The Anti-Social Network? Framing Social Media in Wartime

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Abstract
Numerous studies address the uses and perceived effects of social media, but a scholarly void exists about how it is framed in the mainstream media. This study fills this void using a content analysis of news items that included references to social media in Israel’s six daily Hebrew-language printed newspapers during the Israel–Gaza war (2014). The papers framed social media primarily as spaces of hate speech and distribution of rumors. Additional salient themes referred to social media as alternative media channels by politicians and celebrities and as arenas of public diplomacy. Social media was rarely portrayed as platforms to orchestrate collective action or to meet the enemy.

Keywords
social media, Facebook, emergency, framing

Introduction
The study examines the framing of online social media in the mainstream press, using the case of the Israel–Gaza war in the summer of 2014.

The article focuses on Facebook which in 2010, when Mark Zuckerberg its chairperson was hailed as *Time Magazine’s* Person of the Year, was lauded “for connecting more than half a billion people and mapping the social relations among them, for creating a new system of exchanging information, and for changing how we live our lives” (Grossman, 2010). Israel is a fruitful arena for studies of the usage and framing of Facebook, being a world leader in the percentage of the population who use Facebook and the average time spent thereon (ComScore, 2011). A variety of reasons explain social media usage. First and foremost is the need to maintain contact with friends. Additional reasons are receiving information and updates, fun, pastime, keeping in touch with family, work purposes, and more (Dror & Gershon, 2012).

In spite of the extensive use of social media, there are barely scholarly references as to how social media is framed in the mainstream media in general and in newspapers in particular. I next explain the significance of studying the framing of social media in the press and then present some salient frames of social media from the academic literature and the media as a background to study the textual frames of social media in the Israel–Gaza war of 2014.

Social Media Frames
Frames can be defined as central organizing ideas or storylines (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987), which can shape individual understanding and opinion of an issue by emphasizing specific elements or features of the broader picture (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997), in a manner that promotes a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993), making framing a fundamental part of political communication (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Moreover, frames have the ability to grant meaning to the issue, while they suggest how a person should think about it and understand it (Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

Arguably, frames can be significant for our perceptions and views of the online realm, not only because they demonstrate how it is discussed in various spheres and perceived in the cultural discourse of technology but also since they generate “an initial structure to Internet experiences” (Johnston, 2009) by highlighting and focusing on of several aspects of our online experiences, overshadowing others. Moreover, Wyatt (2004) emphasizes that framing can influence our perceptions and views not only about online experiences that
already occurred but also such online experiences that had no occurred yet; discourses about the online realm “can at the same time both [provide] us with possibilities and [limit] our possibilities . . . [they] can help people comprehend the new, the unseen, the unknown” thus leading us to abstain from certain experiences and facilitate others.

Indeed, the literature demonstrates how a framing shift has been accompanied by a conceptual shift in a variety of online issues, such as the framing of/thinking about hacking (Nissenbaum, 2004), use of self-tracking devices that connect to the Internet (Ruckenstein & Pantzar, 2017), the accumulation and analysis of “big data” (Puschmann & Burgess, 2014), and more. Arguably, the framing of social media in the press can also influence how it is perceived by the public; for example, as spaces for civic collaboration or hate mongering? Arenas for spreading of rumors or for finding solutions to public problems?

Fisher and Wright (2001) illustrate how discourse in the academia and in popular culture about the Internet and its implications are replete with both utopian and dystopian arguments. Utopian views include a conception of the Internet as a technology potentially capable of solving social problems, specifically capable of deepening democracy, increasing social capital in communities, and enhancing civic participation. In contrast, the dystopian views stress the Internet’s potentially diverse effect on society and especially on its democratic backbone, and its capacity to undermine the centers of power in government, society, and communities. Since such discourses can influence public perceptions and opinions, it is important to study how the Internet in general, and social media in particular, is framed by the mainstream media: negatively or positively? as spaces that close or open possibilities? or even: as utopian or dystopian arenas?

Journalists attribute considerable significance to the impact of digital tools on the scope and character of participation in activism (Freelon, Merritt, & Jaymes, 2015). Still, in the academic literature, there are hardly any references to the frames of these digital tools in the mainstream press. The first of two studies that examined how social media are framed in the mainstream press analyzed how social media were framed during the 2011 revolution in Egypt on Al-Jazeera in Arabic (Campbell & Hawk, 2012). The mainstream media presented social media only in a positive light, as tools that empower users and as sites that present what actually happens in Egypt. Distributing materials on social media enabled the revolutionaries to achieve their goals, and in this regard Facebook and other social media platforms were presented as inseparable parts of the revolution. More than a third of the mentions of Facebook were in reference to Egyptian youth, and social media were presented as places that enable them to dream of and plan better futures in their country.

The second and last study of media representation of Facebook analyzed its coverage in reference to the 2011 social protest in the Israeli local press (Lev-On, in press). Facebook was mainly presented as a recruitment and organizational tool, and as a means for transmitting information among the protesters and between them within the general public. As in the Egyptian case, Facebook was mainly presented in a positive light, as a tool that enabled public discussion, transparency, and access to information.

Social and Political Usage of Facebook

Besides the few studies that examined the frames used by the mainstream media to cover social media, numerous studies looked at the uses that citizens and politicians make of social media. The studies reveal a few central themes.

Social Media as Tools for Civic Collaboration

Many studies demonstrate that social media have become major tools for entrepreneurs and activists. For example, they provide meeting places for activists for various causes; enable rapid and extensive top-down and bottom-up information flows, from opinion leaders to activists and vice versa; and supplement mobilization and recruitment efforts (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Lev-On, 2012; Lev-On & Hardin, 2008; Lev-On & Steinfeld, in press; Shirky, 2008).

The significance of social media usage increases in emergencies, when individual needs become more acute, and concern existential aspects like taking care of family members or shortage of food and shelter. Sometimes, the digital and cellular channels are the only channels available to the public to send requests and provide assistance. Hence, an academic interest emerges in the abilities of social media to enable citizens to organize and provide mutual assistance.

Indeed, studies of media usage in emergencies point to the significance of new media channels, which lies not only in “top-down” information transmission but also mainly in the opportunities it provides for individuals and groups to disseminate information, organize, and participate in collective action. Another interesting finding is the centrality of small media, such as local online forums and Facebook groups, which often are the ones in which information adapted to the needs of residents can be obtained. On the other hand, despite the flood of information available in the traditional channels, they do not always contain information in the granularity needed by residents (Lev-On, 2012; Lev-On & Uziel, 2018; Procopio & Procopio, 2007).

Social Media as Arenas of Struggle Over Public Opinion

Studies demonstrate that social media function as arenas of struggle over public opinion. For example, as the presence of worldwide population on Facebook continues to grow, the advertising and public relation efforts of states and organizations shift to Facebook. In the overt or covert leading of states
and institutions, people are recruited for online activities that promote the interests and images of states (Attias, 2012).

Zhang (2013) offers a four-stage model to describe the process in which social media becomes a part of public diplomacy efforts: the initial stage which he calls the issue fermenting and going viral phase, the second and proactive phase, the third and reactive phase, and the last one—the issue receding and a new issue fermenting stage. Zhang argues that in the proactive and reactive phases, there is a strategic role for social media. In these phases, political actors can effectively use social media to support a trend, which aligns with their interest, participate in setting agendas, and respond to crises.

Social Media as Tools for Bypassing Mainstream Media

Social media also comes up in the literature in the context of usage by opinion leaders to bypass mainstream media. Social media enables politicians, journalists, celebrities, and others to maintain direct contact with their audiences. Whereas in the past they were dependent on the mainstream media for coverage and exposure, now they can use their social media pages to interact with their audiences directly without the involvement of the traditional intermediaries.

Early research about Internet usage by politicians focused on their fears and the damages that social media might cause to their image. Social media arenas expose politicians to the public’s criticism, force them to answer uneasy questions, and require time and resources to be properly administered (Stromer-Galley, 2000). Still, currently it seems that Facebook pages are an absolute must for politicians. In Israel, 105 of the 120 MPs maintain a Facebook page (Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2018), sometimes with extensive activity.

Journalists also use the content posted on pages of politicians, which are useful resources, to directly access the politicians’ musings. A study from Germany demonstrates that the main target audiences of the Facebook activity of many of the politicians are not citizens but rather journalists; local politicians primarily aim at getting journalists’ attention and making their positions about relevant issues accessible to them (Bernhard & Dohle, 2015).

Rumors on Social Media

DiFonzo (2008) defines rumors as “unverified information statements that circulate about topics that people perceive as important; arise in situations of ambiguity, threat, or potential threat; and are used by people attempting to make sense or to manage risk” (DiFonzo, 2008, p. 38).

Creating and circulating rumors online became very common due to the easiness to manipulate messages and distribute them to large groups. In addition, when information is virally distributed on social media it gains legitimacy from the people who forward the message; the fact that people receive the message from an acquaintance grant them confidence that the information is indeed legitimate, thus giving them a green light to forward the information themselves (Friggeri, Adamic, Eckles, & Cheng, 2014).

The scholarly evidence about rumor circulation via social media is not conclusive. On one hand, studies demonstrate that Twitter can reveal corrections to false information and spread them around; thus, in a study of social media activity after the earthquake in Chile in 2010, there was a 1:1 ratio between tweets that grounded false rumors and tweets exposing them. On the other hand, a study that examined three Twitter rumors after the terrorist attack in the Boston marathon in 2013 found that the ratios were 44:1, 18:1, and 5:1 in favor of tweets that support false rumors (Starbird, Maddock, Orand, Achterman, & Mason, 2014; Zubiaga, Liakata, Procter, Bontcheva, & Tolmie, 2015). It seems that in the contemporary media ecology, it is quite easy to spread lies and rumors but it can be much harder to refute them.

Social Media as Facilitators of Incitement and Hatred

Generally, in Facebook and other social media platforms, people are identified by their full name, publicize texts and pictures of themselves, and make efforts to build a positive image. Studies found that Facebook users tend to mainly post information about their achievements, successes, and significant milestones in their lives yet avoid publicly sharing their personal difficulties, failures, and hardships (Day, 2013). Consequently, there are significantly more positive than negative messages on Facebook, which is often described as a “happy world” (Chou & Edge, 2012; see Kim & Hancock, 2015).

Still, in recent years, another aspect of Facebook usage emerges, which includes hate speech, threats, incitement and bullying. Cohen-Almagor (2011) defines hate speech as hostile and malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics. It expresses discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or prejudicial attitudes toward those characteristics, which include gender, race, religion, ethnicity, color, national origin, disability or sexual orientation. (p. 3)

High-profile events such as elections, security, or economic crises can lead to proliferation of hate speech (Oksanen, Hawdon, Holkeri, Näsi, & Räsänen, 2014).

The academic study of hate speech focuses on websites and on organizations that mobilize people to perform hate speech activities, often anonymously. Still, much hate speech is between private individuals who do not belong to online organizations and on Facebook—where people are identified (Oksanen et al., 2014). The few studies of exposure to hate speech online indicate that social media may facilitate the spread of hate speech, with studies finding that the proportion of people who engage with hate speech is higher on social media than on traditional media. However, the extent to which social media facilitates the spread of hate speech remains a topic of ongoing research.
speech on social media demonstrate the large scope of this phenomenon. In a study of 723 Facebook users aged 15–18 in Finland, 67% reported that they were exposed to hate speech, and 21% responded that they were victims of hate speech. Most of the hate speech evolved around sexual orientation (68%), appearance (61%), ethnic or national origins (50%), and religious faith (43%). Facebook (67%) and YouTube (47%) were the most prominent arenas for hate speech, while on Twitter such a speech was almost nonexistent (Oksanen et al., 2014).  

Another study of 1,032 American Internet users aged 15–30 found that 53.4% were exposed to hate speech in 3 months before data collection took place. Here as well, the prominent contexts for hate speech were sexual orientation (60.6%) followed by ethnic or national origins (60.1%) and political views (47.9%). This study also demonstrates that Facebook leads in the exposure of hate speech, followed by YouTube (Hawdon, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2014).

The Israel–Gaza War of 2014

The Israel–Gaza war of 2014 was the longest military operation waged by the State of Israel. Its immediate background, from the Israeli perspective, was the growing number of rocket fired from Gaza at civilian populations in Southern Israel in June 2014, which escalated into a full military operation. The operation began on 7 July 2014 and lasted 50 days. During this period, rocket firing was frequently carried out toward civilian population in the communities surrounding the Gaza strip, the Southern parts of Israel, and beyond. Overall, 3,600 rockets and mortars landed in Israel, 224 of which fell in urban areas (Wikipedia, 2015). This was the first operation in which significant parts of the country were under a considerable barrage of rockets, although the missile-against-missiles “Iron Dome” was able to intercept many missiles fired toward residential areas. During the operation, 67 Israeli soldiers and 5 civilians were killed and some 1,620 soldiers and 837 civilians were injured. On the Palestinian side, 2,203 were killed and over 11,000 injured.

The content in the leading media channels was dominated by issues related to the military operation. Rockets fired into Israel, the functioning of the “Iron Dome” system, the threat of border-crossing tunnels from Gaza, and military and political activities were at the top of the headlines in the printed press throughout the entire operation (Mann & Lev-On, 2015). Where television and Internet news sites were primary sources of national and local information, mobile and social channels (SMS, Facebook, and WhatsApp) were dominant in terms of social uses, discussions, requests, and provision of assistance (Lev-On & Uziel, 2018). According to a survey of the Israel Internet Society (2014), 39% of WhatsApp users learned through it about security events before they were publicized, while 37% confirmed that they forwarded classified information received through WhatsApp. Another study of Malka, Ariel, and Avidar (2015) conducted via a representative online panel indicates that 47% of Israelis used WhatsApp at least once a day to keep up with what was going on and over 36% did so several times a day. Overall, 38% reported they were involved in forwarding rumors at least once during the war.

Another channel that attracted significant interest during the war was Facebook, which on one hand was used to promote collaborative initiatives of civilians, for example, campaigns for purchasing products manufactured in the South, for recruitment of participants in funerals of soldiers without families, for visiting wounded soldiers in hospitals, organizing and sending packages to soldiers, and more (Malka et al., 2015). On the other hand, Facebook stood out due to the violent discourse that has developed on it and included very large amounts of verbal violence, calls for boycotts and “unfriendings” due to political disagreements (John & Dvир-Givrsman, 2015).

Two months after the war, Israeli president Reuven Rivlin expressed in the Israeli parliament his outrage and concern from the online hate speech phenomenon: “I was horrified by the utter bullying that has contaminated the public discourse . . . unfortunately this violence does not stop in the social networks, just as it is not aimed merely at public personas. It is amongst us, in the streets, in the demonstrations and in the schools” (Knesset, 2014). According to Rivlin, hate speech is not unique to social media, yet it is accelerated and radicalized on Facebook.

The literature demonstrates that Facebook and online social media can and has been framed and used in many ways. On one hand, it could be used to orchestrate collective actions, communicate with target audiences while bypassing intermediaries or implement public diplomacy actions collaboratively. On the other hand, the very same tools can be used to circulate rumors, insult, humiliate, and antagonize. The study examines the prevalence of such frames during the Israel–Gaza war of 2014 in the Israeli press.

Methodology

The study analyzes the coverage of social media in general and Facebook in particular, in the mainstream media during the Israel–Gaza war in 2014. For this purpose, a quantitative content analysis was used.

The study analyzed items from the six daily newspapers that appear in print in Hebrew: Israel-Hayom, Yedioth-Aharonot, Ma’ariv, Ha’aretz, Globes, and Calcalist. The items were retrieved from the database of IFAT, an Israeli media monitoring company that maintains a digital database of content from all the Israeli media. All the items from throughout the war (8 July 2014–26 August 2014), which included one of the pre-defined search terms (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and social networks) were extracted from the database. This kind of automatic search ensures that all the items, which have at least one of the search terms would be included in the sample, but at the price
of including many irrelevant stories. Hence, a secondary process of filtering was required, at the end at which the final sample included 329 items, out of which 68 were published in Yedioth-Aharonot (20.7%), 75 in Ma’ariv (20.8%), 84 items in Ha’aretz (25.5%), 72 items in Israel-Hayom (21.9%), 20 in Globes (6.1%), and 10 in Calcalist (3%). More than half (59.3%) of the items are news items (195) and almost a third (29.8%) are personal columns. The rest are from sections that do not deal with current events (31, 9.4%) and others (5, 1.5%).

Half of the items in the sample (165, 50.2%) were in the first section of the newspapers, slightly more than a third were in the weekend sections (115, 35%) and the rest were in sections that were published during the week (31, 9.4%), in economy sections (17, 5.2%) and one item was published in a section classified as “other.”

The coding book prepared for this study included these variables:

- General variables: the names of the newspaper and the author, the title of the item, date of publication, page number, section in the newspaper, and the kind of item (opinion piece, news items, sections that do not deal with current affairs—such as television reviews and gossip columns or “other”).
- The level of salience of the item:

  1. Low salience: references to social media in the context of the war are made in passing in a few sentences throughout the item.
  2. Medium salience: references to social media in the context of the war cover at least a full paragraph and although it is not the central theme of the item, it can appear in its title.
  3. High salience: references to social media in the context of the war appear throughout half of the item at least and can appear in its title.
  4. Very high salience: a story exclusively in reference to social media in the context of the war, it is the central theme of the item and appears in its title and in at least half of the item.

In a large part of the items, references to social media in the context of the war gained low (154, 46.8%) or medium (98, 29.8%) salience. In 24 of the items (7.3%), the theme received high salience and in 53 items (16.1%) the theme reached very high salience.

In total, 14 central themes that appeared in the items were identified by the principal investigator (PI) and the coder. Those categories where coded as binary variables and the coder was asked to indicate whether the theme exists in the item or not. A reliability test was carried out between the coder and the PI. After two rounds of coding involving 65 items (20% of the sample) and after deciding on controversial issues, the reliability achieved over 90% in all categories.

The seven most popular themes (each appeared in more than 10% of the items) will be more thoroughly discussed in the “Findings” section. They are social media as public spaces for expression, as discourse arenas, as platforms for hate speech, as alternative media for political players, as arenas of struggle over international public opinion, as alternative channels for celebrities, and as tools for disseminating lies and rumors. Due to shortage of space, the seven themes which were less frequent and were mentioned in less than 10% of the news items in the sample are briefly mentioned below:

1. Social media as alternative channels for journalists— included 30 (9.1%) of the items and in 6 (7.8%) of the items in which references to social media were salient or very salient: “Israelis are standing on a hill overlooking Gaza, they enjoy the Israeli attack over helpless Gazans”, this was the title of a photograph by a Danish journalist who uploaded it to his twitter account.”
2. Social media as arenas to demonstrate Israeli patriotism—included in 29 (8.8%) of all items and in 11 (14.3%) of the items in which references to social media were salient or very salient: “The organizers opened a Facebook page called ‘together thanking the soldiers’ in which Internet users were asked to replace their profile picture with a picture of combat soldiers.”
3. Facebook as a platform for assisting soldiers and their families—included in 21 (6.4%) of all items and in 6 (7.8%) of the items in which references to social media were salient or very salient: “A status on Facebook about a lone soldier (who has no family in Israel) who is hospitalized . . . attracted dozens of people yesterday”; “The Israeli people set me up with a job until retirement” said the father of captain Demitr Levitas, RIP who was killed in operation Protective Edge. “The father, Alexander, is a gifted illustrator . . . His daughter Anna posted on Facebook a request to assist her father to work as an illustrator to keep him from going into a deep depression . . . [the request] received thousands of Shares.”
4. Social media as sources of information on soldiers and citizens killed in the war—included in 19 (5.8%) of the items and in 3 (3.9%) of the items in which references to social media were salient or very salient: “The Facebook pages of Gilad Ya’acoby and Oz Mendelovic, combat soldiers killed in Gaza, turned in one horrible moment into memorials . . . Facebook reveals everything. Youth, joyfulness, love and tragedies as well.”
5. Social media as platforms for assisting residents of the South—included in 16 (4.9%) of the items and in 3 (3.9%) of the items in which references to social media were salient or very salient: “Residents of the North . . . offer their houses to the families of the
South . . . on the Facebook page ‘hosting the south residents’, which has approximately 5,000 members, offers are made since the beginning of the fighting.”

6. Social media as platforms for memes and jokes— included in 14 (4.9%) of all items and in 9 (11.7%) of the items in which references to social media were salient or very salient: “At the height of the war a new kind of discourse began to spread on social media: conversations, mainly sarcastic or humoristic, that Israelis had with the official Hebrew Twitter account of the military arm of the Hamas.”

7. Social media as an opportunity to meet the other— included in 6 (1.8%) of all items, and in 1 (1.3%) of the items in which references to social media were salient or very salient: “On the Facebook page: ‘Israel loves Palestine, Palestine loves Israel’ a dialog was carried out between Palestinians and Israelis.”

Findings

In this section, the seven most frequent themes from the entire sample are surveyed in detail:

1. Social media as public spheres, in which contents are distributed and opinions are presented;
2. Social media as discourse arenas, emphasizing the dialogic aspect of the conversations that occur in social media platforms;
3. Social media as platforms for hate speech and incitement;
4. Social media as tools for politicians to bypass the mainstream media by Israeli, Palestinian, and foreign politicians and institutions;
5. Social media as arenas of struggle over public opinion;
6. Social media as alternative channels for celebrities to communicate with their audiences; and finally,
7. Social media as channels to distribute rumors and lies

Below I expand on each of these themes in detail.

Social Media as Public Spheres

Social media during the war was first and foremost portrayed as public spheres in which contents are distributed and opinions are presented. This theme appears in 99% of the items, and in all the items in which social media gained high or very high salience, for example:

Social media is our largest bonfire, it is the arena in which most of us spend a lot of time these days, to relieve our boredom and stress, or to express ourselves and to demonstrate that the Hamas cannot break our spirit.

In items with very few lines, for example, from gossip sections, this was the only theme that emerged. Such items portray social media usage by celebrities, without mentioning the responses received following their posts, for example, “he wrote a post on Facebook offering to spend a week in his house in Neve-Tzedek.”

Social Media as Discourse Arenas

The second frequent theme refers to the dialogic aspect of social media. This theme appears in slightly more than half of the items in the sample (52.2%) and in 85% of the items in which references to social media were highly or very highly salient. Items included explicit references to at least one of these actions: liking a post, commenting on or sharing a post, writing a status or comment, friending or unfriending, updating contents incorporating evidence for self-censorship. A few examples are as follows:

Even the greatest cynics would have become enthusiastic in light of the general atmosphere . . . over the weekend on Facebook which is the central public discourse arena. Countless people are not only praying for our soldiers to be well but also call everyone to share the prayers.

Usually I would get thirty or forty likes on a post and in extreme cases it reached 100 or 200, and here in 2-3 hours I got 10,000 likes and hundreds of comments and shares . . . if we look for the communicative sphere which best symbolizes the war . . . it is the new interrelations between social media and mainstream media . . . these networks have become a kind of spokesmen for the feelings of the public that are highly tense during the war.

These quotes demonstrate the extent to which social media, and particularly Facebook, are perceived by journalists as central discourse spheres. Facebook was portrayed as an active part in setting the agenda of the public discourse in Israel, online as well as offline. The influence over the communicative agenda was just one aspect of a much broader phenomenon, which is the carryover of Facebook discussions from the online to the offline realm. The notable examples in terms of scope of participants and emotionality were in the massive funerals of lone soldiers killed during the war. As a result of Facebook statuses that called people to participate, hundreds of thousands of people arrived to pay soldiers their last respect. A popular TV show about Internet affairs called such a funeral “the first Facebook funeral in the world”:

Today you do not need a megaphone. It has been replaced by social media . . . in the funerals of the lone soldiers who were killed . . . the heart simply flooded due to this dense and strong social network that is called the people of Israel.

This quote was taken from a personal column and is worth analyzing in light of two interesting points that it demonstrates. First, the writer equalizes Facebook to a megaphone. This metaphor encapsulates a worldview according to it. Facebook is primarily a tool that enables voices to be better heard, it enhances the volume of arguments that exist anyway but does not create
something new out of nothing, that is, Facebook echoes to large
distant voices that otherwise would have not gained substantial
exposure. Second, the author presents a structural analogy
between online social networks and the classical meaning of a
social network—a group of connected people.

Another example that uses social media as a metaphor
refers to the combat strategy of the Israel Defense Forces
during a security event that required cooperation between
many military units:

The naval penetration of Hamas’s five terrorists who were
quickly located and killed as they got out of the water . . .
demonstrates that the joint land, sea and air security cooperation
works very well . . . The idea is to connect all the different forces
to one joint network similar to the online social media.

When analyzing Facebook frames that emphasize its discursive aspects, one should ask: who participates in the discourse? The items present a wide range of discourse participants and it seems like “everyone is there”; even soldiers who were killed got their “voices heard” through statuses from their Facebook profiles. Two distinct populations, children and Palestinians, who face obstacles that prevent them from participating in offline social discourses, were portrayed as easily accessible on Facebook:

In the show “let us grow up quietly” [on the Children’s Channel] the hosts encourage the young viewers to share their feelings on “face” [Facebook] . . . and to upload pictures to “instush” [Instagram].

Inside of all this anxiety and uncertainty, the family of the missing warrior Oron Sahul had to face Hamas’s psychological warfare . . . a few Facebook pages were established with the soldier’s name in Hebrew, English or Arabic in which statuses like “we want Oron home” or “it is all up to your government” were posted. Other pages included memes and drawings that made fun of the soldier and his family. Many users complained to Facebook that the pages contain offensive content but since most of them were not removed, users started to flood the pages with Israeli flags and messages.

The last quote demonstrates that Facebook has become established as a platform where discourse is not always civil and friendly. One possible result is the prevalence of “unfriending,” which appeared in quite a few items in the sample:

If there is something that we have not seen in the past military operations it is that people threatened to unfriend their friends, and eventually did it to people who had different and more extreme opinions than their own.

**Social Media as Platforms for Hate Speech**

The third most frequent theme was in reference to social media as platforms of hate speech and incitement. Groups and pages were set up calling to send all leftists to gas chambers and kill all the Arabs, or at least have the citizenship revoked from members of these two groups: people who dared to express empathy toward the residents of Gaza were cursed and threatened. There were also cases of people expressing happiness over the death of IDF soldiers and statuses with prayers for further Israeli victims. Newspapers devoted dozens of items (28.8% of the items in the entire sample; 37.6% of the items in which social media gained high or very high salience) to hate speech on social media:

In the past few weeks Facebook has become a war zone. Virtual and real friends are radicalizing their positions, calling for death, revenge and expressing joy for demonstrations of violence. Whoever disagrees remains quiet, unfriends or leaves . . . The Facebook page “Racists that depress me” . . . covers shameless racist crap and presents screenshots of posts that are openly inciting, racist and extreme.

As in the previous theme, the connection between online and offline is straightforward. Online hate speech has led to physical violence that resulted in involvement of the police and the courts. Items have covered this phenomenon from many angles, from presenting screenshots, following through how many indictments and complaints were filed in a special center set up by the ministry of justice, to reporting the suspension or firing of employees due to controversial remarks on their personal Facebook profile:

The past weeks have dissolved the definition of “social” media for Facebook in Israel. The texts, videos and statuses smell of war . . . but the free speech on Facebook and the radical statuses, especially from the Arab-Israeli side of the political map, have their price. Cellcom (a leading cellular company) had to face a wave of complaints and threats of disconnections because one of their employees wrote on her Facebook profile that eleven more soldiers were killed, adding a smiling emoji . . . The Israeli Mail Service had to face a similar situation when an employee wrote on her Facebook profile that all leftists should be sent to the gas chambers.

The TV and sirens do not scare me anymore; the only thing that scares me now is the new scare: the scare of Facebook. Whenever I enter this damn site, I am flooded by racist, ultra-nationalism, violent atrocities.

The combative semantic in the paragraph above appeared in many other items. In the next quote, the writer used even more extreme words such as lynch, crystal night, terrorism, reign of terror, hostages, patrolling, and firing at point blank range:

The streets are now dominated by campaigns of intimidation, incitement, and almost lynch by Jewish and Arab thugs: on my Facebook every night is the crystal night and thousands of proud mobsters reach higher peaks of racism and hatred. The Israeli Internet has been ruled for some time by those types, first they took the users comments as hostages, now they patrol the social media and shoot from close range anyone who dares to step out of line from their extreme positions . . . we will have to clean the
stresses, both the physical and virtual ones from the racist filth that took over them . . .

A metaphor that connected the online and the offline was the “tunnels.” Tunnels have been the big surprise of the war and have become a primary strategic asset for the Hamas who used them to infiltrate deep into Israeli territory. The fear of an enemy who suddenly erupts from below the ground has been felt in the public and the media. This metaphor was used to describe the undercurrents of hatred and violence that erupted through Facebook:

The social media, as a kind of terrifying unconscious collective . . . as a kind of a sewage system under the entire country . . . is full of names of potential victims and suggestions of people to murder . . . the writing is on the wall, on the feeds and plasmas.

tunnels that we, for dozens of years . . . have dug between ourselves; between the religious and the secular, between rich and poor, between ethnic groups and between sectors, and lately another particularly dark and deep tunnel, between right and left. These horrible tunnels have not been dug overnight; they were built in broad day light, sometimes even proudly in clubs, roundabouts, on buses and on Facebook . . .

Some writers claimed that hate and violence existed prior to Facebook and are independent of it. Moreover, there is a positive side to exposing hatred and violence through Facebook because now this state of affairs cannot be overlooked:

One should bless the brutalization and belligerence expressed during the war on Facebook . . . Without Facebook we would continue to repress some of the critical problems of the Israeli society: intolerance, racism, violence and ignorance. All have been there many years before Facebook. Social media demonstrate and provide support for views that until recently could only be heard in one’s private living room . . . it is good that Facebook exists. It provides us with a constant and immediate mirror . . . through which you can see who people are, where they work, how many children they have, which school they attended and even more important, how many likes they got.

Facebook, initially invented for discourse among friends, has become a weapon of slander. People who look for ways to promote their page know that only extreme phrases and harsh language, terrible pictures and shameful curses will bring them the exposure they crave for.

Some column writers, actors, singers, and journalists have described at length their personal experience as they were attacked, sometimes even physically, due to Facebook statuses they posted:

I dared to express my shock and anger on Facebook . . . I was attacked with dozens of hate messages on Facebook, right-wing supporters and other lunatics wished me to burn in hell and to be involved in a terrorist attack.

Unlike the seriousness of the great majority of the items that included this theme, a weekly column covering cell applications introduced a sarcastic piece about a recently developed app:

[The concept of the recently-developed] application “someone to argue with” is simple: you enter a chat room, choose a position, right or left and wait for someone to argue with you . . . in the past few days [screenshots from the app] are starring on Facebook.

Social Media as Tools for Politicians to Bypass the Mainstream Media

The fourth frequent theme in the sample portrays social media as direct channels of communication by Israeli, Palestinian, and foreign politicians and institutions, which bypass the mainstream media. For instance,

Shortly after the launching, Hamas tweeted: “Izz-ad-Din-al-Qassam brigade” successfully launched rockets towards the occupied Umm-Rashrash.

This theme appeared in 22.7% of the items, but only in 16.9% of the items in which the issue of social media gained high or very high salience. This demonstrates that many items quote what the politicians say, but there were much fewer items in which these quotes were expanded upon. Often the quote was presented almost entirely as the politician posted it, along with a screenshot of people’s engagement with the content:

Minister Yair Lapid expressed a strong view on his Facebook page: “Returning to attack the terrorists in Gaza,” he wrote “Nobody in Israel wanted this, but we will not abandon the residents of the South.”

Lieberman [the foreign minister, wrote] on his Facebook page: “I call everyone not to buy anymore from shops and businesses of people in the Arab sector who participate today in the general strike declared by the monitoring committee of the Israeli Arabs as a sign of solidarity with the residents of Gaza against the war.” Lieberman’s quote received thousands of likes and positive comments.

Social Media as Arenas of Struggle Over Public Opinion

The fifth frequent theme appeared in slightly more than a fifth of the items (21.5%), and in 28.5% of the items in which social media gained high or very high salience, and it presents social media as an arena of struggle over international public opinion. Here also, words from the military jargon were used to describe social media activities:

Behind the rockets lunched towards Israel and the attacks of the IDF in Gaza, there is a parallel war online over public opinion.
The Palestinians present on Twitter and Instagram images of victims of bombings that arguably were hit in Gaza strip under the hashtag #GazaUnderAttack . . . the IDF uploaded promotional videos to demonstrate to the international community the intolerable situation . . .

Instead of risking our soldiers, let's send tens of thousands of public diplomacy soldiers to every country in the world and onto the social media, where the real war takes place . . . the huge budgets used for recruiting reserves will be channeled to spokesmen and plane tickets . . .

The scouts established a “war room” which operates 24 hours a day on Twitter and Facebook. Instead of tanks they fight with posts and comments, they are the virtual Iron Dome of Israel.

This theme included a few kinds of items. The first addressed national or worldwide celebrities who posted statuses for or against Israel and the war. Second, some stories describe the character of the coverage of the 2014 Gaza war in the foreign press. Third, some items referred to online public diplomacy efforts by the Palestinians:

As in Israel, private citizens who support Hamas flooded Facebook and Twitter with informational materials. These spokesmen are aware of the emotional effect of pictures of kids with destruction in the background, so they bomb the network with such photos, others look for catchy slogans and quickly launch them online.

Many stories included criticism over disinformation and the problematic use of materials to smear the Israeli image:

Last week it was the BBC that exposed that many of the Twitter photos used to present the destruction of Gaza are from “Cast Lead” (an earlier military operation), or were taken from the confrontations in Syria and Iraq.

Social Media as Alternative Channels for Celebrities

The sixth frequent theme describes the broad use by Israeli and foreign celebrities of social media as direct channels for communication with their audiences (12.4% of all items; 22% of the items in which social media gained high or very high salience). Many stories dealt at length with celebrities who posted their opinions of the war:

The only thing Rihanna had to do was tweet the hashtag #freepalestine . . . only 8 minutes passed until she got tones of criticism, regretted and erased it, but it already circulated the social network and got back with 7,000 retweets . . . the camps on both sides of the war online are always happy to recruit celebrities with many followers . . . NBA player Dwight Howard used the same hashtag #freepalestine and like Rihanna deleted it and posted a clarification tweet . . .

Facebook and Twitter use by movie stars, athletes, entertainers who expressed their opinions about the war also provoked a great interest in the Israeli press:

Another Israeli representative in the NBA, Omri Casspi, has become in recent weeks one of the most notable Israeli spokesmen on social media. He has more than 200,000 followers and almost everyday shares pictures, videos and messages . . . “I get a lot of curses on Twitter and sometimes threats as well, it is not pleasant but I am not scared . . .”

Every artist who expresses his objection to the war becomes a target for a violent and hateful attack online . . . if artists dare to express an opinion contrary to the spirit of fighting . . . they will soon meet a new audience, an angry and combative mob targeted to attack them lynchnet-style . . . the social networks have cancelled the one-directional messages which the artists have span on the crowd and removed the intermediation of the press. They enable anyone who is angry about any saying of famous artists to express their unhappiness immediately, and at his face.

Such items demonstrate the bi-directionality and the shortening of distance between artists and their audience. In the same breath that the artists’ ability to write directly to the public without intermediation of traditional media increases, so does the ability of the audience to respond immediately to messages by the artist. For example,

Reality tycoon Simon Cowell donated 150,000$ to the IDF a year ago . . . [today] Cowell is flooded on Facebook and Twitter with horror pictures of dead babies from the war in Gaza. “The blood of the killed children is on your hands,” wrote to him a user named Lima . . .

Social Media as Channels to Distribute Rumors and Lies

The last theme is about an additional problematic aspect of social media, with focus on WhatsApp: their functioning as channels to disseminate false rumors. In total, 10.3% of the items in the sample and 19.4% of the items in which social media gained high or very high salience involved this theme. The interest in this theme grew when in one of the military operations in which a few IDF soldiers were killed; their names were circulated on WhatsApp before formal messages were delivered to the families:

The viral rumors on WhatsApp turned into a negative symbol in the struggle over consciousness . . . numerous Israelis woke up on Sunday to a devastating message on their smartphone screens: a double-digit number of IDF soldiers were killed in battle in Gaza . . . the list of the names of the soldiers who were killed [passed around] and was nearly entirely correct but it had a few mistakes: a soldier reported as killed turned out to be wounded . . . The family of another soldier started to mourn him just to discover he is alive and well . . .
Still, in spite of the problematic reliability attributed to social media, a large part of the Israeli public felt that most of the time they were even more trustworthy than the mainstream media:

Since the wave of rumors yesterday turned out to be mostly true, the public feels that the truth is online and not on the mainstream media.

Not all the rumors were about what occurred on the front; the next example is about a rumor relating to an incident in the heart of Tel-Aviv:

A loud explosion in the center of Tel-Aviv was probably because of a collision between two garbage trucks... pungent smell spread and shortly afterwards Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups were established in which information was spread that the odor is a secret chemical weapon of the Hamas.

A number of items addressed the damage caused to the strength of the Israeli society by such online rumors:

Many think that the strategic weapon the Hamas was wise enough to develop was the tunnel, but actually the strongest one is the Israeli tendency for rumors and hysteria which got a dose of steroids by WhatsApp and Facebook.

Discussion and Conclusion

With over a billion registered users, Facebook is the largest online social media platform, addressing a verity of cognitive, emotional, and social needs of its user. Its political significance is repeatedly demonstrated in the current study, where social media is referred to by the mainstream press as “our largest bonfire,” the “central public discourse arena,” and more.

Studying the journalistic framing of social media is significant as it allows to recover cultural meanings embedded in the text, and due to its possible impact on perceptions, views, and possibly even behaviors (Fisher & Wright, 2001; Johnston, 2009; Nissenbaum, 2004; Wyatt, 2004). For example, in this study, the framing of social media in the press can demonstrate if they are portrayed as spaces for civic collaboration or hate mongering? Arenas for spreading of rumors, or for finding solutions to public problems? Such portrayals may, arguably, impact people’s perceptions of social media and the uses they make of social media platforms.

The study analyzes how social media were framed in the mainstream press during wartime. The academic literature agrees upon the ability to use social media to recruit citizens to provide assistance and support when the authorities are overwhelmed and malfunction. Many studies portray social media as discourse arenas, which enables efficient and fast information circulation between many people. The few studies that analyzed how social media are portrayed in the mainstream media found that they are described as places where the public gathers, activists are recruited, plans take shape and are carried out. They signify the ability of the public, especially of young people, to self-organize for a better future (Campbell & Hawk, 2012; Lev-On, in press).

Still, this study finds that first and foremost, Facebook is portrayed as a public space for expressing and reacting to content. Whether these are posts by politicians, journalists, or laypersons, uploading contents is perceived as a basic feature of social media and journalists are referring to it in almost all the items analyzed. However, in contrast to findings of previous studies, Facebook in particular and social media in general were frequently portrayed negatively as platforms that accelerate violent and hostile speech and as a catalyst for spreading lies and rumors. Although the prevalent themes portrayed social media as spaces for exchange of opinions and as a dialogic opinion space, oftentimes the posts and dialogues included harsh, brutal, violent, and threatening content.

The study demonstrates that social media are portrayed as central discourse arenas that involve many stakeholders, from opinion and political leaders to terrorists, from international celebrities to anonymous kids, even civilians and soldiers who were killed could have their “voice heard” through their Facebook profiles which became a memorial after their passing. Still, a large part of this discourse was perceived as brutal and violent that was directly linked to the violent protesters on the streets, investigations that were opened by the police and indictments that were filed. These phenomena point to the deep connection between the online happenings on Facebook and the offline events “on the streets.”

Metaphors such as tunnels, and words taken directly from the military jargon, were salient in a large number of items, specifically in reference to the theme that portrayed Facebook as an arena of struggle over public opinion. An additional metaphor that emphasizes the connection between the online and the offline realms is the megaphone which, arguably like Facebook, does not create something out of nothing but merely enhances existing voices and enables them wider exposure. Additional metaphors used words from Facebook’s content world, like “walls,” “friends,” and so on, to signify parallel offline phenomena.

The findings present Facebook as a significant chain in the media ecology, especially during emergencies. States and citizens use Facebook to reach audiences and influence public opinion. Facebook is also perceived as a direct and efficient channel that bypasses the mainstream media for stakeholders, Israeli, Palestinian and foreigners, and even Hamas spokespersons who used Facebook to acknowledge the Israeli public on the times and destinations of their planned attacks. Journalists also used Facebook as a shortcut to bring quotes from opinion leaders and celebrities to the public.

The mainstream media during the Israel–Gaza war of 2014 hardly covered additional uses of Facebook like orchestrating logistical assistance for citizens, soldiers, and their families and to the residents of the South; exposure to the other side without the filters of the mainstream media;
distributing satirical memes and more. All of these themes gained fractions of percentages of the coverage of the social media by the mainstream media.

The study is limited by the fact that it examined press coverage and audience reception; it did not examine actual social media uses but rather their framing in the mainstream media. Hence, it is certainly possible that Facebook and WhatsApp campaigns for the residents of the South, soldiers, or their families gained significant public attention, and that satirical memes were also quite salient on Facebook and WhatsApp during the war (Malka et al., 2015). Such topics that reached a high place in the public’s mind could not find a way to a respectable place in the agenda of the mainstream media.

Perhaps the most surprising finding in this study is the salience that the mainstream media attributed to online hate speech during the Israel–Gaza war of 2014 as opposed to the positive framing of Facebook during the social protest in 2011 in Israel. Future studies in Israel and worldwide can continue and analyze the scope of hate speech on Facebook and also use quantitative tools to examine the perceived impact of such speech on the perceptions and offline behaviors of individuals and groups.

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