



Article

Israel in the Italian Media Before 7 October

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Abstract: Images broadcast on television, radio analyses, and long articles printed in newspapers and, today, the content of digital platforms have become an overwhelming part of our daily lives. The history of the State of Israel, which has been debated since its foundation, is very complex and not exempt from the reverberations that the policies of the opposing blocs have had over time on the conflicts that followed. Given the attention of the European public to international events concerning Israel and the role of the media in conveying information about them, the aim of this research was to investigate how Israel is talked about in the current media environment in Italy, particularly the digital one, within the Facebook platform between the years 2019 and 2021. This is the period before the outbreak of the war on 7 October 2023; this is to try to understand whether Israel has always been narrated according to specific media frames in Italy, such as those we see emerging with the current conflict against Hamas, or is it possible to highlight different aspects in previous years within the same context of crisis, but a global health crisis: before and after COVID-19.

Keywords: Italy; media; Israel; framing; journalism; crisis



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1. Introduction

Since its inception, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has undoubtedly been one of the most discussed topics in the Western media. It started on 14 May 1948 when, following Israel’s declaration of independence, a war broke out between the Arab states, which intervened in favour of the Palestinian Arab community, and the newly created State of Israel, which managed to take control of its territories and repel the Arab armies.

In Italy, according to Limes (2001), anti-Israeli stereotypes have characterised the coverage of the Intifada by some of the major Western media, including the Italian media, for about twenty years. They have led the Palestinians to believe that they can force Israel to make impossible concessions.

The Italian media’s coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has allegedly succeeded in spreading a prejudice against Israel in world public opinion. The Jewish state is almost always portrayed as the aggressor, rather than the Palestinian victim; events are taken out of context in order to conceal the threat to Israel’s security. Since 2001, news giants such as CNN and the BBC have chosen to interpret information from the Middle East in favour of the Palestinians, as have dozens of other news outlets around the world.

According to Giannotti (2008), in Italy, the press and television covered the Palestinian–Israeli conflict for more than seven years, from the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000 to early 2008, comparing headlines, articles, commentaries and photographs. Media coverage of the subject is as in-depth and meticulous as anywhere else in the world. The Middle East has come under a kind of magnifying glass. Every single episode is sifted through, dissected and analysed.

According to the author, the analysis reveals information that is not very objective, with serious omissions, prejudices, lies and one-sided attitudes according to a stereotype that has now been trivialised: Israel = aggressor, Palestinians = victims. Giannotti detects a subtle war of words against Israel, a meticulous attention to vocabulary that, in most of the articles examined, uses delicacy towards the Palestinians and severity towards the Israelis.

The author examines some key episodes in the Israeli–Palestinian question, such as the case of the Palestinian boy caught in the crossfire, whose death, seven years later, is still very much in doubt; the lynching of Israeli soldiers in Ramallah, with the resounding letter of apology sent to the Palestinian Authority by RAI correspondent Riccardo Cristiano; the terrorist siege of the Basilica of the Nativity; the fake massacre in Jenin; and the war with Lebanon. The author denounces the inappropriate use of images, some of which have been falsified, reveals the censorship of certain news by some newspapers, and finally shows how the Israeli–Palestinian issue has become the subject of political clashes in Italy, with preconceived positions according to party lines, with no respect for the objectivity of information.

However, since 7 October 2023, when Hamas terrorists attacked around 1200 Israelis, killing over 300 participants in the Supernova Festival in southern Israel, five kilometres from the Gaza Strip, and attacking civilians in nearby kibbutzim with unprecedented violence, the internal socio-political situation has seen a sudden violent escalation (Bordas 2024).

2. Israel in the Current Italian Media Landscape

In this context, a study by Scomodo (2024), a community of independent activists/researchers, sought to understand the existence and extent of pro-Israeli bias in three Italian newspapers: *La Repubblica*, *Libero* and *Corriere della Sera*.

Six months after the start of the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip, it was time to take stock of the media coverage of events in the Strip.

For the Scomodo researchers, this necessity arose from the gap that has been created between public opinion and the media system, which has become more acute as the number of Israeli war crimes during the attacks inside the Strip increased. In fact, there is a general feeling that the widespread solidarity and sensitivity of public opinion towards the tragedy of the Palestinian people does not find a place in an international media system that has decided to uncritically embrace the Israeli cause, constantly highlighting the responsibility of Hamas and remaining silent on the massacre of civilians by the IDF, the Israeli army.

This factor has a profound effect on the already frayed relationship between the press and public opinion, with the latter becoming increasingly distrustful of newspapers in the face of what appears to be a clear pro-Israeli stance. This issue is part of the general climate of mistrust towards the world of information that the Parallasse column has been analysing for years and hence, the decision of the editors to deal with this issue, in addition to the centrality of the events in Gaza in the current international scenario.

Work similar to what we propose in this episode of our column was carried out by the investigative journalism website *The Intercept*, which has always been attentive to developments in the international media system. In an article published on 9 January, the journalists Adam Johnson and Othman Ali published the results of their quantitative study of the coverage given by the main US newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*) to the Israeli performance in the first six weeks of the Gaza offensive. According to the authors, who analysed more than a thousand articles dealing with the issue, there was a clear bias in favour of Israel. They found a collapse in the use of the term “Palestinians” as the number of civilian victims increased; the use of terms such as “massacre” to refer only to the Israeli side; the reluctance to mention the massacre of minors in Gaza; and the focus only on cases of anti-Semitism on American soil, while remaining silent on episodes of Islamophobia during the same period. All these elements would prove the existence of a clear choice of field on the part of the most authoritative American newspapers: a choice that rewards the Israeli cause to the detriment of a methodical coverage of the drama of the civilian population of Gaza.

The Number of articles containing the keywords in the title, grouped by journal, was recorded. For ‘Palestine’ and ‘Israel’, derived terms were also included.

Following this work, Scomodo decided to promote research focusing on the Italian media system in order to understand the existence and spread of a similar pro-Israeli bias in some national newspapers.

Three newspapers were considered: *La Repubblica*, *Libero* and *Corriere della Sera*. The choice stemmed both from the desire to cover a rather heterogeneous range of editorial lines and from practical considerations regarding the accessibility of the data during the collection phase. We identified some keywords and collected all the articles published between 7 October 2023 and 25 February 2024 that contained at least one of these terms in the body of the text. There were about 18,000 articles in total. The key terms selected were as follows: 'Israel', 'Palestine', 'anti-Semitism', 'Islamophobia' and all their derivatives.

Almost 17,800 articles were collected. In all the newspapers studied, the number of articles per day on the subject was very high in the first few days after 7 October. It then fell, reaching its lowest levels between Christmas and early January.

The number of articles published daily containing the words 'Palestine', 'Israel' and their derivatives in the body of the text, grouped by newspaper, was recorded. The data were presented as a three-day moving average.

One possible interpretation of this trend lies in the normal dynamics of information: initially, a story or news item is so important that each small update deserves its own article. As the weeks go by, that story is no longer newsworthy and should be given less space. Even *The Intercept*, which focused on the period between 7 October and 25 November 2023, found similar data for American newspapers. This shows that even the Israel– Hamas conflict is no exception. It is a somewhat paradoxical effect, given that Palestinian civilian casualties increase as the Israeli offensive progresses, but for newspapers, this is now history.

Later, researchers focused on the way the titles of these articles were structured. The aim was to understand which topics appeared most often in the headlines: Palestine and the Palestinian people, Israel and the Israeli people, or Hamas. More than 54% of the articles published by *Libero* included the word 'Israel' and its derivatives in the title, while about 30% mentioned 'Hamas'. *Repubblica* and *Il Corriere* presented similar data, although in comparison with the *Sechi*-led newspaper, both mentioned 'Palestine' and its derivatives slightly more often in their titles, at the expense of 'Israel' and its derivatives.

However, there are important points to note: not only is Israel the protagonist of the narrative in all three newspapers, but the use of the term 'Palestine' and its derivatives was lower in all of them than the use of 'Hamas', which was the preferred counterpart. It should be noted, however, that this analysis only looked at headlines and not at the body of the articles.

The study showed a very similar trend to what we saw in 2015 following the Islamist attacks linked to the Islamic State. In particular, in the first months of the conflict, Hamas was often associated with the Islamic State, despite the profound difference between the two, precisely in order to fuel this idea of terrorism.

Throughout the period, all three newspapers published several hundred articles containing the word 'anti-Semitism', while the maximum for 'Islamophobia' was just over thirty articles.

The final aspect of our survey concerned the attention given to forms of hatred and discrimination such as Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. A comparison of the number of articles with titles containing the word 'Islamophobia' and its derivatives with those containing the word 'anti-Semitism' and its derivatives revealed a very large discrepancy. Throughout the period, all three newspapers published several hundred articles containing the word 'anti-Semitism', while for 'Islamophobia', the maximum was just over thirty articles. The most striking difference concerned *La Repubblica*: there were 852 articles with the word 'anti-Semitism' in the text while there were only 34 with 'Islamophobia'. This is a ratio of twenty-five to one.

The number of articles published each day containing the words 'anti-Semitism', 'Islamophobia' and their derivatives in the body of the text, grouped by newspaper, was recorded. The data were reported as an average every three days.

There are many points of contact between the narrative in the Italian context and what is happening across the Western bloc, even if some newspapers have never been as openly

pro-Israeli as they are now. A glaring example is that of *La Repubblica*, probably not so much because of the publisher but because of the editor himself. According to an analysis by *The Intercept*, the pro-Israeli bias appears to stem from a decision not to use words such as 'extermination', 'massacre' or 'carnage' when referring to the Palestinian people, while in Italy, it is not limited to this, leading to the publication of openly Islamophobic headlines.

According to Laila Sit Aboha, an Italo-Palestinian activist we interviewed, from this point of view we are stuck in the language of the post-9/11 era, when the war on terror [an international military campaign led by the United States following the attacks of 11 September 2001] changed the perception of Arab and Muslim people. This has also led to a huge difference between the representation of the Ukrainian context and what is happening in Palestine: the Italian press recognises the legitimacy of the Ukrainian resistance, while when it comes to the Palestinian population, no one mentions the legitimacy of resisting a military occupation, despite 75 years of colonialism behind it.

There is a very strong anti-Islamic sentiment and anti-Palestinian racism that leads to my community, simply because it is also a Muslim people, being automatically lumped into the container of 'terrorists' and the need for the West to be liberated from Islam.

The idea of Western supremacy as the home of rights, which identifies other cultures as violent and backward, is certainly one of the causes of a non-neutral and deviant narrative of what is happening.

On the other hand, the problem also lies in the fact that the Italian press is not really free. It stays on this line to avoid internal problems, given that Italy is a state that exports arms to Israel and given the links between the European right and the Likud. Another aspect that certainly has an impact is the very low presence of racist people in the editorial offices, as well as the silencing of Palestinian voices in this historical period. Finally, there is often a lack of contextualisation: there is an information capitalism that makes people rush through everything and prevents them from going deeper. What little in-depth study is done is often left to people who are not specialised in the subject. This leads to the narration of a scenario that does not exist, far from reality. In this way, the credibility of an entire sector is at stake ([Ravenna and Brambilla 2011](#)).

3. Methodology

Following the recent reconstruction of a brief theoretical framework on the national coverage of Israel, the object of this first report was an exploratory quantitative analysis of the news on the State of Israel reported in the main Italian media before the outbreak of the latest conflict on 7 October 2023.

The data were identified through a keyword search using the *CrowdTangle* platform, a tool owned by Facebook that can be used to monitor the public content of pages and groups and export basic metrics on interactions and information on the type of posts and the text of messages or links.

The period covered runs from 2019 to 2021 (in the month April and May), and therefore includes the 'pre-COVID' and 'post-COVID' periods. Specifically, 413 articles in the post-pandemic period published by three major Italian newspapers, *Corriere della Sera*, *Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, with 'Israel' as a specific topic (and keyword for a more targeted internal channel survey) were analysed.

Approximately one hundred articles were selected as suitable for analysis based on the research objectives and the questions posed to address the topic of the paper. Each news item was digitised and indexed by date, headline, topic, subject and interviewee.

The indexing and digitisation activities made it possible to reconstruct the attention given by the different newspapers to the issue of racial hatred and anti-Semitism in Italy.

To this end, content was considered relevant if the historical, political and cultural will of the selected media in dealing with these issues was evident in the media landscape studied, also in relation to the reference period of the year and the events that took place. Instead, content that was categorised as 'empty' or related to news events and political debates in which the issues of anti-Semitism and hatred were indirectly involved were not

at the centre of the narrative or were closely related to the fact described in the Facebook spaces of the selected newspapers and was excluded. The term 'will' is used here to refer to the media's ability and willingness to consider all aspects of the Israel issue as a complex reality to be narrated. In fact, as the sociologist Harold Innis (1951) notes, the "tendency of the media" is to orient every dimension of reality in time and space, to support it with technical and cultural prejudices, and thus to lead the public not only to talk about this specific topic, but to talk in a specific direction. Precisely for this reason, not all articles that referred to Israel but were not at the centre of the narrative, but were merely a "quotation" within the speech, were taken into account. What will therefore be taken into consideration is the news "about Israel" and the media construction of this theme by Italian journalism.

Given the vast repertoire of media and information, in order to achieve a clearer and more ordered reading of the information, the analysis took as references, on the one hand, the temporal context (the periods analysed) and, on the other hand, the national political-cultural context (episodes of violence, political elections, crisis situations, etc.), identifying a possible link between facts, news and actors, thus studying the contents and the media environment in chronological order within a well-defined social framework.

The research involved the identification and study of three specific topics with Israel as the main narrative object, referring to selected Italian online media news groups that provided national coverage of Israel within a circumscribed time period on the following topics: "international politics"; "Israeli–Palestinian conflict"; "COVID and conspiracy/antisemitism".

To be more precise, the articles in digital format of three Italian newspapers (*Corriere della Sera*, *Repubblica*, and *La Stampa*) were taken as the journalistic spaces for the analysis. These three newspapers are the main historical newspapers which, despite the sharp drop in trust and general sales of information, still represent the most widely read and sold information products in Italy and thus the most representative at the national level (even if still limited) of a large part of the public opinion on the research topic presented, at least from the socio-political and cultural points of view. This was reinforced during the pandemic period, when media coverage on the topic of Israel was very high and focused on the Italian audience.

Prior to the analysis of the Facebook pages of the newspapers, a preliminary background analysis was carried out on the issue in order to gain some understanding of the sentiment and the general level of the presence of the topic of Israel (in the 2019–2021 time period) by accessing the database of the Pavia Observatory, an important independent Italian research centre. This kind of selection and analysis work had already been partly started by collaborating with the observatory on a recently concluded European research project called *Hideandola* (hidden antisemitism and communication skills for criminal lawyers and journalists), the aim of which was to determine and understand the communication skills of Italian journalists on the topics of antisemitism and anti-Zionism.

So, the research background from which we started was already well established. In this study, we went deeper by updating and critically interpreting the collected data in the light of what is happening now in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict after 7 October 2023.

First of all, there were two main research questions: How did Italian news outlets report on Israel before 7 October 2023? Did the narrative of the State of Israel change over time, especially with the beginning of COVID-19, in the online space of Italian media and how? What are the main frames that have emerged over time, from 2019 until today?

The methodological and analytical path adopted is particularly promising for reconstructing the main journalistic arguments that emerged on specific topics, taking into account the spatio-temporal dimensions, agendas and forms of public narrative that recur in the mediated public sphere (Tipaldo 2014).

The data presented here do not take into account the current situation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and its impact in Italy and Europe following the attack of 7 October 2023. In fact, the *Hideandola* project, and therefore part of this study, began in January 2022 and ended in July of the following year. Consequently, the Italian media attention and

coverage of the State of Israel must be read in a national socio-cultural and political context (2019–2021) that is very different from the one after 7 October 2023.

4. Results

4.1. International Politics Outside and Inside the Conflict in 2019

From March 2019 to the end of April, the reference months for this research, the narrative from Facebook of the selected newspapers focused on three themes that were often interconnected. A historical–cultural link was thus produced by the “facts” or by a thematising action on the part of the journalists, as in the case of the election–conflict or migration–terrorism link.

Specifically, *Corriere della Sera* (62%) and *La Stampa* (67%) showed very similar percentages in 2019. The dominant news items were those related to national and international politics, such as elections, verbal clashes between state presidents and migration issues. In both media, more than 32% of the news content concerned Israeli President Netanyahu (Figures 1 and 2).

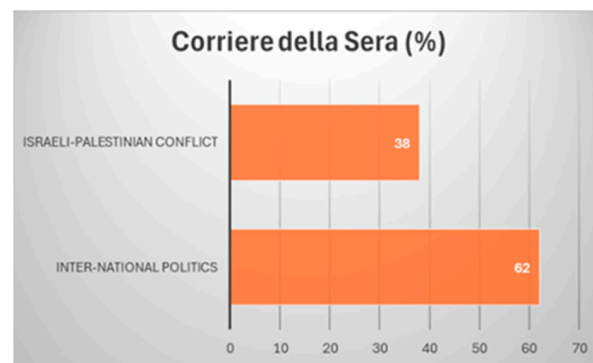


Figure 1. Articles published in 2019.¹

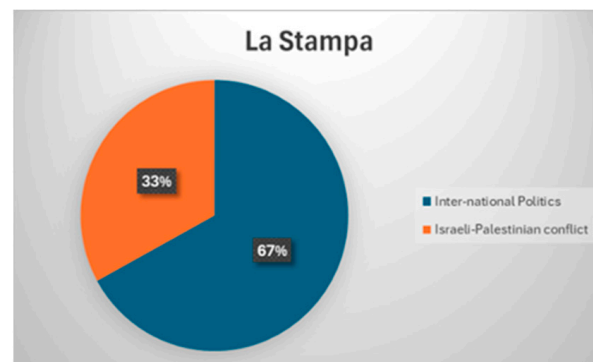


Figure 2. Articles published in 2019.

In contrast, the articles shared via Facebook on the pages of *Repubblica* showed a much more rigid journalistic agenda, mostly focused on the political–military dynamics of the Palestinian conflict. They ranged from war stories to more specific articles on victims, from political statements to military threats of attack/defence by the actors on the ground. Some of the main headlines were “Israel, rocket exploded from Gaza” and “Gaza, 430 rockets fired. US: Israel has right to defend itself”.

The frames and newsworthy fragments bore a strong resemblance to what was reported in the above literature on the Italian coverage of the conflict after 7 October 2023, and moved within a process of thematisation and newsworthiness that could be defined as circular, both in April and in March, as often happens with news during the coverage of a crisis (Buoncompagni 2024).

Beyond the type of journalistic field and the nature of the news, the digital context in which all this takes place should not be forgotten.

The social environment of Facebook, which is increasingly being blamed for creating echo chambers and cultural bubbles where the public only seeks information that corresponds to their own point of view, soon turns out to be nothing more than an illusion, created by the strength of the media, the pluralism of information very soon turns out to be only an illusion generated by the power of chatbots and algorithms, in this specific case as an environment capable of offering, on a complex issue such as anti-Semitism, voices, ideas and differentiated points of view offered by intellectuals, journalists and ordinary citizens. Probably also thanks to the thoughtful editorial choices (Figure 3).

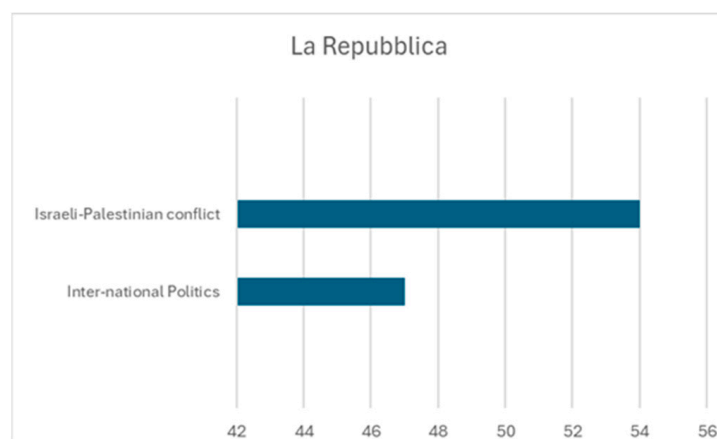


Figure 3. Articles published in 2019.

Another interesting element that was captured in the digital information was that the image format of photographs, with or without text, is gaining greater ‘autonomy’. The photo is often shared without the link to the posted article, thus becoming a ‘media text’ itself.

As will be discussed in more detail shortly, the two years 2018 and 2019 marked the beginning of a period of uncertainty and chaos in our country, characterised by spectacular information, mistrust in political parties, social anger and the re-proposal of the “great Jewish myths” in Italy and in the world, in politics and in (social) media.

The anti-Semitic episodes concerned, in order of importance, conspiracy theories, anti-Zionism, neo-Nazism, trivialisation of the Shoah (mockery of the Shoah) and anti-Judaism (Christian and religious anti-Semitism). In particular, the themes of anti-Judaism (blood libel, deicide, etc.) have experienced a strong resurgence in the last five years. Episodes such as Holocaust denial are widespread only within neo-Nazism, while the same myths, adapted to Israeli reality, find consensus in more heterogeneous sectors: the extreme left, ethno-regionalism, environmentalism, the anti-elite galaxy and Islamism (Taguieff 2016; Pasta 2018; Pasta et al. 2021; Monaci 2022).

Anti-Semitism is openly expressed in the media through extremely aggressive and demonising iconographic and lexical forms.

And, the online environment, in particular, seems to be increasingly assuming the function of an incubator of hatred and of this type of poisonous information, which is difficult to counteract even with the analyses, interviews and in-depth studies proposed in the press.

4.2. “Narrative Pandemics” in 2020–2021

The year 2020 began with an extraordinary event that was unpredictable or simply one of the side effects of global society that we should learn to live with: the first global pandemic of COVID-19.

This global shock that forced billions of people to stop and lock themselves in their homes, to leave schools, factories and offices for months on end. The only “frequented” places were hospitals, which nearly collapsed in early March.

Pascal wrote that “men, having failed to cure death, misery and ignorance, have decided not to think about them in order to make themselves happy” (Serini 1943).

In a society that is constantly evolving and striving for continuous progress, where risks no longer concern the consequences of a single decision, but arise from the aggregate effects of the entire social organisation, the lack of (willingness to) think and the lack of foresight have increased the exposure to a multiplicity of possible shocks capable of affecting the whole of humanity (Weber 2002).

In an emergency, what is taken for granted is disrupted and everything is called into question. The common experience is one of psychic alienation and the partial or total disintegration of collective frames of reference.

In the 1992 David Lockwood uses the term “anomic declassification” to describe the situation in which the system of legitimate beliefs (roles, power relations and collective goals) that supports a given social order collapses vertically. A state of perceptual, economic, normative and informational disorder brings to light tensions, doubts and new beliefs.

From March 2020, the spread of COVID-19 imposed isolation for many weeks, with phases of opening and closing, affecting numerous nations, including Italy, until mid-2021.

Being together has increasingly become an online relationship.

Our daily life has become more and more “platformised”: our home, school and work environments have become exclusively digital.

To describe this unprecedented situation, Anthony Giddens used the term “digidemic”, the first digital pandemic in history, made up of connections, data and, above all, an excess of information.

It is no coincidence that another word that characterised the pandemic period was “infodemic”, a term first coined by the political scientist David Rothkopf (2003) and then reused by the World Health Organisation during the emergency.

“Infodemic” refers to the presence of an overload of news about a particular event that confuses public opinion, overwhelms the media and puts institutions in crisis because it severely conditions our minds and our ability to process multiple pieces of information correctly.

Some facts, writes Rothkopf (2003), mixed with fear, rumour and speculation are amplified and transmitted around the world by modern information technologies and have the ability to influence the economies, politics and security of many nations.

In this scenario, in the first half of 2020, the Italian media agenda on Israel changed radically. The conflict took a back seat to political health issues, particularly everything to do with the number of victims of the pandemic and the restrictions imposed on the country by its president, who was having difficulties with the political management of the internal infections (Figures 4–6).

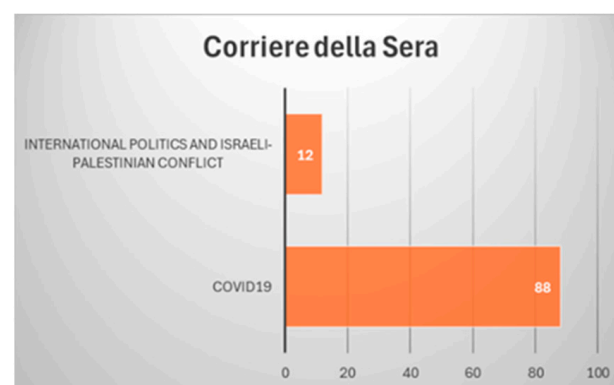


Figure 4. Articles published in 2020.

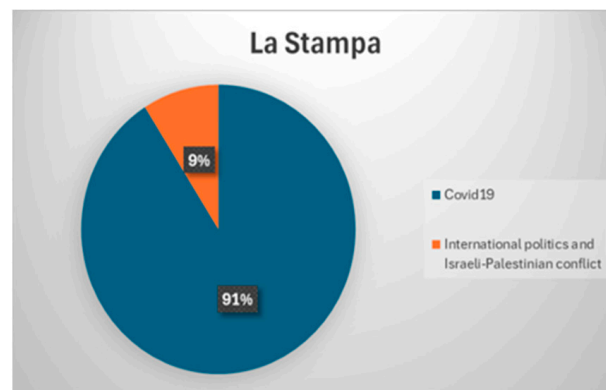


Figure 5. Articles published in 2020.

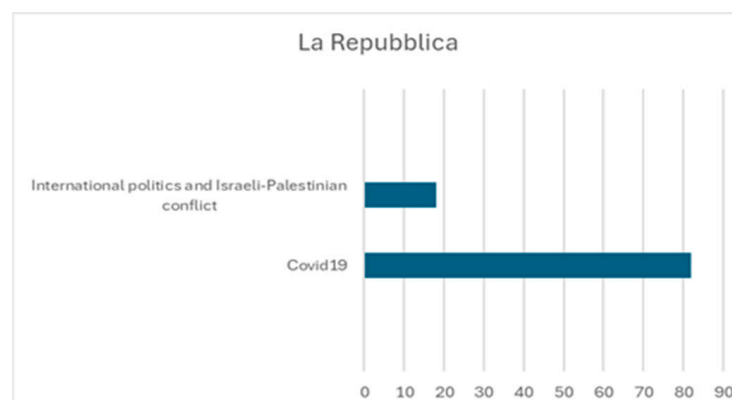


Figure 6. Articles published in 2020.

A very similar behaviour in 2020 by all three newspapers was observed, both in the content and in the structure of the titles of their articles: “Israel. 5 thousand cases of COVID a day”, “The Israeli health system raises the red flag” and “Israel returns to lockdown”.

Faced with a pandemic, one is by definition unprepared, and the exceptional nature of the situation, even in Italy, created chaos and mistrust at all levels: in institutions, among citizens and even in the world of journalism.

The information overload has fuelled doubt, social anger, polarisation and hatred of the other, be it a migrant, a tourist or a neighbour, as all are possible carriers of the virus.

In the Italian media, the narrative of the pandemic occupied the front pages of the print and online press for many weeks. Until the announcement of the first reopening by the Conte government in the summer months of 2020, all news editions were (almost exclusively) about COVID-19.

But the media scenario in this two-year period seemed to be divided into two parts.

The COVID issue included political and health difficulties on the part of Netanyahu and the first traces of anti-Semitic hatred on the part of the online audience commenting on the news (CdS: 88%; Rep.: 80%; LaSt.: 91%); elements were linked in a “cross-media” way to the long local debate, all Italian, were recorded every year around the Day of Remembrance or the most current issue. The filtering operation carried out on the mass of collected data allowed us to note how, after the first months of “forced” isolation at the beginning of the summer of 2020 and the subsequent first announcements of a possible anti-COVID-19 vaccine in the months of October and November, the news published, especially through posts shared on the platforms, had begun to circulate, mixing different contents such as health and institutional information and acts of racism against public figures of Jewish origin, or false information about possible cures for the virus and related conspiracy theories. Pseudo-news were often accompanied by the names of leaders of religious groups or pseudo-scientists, all victims or authors of the so-called “Great Reset”.

In this particular case, the content formats disseminated by some users were audio messages, photographs and videos, which were produced with the sole aim of sowing doubt about the real existence of the virus and its dangerousness, and in an attempt to (desperately) create counter-narratives based on recognised scientific theses put forward by virologists or so-called experts, “web stars” who are now almost devoid of credibility (Monaci 2022).

The impression is that newspapers are turning into mere mailboxes where freedom of speech is granted, often without any verification, especially to those who are more adept at managing social communication and the internal conflict within it (Sorrentino 2015; Sorrentino and Splendore 2022). Given that videos and photos are also considered effective languages in the journalistic world, many of these messages were re-shared online via Facebook only in this format, as textual content, giving voice to “experts” or “conspiracy theorists”.

Italian authors (Sorrentino and Splendore 2022) underlined that the main gap is the nature of Italian journalism as “opinion” journalism, which are strongly influenced over time by political and sensationalist logics that often lead to even information professionals themselves to perceive themselves as “free” in the construction of news. Other obvious examples in the content analysed concern the figure of George Soros, who appeared several times alongside the conspiratorial “voices” in Facebook posts and in the headlines reported by Repubblica and Corriere in the months before the outbreak and after the first blockade in Italy including “Soros, the financier, attacked from the right and the left. From speculation against the pound and the lira to philanthropy to promote the open society”; “Coronavirus between deniers and hoaxes. The real reasons for false beliefs”; and “Gates and Soros are the number one target of conspiracy theorists: it even surpasses the COVID 5G hoax”.

To better understand the information chaos of those months, it is interesting to recall two other examples of material disseminated online, in addition to those already highlighted.

The 26-minute video published on YouTube (which has been removed) entitled “Pandemic”, in which the coronavirus was defined as a laboratory product to guarantee the giants’ profits from vaccines. The video, shared on Twitter by the user IMChamber24, shows a bus driver discussing the spread of COVID-19 in Turkey with her passengers, claiming that the most serious diseases to appear on the planet in recent decades, from AIDS to Ebola, were created by pharmaceutical companies controlled by Jews.

The pandemic has thus accelerated the proliferation of social networks as ideal environments for creating or maintaining social networks in times of distance and isolation.

As Deborah Lupton noted a few years ago, digital media played an important role during the emergency, supporting relationships and gestures of solidarity, but also facilitating the enormous spread of fake news, often characterised by conspiracy narratives.

The year 2021 did not seem to improve until at least mid-April, when the “vaccine issue” tended to dominate the headlines.

Several studies (Khan and Mian 2020) analysed the spread of the infodemic and conspiracy theories in relation to the evolution of the public health emergency by automatically analysing the content of social platforms.

The results showed, first of all, a massive presence of misinformation on Facebook and in online newspapers. The process followed a network model of propagation, very similar to that of a normal virus, whose permanence on the net was reinforced by the difficulties of ordinary users, politicians and journalists, who are not always aware and able to understand the truthfulness of a fact and the reliability of a source, and who fall victim to so-called “online rumours”.

The data we collected on Facebook are in line with what is reported in the literature, although we limited our research to the topic of anti-Semitism, which was still confirmed as the “longest” and “most hidden” form of hatred in the period of the health emergency.

The infodemic, along with conspiracy theories and denialism, tended to increase in the first half of 2021, with the production of the vaccine (considered too “fast and ineffective”), the alternating closures due to the increase in infections, and the subsequent introduction

by the Italian government of the numerous self-certifications to be filled out in the event of recovery or illness as a tool for monitoring the virus. In the print media, as well as in most of the reports on TV news programmes, and therefore also in online information in Italy, which often repeats and elaborates on content that has gone viral on social networks, the most common occurrences were episodes of anti-Semitism and the political debate around the issues of “COVID-19 and the green card” or “vaccine and refusal”.

One of the most relevant events in this sense, which attracted the attention of all the Italian and international media, was the attack on the United States Capitol in Washington on 6 January 2021. The police and the main American media observed the profiles of the attackers, who were later arrested, mainly through social networks, and described those responsible for the violence as a “rather transversal crowd”, especially in terms of economic status and social position.

What they have in common is the racial element, namely “whiteness” and belonging to the far-right group called QAnon.

According to The Forward and the Washington Post, the QAnon theory presented arguments against important Jewish figures such as George Soros and the Rothschilds, and has been described by the Jewish-American magazine as containing impressive anti-Semitic elements with racist undertones and constant references to the archetypes of the “blood libel” and the kidnapping and killing of Christian children for ritual purposes.

The arguments of the conspiracy theorists were therefore taken up by the newspapers, but a critical analysis of the texts published in the information space was rarely proposed. In this sense, there were no specific insights or references to anti-Zionism or anti-Semitism, but the reference to Israel was still present in an implicit or explicit way in the texts and words of the journalists (Figures 7–9).

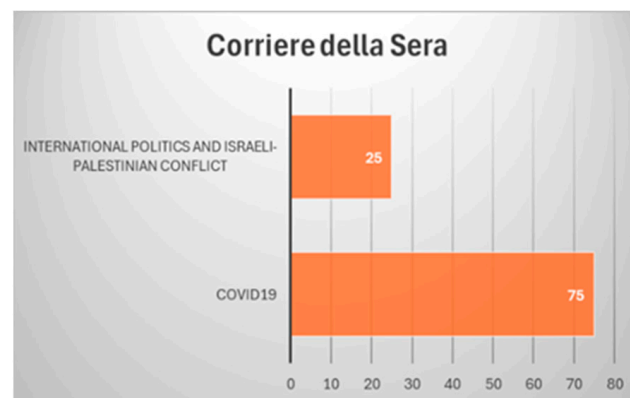


Figure 7. Articles published in 2021.

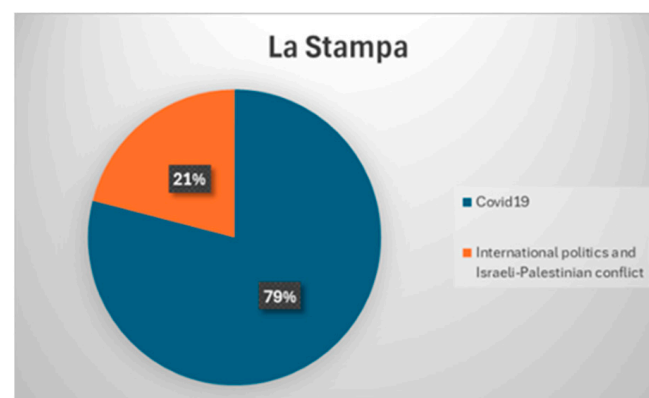


Figure 8. Articles published in 2021.

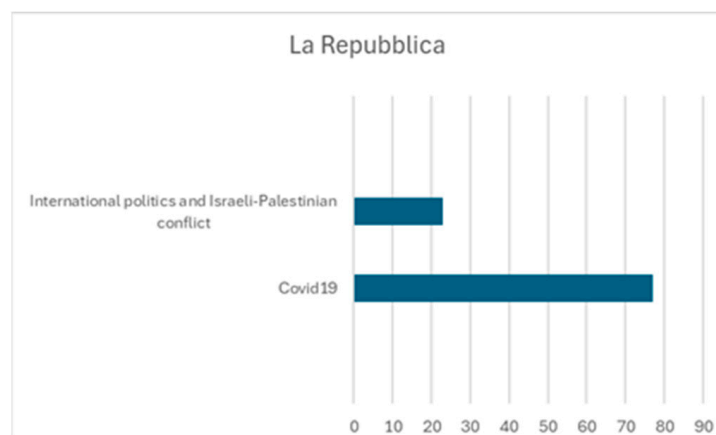


Figure 9. Articles published in 2021.

Since the end of April 2021, the online agenda in Italy seems to have changed slightly.

Violence and political–military conflicts seem to have taken over the Italian journalistic field. The percentages of non-pandemic topics remain rather low, especially in *Stampa* (21%) and *Repubblica* (23%).

5. Conclusions

In the three-year period of 2019–2021, despite the different contexts of fluctuating crises at global and local levels, between conflicts, political disagreements and pandemics, most of the content from the three main media seemed to repeat points of view and narrative constructions similar to those that recur today after 7 October 2023, or those that have appeared in the Italian press in the last twenty years, as already highlighted by many studies on the subject.

At the end of this initial analysis, which is useful for understanding the level of media coverage on the subject of “Israel” and the hybrid forms of contemporary—political—hatred narrated by the media in Italy, we will briefly present what we consider to be the main aspects that have emerged regarding the “state of the art” and the critical issues that concern the relationship between national journalistic communication and the State of Israel:

- There is a binary narrative where Israel is both a “victim” of history and a “military and political power”, viewed positively by the Italian media because of its democratic political nature and history, and because of Italy’s strong sensitivity on issues such as the Holocaust, due to having experienced fascism. This institutionally ritualised issue polarises national parties and public opinion year after year;
- The conflict is often told from the Israeli point of view, even in the Italian media. Western journalism in general, since 2019, seems to be fully committed to the Israeli narrative. With some exceptions during the COVID pandemic, conspiracy theories and the high level of social insecurity and disinformation seemed to mitigate this bias in Italian newspapers. Thus, even the failures of Netanyahu’s health policy were presented according to a more critical framework;
- The current situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories only reinforces, even in Italy, many of the discussions and reflections on the work of newspapers, journalists and those who disseminate information on social networks. The recent massacres that took place around the hospital in Gaza caused great difficulties even for the most authoritative international newspapers. Many of them immediately spoke of an Israeli attack, reporting accusations from Hamas sources and labelling them as such. A rather superficial and dangerous choice, given that many of these reports supported a version of the facts that has yet to be verified, and that within minutes, they provoked violent reactions accompanied by attacks and demonstrations in various cities, even outside Israel.

Only a few hours later, many of these headlines were revised and corrected, with the emergence of doubts and sceptical reconstructions taking root in the international public and political debate.

Among the main “accused”, we find newspapers such as the New York Times, which tried to defend itself with an article describing the objective difficulties of following events in Israel with few journalists on the ground and given the dangerousness of the situation.

There is an obvious problem of media “presence” in this conflict, with regard to the history of the State of Israel. And this has been the case for many years in the Italian media, and not only in this case.

Routine journalistic work, made up of selection and hierarchisation, has to produce news, if possible, without polluting it with personal prejudices. In conflicts, everything is even more complex (Ozohu-Suleiman 2014).

According to H.A. Hellyer, a researcher at the London-based Royal United Services, there are legions of international journalists in Israel who can tell you every detail of every atrocity that has happened there and has been happening for some time. But, there is no coverage of the depth of the incredible humanitarian catastrophe taking place in Gaza. It seems that the absence of international journalists creates a certain imbalance in the coverage of Palestinian suffering compared to that of Israeli civilians.

Compared to the media coverage of recent global crises, the news of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which the entire world of journalism has been covering in these weeks, is perhaps the mother of all divisive issues of the last century, generating deep hatred and uncivilised behaviour out of all proportion and without respect for the real tragedies in question. And those who work in the field of information have become victims of pressure and blackmail to give space to the “contradictory”, to respect general “equality”, or simply not to find themselves the victims of attacks and discreditation beyond the limits of civilisation.

In the digital environment, there is already a large amount of video and news from war zones, but the widespread spread of fake news and disinformation makes these sources much less reliable, and verifying all the material available online is a very costly operation in terms of time and work.

This is all the more reason for the major international media to have correspondents and staff on the ground. “Narrating from the inside” could favour the emergence of parts of the social realities of the conflict that are still unknown, thus broadening the field of news and drawing on a greater number of sources, in the hope of improving the information provided to those who look “from the outside” or “from above”, such as Italian journalism.

We are aware that the characteristics of this exploratory study on online content about Israel do not allow us to fully grasp the representations of Israel conveyed by the press, and that the conclusions we have reached relate specifically to a current context of war, which is still evolving, and to a pandemic period. However, we believe that this work is a useful starting point to better specify the dimensions that currently articulate the social perception of this country and its inhabitants, even in a post-war future. In conclusion, the fact that the Italian press does not always convey a univocal image in this regard, and that the context, especially the local and crisis contexts, has a considerable weight in the construction of specific narrative frames, suggests that it exerts a moderate influence (Bar-Tal and Teichman 2005) on the transmission of stereotypical images of Israel. It might be more useful to reflect not only on how to “do (good) journalism” and how to invest better and more in the construction and identification of the so-called good news or counter-narratives, but also on “being a journalist” today in a society in continuous transformation (Gans 2018), that is, on professional ethics, in order to limit spectacularisation and promote greater professional and knowledge (also scientific) awareness of the phenomenon being narrated, so that media audiences can understand the ongoing events in greater depth.

To date, one year after the 7 October 2023 massacre, the Italian representation of the ‘new conflict’ seems to support the Israeli government’s point of view. This is not an isolated case, and seems to coincide with the behaviour of other European media.

Upday, an app owned by German media giant Axel Springer and the largest news aggregation app in Europe, was instructed to prioritise the Israeli perspective and downplay Palestinian civilian deaths in the news.

Indeed, according to interviews with employees and internal documents obtained by The Intercept, the company's coverage of the Gaza war is heavily skewed due to pro-Israeli sentiments.

Furthermore, in its new report, the Centre for Media Monitoring, after analysing about 180,000 video clips from seven British and three international TV channels and about 26,000 news articles from 28 British media websites, found that the British media reliably informs the public about the conflict and responsibly presents the positions of all parties involved.

Therefore, in line with the findings of smaller studies conducted so far, including research on media behaviour in Europe, it can be said that Israeli narratives, voices and grievances currently appear to be privileged in coverage over Palestinian voices, narratives and grievances.

In the information and platform society, therefore, good intentions and honest efforts are not enough for good journalism and a possible 'objective' narrative. What is needed is a greater 'scientific spirit', a unity of method rather than a unity of purpose, as sociologist Walter Lippmann argued.

This expression is used by Lippmann to mean that journalism should aspire to a common intellectual method. It is the method that is objective, not the journalist.

The consideration of this point will have a great impact on the future narrative of the conflict and on political and military choices.

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Note

¹ All values in the graphs are in percentages (%).

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