

## Further thoughts on Covid-19 communication transparency

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Following the paper by Martin & Baccarani (2020)<sup>1</sup>, an interesting question comes to mind: is the phenomena described there unique to these two countries, or is it a more common concern? It is the purpose of this paper to answer this question. Sadly, the phenomena of half-truths, misleading information, misdirected and even personally motivated statements is present in other countries as well<sup>2</sup>. In Israel, we saw all of these falsehoods being propagated to the public, with the officials changing their opinions and instructions changing to suit either their agenda or the constraints that existed at the time of the latest public speaking event. Even the fact that they were confronted by some journalists using their videotaped totally opposite statements, made only a few days prior to the current statement did not faze them. The officials came on during the (extended) newscasts every evening, so much so that one might have thought that they never leave the studios – certainly, in times of restricted travel and closures they could not hop around, could they? All, in a concerted effort to enlist the public to do their bidding. They repeated, over and over again, that the defeat of this pandemic would be attained only if all citizens obey the edicts and comply with every single instruction. The calls for obedience, compliance and suspension of all forms of critical thinking were central to all public statements. It was evident from the start the cooperation was key, as one person could infect another, even a total stranger and thus we all depend on each other. The public was given an impression that it was being provided with the latest, up to the minute, precise information - transparently.

It became clearer and clearer as the days passed, that we had a case of "we (the government) are perfect, full of goodwill, free of bias – except when it suits our political/sectorial/ personal/professional<sup>3</sup> interest, or when it is in the government interest to purposely mislead the public". Much as the European experience reported in Martin & Baccarani (2020), two major issues were subject to the Sour Grapes syndrome of Aesop's tales<sup>4</sup> - what we do not have is, anyhow, unnecessary. When we do not have masks, they are completely useless – when we have enough of them, they are indispensable, a veritable must. When we do not have enough tests, having more will not clarify the contagion picture. When we have enough – we are going on a large-scale testing campaign to find out where the hotspots are. The worst offence was the political deception: when the contagion spread unproportionably to areas inhabited mainly by a specific sector of the population that wields great political power then, rather than impose closure on that area, the whole country was quarantined. Supposedly, that was to prevent discrimination, but in effect it worked quite the other way around. People understood all too well that in order to appease the politically powerful population (or, more exactly, its representatives in parliament) the rest of the population were restricted unnecessarily. In order to try to enforce compliance, the government resorted to extreme scare tactics. The initial forecasts were for over one million infected (out of a population of about nine million), and over 10,000 deaths. We were also told that there was an acute shortage of ICU beds (true regardless, mainly due to a severe shortage of ICU nurses); of respirators and more. At some point, owing to the total lack of logistical know-how in the ministry of

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<sup>1</sup> [http://sites.les.univr.it/eisic/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2\\_SOME\\_THOUGHTS\\_Martin\\_Baccarani.pdf](http://sites.les.univr.it/eisic/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2_SOME_THOUGHTS_Martin_Baccarani.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The USA will not be discussed here but the situation there is quite evident even to the most casual news watcher.

<sup>3</sup> More than one answer may be applicable at any given time.

<sup>4</sup> Where the fox, unable to enter the grapevine, announced that the grapes were, anyhow, sour.

health, military forces – and even the various secret services – were enlisted to take up the slack. When asked about the very, very, very large discrepancy (as of May 5<sup>th</sup> Israel had, fortunately, 16,628 cases and 237 deaths<sup>5</sup>), the prime minister did not hesitate even for one second before taking credit for this achievement<sup>6</sup>, claiming that he deflected the course of the pandemic by the very steps he initiated.

It is quite possible that similar scare tactics would have been employed had the pandemic happened in 'normal' times, mainly in order to hide incompetence, neglect and the inability to cope with a nation-wide health crisis. However, it happened during Israel's longest and most serious political crisis. For almost one and a half year the country is governed by an interim government with limited powers. For example, the country is now managed using a carry-over budget from 2019 as a new budget bill could not be passed in the divided parliament. The country has gone, in that period, through three elections to its parliament, required because of a political impasse that prevented either one of the big parties from forming a coalition government. Therefore, for some political figures, the pandemic was not a serious, life-threatening event – but a golden political opportunity to form a government fashioned to their own tastes and preferences<sup>7</sup>. The incentive to use this crisis as a tool to gain political advantages was too alluring for some parties, and the issues of transparency or credibility were readily sacrificed. The politicians delivering the Covid-19 news – and resulting restrictions – almost daily on prime time, had no compunctions and used the crisis to further their own agenda, even including threatening political messages in the 'neutral' pandemic briefing.

The public, eventually, grew tired of these dire warnings. Having seen that the pandemic is, at least for now, receding, and many special-purpose hospital wards converted for use by Covid-19 patients are being returned to their normal functions, the people have started clamoring for lifting the restrictions. This phase, too, was devoid of any transparency and is characterized by chaos. For example, schools reopening was decreed, than made 'optional' – all in the span of one day; truancy is now an accepted norm, left completely for the parents to decide, whereas it was an offence just the day before. Another example involves commerce: shopping malls are closed – but the huge Ikea stores are open. Using delivery services by restaurants was allowed, takeaway forbidden. Needless to say, these contradicting, non-transparent restrictions (the reasons for them was never explained) did not help the public confidence. The result was, as might well have been expected, an unglorified retreat by the government from most of its restriction, with the same experts that advocated the continuing of the strict measures now heralding the voice of the collapsing economy (true) as the reason for lifting many prohibitions. We just hope that the public, with its healthy (?) common sense, will also be able to recognize the return of the pandemic, if the threat of 'the second wave' ever materializes.

*Si vis pacem, para bellum.*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ynet.co.il/home/0,7340,L-31372,00.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://13news.co.il/item/the-main-edition/episodes/mm040520-1055151/>

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, that worked and a so-called 'government of national unity' is in the process of being formed these days.