

Framing the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Icelandic media: What were the key concerns and who could raise them?

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Abstract

The worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of reliable and relevant information dissemination. How well a crisis like COVID-19 is handled depends, in many ways, on how the public perceives the crisis and risks related to it, through the media. Therefore, how the situation is framed, what are seen as key issues, and who is perceived to be in charge, can have implications for the outcome. This article analyses Icelandic news media content about COVID-19 at the onset of the pandemic by using theories of agenda-setting and framing. The objective is to examine how the pandemic was framed, which topics were highlighted and who was given a voice in the media. We specifically investigate what kind of leadership was present during the earliest stages of the pandemic. Using content analysis, we examined media content about COVID-19 from 21 Icelandic media outlets from January 1st to March 31st, 2020. Our conclusions show that from the start of the pandemic, health related subjects, such as disease prevention, COVID-19 statistics and the health care system were salient in the media, though tourism and economic factors were also quite prominent. Furthermore, experts were at the helm of communication whilst politicians remained more in the background. The dissemination of instructions and rules illuminates the relationship between the experts and



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politicians, as the experts were given a voice in the media to communicate such information. The politicians, however, directly cited the experts, thanked them or endorsed them, when they spoke on instructions and rules in the media.

Keywords: COVID-19; media; Iceland; information dissemination; crisis.

Introduction

The novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 quickly started to spread to numerous countries at the start of 2020. Since the infectious and deadly disease emerged, infections have transmitted around the world. The importance of accurate and up-to-date media coverage quickly became apparent due to the rapid spread, serious repercussions and how little was known about the virus at the onset of the pandemic (World Health Organization 2020).

The importance of the news media during precarious and uncertain times is clear, as the delivery of information affects responses and has implications for all societal areas, including health and the economy (Sasaki et al. 2020). A vast body of research in the field of media audience and reception has demonstrated that the presentation of events, groups or any given affair in the news can affect people's experiences, perceptions and behaviour (see for example Devereux 2014; Coman et al. 2021). In light of the media's importance during critical events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is apparent that the way crises are framed in the media can play a key role in how events subsequently develop (Coman et al. 2021; Khan 2020). According to the report of the National Security Council's Working Group on Information Disorder and COVID-19 in Iceland (2020), 94,5% of the general public in Iceland acquired information about the disease and the virus from Icelandic news media outlets during the first wave of the pandemic, which further illuminates the importance of the media in relation to COVID-19.

Since the first news reports of the impending COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Icelandic authorities have consistently stressed the importance of accurate and up-to-date information concerning the virus and the disease. By the end of January 2020, authorities had already established a strategic arrangement and began active and systematic information provision, placing the Icelandic Directorate of Health and the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management at the forefront (The National Security Council 2020). The onset of the pandemic was particularly important when it came to information dissemination as Iceland, and the entire world, was facing an unknown disease and little was known about what the next months, or even years, would bring. Consequently, how information was presented was crucial, especially in terms of what was highlighted as key issues and who were given a voice in the media. At the start of the pandemic, concerns focused unsurprisingly heavily on health-related issues, such as how people became infected with the disease, what the symptoms were, but also on various instructions and rules regarding how to prevent getting infected and spreading the virus. Moreover, much of the discussion was framed with a focus on economic concerns, with tourism and travel being prominently highlighted at the start of the pandemic (Ólafsson 2021).

The early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic was, furthermore, a critical point in time as the overall crisis responses were formalized during that phase (Coman et al. 2021). This course of events has transpired the importance of the interplay between the media, politicians and experts. Khan (2020) has identified two different models of leadership which can be used to describe this interplay. On the one hand, “The Politician Prominence Model”, which is characterized by the politicians receiving consultation from experts but remaining at the helm of communication as leaders and the faces of a crisis. On the other hand, “The Expert Appointee Prominence model”, where experts are at the forefront of disseminating vital information to the public, whilst the politicians support and endorse the expert opinions.

Given the importance of the early dissemination of information concerning a virtually unknown disease at the time, our goal is to answer *how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iceland was framed and who were given a prominent voice in the media*. We accomplish this goal by using media coverage about COVID-19 from 21 Icelandic media outlets from January 1st to March 31st, 2020. The first COVID-19 case was confirmed on February 28th, marking March as the first month of the reality of COVID-19 in Iceland. Using this data, we answer two specific research questions: First, how was COVID-19 framed in the Icelandic media during the first months of COVID-19, with a focus on the two issues that were of immediate concern in the pandemic, health and the economy. Second, who were given a voice in the media at the start of the pandemic and what was the interplay between experts and politicians during these early stages. Our overall purpose is to illuminate the tactics of the Icelandic government during the earliest stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iceland.

1. News media, agenda-setting and framing

The media and news journalism are seen as key components of contemporary democracies, providing vital information and platforms for deliberation and action (e.g., Lee-Wright et al. 2012; McNair 2012; Fenton 2010; Kristinsson 2007). The way in which journalists present news and other media content is important as numerous studies have demonstrated that news presentation can have a formative effect on public opinion and behaviour (see McCombs & Valenzuela 2021). Journalists and editors are powerful as they can influence what information is imparted and how. Even with an increasingly fragmented media market and the proliferation of online and social media, studies indicate that the traditional news media is still influential when it comes to having an effect on public opinion (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata 2017). The course of events during the outbreak of COVID-19 has illustrated that it is important that the general public perceives the seriousness of the crisis. Information delivery is crucial and can encourage and motivate responsible behaviour (WHO 2020; Ophir et al. 2021).

Many studies have highlighted how news content can influence which issues the public perceives as important. Journalists and editors identify key issues and topics to cover and the news media’s ability to influence the salience of these topics has come to be referred to as “the agenda-setting role of the media” (McCombs & Valenzuela 2021).

The relative salience of topics in the news can be illustrated by where they are placed in the newspapers, on online news sites or in the evening television news broadcast. Gradually, the topics that are highlighted in the media are the issues that the public determines as important (McCombs 2004). At the same time, topics that do not pass through the gatekeepers (including editors and journalists), cannot give the same salience cues to audiences concerning their relative importance (Wanta et al. 2004). Research has shown how increased news coverage of particular issues has correlated with the public perceiving the same issues as important. The ground-breaking study on this was conducted in Chapel Hill during the 1968 US presidential election where McCombs and Shaw (1972) compared the issues perceived as important by the voters in Chapel Hill with the news media's content. Their results illustrated that there was a strong correlation between the news media's coverage of issues and which issues undecided voters perceived as important. The findings in this study, and many others that have been conducted subsequently, suggest that the news media plays a key role in determining which issues people perceive as important (e.g., Winter & Eyal 1981; Brosius & Kepplinger 1990; Shehata 2010).

It is commonly stated that the agenda-setting role of the news media does not affect what people think, but what they think about. People learn which topics are important in the mainstream discourse based on how much emphasis the news media places on the particular topic. This is commonly referred to as “first-level agenda-setting effects”. Explication of a second-level of agenda-setting, also known as attribute agenda-setting, is focused on substantive and affective attributes and links agenda-setting theory with the concept of framing. This focuses on “how the objects of attention in messages – issues, political figures or other topics – are presented” (McCombs & Valenzuela 2021, 60). Goffman's insights on framing are closely related to second-level agenda-setting and refer to the process in which humans seek to simplify the world in order to understand it (Appelrouth & Edles 2016). Many researchers in the field of media and framing have since adopted this theoretical position and expanded the idea. Although there is not a unanimous definition of the term, a common understanding of framing entails choosing a certain understanding of reality and making it salient in communication. By doing so, one is trying to legitimize and strengthen certain definitions of a particular problem or matter (Brinson & Stohl 2012; Powell 2011).

In a journalistic context, news stories are given meaning in relation to certain news values that are used to connect stories to some wider structure or narrative. For example, global warming can be framed in economic, political or personal lifestyle terms, depending on how the emphasis given to particular angles in the news are related to the topic (McCombs & Valenzuela 2021). There is almost no way for journalists to avoid framing their stories in some way. Journalists commonly introduce some bias, whether it is unintended or not. As McQuail (2010) argues, framing inevitably reflects both the sources that are chosen and the context they are presented in. Within political communication, framing often refers to media management, which can entail establishing a shared understanding, such as promoting general awareness about COVID-19. Managing information involves collecting, analysing and disseminating information whilst managing meaning involves shaping *how* people perceive a crisis (Lilleker et al. 2021).

During a crisis people crave context and an understanding of what is going on in their community. Therefore, consistent frames focusing on the crisis at hand which promote a shared understanding are required. The importance of media frames is unquestionable as they can affect public opinion, including who is to blame and what is relevant. Studies have shown how the agenda-setting role of the media is heightened when there is a need for orientation (Chernov et al. 2011), such as during a crisis like COVID-19. Put simply, in times of uncertainty, the media can have more of an agenda-setting effect than during more routine periods. This is, however, complicated by the fact that even when a clear message and persistent frames are offered through the news media and key actors, they do not automatically transfer into a single unanimous frame as there are always competing frames. The public subsequently needs to interpret the frames offered by these societal actors and create their understanding about the crisis at hand (Coman et al. 2021).

In light of the media's important role in determining which issues people perceive as important, and how they are framed, it is vital to understand how a crisis such as COVID-19 is framed as it can affect how willing the public is to participate in disease prevention measures. For example, when reporting and framing public health matters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, one should endeavour to aim the attention at what causes infections and how to prevent the spreading of the disease (Coleman et al. 2011; Coman et al. 2021). If a crisis is not framed as a serious risk it can lead to the public not taking the necessary action. Research illustrates that the public has a tendency to behave according to advice from the authorities when they are afraid (Coman et al. 2021). For example, a study of the media coverage of H1N1 (commonly referred to as the swine flu) emphasising risks was found to increase the public's level of knowledge, which led to engagement in preventative measures (Zhang et al. 2015). Moreover, a recent study on the media coverage of COVID-19 in Italy illustrates how a "containment frame" which focused on the seriousness of the disease and on topics such as quarantine, online schooling and suspension of sporting events, appears to have quickly led to a decrease in overall mobility and increased the time spent at home (Ophir et al. 2021).

1.1 Communicative leadership and response to COVID-19

When a crisis occurs, the public looks to guidance from authorities, whether it is politicians, experts or someone else. To capture this, Khan (2020) proposes a dyadic theoretical model in the course of a crisis, such as COVID-19. On the one hand, "The Politician Prominence Model", which entails an arrangement where politicians are central in terms of decision-making and interacting with the media and the general public. They receive consultation from professional experts but remain at the helm in the main role as leaders. On the other hand, "The Expert Appointee Prominence model", which is characterized by experts at the forefront of elementary strategic planning, decision-making and informing the general public. The role of the politicians is limited to endorse and back up the experts' implementations and decisions (Khan 2020).

The latter model describes the Icelandic arrangement quite accurately as the Icelandic government put the experts at the forefront of communicating important informa-

tion to the nation. By doing so, they wanted to prevent uncertainty that could possibly lead to serious repercussions due to misinformation (The National Security Council 2020). Research illustrates how credibility during a pandemic requires experts to be given prominence (Lilleker et al. 2021). The national response to COVID-19 in Iceland has been characterized by a heavy emphasis on facilitating the experts to communicate information to the general public constantly, and the government in general followed scientific advice during the first wave of the pandemic (Ólafsson 2021).

Icelandic authorities have emphasized the importance of information delivery as they consider reliable information the best instrument to counter societal fear and anxiety. The Icelandic government has consistently stressed the importance of stable and accessible media and has carried out active information provision managed by Iceland's experts ever since the civil defence proclaimed "uncertainty alert level" at the end of January 2020 (The National Security Council 2020; Covid.is 2021).

Media coverage about COVID-19 started to emerge in Iceland in January 2020 in the wake of the rapid spreading in Wuhan. In the beginning it was a distant, possible and unknown threat, but that would all change as the first infection in Iceland was confirmed. February 27th marked a turning point in the media coverage of the pandemic in Iceland, as daily briefings broadcasted live on television, radio and online began, held by a team of experts. At this point, it was becoming clear that COVID-19 would present a major threat in Europe and it was deemed critical to disseminate important information directly to the news media and the public during the upcoming crisis. Swiftly, these briefings became the central media moments regarding COVID-19. Consequently, a large amount of news reports and other media content covered the meetings and the information communicated there (Ólafsson 2021). The information briefings took place every day at 11am during the first wave, with the so-called trio (The Icelandic Director of Health, The Director of Emergency Management in Iceland, and the Chief Epidemiologist) generally present, and other experts and relevant parties were frequent guests and discussed some specific matters. These guests included kindergarten teachers, psychologists and specialists from the University of Iceland. Furthermore, the daily briefings also had the function of safeguarding against misinformation and fake news, providing citizens and the news media real time and fact-checked scientific information (Covid.is 2021; The National Security Council 2020).

In addition to the numerous information briefings held since late February 2020 and multiple media interviews, the members of the Icelandic disease prevention authorities opened a public online information page (www.covid.is) which was updated daily and contained general advice as well as the most recent statistics on how many individuals were sick, in quarantine and in hospital at any given time. The webpage included which restrictions were in effect and various information related to COVID-19 in ten languages (Ólafsson 2021; Covid.is 2021).

The Icelandic Director of Health, Alma Möller, the Director of Emergency Management in Iceland, Víðir Reynisson and the Chief Epidemiologist, Þórólfur Guðnason,

made up the expert team who have been the face of the Icelandic response to COVID-19, particularly during the first wave. They were unquestionably the most prominent faces in the media during this time. Kári Stefánsson, the CEO of deCODE genetics, was also a pivotal actor who influenced the public discourse and public communications. He was prominent in the Icelandic media at the time as a scientist and stressed the importance of screening as many people as possible. Furthermore, Stefánsson often voiced his concerns about specific methods the authorities had implemented but, overall, he endorsed how Icelandic authorities handled the pandemic during the first wave (Ólafsson 2021).

The Icelandic media has carried out the important role of being the intermediary between the (expert) leaders and the general public by mediating important information, live broadcasting from briefings, press conferences and so on, as well as asking important questions. Politicians have mainly let scientists and experts handle direct communication to the public. Some government ministers from relevant ministries have, nevertheless, been prominent during significant moments and held press conferences where restrictions were declared or lifted, and also to announce economic relief packages (Ólafsson 2021). The central politicians, both regarding decision-making and media presence concerning COVID-19, were Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir and Iceland's Minister of Health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir, who have endorsed and promoted the experts. For example, Svavarsdóttir followed all recommendations from the Chief Epidemiologist during the research period (Ólafsson 2021). Other government ministers were also present at government press conferences when they were specifically related to their ministry, such as Lilja Alfreðsdóttir, Minister of Education, Science and Culture, when discussing the impact on the education system.

In general, it seems as if Icelandic authorities succeeded in building unity among the Icelandic population during the first wave of the pandemic, and that placing the experts at the forefront of communication has been effective, as nearly 90% of general public in Iceland participated in disease prevention measures and more than 95% believed that the measures would “very likely” or “most likely” be successful in April 2020 (Jónsson et al. 2020). This is not surprising since research has shown how experts can increase the credibility of government responses during crises, measures put in place and public requirements concerning the measures (Coman et al. 2021). Furthermore, Icelanders were in general satisfied with the prevention measures in August 2020 (Ólafsdóttir et al. 2020). It is clear that the Icelandic public followed the recommendations provided by the authorities during the first months of the pandemic. It is also known that a large part of the strategy pursued by the authorities was communication with the public through the media. However, a comprehensive study of the news media content in Iceland concerning COVID-19 at the start of the pandemic, both from major sources and smaller ones, has yet to be carried out. We provide such an analysis in this paper, with a focus on: 1) how the pandemic was framed in the beginning, with a specific focus on health and economy; 2) who were the key players given prominence in the media.

2. Data and methods

The data was collected from Creditinfo's database called Fjölmíðlavaktin (e. the media watch). The database consists of media content from nearly all Icelandic news media outlets, including print media, online editions, television broadcasting and radio. We used all the media content documented at Fjölmíðlavaktin from 21 Icelandic media outlets containing the words *COVID*, *Wuhan* or *Kórón**¹ from January 1st to March 31st 2020 in order to capture the news content at the start of the pandemic. The number of media outlets examined is large as the objective was to create a comprehensive database which reflects the Icelandic news media as a whole. We opted to include large media companies as well as smaller and/or more marginal ones. We excluded local papers, since COVID-19 has commonly been a national news story.²

As the Icelandic media landscape is quite small (Ólafsson & Jóhannsdóttir 2021; Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson 2018), we could include a high proportion of news media outlets, resulting in a good reflection of the Icelandic media. More specifically, we included the following outlets: Morgunblaðið, Mbl.is, Stöð 2, Fréttablaðið, Frettabladid.is, Stundin, Stundin.is, Kjarninn.is, Viljinn.is, Utvarpsaga.is, RÚV, Ruv.is, Rás 1, Rás 2, DV, DV.is, Viðskiptablaðið, Vb.is, Frettatiminn.is, Bylgjan, and Visir.is. When choosing the media outlets, we examined the larger news outlets such as the newspapers Fréttablaðið and Morgunblaðið, the television stations RÚV and Stöð 2, and the news sites Visir.is and Mbl.is. We also included smaller outlets such as DV, Stundin, Viljinn.is and Utvarpsaga.is in order to examine as much breadth and scope as possible in the national news coverage concerning COVID-19.

Our goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding about the media coverage but as the number of news reports during the research period is very large (10,506 news reports, interviews, opinion pieces or discussions) we took a stratified sample. Stratified samples entail dividing the research population into different layers or strata (in this case divided by months) and taking an equal proportion (32.9%) from each stratum. The final sample consists of 3,460 news reports as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Number of news reports about COVID-19 in the population and the sample by months

	Number of news reports in the population	Number of coded news reports (the sample)
January	390	128
February	1,292	425
March	8,824	2,907
Total	10,506	3,460

Content analysis was used to systematically analyze the characteristic features of news media coverage about COVID-19. The method is convenient to examine extensive

amounts of written texts for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. A mixed approach was adopted in this analysis which entails both simple coding and general context analysis of the media coverage as a whole (Healey 2015).

Three coders conducted the content analysis. In order to ensure intercoder reliability, all three coded all the news in January together to ensure that they coded in the same way. After this was secured, each coder coded independently, yet during the coding process, the same news reports were regularly coded by each coder and results compared to ensure intercoder reliability. Furthermore, the research team met regularly and discussed any uncertainties and debatable questions.

We identified two main frames which characterized the beginning of COVID-19 in Iceland: Health related factors and economic factors. To illustrate how the early stages of COVID-19 was framed in the Icelandic media, we used the two frames which show the key topics of interest at the onset of the pandemic in Iceland. First, “*Health*” includes news covering one or more of the following factors: disease prevention, the health care system, doctors, other health care workers, medical appliances (i.e., respirators, disinfectants, masks etc.), COVID-19 related statistics, facts about the disease, medical treatment and predictions about the pandemic. Second, “*Economy*”, is made up from two codes related to economic factors: a code covering different sectors of the labor market (e.g., tourism, agriculture, retail) and a code comprising direct mentions of business (e.g., unemployment prospects, financial support from the government, direct effects of the pandemic on businesses etc.). The two frames, “*Health*” and “*Economy*”, are not mutually exclusive as much of the Icelandic media coverage on COVID-19 addressed health and economic factors simultaneously. Therefore, it was not uncommon for both frames to be present in news reports.

To show who was given a voice in the media and to make sense of the leadership emerging during the research period, we chose two codes from the content analysis which show the course of events in Iceland during the research period. The expert code contains news where one or more of the experts at the forefront of COVID-19 in Iceland were given a voice in the media and had the ability to present and promote their opinions and attitudes (e.g., direct quotes, interviews etc). These experts were Alma Möller, the Icelandic Director of Health; Þóroldur Guðnason, the Chief Epidemiologist; Víðir Reynisson, the Director of Emergency Management, and Kári Stefánsson, neurologist and the CEO of deCODE genetics, a biopharmaceutical company in Iceland who was a salient figure in the Icelandic media at this time (Ólafsson 2021). This code also includes media coverage where doctors, other medical staff or academics were able to voice their opinions. The political code includes news where one or more Icelandic politicians were given a voice in the media. These politicians are the Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir; the Minister of Health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir; the Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs, Bjarni Benediktsson and the Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation, Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir who were most directly relevant during this time. We combine other politicians (that were less prominent in the news reports) into two categories, other government ministers and other politicians, that

can be either in national or local politics. Finally, we use the code instructions and rules. The dissemination of instructions and rules illuminates the relationship between the experts and politicians, as the experts were given a voice in the media to communicate such information. The politicians, however, directly cited the experts, thanked them or endorsed them, when they spoke on instructions and rules in the media.

Together these five codes are able to shed light on: a) what was seen as key issues, (i.e., how the onset of COVID-19 in Iceland was framed in the media), and b) who were given salient voices in the media (i.e., by whom was the pandemic being framed), and subsequently illustrates the arrangement between politicians and experts in terms of communicative leadership.

3. Analysis

As first reports of a potential pandemic surfaced, it would be expected that health-related issues would be the first concern, both in terms of the threat of the disease itself as well as how the Icelandic health care system would be prepared for it. However, as the seriousness of the threat became clear, it was evident that this was likely to have major economic consequences for countries around the world. Consequently, the two main overarching frames that we focus on are “Health” and “Economy”.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of articles about COVID-19 in the sample that use each frame from the early news of the threat to the end of the first month of living with COVID-19 (March 2020). Health-related frames clearly dominate the coverage in these three months, being invoked in about 72% of news reports in January, almost 74% in February and roughly 67% in March. However, it is clear that economic concerns are always present and prominent, with an economic frame invoked in about 56% of news reports in January, almost 66% in February, but dropping down to about 37% in March. This indicates that unsurprisingly, COVID-19 was viewed as a major health threat from the beginning, but economic concerns were present from the early start. However, as the reality of COVID-19 enters Iceland with the first confirmed case on February 28th, the difference between the proportion of reports focusing on health, as compared to the economy, drastically increases. In what follows, we go into more detail about what was being covered when these two major frames were used in media coverage.

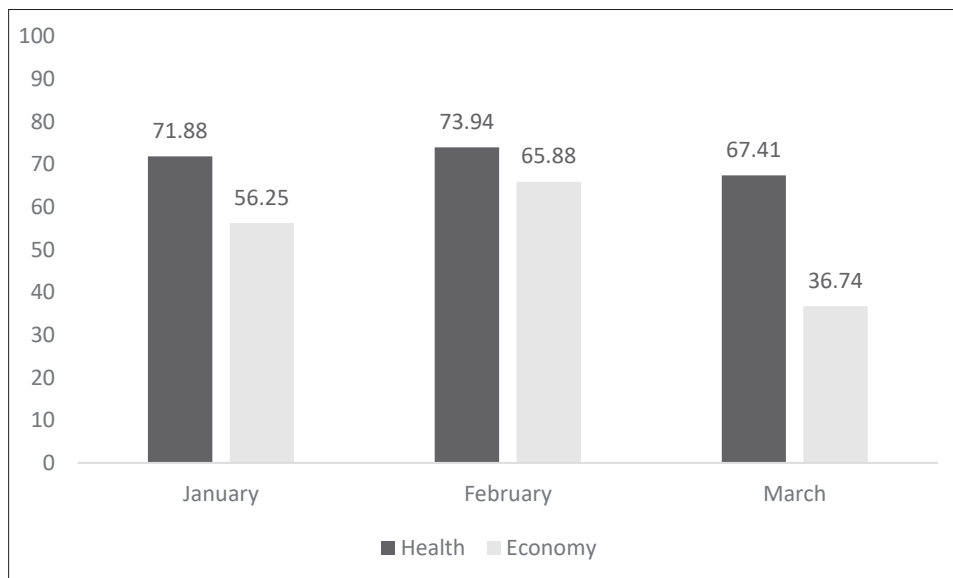


Figure 1. Key frames in Icelandic news media reports about COVID-19 from January 1st to March 31st (%)

3.1 COVID-19 as a health concern

Table 2 shows the specific issues that were the focus in the coverage when the “Health” frame was invoked. The key issue is clearly disease prevention, (such as hand washing, quarantine and social distancing), as seen in the fact that about half of all reports in all months covered disease prevention, with a peak of almost 56% in February. News reports that covered disease prevention often involved instructions on prevention measures but oftentimes experts were reminding the public that the measures were the key to fight the outbreak. For instance, Þórólfur Guðnason, the Chief Epidemiologist, was quoted in a report in March saying that “our success is based on these [preventive] measures”³ as he pleaded to the public to sympathize with the reduced freedom. As the virus was unknown before the start of 2020, it is not surprising that a large proportion of articles focused on explaining the virus itself at the start of the pandemic. Already in January, almost 40% of the articles explain the novel coronavirus in one way or another, that proportion then went down to 34% in February, with a drop to about 16% in March, which was the time when the reality of COVID-19 was unescapable in Iceland. When explaining the virus itself, and the disease it causes, it was typical that the news reports focused on how or if the virus could affect specific groups. For example, one report quoted the head of the birth unit at the National University Hospital of Iceland, who was present as an expert at one of the press conferences: “Hulda said that of course everyone is worried about pregnant women getting infected by COVID-19. Luckily, there is nothing that indicates that pregnant women become unusually sick as it sometimes is with viral diseases.”⁴

Table 2. Detailed proportions of sub-codes within the “Health” frame (%)

	January	February	March
Disease prevention	50.78	55.87	44.99
The virus	39.84	34.04	15.79
Medical statistics	39.84	43.43	24.56
Prediction models	0.78	0.7	2.72
Health system	30.47	41.08	24.18
Doctors	6.25	11.5	6.5
Other medical staff	7.81	4.69	7.22
Medical equipment	29.69	12.68	10.94
Treatment/cure	4.69	4.69	1.55

Statistics about COVID-19 emerged as an important part of the news coverage with about 40% of reports presenting some kind of statistics in January, that proportion was slightly higher in February but dropped in March where about one in every four articles presented COVID-19 related statistics. Typically, COVID-19 statistics were presented straight forward and in detail. For example, as highlighted in a typical news report of this kind in March: “Eight new coronavirus infections have been diagnosed in Iceland in the afternoon. It is unknown how many of the above-mentioned infections are domestic infections, but in total 119 samples were screened.”⁵⁵ While news reports covering any kind of prediction models concerning the spread of the virus and the disease were not frequent to begin with, there was a clear increase in March when the prediction model presented by academics at the University of Iceland emerged. When prediction models were discussed, it was common to illustrate what the most optimistic and the most pessimistic models looked like and then placing the current situation of the pandemic in Iceland within that context. Oftentimes, the news reports addressed how the prediction models work. For instance, typical news coverage on the prediction models can be highlighted from a report in March. It quoted Þórólfur Guðnason, who said: “We have yet to see the model and the statistics can change the model considerably. As the numbers are looking now it seems as if we are heading towards the most pessimistic prediction.”⁵⁶

Concerns about the Icelandic health care system began already in January, with about 30% of news reports discussing the health care system, and that proportion went up to more than 41% in February and then down to about 24% in March. Generally, the code covered all mentions about the situation of the health care system. For example, as stated in a news report at the end of March: “The Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management is seriously worried that people’s travel over the Easter could trigger increased burden for the health care system which is already run around because of the corona pandemic.”⁵⁷

About 5-10% of news reports specifically mentioned doctors or other medical staff in all three months. Medical equipment was clearly on the agenda in the first month, especially as concerns were raised about how prepared the Icelandic health system was for a potential pandemic, and this included both equipment for medical staff as well as medical equipment specifically needed for the disease, such as ventilators and testing pins. Typical coverage was similar to this report from mid-March: “Þórólfur Guðnason, the Chief Epidemiologist, at the Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management information briefing, said that testing pins were about to run out and that it could decrease the number of screenings in Iceland.”²⁸ About 30% of news reports in January discussed medical equipment, with the percentage dropping drastically in February and even further in March, when only about 10% of news reports discussed medical equipment. Finally, a small number of reports focused on the treatment of COVID-19, which is unsurprising given that the world hardly knew what the disease was and what the consequences of it would be, and a focus on treatment had not yet become prevalent. Uncertainty characterized these discussions which again highlights how little was known about the virus and the disease at the time.

3.2 COVID-19 as an economic concern

It quickly came apparent that COVID-19 was not only a health threat, but would affect almost everything in our society and have major economic consequences. The “Economy” frame, as mentioned before, consists of two codes: a code covering different sectors of the labor market (e.g., tourism, agriculture, retail) and a code comprising direct mentions of business in general and the repercussions of the pandemic on the economy (e.g., unemployment prospects, financial support from the government, direct effects of the pandemic on businesses etc). Table 3 breaks down the key sectors that were discussed when the media coverage was focused on economic issues. Usually, the coverage on economic factors centered around decreases in sales or other types of impact the outbreak of the pandemic had on the financial market or specific companies. Not surprisingly, tourism comes up as the largest category, and especially in the uncertain times when COVID-19 was clearly impacting other countries but had yet to enter Iceland. In fact, over half of all news reports that focused on the economy in January and February discussed concerns related to tourism. This shows how COVID-19 as a global threat emerged before it became a national threat, as the travel behavior of others had become a major source for the Icelandic economy.

Table 3. Detailed proportions of sub-codes within the “Economy” frame (%)

	January	February	March
Tourism industry	54.69	53.18	21.29
Other industries	19.53	7.06	11.46
Business in general	0	20.71	15.58

Typically, the media coverage on the pandemics' effects on the tourism industry focused on the specific impact on various Icelandic tourism companies. That was for example the case in a news report about the decreasing usages of taxis in Iceland in February. The report stated: “[...] Tours to Keflavík [where the international airport is located] have decreased drastically due to the recession in tourism and generally taxi drivers are not busy because of society’s slow pace in general.”⁹ Yet, as the pandemic moved closer into Icelandic reality, the focus on tourism became balanced out by an increased focus on business in general and other industries. In March, about 21% of articles focusing on the economy were related to tourism, compared to about 16% that related to business in general and roughly 12% to other industries.

3.3 Who had a voice in the media discourse at the onset of the pandemic?

Our second focus is on who was given a voice in the media at the beginning of the pandemic, with special attention on the role of experts vs. politicians. Figure 2 shows how this was divided during the first three months of 2020. Even though no cases had been confirmed in January, nearly 19% of media content addressing COVID-19 represented expert opinion. This underscores that experts were given space in the media from the very beginning (and even before the pandemic reached Iceland).¹⁰ The proportion of experts being able to voice their opinion grew to roughly 24% in February, the month when the first case of COVID-19 in Iceland was confirmed. It is, however, interesting to see that the proportion decreased already in March, the month when COVID-19 had firmly arrived in Iceland, when about 16% of articles include expert opinion.

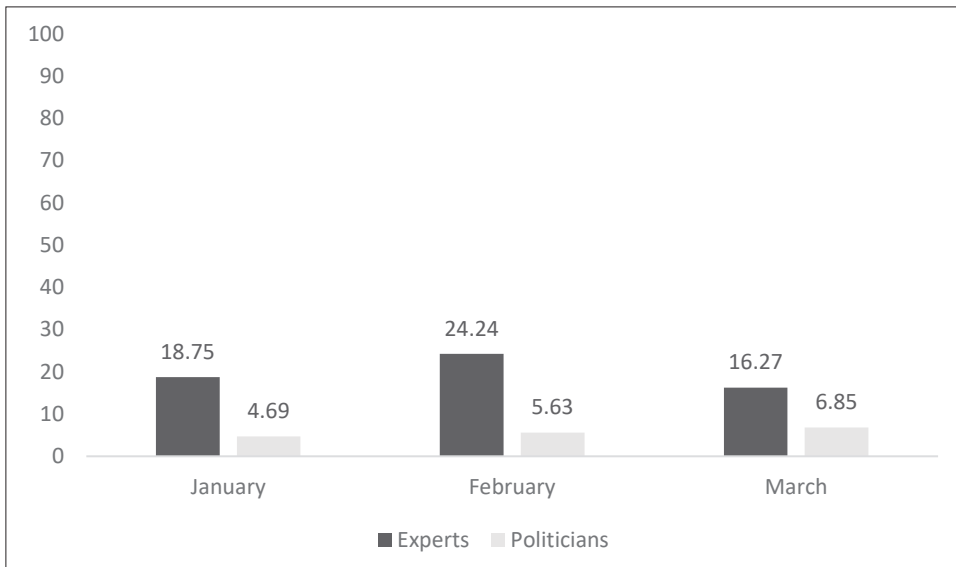


Figure 2. The proportion of experts and politicians voicing their opinions in the coded Icelandic news reports about COVID-19 (%)

3.4 The major role of experts in the media discourse

Of course, there are multiple types of expertise that can be covered in the media, but as COVID-19, at least in the beginning, was largely a health threat, our focus is on health-related experts, although our coding also shows experts outside of the health arena. Within the health realm, we on the one hand focus on the key players which include the team of three (often known as the trio), Alma Möller (Director of Health), Víðir Reynisson (Director of Emergency Management) and Þórólfur Guðnason (Chief Epidemiologist), as well as Kári Stefánsson, CEO of deCODE. On the other hand, we evaluate the extent to which the media gave voice to general experts on health and illness, including doctors and other medical staff.

Table 4 shows that the period preceding the arrival of the coronavirus in Iceland was dominated by the Chief Epidemiologist, Þórólfur Guðnason; during these two months (January and February) he was featured in almost 13% of all COVID-19 related news reports. The Director of Health, Alma Möller and the Director of Emergency Management, Víðir Reynisson, emerged on the media scene in January, but not nearly to the extent that Guðnason did. In February, roughly 2% of articles gave voice to Möller, compared to almost 6% that did the same to Reynisson. The proportions between the three seemed to even out a bit as the Icelandic nation became deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in March. However, Guðnason, still maintained the most prominent voice, followed by Reynisson and then Möller. Stefánsson emerged on the scene in March, with just under 2% of news reports citing him. Experts outside of the health care system, for example researchers from the University of Iceland, are categorized as other specialists and did not play a key role in the first three months of the pandemic. In fact, all of them combined were given a voice in about or less than 3% of news reports during this time.

When this is contrasted with politicians, it is clear that experts played a much larger role at the beginning of the pandemic, but politicians only had a voice in about 5% of articles in January and February, and only reached about 7% in March when the pandemic was clearly a major threat to Icelandic society (see figure 2).

Table 4. Detailed proportion of experts having the ability to voice their opinions in the coded news about COVID-19 (%)

	January	February	March
Alma Möller	0.78	2.35	3.1
Víðir Reynisson	0	5.63	4.82
Þórólfur Guðnason	12.5	12.91	5.61
Kári Stefánsson	0	0	1.65
Doctors	0.78	3.99	2.37
Other medical staff	3.91	1.64	1.72
Other specialists	3.13	3.29	2.27

3.5 The minor role of politicians in the media discourse

As shown, politicians played a minor role in the media discourse during the early stages of pandemic, and in fact had a voice in the media in less than 7% of articles during the first three months. Table 5 breaks down which politicians were given voice in the media during the period. We specifically show the four government ministers that were most directly relevant during this time, the Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir; the Minister of Health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir; the Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs, Bjarni Benediktsson; and the Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation, Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir. We combine other politicians into two categories, other government ministers and other politicians.

Table 5. Detailed proportion of politicians having the ability to voice their opinions in the coded news about COVID-19 (%)

	January	February	March
Katrín Jakobsdóttir	0	1.65	1.89
Svandís Svavarsdóttir	2.34	1.41	0.76
Bjarni Benediktsson	0	0.47	0.86
Þórdís Kolbrún R. Gylfadóttir	2.34	0.24	0.21
Other ministers	0	0.95	3.02
Other politicians	1.56	2.59	3.27

The table clearly confirms that politicians played a secondary role in the news media compared to experts. The nation was going through its greatest disaster in decades, arguably even exceeding the economic collapse of 2008. Yet, the Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, was only given voice in about 2% of news reports in February and March concerning COVID-19. For example, Jakobsdóttir was present in a similar number of news reports in March as the CEO of deCODE genetics, Kári Stefánsson. The Minister of Health, Svandís Svavarsdóttir, was slightly more prominent in the beginning of the potential pandemic, but less than 1% of articles during the first month of COVID-19 in Iceland (March) cited her. Similarly, the Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs, Bjarni Benediktsson, is virtually absent from the media discourse. Interestingly, our analysis revealed that the Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation, Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir, was featured in the same proportion of articles in January as the Minister of Health. While the proportion is small, it is noticeable for the status of the tourism industry at the beginning of the pandemic and the concerns for one of the major foundations of the Icelandic economy. Other ministers and politicians were given voice in about 3% of news reports in March, but those of course are a combination of several individuals, as compared to one person. The results clearly show that politics and politicians took a backseat to health-related concerns and experts during the emergence and first stages of COVID-19 in Iceland.

3.6 The interplay between specialists and politicians: Disseminating instructions and rules to the public

The key role of authorities during the first months of the pandemic was to guide the public through it. We use the communication of instructions and rules as one illustration of the interaction between experts and politicians. Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of instructions and rules in the news media content. They were often communicated by citing the information website covid.is or by citing experts directly. For instance, Guðnason's direct quote on hand sanitation in early February captures a typical dissemination of instructions to the public. He said: "People should do it [sanitise their hands] rather often, especially if they are in contact with objects and don't know what is on them. Then people should sanitise or wash their hands well because the virus is very sensitive for hand soap and hand sanitizer. It decreases the likelihood of people getting infected."¹¹ Another typical example of instructions and rules in the Icelandic media is Möller's remarks on hand sanitation and her encouragement to follow the rules on quarantine early in February 2020. She was quoted as saying: "Everyone has to obey the rules [upon returning home from abroad] in force. Then it is the rest of us [who haven't been abroad]. We need to be careful in all our behavior, we need to be careful when sanitising our hands. We have spoken about soap and hand sanitiser the whole week, we are not supposed to cough freely, we have to cough into a handkerchief or into the elbow pit and we should not be hugging or kissing a lot, maybe only our immediate family members. And show a lot of caution when we are around elders and others who are sensitive towards the disease with a lot of caution. We all need to familiarise ourselves with these instructions."¹² As can be seen in this quote, the instructions and rules were communicated in detail.

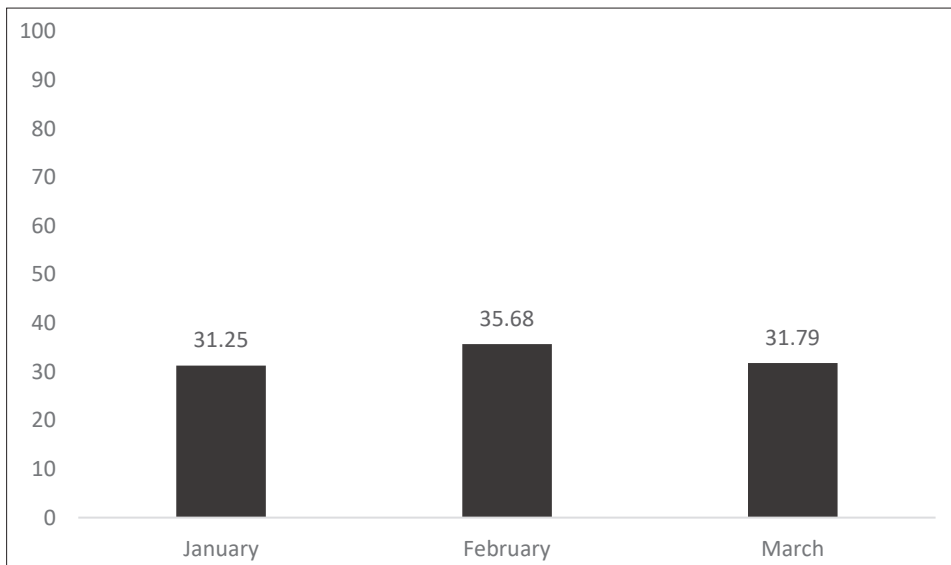


Figure 3. The proportion of news reports about COVID-19 featuring instructions and rules (%)

Oftentimes, the instructions and rules that were disseminated in the news reports served as reaffirmations or corrections. Reynisson's remarks on the rules for people returning from Italy to Iceland in late February 2020 encapsulate a typical news report of that kind. He was quoted saying: "We [the trio] want to iterate that it does not matter what route people are travelling from Italy. People who've been in Italy during this specific time, from February 29th, are required to obey the instructions of going to a 14 day quarantine."¹³

When politicians were given a voice in the media concerning instructions and rules, they mainly encouraged the public to listen to the experts, gave them credit, thanked them or quoted them. For instance, Minister of Health, Svavarsdóttir, urged the public to follow the trio's instructions, when she was quoted in February as saying: "It's important that everyone thinks about their hygiene habits and handwashing, that we minimize hugging [...] and follow the instructions in force."¹⁴ Prime Minister Jakobsdóttir's remarks on the trio in March are a good example of the way politicians praised the work of the specialists. She was quoted saying that the trio's contribution to the society was "enormously important."¹⁵ Another example which captures the complex relationship between politicians and the experts concerning rules and instructions comes from the Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation. As Gylfadóttir said, when discussing the relationship: "[...] because we have extremely great people, but we also have us who bear the political responsibility. Without saying: "Well done Þórdís Kolbrún [Gylfadóttir]", I must still say that we [the politicians] are not simply tossing the responsibility completely to the trio [...] we are taking responsibility by reaching conclusions according to what the experts say. This, however, does not mean that we can point our fingers to them and say: "Hey! They told us to do it" It is us [politicians] that ultimately are responsible."¹⁶ This interesting tendency to either quote, thank the experts or reaffirm their role, further underlines the nature of the political role that was emerging at the time, with experts clearly being at the forefront, even in the political discourse.

4. Discussion

Our aim was to answer *how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iceland was framed and who were given prominent voices in the media*. Recent research has shown how COVID-19 has affected Icelandic journalists and the working conditions in newsrooms (Guðmundsson 2020), and as we have shown, the pandemic also had great impact on the news media content that these journalists produced. We have demonstrated that health-related subjects and economic factors were prominent in the news media at the onset of the pandemic. COVID-19 was framed as a health issue with serious implications for the economy. Our findings highlight that from the very start of the pandemic, health-related subjects, such as disease prevention, COVID-19 statistics and the health care system were at the forefront of media coverage. The considerable prominence of economic factors in the media is not surprising, though, considering the serious financial repercussions the Icelandic economy was facing as the pandemic affected the tourism industry from the very start.

The two key frames that emerged, “Health” and “Economy”, highlighted the medical and economic nature of the pandemic and these consistent frames gradually created a general and shared understanding of the seriousness of the crisis (Brinson & Stohl 2012; Powell 2011). This however, also happened through agenda-setting, as the public was constantly given cues to determine the seriousness of the situations. An important cue of this kind was for example the daily information briefings which highlighted how serious the pandemic was. Furthermore, the quantity of news about rules, instructions and disease prevention measures, also served as cues (McCombs 2004) to the pandemic’s severity. The fact that health-related subjects were seen as key topics, resonates well with the government’s avowed aim to ensure that the general public had access to the relevant and correct information. Authorities asserted that educating the public on how to fight the pandemic could help fight the outbreak of the virus in the society. At the onset of the outbreak of COVID-19 in Iceland, authorities highlighted the importance of correct and relevant information and stressed that it is pivotal, during critical times of a serious threat to public health, to have reactive and relevant information available (The National Security Council 2020).

As we have illustrated, experts were given the most prominent voices in the media at the onset of COVID-19 in Iceland. Our analysis shows that experts were at the helm of communication whilst politicians remained in the background supporting and endorsing the experts’ ideas and advice. The dissemination of instructions and rules concerning COVID-19 illuminates the relationship between experts and politicians, as the experts were given voices in the media to communicate such information. The politicians, however, commonly cited the experts, thanked them or endorsed them, when they emphasized specific rules and instructions. As previously highlighted, Khan (2020) has identified two different models of leadership. On the one hand, “The Politician Prominence Model”, which is characterized by the politicians receiving consultation from experts but remaining at the helm of communication as leaders and the faces of a crisis. On the other hand, “The Expert Appointee Prominence model”, where experts are at the forefront of disseminating vital information to the public, whilst the politicians support and endorse the expert opinions. Our analysis shows that the Icelandic case can be defined to fit within the latter model. It was not surprising that the experts were more prominent in the media at the onset of the pandemic in Iceland and this most likely contributed to high trust numbers seen in Iceland concerning the response to the crisis. As previous studies have shown, experts can increase the credibility of government crises responses, the measures implemented and the public’s participation (Coman et al. 2021). The political presence in the Icelandic media at the onset of the pandemic was perhaps less than what could have been expected in such a massive crisis. The near absolute absence of the most powerful and relevant ministers was indeed quite surprising. The traditional political role was mainly visible when discussing economic topics.

Finally, we would like to highlight that further research on news media reports concerning COVID-19 is required as we have only covered the onset of the pandemic in Iceland. It is important to conduct research for longer periods of time and to investi-

gate how the narrative and the relationship between the experts and politicians changes over different periods of the pandemic, and how this might have impacted perceptions concerning the disease and the measures put forth by authorities. Moreover, it would be curious to compare the situation between different waves of the pandemic. Yet importantly, we have clearly illustrated the role of experts at the beginning of the pandemic and how the media framed the crisis in terms of health and the economy. Our work sheds a critical light on media coverage at the early stages of the pandemic, during a time when neither experts, politicians or the public had the faintest idea of what was to happen in the next few months and how our society would be fundamentally altered.

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Notes

- 1 Kórón* includes all the Icelandic declensions of the word.
- 2 Furthermore, regional media outlets in Iceland have historically been weak (Guðmundsson, 2006).
- 3 “Þórolfur undrandi á undanþágubeiðnum fyrir sóttkvi“, *Ruv.is*, March 31st 2020. <https://www.ruv.is/frett/2020/03/31/thorolfur-undrandi-a-undanthagubeidnum-fyrir-sottkvi>
- 4 “Aðstandendur fá ekki að vera viðstaddir keisaraskurði“, *Ruv.is*, March 31st 2020. <https://www.ruv.is/frett/2020/03/31/adstandendur-fa-ekki-ad-vera-vidstaddir-keisaraskurdi>
- 5 “117 smit staðfest hér á landi“, *Mbl.is*, March 12th 2020, https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2020/03/12/117_smit_stadfest_her_a_landi/
- 6 “Virðumst vera frekar að stefna í svartýnu spána“, *Vísir.is*, March 22 2020, <https://www.visir.is/g/202024182d>
- 7 “Ferðalög um páskana gæti sett enn meira álag á heilbrigðiskerfið“, *Vísir.is*, March 31st 2020, <https://www.visir.is/g/202029846d>
- 8 “Skortur á sýnatökupinum á ekki við um Landspítalann“, *Ruv.is*, March 18th, 2020, <https://www.ruv.is/frett/skortur-a-synatokupinum-a-ekki-vid-um-landspitalann>
- 9 “Lítið að gera hjá leigubílstjórum vegna ástandsins“, *Mbl.is*, March 14th, 2020, https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2020/03/14/litid_ad_gera_hja_leigubilstjorum_vegna_astandsins/
- 10 This echoes previous research in Iceland that has shown how Icelandic journalists tend to rely on experts as their sources (Kolbeins 2012)
- 11 “Myndi vilja geta takmarkað komur ferðamanna“, *Ruv.is*, February 2nd 2020, <https://www.ruv.is/frett/myndi-vilja-geta-takmarkad-komur-ferdamanna>
- 12 “Þetta er auðvitað stríð og nú er innrás hafin“, *Fréttabladid.is*, March 8 2020, <https://www.frettabladid.is/frettir/thetta-er-audvitad-strid-og-nu-er-innras-hafin/>
- 13 “Bent á að Íslendingar komi aðra leið heim frá Ítalíu“, *Ruv.is*, March 2nd, 2020, <https://www.ruv.is/frett/bent-a-ad-islendingar-komi-adra-leid-heim-fra-italiu>

- 14 “Þakklát öllum á Íslandi fyrir að leggja sitt af mörkum í baráttunni við veiruna“, *Vísir.is*, March 22nd 2020. <https://www.visir.is/g/202024264d/thakklat-ollum-a-islandi-fyrir-ad-leggja-sitt-af-morkum-i-barattunni-vid-veiruna>
- 15 “Íslendingar miklu betur í stakk búnir en áður“, *Vísir.is*, March 31st, 2020, <https://www.visir.is/g/202028706d/islendingar-miklu-betur-i-stakk-bunir-en-adur>
- 16 “Segir stjórnvöld alls ekki vera að varpa ábyrgðinni yfir á þríeykið“, *Vísir.is*, March 24th, 2020, <https://www.visir.is/g/202025023d>

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