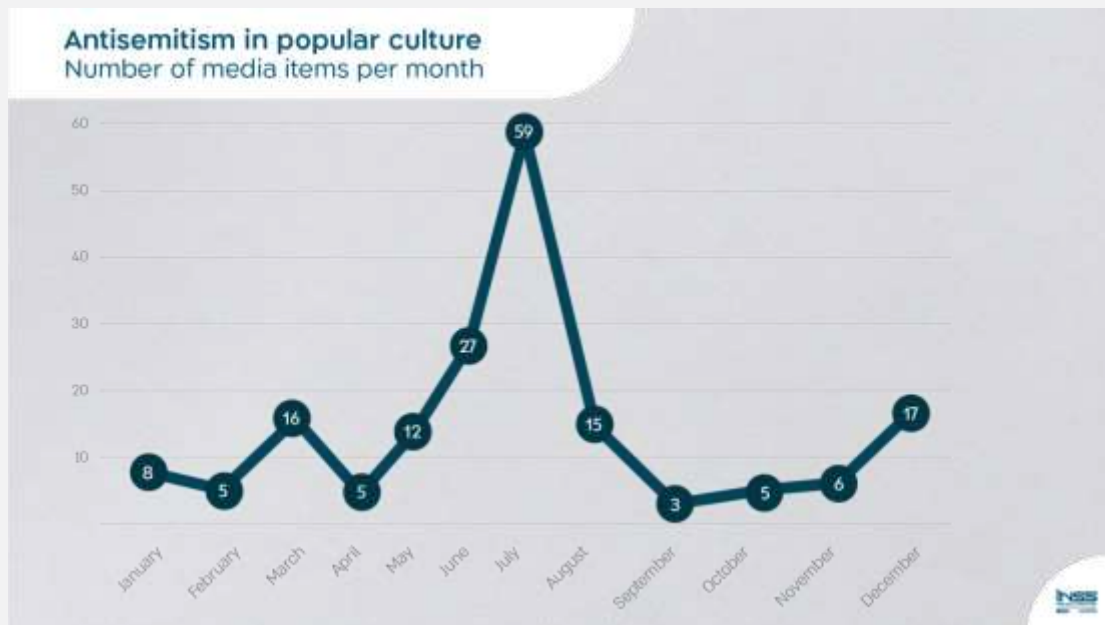
Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism

The media discourse only gave slight coverage to the issue of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, although it increased significantly toward the end of the year, specifically in November when the US Secretary of State announced that the Trump administration would relate to BDS organizations as hate organizations that disseminate antisemitism (see Figure 9). As a result, the media then began to more intensely cover the connections between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, the dispute regarding the different definitions of antisemitism,[3] and the ongoing argument about the connection and the tension between antisemitism, anti-Zionism, and legitimate criticism of Israel. Furthermore, the media addressed anti-Zionist and antisemitic statements made by various celebrities and US politicians, mainly from the political left.

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[3] On the IHRA definition of antisemitism, see https://bit.ly/3x7N8vQ; on the Jerusalem declaration on antisemitism, see https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/; on the Nexus Document, see https://bit.ly/3g54tzP

Figure 9
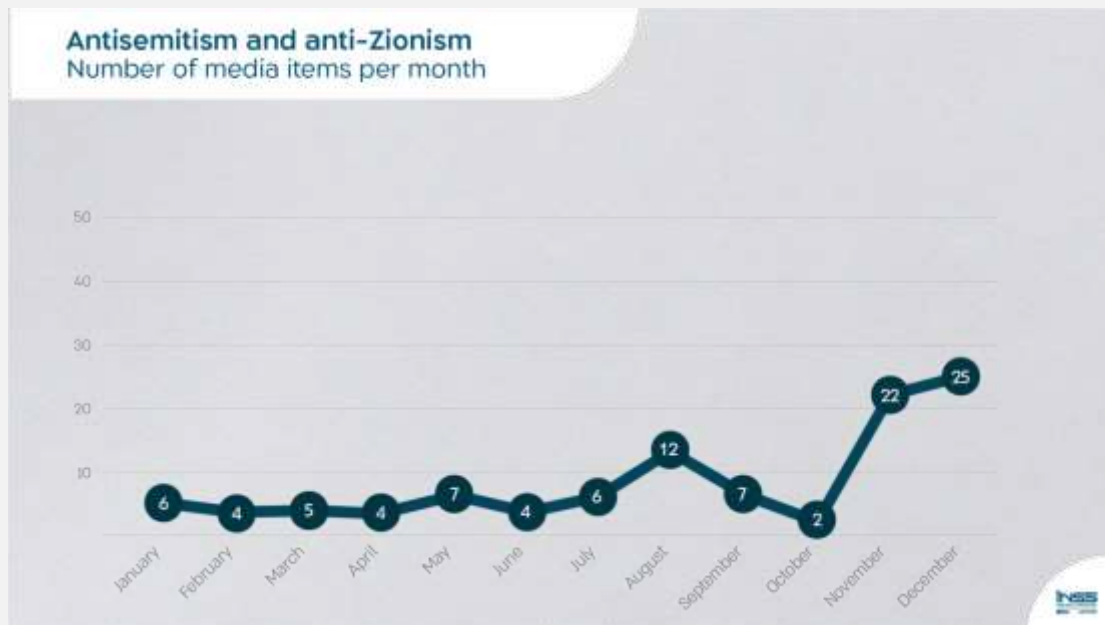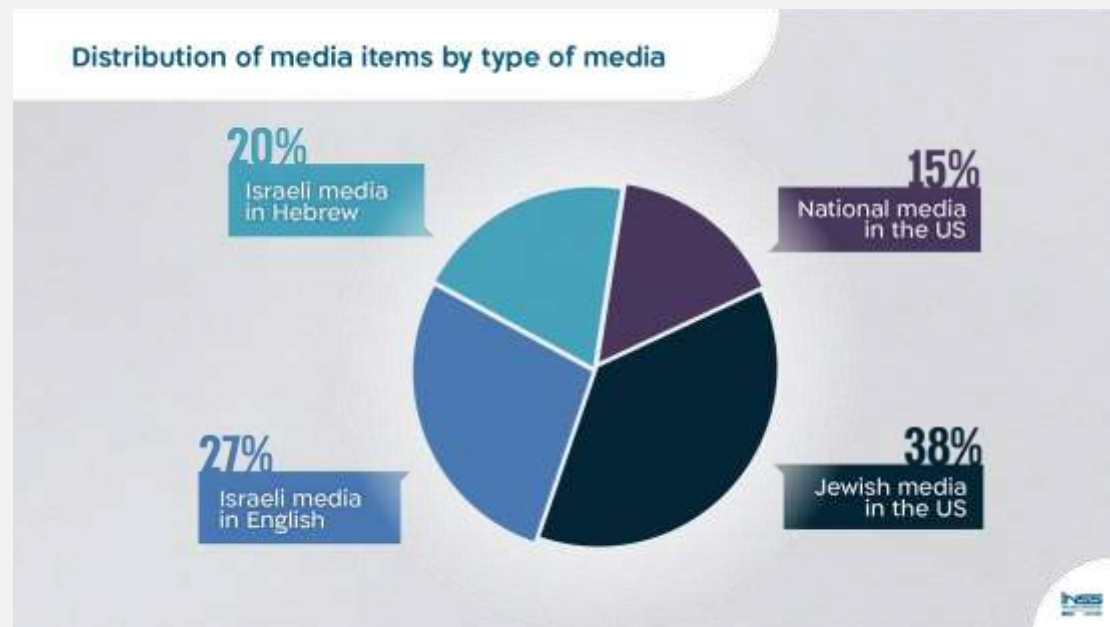

Analysis of the Coverage by Different Media Outlets

The media items examined were divided into four kinds of media: national media in the US, American Jewish media, Israeli media in English, and Israeli media in Hebrew. Each type of media targets different audiences. While the national media in the US is consumed by some of the American general public, the readership of the Jewish American media is mainly the Jewish community in the US. The Israeli media in Hebrew is aimed at an Israeli Hebrew-speaking audience, most of whom live in Israel. In contrast, the Israeli media in English targets mainly Jewish, English-speaking audiences, residing both inside and outside of Israel.

As shown in Figure 10, of all the media items about antisemitism in 2020, 182 items, constituting 15% of all the media items were published in the national media in the US; 475 items or 38% of all the media items appeared in the Jewish media; 252 items or 20% of all the media items were published in the Israeli media in Hebrew; and 345 items, comprising 27% of all the media items appeared in the Israeli media in English (see Figure 10). It is important to note that articles are republished in different media outlets; that is, an article published in a Jewish media outlet could be republished in other Jewish media outlets, or in the Israeli media in Hebrew and English. The Jewish media in the US

tends to often serves as a central source for republishing by the Israeli media,[4] along with the use of materials distributed by news agencies.

Figure 10

Distribution of media items by type of media

20% Israeli media in Hebrew

15% National media in the US

27% Israeli media in English

38% Jewish media in the US

When examining the coverage by categories, we can see that the trends that characterize the media are identical in certain areas. For example, the most covered topic in 2020 in the four types of media was antisemitism and politics, while the topics covered the least were the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and Islamist antisemitism. Coverage on other topics differed, however, according to the media type.

**Differences in Coverage Between Jewish Media and the US National Media**

From a preliminary review of the distribution of the number of articles relating to antisemitism published in the US national media and the Jewish media, naturally the Jewish media had more extensive coverage of this issue. From these figures, the issue of antisemitism in the US overwhelmingly preoccupies the American Jewish population far more than it preoccupies the American general public or the Israeli public. When examining the distribution of the articles by various categories, the differences were significant in the scope of the coverage between the types of media.

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[4] Recurring items that were republished in different media outlets were counted as separate items for the purpose of analyzing the data for this article.

While the issue of antisemitism and politics received a similar scope in coverage in both the national media and the Jewish media, as well as in relation to the average amount of coverage in the different types of media, other issues did not receive similar coverage. For example, in Figure 11, we can see that 16.73% of the articles surveyed in the national media dealt with antisemitism in popular culture, in contrast to the Jewish media, in which only 8.36% of the media items surveyed addressed this topic, compared to 9.74% of the articles surveyed in all four types of media. The national media gave extensive coverage to antisemitism in popular culture because of the antisemitic statements made by celebrities, including NFL player DeSean Jackson, NBA player Stephen Jackson, comedian Nick Cannon, and rapper Ice Cube, as well as the condemnations by other celebrities about these statements. Moreover, the centrality of popular culture in the US dramatically influences the national media's interest in stories related to this topic. However, an opposite trend is apparent when dealing with antisemitism in academia and on campuses or antisemitism in social media. While the Jewish media widely covers these issues, the national media gives them limited coverage, even in relation to the coverage of the issue by the other types of media.
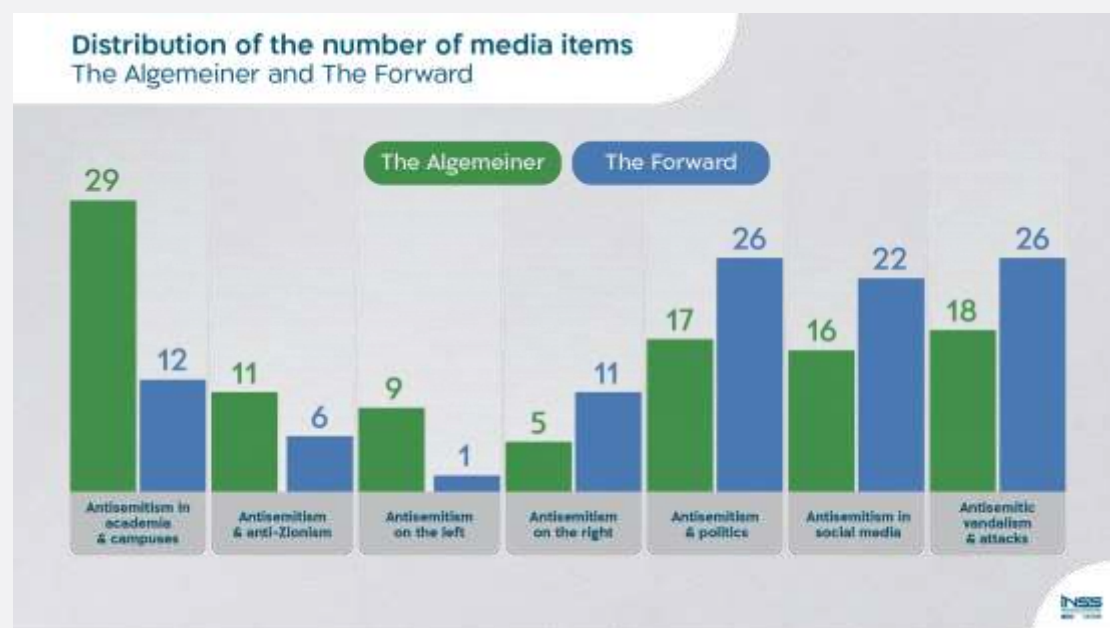
Figure 11

Percentage distribution of media items by various topics
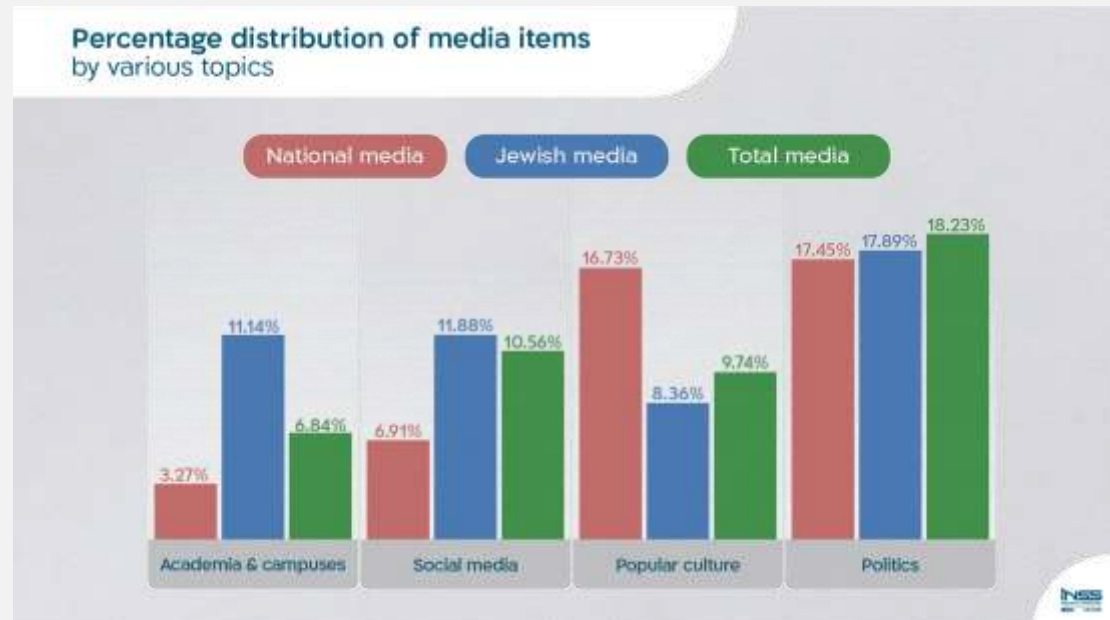
Differences in Coverage Among Media Outlets with Different Political Affiliations

The nature of the coverage of antisemitism among media outlets with different political affiliations varied significantly. Even though these are only numerical figures and not an in-depth analysis that examines the way each article relates to

the issue in question, by comparing the media outlets, we can receive a clear picture of their political affiliation. The amount and nature of coverage varied between the different Jewish media outlets that are identified with diverse political perspectives. In comparing the media items published online on the *Forward* website, which has a liberal orientation, with those on the *Algemeiner* website, which has a conservative orientation, the amount of coverage dealing with antisemitism in general was more or less the same in 2020 (see Figure 12). While the *Forward* published 161 items that dealt with antisemitism in the US in 2020, the *Algemeiner* had 144 items on the topic. A significant difference occurs when comparing the subtopics covered by the two media outlets. The *Algemeiner* extensively covered the issues of antisemitism in academia and on campuses, antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and antisemitism on the left, in contrast to the *Forward*. Meanwhile, the *Forward* extensively covered the issues of antisemitism on the right, antisemitism and politics, antisemitism in social media (which on many occasions involved covering antisemitic statements of extreme right-wing activists in social media), and antisemitic vandalism and attacks, in contrast to the *Algemeiner*.
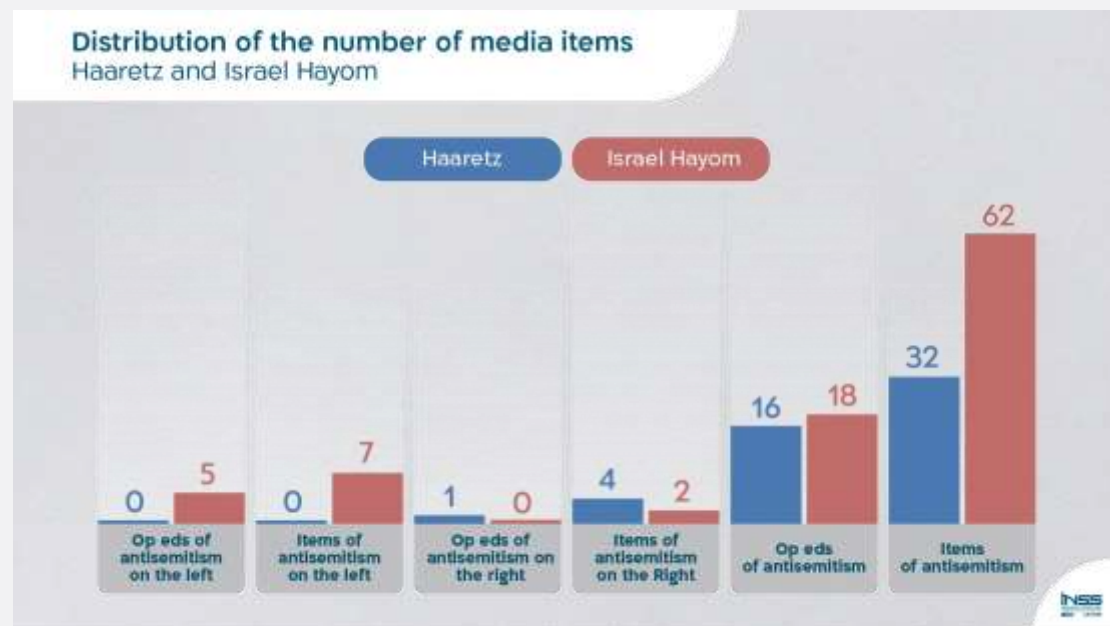
Figure 12

In addition to the differences between Jewish media outlets, the nature of the coverage also varied when comparing between the items published online by the left-leaning *Haaretz* and those by the right-leaning *Israel Hayom* (see Figure 13). *Haaretz* covered the issue of antisemitism in a much more limited fashion. While the *Haaretz* website published 32 items that dealt with antisemitism in the US in 2020, the *Israel Hayom* website had 62 items on the topic.

Even though clear differences in a range of issues are not as apparent as they were in the comparison of the Jewish media outlets in the US, the two papers address differently the issue of antisemitism on the right and on the left. While *Israel Hayom* devoted comprehensive coverage to the issue of antisemitism on the left, *Haaretz* related to the issue in a more limited manner. As for antisemitism on the right, we can see the opposite trend.

Figure 13

Distribution of the number of media items
Haaretz and Israel Hayom

It is important to note that when comparing the opinion columns alone between these two media outlets, the amount of coverage becomes similar; As seen in Figure 13, 18 opinion columns that dealt with antisemitism were published on the *Israel Hayom* website, while 16 appeared on the *Haaretz* website. However, here too the political orientation of the newspapers is maintained. *Israel Hayom* published 5 opinion columns about antisemitism on the left, while *Haaretz* did not publish any opinion columns on the issue. In addition, *Haaretz* published one opinion column on antisemitism on the right, while *Israel Hayom* did not publish any column on the antisemitism on the right, and instead focused on a variety of other issues, including antisemitism and COVID-19 and antisemitism originating in the Black community.

These figures, both in the Israeli media and in the Jewish media, serve as an example of the way the issue of antisemitism is politicized. Both sides of the political map, not just in the United States but in Israel too, connect the issue to their world view and try to give the phenomenon a political affiliation and to use it for their purposes. The media representation of this phenomenon reflects the

differences in approach and disagreements regarding the issue of antisemitism in both the public and political spheres.

Conclusion

Media coverage of antisemitism in the US in 2020 reflected increasing public interest in the issue, and was part of a trend that began in 2018, with the attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The media is a complex system that both is influenced by and affects the existing reality. The media's choice to cover a specific issue or event affects the way it is seen by the media's target audience. This is in addition to the extensive influence of events on reality and on the perspectives of the target audience. These complexities require examining the issue of antisemitism in the US from different angles and extents and by taking into consideration the media's target audience, at a specific moment in time.

However, despite the differences in target audiences, the media reflects the trend of the politicization of antisemitism and its coverage is perhaps even intensified by it. Political framing of the media discourse on antisemitism is apparent, as the two sides of the political map accuse the other as being responsible for the phenomenon. The right blames the left for being responsible for antisemitism and anti-Zionism, while the left attribute it to white supremacists on the right. This political attribution also occurs, whether openly or tacitly, in each media outlet and with respect to all of the various target audiences. This is not a phenomenon that characterizes only the national media in the US, but also, and perhaps mainly, the Jewish media in the US as well. Hence, it reflects the political polarization in the Jewish community in the United States (and also in Israel) and its representation in the media, both from the news coverage and from the opinion sections. The difficulty in agreeing upon central issues—such as the definition of antisemitism, its sources, and how to properly address—is a significant point of contention in the US Jewish community, a difficulty that continues into 2021 (see, for example, JTA & Kampeas, 2021; Kampeas, 2021).

Despite the large-scale impacts of the noninstitutional media and of social media, the discourse in the institutional media continues to be central, and to a considerable extent, reflects the way the general public perceives the phenomenon of antisemitism. As long as antisemitism continues to exist in American society, it will continue to be present within the media discourse, to influence it, and to be influenced by it.

Appendix

Distribution by media outlet of all items published in 2020 on the topic of antisemitism in the US

National media in the United States	182
ABC News	7
CBS	1
CNBC News	1
CNN	18
ESPN	3
Forbes	1
Fox News	22
LA Times	9
NBC News	20
New York Times	30
NPR	9
Politico	3
Reuters	3
The Hill	12
Time Magazine	2
USA Today	10
Wall Street Journal	5
Washington Examiner	1
Washington Post	25

Jewish media in the United States	474
Algemeiner	94
Forward	119
Jewish Insider	11
Jewish Journal	59
Jewish Standard	2
JNS	112
JTA	78
Israeli media in English	**345**
Haaretz	33
I24 News	7
Israel Hayom	53
JP	140
Times of Israel	105
Ynet	7
Israeli media in Hebrew	**253**
Mako	2
N12	6
The Marker	6
Ynet	42
Globes	6
Galatz	1
Haaretz	32

Walla	13
Channel 12 News	1
Channel 13 News	5
Israel Hayom	62
KAN 11	1
Calcalist	7
Maariv	36
Makor Rishon	24
Channel 20	1
Arutz Sheva	7

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