"The Torah Shelters and Saves": COVID-19 Pandemic and the Framing of Health Risks in Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Religious Media

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Abstract

Despite growing recognition of the important role which culture and religion play in risk communication and framing theory, research on framing in religious media is limited. In the context of health risks, framing remains virtually unexplored. In an attempt to address this gap, this study looks at risk reporting in religious media. By means of a content analysis of 331 news reports and articles published in the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious media in Israel during the COVID-19 outbreak in Israel, this study serves the dual purpose of offering the empirical evaluation of the "quality of risk information" as well as the framing of health-risks in religious media. Drawing upon the constructivist approach to framing theory, the study's findings shed light on the mediation of frames through cultural-religious prisms and its effects on the quality of risk information. In addition, the findings provide a conceptual basis for comparative analysis across various cultural and religious groups.

Keywords

risk communication – culture – COVID-19 – religion – framing – Israel – Haredim

Introduction

An individual's ability to effectively navigate through a complex reality is challenged by his or her limited cognitive capacity to process, understand, and recall information (Druckman & Lupia, 2017). In the era of new media and big data, numerous actors vie for our attention, inundating us with a tsunami of information and misinformation. Framing breaks down these complexities through a process of interpretation, categorization, and organization in an attempt to make sense of the overwhelming knowledge (Van Gorp, 2007).

According to framing theory, the individual is an active participant in the communication process – even though journalists are usually the first to report and therefore shape the news. Consciously or unconsciously, editors and journalists draw attention to specific aspects of an issue by focusing on certain features while omitting others (Shih et al., 2008; Lee & Basnyat, 2013), or, as Entman put it in his often-cited definition: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993). The higher the salience, the more likely that the audience feels and responds in a predictable way towards an issue (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

In mid-March 2020 – as the worldwide number of infected people by the COVID-19 pandemic first crossed the hundred thousand mark – a pattern involving religious communities emerged. Countries from as far as East Asia to North America saw large infection clusters trace back to faith congregations, at times accounting for more than half of infections (Yee, 2020).

In Israel, too, the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox Jewish) community was also more severely affected than other demographics. Constituting only 12.5% of the population (Cahaner & Malach, 2019), they measured up to 60% of intensive care unit hospitalizations by the end of March (Even & Marciano, 2020). An Israeli Ministry of Health report traced the increase among the Haredi community to religious gatherings and festivities of the Purim holiday that had been observed two weeks prior on March 10 (MoH, 2020). Socioeconomic factors, namely large families in crowded houses, coupled with religious gatherings, created the perfect environment for the pathogen to multiply. There was a disregard for government guidelines exhibited by some Haredi communities, a "traditionally" low trust in the authorities and how religious leaders gave direct orders to keep open religious institutions; after all, as the Babylonian *Talmud* (Sotah 21a) says, "The Torah Shelters and Saves".

It was neither a problem of reach, nor was it that the relatively recluse community was oblivious to the ongoing emergency. Rather, many of the myriad

Haredi news outlets covered the outbreak since its onset in January 2020. Experts suggest that the *quality* of the risk was poorly communicated in the Haredi media. According to a report by the Israel Democracy Institute, this resulted in knowledge gaps and low risk perceptions that reached up to the highest levels in the Ultra-Orthodox sector, the rabbinical heads (Malhi et al., 2020).

In the absence of personal experience with different types of hazards, individuals depend upon mass media as their key source of risk-related information (Gisela et al., 2013). This is true specifically for a novel infectious disease that develops in another continent and spreads surreptitiously over a span of several weeks or months before it reaches exponential growth which then calls for immediate action (Viboud et al., 2016). Numerous studies have established how effective risk communication allows for better decision-making (Covello, 2009; Roche & Muskavitch, 2003). Dudo et al. (2007) produced a theoretical framework that empirically measures the nebulous concept of "risk information quality" as it relates to scientific, environmental and health risks. Later studies (e.g., Hove et al., 2015; Saxon et al., 2018) are part of a broader discipline in health communication that applies content analysis on risk reporting to determine how risks are framed in the media.

Framing is a social construct used by journalists and their audience to interpret reality through their own social contexts and thus are viewed as inseparable from culture (Van Gorp, 2007). Past evaluations of the impact of health communication are limited to the comparative analysis of frames in a cross-cultural context (Dan & Raupp, 2018). Their findings fail to explain whether disparities are linked to culture, to framing reconstruction dynamics, to journalistic practices, or simply to the health issue covered (Shih et al., 2008). In an attempt to "bring culture back in" (Van Gorp, 2007), this study uses content analysis to examine the coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Israeli Haredi media and is set to

(1)   empirically measure the quality of risk information in the Haredi media;
(2)   understand how risk is framed in cultural-religious media.

Framing of Health Risks

The ubiquity of framing over multiple disciplines has led to many inconsistencies in the way it is defined, conceptualized, operationalized, and analyzed (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). In media content analysis, the researcher codes frames in a pre-defined unit of text and measures their occurrence rate over multiple units in order to find patterns. A frame can be a word, a sentence, or

an entire news item. Less often, graphics are coded as well (Matthes, 2009). Frames can employ *generic* constructs such as "conflict" or "human interest" that apply to a broad range of coverage from war and epidemics to gossip and culture. Researchers find this tool useful to draw comparisons between sources across issues, frames, and topics (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Frames can be more *issue-specific*, for instance, looking at the framing of *E. coli* outbreak through a "public health and consumer safety" frame (Raupp, 2014). The decision of which frames to code can be made *deductively*, that is, by an a priori selection of frames that match the nature of the research and are derived from over 560 existing frames in literature, or made up by the researcher. Alternatively, frames can be extracted *inductively* by discerning recurring patterns during the analysis (Matthes, 2009).

The framing of health risks in mass media may determine how people perceive these issues and act upon them (Beaudoin, 2007). Although the direct impact of the media are hard to ascertain, as they depend on numerous other psychological and cultural factors (Dahlstrom et al., 2012), it is argued that the central role of mass media in risk communication is crucial in helping people make informed decisions, alleviate needless uncertainty, and ensure that different parties invest their attention and resources in higher risks and do not unduly invest in lower risks (Roche & Muskavitch, 2003). However, media competition gives rise to sensationalism, increasing politicization and polarization, while journalistic beliefs, judgment, and possibly limited scientific knowledge can prove detrimental to the quality of risk-related information (Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Druckman & Lupia, 2017).

Past studies have measured the extent to which high-quality risk information is presented in the news media (Dudo et al., 2007). These studies are part of a subfield in health communication where news of risks and hazards are coded in general and/or issue-specific frames. Framing theory and the methodological insights of existing risk communication constructs are helpful for exploring the subject matter and for drawing comparisons with previous works. It is based on Dudo et al.'s (2007) framework for quality of risk information but will use Dan and Raupp's (2018) unifying constructs for the frame titles.

Religion and Framing

Before the Enlightenment, it was difficult to distinguish between religion and news in most print media, since the content reflected the pious lifestyles of the early journalists (Sloan, 2000). The separation of church and state and the

advent of secularization turned religion from an underlying motif into just another topic to cover alongside such other topics of news such as culture and sports (Stout & Buddenbaum, 2003). This decoupling has made it possible for scholars to explore how religion and religious groups are framed in the media, including the religious press, and to gain insight into the religious values of publications on contentious issues such as politics (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), stem-cell research (Nisbet et al., 2003), the dual framing in the media of sex and of religion (Claussen, 2002), homosexuality (Christensen, 2012) and same-sex marriage (Warren & Bloch, 2014). Badaracco (2007) examined how the media has shaped popular ideas about religion and health. Lumpkins (2010) explored how religion in health adverts was used to appeal to African women about breast cancer screening. The question of media framing of death was addressed by Duncan and Newton (2017). Media framing of Islam has also generated research interest (Mellor, 2005; Ewart & O'Donnell, 2018) with a particular focus on violence, including risk implications in the aftermath of 9/11 (Wicks, 2006; Ewart & Rane, 2011). Despite growing recognition of the important role that culture and religion play in risk communication and framing theory, studies of frames in religious media in general are limited (e.g., Shahin, 2015), and, moreover, they remain virtually unexplored while in the context of health risks.

Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) work on the five most common frames in the news is widely used in content analysis of health risks (Dan & Raupp, 2018). It has operationalized the *morality frame* by looking for references to moral messages, God, religious tenets, and social prescriptions about behavior. While this methodology can be useful in the research of secular mainstream media, in religious media like the Haredi media – where religion and news are deeply interconnected – coding becomes too broad to produce any meaningful information.

From an anthropological perspective, this study views religion as an inherent expression of human culture (Beyers, 2017) and takes Van Gorp's approach to frames as a social construct that is an integral part of culture (Van Gorp, 2007). Rather than relate to morality/religion as a frame, it should be regarded as a *framing device*, a cultural "tool-kit" (Swidler, 1986) that includes "an organized set of beliefs, codes, myths, stereotypes, values, norms, and frames that are shared in the collective memory of a group or society", helps people make sense of the world around them, and guides their actions (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 62). Accordingly, for multiple stories with recurring cultural-religious motifs, a frame can be reconstructed based on a *package* of framing devices (or "elements") (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), in such a way that when a member of a cultural/

religious group is exposed to these devices, it triggers a cognitive *schema* that latently corresponds with a frame. Unlike frames that are stable in nature, schemata are an organized body of knowledge that builds on experience and feelings and is constantly evolving in the individual's mind. Due to their personal and cultural nature, a schema that evokes a frame for one person may go unnoticed by another (Entman, 1993).

The Haredi Media

The Haredim (Hebrew for "fearful ones") community are not a unified or homogenous institutional community, but rather are groups of people who seek to ensure that their religious identity is not affected by outside influences. The Haredim themselves have been divided over the decades and centuries by different spiritual, political, and cultural orientations (Brown & Leon, 2017). They share parallels in their hierarchical command structures, marked by rabbis' leadership, which exert control over of their followers, such as family life, voting, schooling, and media content (David & Baden, 2017). Most of the 1.2 million Haredim in Israel live separately from the general population (Cahaner & Malach, 2019) and only recognize the modern-secular Jewish state *de facto*. Some even reject the very concept of a Jewish state entity. Of all sectoral communities, the Haredim have been most active in creating their own community media (Campbell & Golan, 2011). Reflecting its philosophy of withdrawal from modernity, and seeking to maintain religious values in a cultural ghetto framework, the Haredi have felt most threatened by changing mass media. The influence of the Haredi community media was particularly wide given that most Haredim are not exposed to television or to secular newspapers, making the Haredi press important agents for political recruitment.

The different ways in which the Haredi media vary from mainstream news can affect risk reporting. Content is heavily influenced by Jewish theology (Cohen, 2005). The spirit of the holy scriptures and strict standards of *Halakha* (Jewish religious law) takes precedence over contemporary issues. Each Haredi daily newspaper has a rabbi-figure acting as a censor to check that unsuitable content is excluded. Some Haredi news organizations have a fully fledged board of rabbis that prescribes the ideological and political line of the newspaper; others have other mechanisms where rabbis are consulted by the editorial board. Popular Haredi websites are not politically affiliated and remain outside rabbinical supervision – but in many cases consult rabbis ad hoc. All of them refuse to acknowledge many facets of modernity, technology, and Western culture (David & Baden, 2017).

The roots of the Haredi press can be traced back to Eastern Europe in the 19th century, where it evolved in parallel with the so-called *Haskalah* ("Enlightenment") movement, which advanced secularization, in an effort to maintain the unique lifestyle of the group and strengthen the hand of the rabbis against outside media pressures (Cohen, 2017). To the extent that the subject of the Haredi media has received research attention, research has focused upon the relationship of the Haredim and the media, raising important anthropological and socio-psychological questions.

The Haredi press has been described. Religious content in different Israeli news media forms, religious and secular, was examined. Baumel (2002) examined the Haredi press through linguistic tools in order to generate the Haredi outlook on the social role of media inside the Haredi community. Cohen (2012) described Haredi rabbinical attitudes to the Internet. Maimon (2018), Cohen (2018), and Feldman (2015) discussed Jewish ethical and legal questions regarding computers and the Internet.

The Haredi media has evolved over the years to include numerous alternatives to the "secular" media, with four daily newspapers, scores of periodicals, two radio stations, *nayes* lines (telephone news lines) and *pashkevilim* (wall posters), and a handful of Haredi news websites. Since the 1980s, the monopoly enjoyed by the daily newspapers has been successfully challenged by a commercially orientated independent Haredi media. These were attempts by journalists from a Haredi background to deploy such techniques as modern graphics, fetching headlines, and covering a broader range of subjects than those in the party "establishment" Haredi press (Gabel & Wassserman, 2007). Whereas in the Haredi newspapers each community newspaper is inclined to focus upon matters within the specific community, some key websites are intra-Haredi in content and are not affiliated with any specific Haredi stream or political party. The commercial Haredi media has introduced a new level of press freedom in an otherwise highly hierarchical media–religion environment. This also was expressed latterly in the breath of information that Haredim as a whole received during the outbreak. Haredi rabbis tried to prevent the rise of alternative news platforms, but the commercial media prevailed, perhaps due to the desire of various segments of Haredi society to be better informed and less disconnected from the modern Israeli state.

Heavily influenced by Jewish theological principles, the content of Haredi media in particular reflects less what reality is and more what it should be. Drawing on the Biblical precept that "the camp shall be holy" (Deuteronomy 23:15), Haredi editors seek to ensure that the newspaper that enters the Haredi home does not "impure" the family atmosphere. Consequently, the Haredi media is characterized by an overwhelming attitude of circumspection

towards crime, violence, and sex-related matters. If the topic is so central to the country's news agenda that they cannot refrain from mentioning it, they will use different means to cover the story without relating to it (Cohen, 2012). Religious–state tensions between the Haredi community and the health authorities and law enforcement agencies surfaced in the Haredi media on several accounts during the pandemic and may have eroded Haredi confidence in the health system.

Digital Media, Haredim, and COVID-19

Haredi rabbis have over the years led a mostly losing battle against new media because it offers access to information not controlled by the rabbis (Cohen, 2015, 2017), and the Internet is used by a considerable body of Haredi Jews today. By 2019, 49% of Haredim were connected to the Internet (in contrast to 89% of the non-Haredi Israeli Jewish population) (Kahaner & Malach, 2019). According to a survey by Israel's largest telecommunication company, Haredi usage of computers and Internet increased yet further as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with up to a 52% increase among Haredi men and women aged 20–55 just during the first lockdown of 2020 (the poll was run on the Internet and, therefore, failed to survey the large number of Haredim not on the Internet; Bezeq, 2020).

Of no less significance was that, by comparison to 82% of Haredim surveyed who reported being updated about COVID-19 from the digital media, only 30% reported being updated by rabbis or Haredi public figures. Only 8% of Haredim relied on *pashkevilim*, the traditional means over the years of the transfer of information in the Haredi thoroughfare. Perhaps of even greater significance for the question of Haredi rabbinical hegemony was the significant number of Haredim who surfed beyond Haredi printed press because the Haredi websites – notwithstanding that they were not rabbinically supervised – did attempt to accord to a large degree with broad Haredi limits on the flow of "undesirable" information (Cohen, Adini, Spitz, 2021; Adini, Cohen, Spitz, 2022). It suggests that these were not fully satisfied with the coverage of the many aspects of COVID-19 by the Haredi media. Of Haredim surveyed, 33% surfed secular news, 30% had already used the secular websites but increased their usage, and only 3% were new Haredi surfers to the secular websites.

Even though it is true that some Haredim are voluntarily cloistered from the rest of the world – and therefore pose a communication challenge for the Israeli authorities in a crisis like COVID-19 – any attempt to depict the majority of Haredim as living in a vacuum and thus unable to obtain information about

breaking news like a pandemic greatly underestimates their high levels of con-
nectivity. As a closed knit community, neighbors, friends, and family were also
sources for updating about the pandemic (39%). Yet, for Haredim linked to
digital media, neighbors and community were less significant and lost some of
their previous value. It is argued that the longer the effect of the pandemic on
social mobility lingers, the less likely Haredim will return to pre-COVID surfing
habits, and thus the temporary expediency will become permanent.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review and the source material, the following research
questions are proposed.

RQ1: What was the quality of risk information in the Haredi media in Is-
rael?

RQ2: How is risk framed in the cultural/religious context of religious me-
dia?

RQ3: What were the main sources for health-risk guidelines in the Haredi
media?

Methodology

Sample

A content analysis was conducted of news reports and articles published
over a two-month period in one of the four Haredi dailies, *HaMevaser* ("The
Herald"), and one of a dozen existing Haredi news websites, *Be'Hadrei Haredim.*
HaMevaser is a publication of the *Shlomei Emunim* movement, a collection of
about 50 Hassidic factions that make up one of the two Haredi parties in the
Israeli Parliament. In 2018, it was the second-largest Haredi newspaper with a
13.8% exposure rate. The coverage in *HaMevaser* of the initial wave of COVID-
19 beginning in early 2020 serves as a case study for risk reporting in printed
religious media under the oversight of religious authorities.

In addition to *HaMevaser*, the content analysis includes *Be'Hadrei Haredim*
(a play on the phrase "*Be'Hadrei Hadarim*", meaning the inner sanctums), a
news website established towards the end of the 1990s, which, by definition, is
not formally supervised by a rabbinical body. According to SimilarWeb traffic
data (2020), *Be'Hadrei Haredim* enjoyed the highest level of engagement dur-
ing the defined study period among all Haredi websites.

Taken together, the two sources reflect two contrasting cases of the state of,
and developments within, the Haredi media described above.

Coding Procedure

The coding was conducted by a native Hebrew speaker with an Orthodox Jewish background. The criteria for selection were to include articles and reports with COVID-19 as a main topic that were longer than one hundred words. Opinion columns and sponsored articles in *HaMevaser* were also included because these were barely distinguishable from the regular news in form and content, and in many cases included much risk-related information that could influence risk perception. Sampling was limited to the "preparedness/planning" phase of the so-called disaster risk reduction cycle. Preparedness includes a range of "activities, programs, and systems that exist before an emergency that are used to support and enhance response to an emergency or disaster", including providing the public with information and guidelines (Bullock et al., 2017). Accordingly, it was heuristically identified as the two-month period from the first public mention of the virus by the Ministry of Health on January 23, which was reported in both coded sources, to the first death of COVID-19 on March 20.

All articles and reports in *HaMevaser* that fulfilled these criteria were included (*N*=242). In the case of the website *Be'Hadrei Haredim*, given constraints to code over 700 COVID-19 related articles published during the designated time frame, a "constructed week" sampling was used instead. It yielded a sample of N=89 papers, for a total of N=331 articles and reports. In this method, a fictional seven-day week is generated when stratified days of the week are chosen for coding at random from the two-month period (in total, eight possibilities for each day). This approach has been shown to be superior to simple random sampling or consecutive day sampling because it accounts for the variance that characterizes the daily news cycle (Hester & Dougall, 2007). A random sample of 10% of each of the two sources was coded again by a second coder to test for reliability using Cohen's Kappa, which produced an "almost perfect agreement" score of 85.4% or higher for all variables (McHugh, 2012).

Coding Variables

Variables for "quality of risk information" were coded based on Dudo et al.'s (2007) framework. Frame titles were used for consistency based on Dan & Raupp's (2018) review and operationalized using dummy variables (0,1) by screening for their latent framing devices, as follows.

The *health severity* frame is divided into risk magnitude and risk comparisons. The former can be viewed as a spectrum of the ability to influence risk perception. Whereas generic qualitative information (e.g., "contagious virus") and non-contextualized quantitative information (e.g., "four people got infected") to describe the risk make it harder to contextualize it, quantitative

information with precise denominators (e.g., "four people out of a hundred diagnosed got infected") produces higher risk perception. Comparisons to similar known risks can help the reader define the new threat in familiar terms that puts it in perspective and contributes to improve risk communication by authorities (Dahlstrom et al., 2012).

The *action* frame provides individuals or small groups with information on actions that they can take to mitigate the health risk, such as health authority guidelines and knowledge of symptoms. It is noteworthy that other studies also look into government and public activities (Krishnatray & Rahul, 2013).

Framing the risk in *alarming* language may lead to a higher sense of fear, which, in turn, increases perceptions of severity and vulnerability (Chang, 2011). It includes "emotionally loaded" words, expressions, and intonations, such as "panic" or "people are dropping like flies". It may also contain inflated and unfounded claims and compare risks to worst-case scenarios (for instance, "The Black Death"). If the risk is truly imminent and harmful, but people remain too complacent, then an alarmist framework may be a useful tool to elicit a response. Nonetheless, it must be paired with accurate health-severity information in order to influence behavior (Dahlstrom et al., 2012).

In accordance with Iyengar's (1991) conceptualization of framing, *episodic* frames focus on the particular and specific, while *thematic* frames enable the individual to "see the big picture" of an issue. An article is coded as "episodic" when a majority of paragraphs focus on the individual, a single event, the private realm, or individual responsibilities for problems, and "thematic" when the focus is on the issue, trends over time, the public realm, broader social and institutional responsibilities for problems, etc. In health-risk reporting, thematic stories can better inform people about the relationship between risk and wider social and structural factors than episodic stories (Nitz & West, 2004). Stories that predominantly feature the *medical* frame take into account the risk from a biological standpoint, examine its impact on the body, and provide scientific remedies (Dan & Raupp, 2018).

A distinction was made between the "secular" schemata that influence the quality of coverage as conceptualized by Dudo et al. (2007) and cultural/religious schemata. For the latter, general and issue-specific frame packages were inductively reconstructed on the basis of frame devices that could resonate with the Haredi reader and correspond to a particular frame. Table 1 demonstrates the "translation" of the secular schemata to a cultural/religious schema by looking in the text for recurring cultural/religious motifs and in order to construct a package of framing devices that inductively resonates with a latent frame.

Finally, where there is distrust of authority, religious leaders can play a key role in community response and post-disaster recovery (Joakim & White,

TABLE 1   "Translating" a secular frame to a cultural/religious frame.

	Attribution of Responsibility Frame			
Schema Type	Framing Device	*HaMevaser*	*Be'Hadrei Haredim*	Total
Cultural/ Religious	The virus arrived at the behest of God to encourage the people of Israel to reflect on their deeds and repent for their sins.	9 (60%)	4 (26.6%)	13 (86.6%)
	The virus was a punishment for the hubris of mankind, as the achievements of modern technology and science were rendered useless against it.	2 (13.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (13.3%)
Secular	China failed at early detection.	2 (22.2%)	0	2 (22.2%)
	People who did not listen to health authorities' guidelines are responsible.	6 (66.6%)	0	6 (66.6%)
	American complacency is to blame.	1 (11.1%)	0	1 (11.1%)

2015); the degree to which the religious leaders in the Haredi media supported or opposed the guidelines of the authorities was examined.

Findings

RQ1: What was the quality of risk information in the Haredi media?

Health Severity

Consistent with previous content analyses of risk (Dudo et al., 2007), the results indicate that the risk information comprising reporting in the Haredi media during the preparedness phase was of varying quality and left room for

improvement. The virus was generally described in generic and alarming qualitative terms, as 28.7% of the 331 news articles analyzed in *HaMevaser* and *Be'Hadrei Haredim* comprised qualitative information about the COVID-19 pandemic, while 20.1% comprised quantitative information, and 6.9% comprised both. Use of quantitative information with contextual denominators, meanwhile, was limited, with only 12.4% of news stories providing precise figures with contextual denominators, and a total of 5.4% comprised comparison of risk-related information.

Action

On the one hand, the action frame showed mixed results, with minimal self-efficacy information on symptoms. Details on known symptoms for COVID-19, such as fever, cough, and fatigue, appeared three or more times in only 4.8% of the articles, with 8.5% describing two symptoms or less. On the other hand, the proportion of information on self-protection measures – albeit relatively slim – was three times higher than in previous studies. This increase may be explained by the virulence and high rate of transmission of the coronavirus when compared to other pathogens, such as Ebola and the avian flu, which therefore made it more newsworthy. Thus, 13.6% of the stories provided three or more guidelines for protection, 23.3% detailed one or two guidelines, while 7.6% recommended following the official guidelines without offering any specific instructions. In a few notable cases in early March, prominent Haredi leaders instructed followers to defy the government's laws on social distancing and to cautiously continue with their religious activities because "the *Torah* shelters and saves" (*Talmud*, *Sota* 21a) and the premise of *bitul Torah*, i.e., interruption of the study of the Torah, "is more dangerous than the corona[virus]" (Cherki, 2020). Against this background, 4.1% of the articles in *HaMevaser* and 14.6% in *Be'Hadrei Haredim* published without disclaimers instructions by rabbis that challenged official guidelines or favorably portrayed rabbinical figures violating them.

Alarmism

The alarmism frame was present in more than half (57.4%) of the articles, of which 22.4% used at least three sensational words or expressions and 35% used two or less. In 23.9% of cases, the emotionally charged words were positioned in the headline or the subtitle, often opening with the header "the Corona Panic". In 26% of cases, alarmist words appeared in the first three sentences, and in 39% in the remainder of the article. Six stories (2.5%) in *HaMevaser* and two (2.2%) in *Be'Hadrei* saw comparisons of the pandemic to worst-case scenarios, such as the 1918 influenza.

Drawing upon religious scriptures and oral traditions, the rhetoric of Haredi news sources reflects the unique patois used colloquially by the Ultra-Orthodox. It abounds with emotionally charged interjections ("God forbid"), phrases ("terror will strike their homes") (*Deuteronomy* 32:25), and lore (the Ten Plagues), which offer Haredi journalists a sensationalist lexicon that is seldom used – and with an air of irony – by their secular colleagues. This may reflect the high salience of the alarmist frame and the comparison of the virus to scenarios of literal Biblical proportions. This hypothesis should be further tested by contrasting the reporting of risks between religious and secular news outlets.

Thematic, Episodic, and Medical

Unlike previous studies, the reports and articles analyzed were predominantly thematically framed (53.8%), whereas roughly one-third (33.2%) were episodically framed; 12.4% equally combined the two. The medical frame, however, was seldom used (0.8%), in contrast to its dominance across health risks and countries (Dan & Raupp, 2018). While the low frequency may have been due to the skepticism among Haredim for disinclination towards science and technology – being a challenge for faith – the more plausible reason is that *HaMevaser* and *Be'Hadrei Haredim* do not have specialized medical correspondents. This highlights the possible benefits to the quality of Haredi risk coverage that could be accomplished through greater collaboration with science and communication experts and the employment of specialist correspondents (Roche & Muskavitch, 2003).

RQ2: How is risk framed in the cultural/religious context of religious media?

In the next phase of the analysis, frames were generated by searching for words and phrases that could activate Jewish cultural/religious schemata and, as such, act as a framing device. By distinguishing between "secular" and "cultural/religious" framing devices by virtue of the schemata they trigger, the study found that common frames in risk reporting have many cultural/religious counterparts. This is not surprising. Observant Jews lead their lives according to *Halakha* (Jewish religious law), which seeks to reconcile religious traditions, laws, and practices with everyday life. This is even truer for the stringent Haredim, for whom *Halakha* is a central criterion for day-by-day decisions. Each result was logged separately according to source, date, and article. Upon completion, keywords and phrases were summed up and inserted into

a table with their conceptual counterparts to create frame packages that were found to be compatible with the following frames:

Action

Calls for cultural/religious self-efficacy actions were infrequent, appearing in 14.2% of the sampled articles and reports, compared with 36.9% for "secular" action frames. 4.23%, comprising at least three separate actions to be carried out by the individual, and 9.97% mentioned two or less. The most common guideline asked the reader to pray (29%). In the second largest category (26%), the reader was asked to recite a particular prayer or a verse, some of which are from the daily prayers recited by observant Jews for protection and for blessing: Psalms (N=13), the "*Shema*" (a Biblical text recited daily acknowledging belief in God) (N=1), the "*Avinu Malkeinu*" prayer of repentance (N=1), and Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith (N=1). Other mentioned prayers are recited as specific protection (*Segula*) against contagions; for example, incense offering prayer in the ancient Jewish Temple (*Pitum HaKetoret*) (N=6) and recitation of one hundred blessings a day (N=3), which recalls the attempts of King David to thwart the pestilence that, according to Jewish tradition, claimed the lives of a hundred of his men every day.

Studying Jewish scriptures and calls for repentance accounted for 11.22% and 16.32% respectively. Encouraged actions, such as giving charity to the poor (*Tzedaka*) (N=6) and being actively happy (N=6), are categorized together as "do good deeds" (12.24%). Conversely, discouraged actions, such as the prohibition on social gossip (*Lashon HaRa*) and refraining from arrogance, were categorized as "refraining from bad deeds" (3.06%). Other religious guidelines included actions that can be generally categorized as rituals (3.06%), such as fasting or asking a blessing from a rabbi.
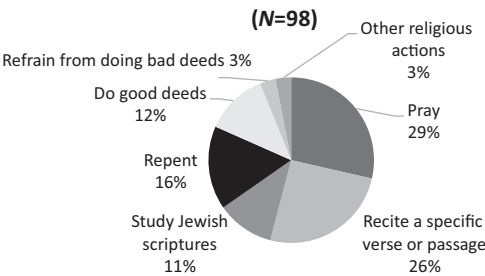

FIGURE 1   Cultural/religious self-efficacy actions against COVID-19.

Due to a dearth of research, evidence of the role that religion and spirituality may play in disease and crisis is inconclusive. Yet, it has been suggested that, among other things, engaging in faith activities could act as a coping mechanism, increase community resilience, and aid individuals in adjusting mentally and emotionally (Joakim & White, 2015). As a result, cultural/religious action frames in the analyzed text, with their different types of prayer, repentance, learning, benevolence, and ritual, may be looked at as forms of religious coping. They have the ability to invigorate believers with a sense of control over the risk and shape their perception (Coleman-Brueckheimer et al., 2008).

Gain/Loss

In eighteen cases (5.43%), the risk was framed either in relation to the spiritual gains (N=13) conferred on those who adhere to the guidelines of the health authorities or as a sinful loss (N=5) to those who violate them, for example, the noncompliance of which was described as an act of *chillul Hashem* (a desecration of God's name). Framing risk in terms of spiritual gains and losses may lead to greater adherence to health guidelines, as intrinsic religious motivation may be stronger than any extrinsic mandatory government legislation (Gorsuch, 1994). This suggests that had these frames been used more, it might have contributed to greater compliance with the COVID guidelines, and warrants further study.

Alarmism, Reassurance, and Uncertainty

The reassurance frame is often seen as a mirror image of alarmism, because it appears to underplay the risk and make unsubstantiated statements to convince the reader that there is little reason for concern. In between the alarmism frame and the reassurance frame lies the uncertainty frame, which presents the risk as a volatile unknown that could evolve in either direction (Dan & Raupp, 2018). The three frames and their corresponding framing devices that are shown in Table 2, serving as a moral evaluation of the risk. Results show high salience of close to two-thirds (63.16%) for the alarmism frame, one-third (33.33%) for reassurance, and a small remainder for uncertainty (3.51%).

Comparisons to cultural/religious worst case scenarios are listed here, and not under health severity, since they contain references to the supernatural and cannot provide a realistic baseline for comparison. Examples include the Biblical Ten Plagues, the attempted genocide of the Jews by Haman in the Book of Esther, and comparison of the coronavirus to the mosquito that, according to a Jewish fable, flew up Roman Emperor Titus' nostril and picked at his brain for seven years.

TABLE 2   Descriptive statistics of cultural/religious alarmism, reassurance, and uncertainty frame.

Frame	Framing device	*HaMevaser* (N=43)	*Be'Hadrei Haredim* (N=14)	Total (N=57)	Percentage of total
Alarmism	The virus is a sign for the end of times/ the Coming of the Messiah/ Gog and Magog War.	4 (9.3%)	2 (14.29%)	6 (10.53%)	63.16%
	The virus evinces the incapacity/ insignificance of man.	8 (18.6%)	1 (7.14%)	9 (15.79%)	
	Nothing to do but pray/only a miracle will save us.	5 (11.63%)	2 (14.29%)	7 (12.28%)	
	Comparisons to cultural/ religious worst case scenarios.	11(25.58%)	3 (21.43%)	14(24.56%)	
Reassurance	No harm will befall us/the Torah shelters and saves/trust God.	13 (30.23%)	5 (35.71%)	18 (31.58%)	33.33%
	No Jew will fall ill and those who have will surely recover.	0 (0%)	1 (7.14%)	1 (1.75%)	
Uncertainty	God works in mysterious ways.	2 (4.65%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.51%)	3.51%

Attribution of Responsibility

In a world characterized by an omnipotent and all-knowing God, tragedies raise questions of theodicy as Haredi believers seek to reconcile His benevolence with misery and destruction (Chester, 2009). In order to resolve this cognitive dissonance, news reports have applied the *attribution of the responsibility* frame through narratives of earthly crimes and divine retribution. The frame appeared in fifteen articles (4.53%) with two distinct framing devices. In thirteen cases, the virus arrived at the behest of God to encourage the people of Israel to reflect on their deeds and repent for their sins. In two other cases, it was a punishment for the hubris of mankind over modern science and technology, which now stand powerless against the invisible threat. It could prove problematic, because health risks become portrayed in terms of individuals equating danger with fatalistic perceptions (Joakim & White, 2015) and serve as a barrier to reasonable behavior.

RQ3: What were the main sources for health-risk guidelines in the Haredi media?

A person's perception and reaction to a risk may be dependent upon the source of information (Hove et al., 2015). Surprisingly, despite their predominance in daily decision-making, religious leaders were found to be quoted less frequently than health authorities and experts with regard to COVID-19 guidelines, at 22.2% and 26.3% respectively. Other major sources included government officials with 15.2%. This supports the notion that believers seek a professional opinion during a time of crisis. Nevertheless, governments may use religious leaders to facilitate risk communication (Cohen & Spitz, 2022). This is reinforced in earlier research that has shown that information about health risks mediated by religious leaders and framed via religious messages can positively change the behavior of their adherents (Coleman-Brueckheimer et al., 2008).

Conclusions

This study was a first step to assess the quality of risk in religious media and to examine how the risk of a pandemic is mediated via cultural/religious prisms by making a distinction between "secular" and "cultural/religious" schemata. This dichotomy may be regarded as overly simplistic, but it allows for building on previous risk communication and framing theory studies while still taking into account the diverse manifestations of religious culture in risk reporting.

The findings based on the secular schemata empirically corroborate public criticism – including from within the Haredi community itself – over the quality of risk communication during the initial phases of COVID-19. They emphasize how the Haredi media could benefit from greater collaboration with science and communication experts and the recruitment of informed medical reporters.

The framing analysis, based on the cultural/religious schemata, is a foundation for comparative analysis of how different risks are communicated through distinct social and cultural/religious constructs. Future research could, therefore, benefit from examining how different risks are mediated across distinct cultural and religious communities and thereby advance a framework for "religious quality of coverage" of health risks.

To sum up, this study has attempted to "bring culture back" into the established subfield of framing of health risks by distinguishing between "secular" and cultural/religious framing devices. It was found that common frames in risk reporting have many cultural/religious counterparts. The ubiquity of religious framing devices for COVID-19 found here not only stands as a unique cultural manifestation of social construct but also may be beneficial or harmful to the understanding of risks and decision-making of believers. They could contribute to the quality of risk information through their ability to reinvigorate believers with a sense of control. Conversely, they might prove harmful by propagating alarm or excessive reassurance and through promoting messages of determinism and divine intervention that distort individual sense of control. Most notably, in cases where the communal way of life and health standards may be in conflict, religious media might have a profoundly negative impact if they choose to endorse the former.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare there is no conflict of interests.

Funding

Biographical Data

Yoel Cohen is Professor (emeritus), School of Communication at Ariel University in Israel. His book publications include God, Jews and the Media: Religion and Israel's Media (Routledge 2012); Spiritual News: Reporting Religion Around the World (editor) (Peter Lang Publishers 2018), and The Handbook of Religion & Communication (editor, with Paul Soukup) (John Wiley, 2023). His research interests include Judaism and Mass Media and Religion News. He is a convenor of the Religion & Communication working group of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).

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