Equalization versus Normalization: Facebook and the 2013 Israeli Elections

Tal Samuel-Azran, Moran Yarchi, and Gadi Wolfsfeld

Abstract
The question of whether social media grant challengers a fair opportunity to compete with incumbents, thus promoting equalization rather than normalization, is a key issue in studies of the web’s contribution to democratic systems. To contribute to the current debate, whose evidence so far strongly supports the normalization hypothesis, we examined the ability of the five leading political candidates in Israel popularity to promote engagement to their messages on social media by measuring Likes and Shares on their Facebook posts during the 2013 election campaign. Surprisingly, we found that first-time candidate, Naftali Bennett, achieved statistically similar engagement levels as achieved by PM Netanyahu, measured by the two Facebook measures mentioned above, and attracted dramatically more Likes than Netanyahu during the campaign. Similarly, first-time contender Yair Lapid’s messages promoted equal levels of engagement as did the messages of opposition leader Shelly Yachimovich. The study indicates the ability of challengers to generate similar engagement levels as incumbents through social media campaigns, an encouraging result that illustrates the democratizing potential of social media.

Keywords
Facebook, elections, equalization, normalization, social media, Israel

The major political parties and their leaders in Israel have traditionally gained dramatic advantages over the smaller parties and candidates through their television political campaigns, as air time was allotted in line with a party’s size in the last Knesset. Thus, the smaller parties were in major disadvantage as television campaigns created little opportunity to compete on equal ground with the more established parties. However, the importance of televised campaigns has dropped dramatically in the last decade, with only three percent of the population reporting that they watched the televised campaigns daily in 2006 (Blunder, 2015). At the same time, the importance of web campaigns and particularly campaigns on social networks is on the rise, arguably replacing television as the main communication platform between politicians and candidates.

Whereas the incumbents’ advantage in televised political campaign was clear, politicians’ increased use of the Internet in election campaigns has led to a heated debate regarding the web’s ability to narrow the divide between incumbents—who hold office and by definition have an advantage when running for government—and challengers. Some scholars argue that social media brings “new and less well-represented voices into the political process” (Koc-Michalska, Gibson, & Vedel, 2014), a position known as the equalization hypothesis (Margolis, Resnick, & Wolfe, 1999). Others, invoking the normalization hypothesis, claim that the web changes very little, and if anything, reinforces the advantage of the more powerful and resource-rich incumbents, a perception known as the normalization hypothesis (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014).

Accordingly, this study examines the validity of the normalization versus equalization arguments involving social media, using the 2013 Israeli elections as its case study. In particular, it examines the ability of challengers, in this case two first-time candidates, to generate engagement in the form of Likes and Shares on Facebook, in comparison to incumbents. The examination of the topic in the Israeli multi-party system allows generalizability of the findings and will contribute to the equalization-normalization debate in general, and specifically in the context of the multi-party system.

The case study was conducted on data from Israel’s January 2013 elections, which has become to be known as Israel’s first ‘Facebook elections’ (Epstein, 2013; Kishik, 2012). Whereas the web played a relatively small role in the 2009 elections in Israel (Lev-On, 2011), surveys since have found that approximately one-half of the population are intense Facebook

Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Israel

Corresponding Author:
Tal Samuel-Azran, Sammy Ofer School of Communications, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Kanfei Nesharim Street Herzliya, Israel 46346.
Email: tazran@idc.ac.il

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users, and, even more impressive, the time spent on Facebook per visitor per month among Israelis is one of the highest in the world (Epstein, 2013; Nissan, 2011). Considering that Facebook is also persistently the second most-viewed site by Israeli Internet users (after Google), with an Internet audience of over 3.5 million visitors (Alexa Top 500 Global Sites, 2015), it is not surprising that Facebook became the main channel of communications between politicians and their followers in election campaign periods. Even the Israeli Prime Minister boasted his ability to mobilize his followers to high activity on his Facebook page (Bender, 2012), further illustrating the “Facebook popularity contest” climate.

Israel’s political landscape provides an important contribution to current literature by offering an opportunity to study the equalization versus normalization debate in a multi-party political system. Israel’s multi-party democracy is characterized by “institutional and ideological pluralism and by intense competition” (Stone, 1990, p. 123). There are currently over 30 political parties in Israel, and these tend to appear and disappear, coalesce, and split. In fact, since Israel’s independence in 1948, no single party has ever governed without forming a coalition with other parties. Moreover, the waning dominance of the two major parties, Labor and Likud, since the late 1980s, adds to the factors that create an opening for other, smaller parties to gain prominence (Stone, 1990).

Furthermore, studies demonstrate a steady rise in personalization in the Israeli system. Although citizens in Israel vote for their preferred party, candidates (and especially party leaders) play an increasingly significantly growing role in election campaigns due to the tendency in western democratic countries to emphasize and personalize candidates (Balmas, Rahat, Sheafer, & Shenav, 2014). Several recent modifications to the Israeli voting system have contributed to this trend. In the 1999 and 2001 elections, the electoral system was changed to a “direct election of the Prime Minister” system. Citizens were given two ballots and were asked to vote for a particular candidate for Prime Minister and a political party for the Knesset. In the 2003 elections, Israel reverted to the original system with some changes, but some believe this accelerated a more personalized type of voting (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Moreover, recent studies assert that political candidates’ use of the Internet to communicate directly with voters increases the personalization trend (Livak, Lev-On, & Doron, 2011).

A multi-party environment, as noted, forces candidates to emphasize their character, credibility, and leadership ability. The multi-party system in Israel promotes fierce competition between the contenders, who are forced to emphasize their leadership abilities in comparison to other candidates who often hold similar ideological positions on various issues (Balmas et al., 2014). Indeed, Sheafer and Wolfsfeld (2009) found that Israel’s multi-party system results in a more competitive environment than election campaigns in a two-party system.

The Israeli political system thus provides an interesting case study to test the equalization/normalization hypothesis as it provides an opportunity for competition between many candidates. Not only does Israel’s multi-party system allow for a large number of political parties to participate in the political process, but personalization of the Israeli political system results in a growing number of personal campaign strategies by candidates.

Election campaigns in Israel receive an extensive media attention; the parties and candidates are being covered in the news, are interviewed in different shows and media outlets, appear or being imitated on comedy shows, in addition to the official advertising air time each party receives on television and radio (Karniel & Lavie-Dinur, 2010). In recent years, we witness an increase in politician use of the Internet in general and in social media in particular, especially during election campaigns. At the same time, there is an increase in the public tendency to use social media to gather news and learn about occurrences in the world. Unlike the traditional media, social media provide politicians the opportunity to promote their messages as they intended—since the information is unfiltered or censored (Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, & Wolfsfeld, 2015; Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, & Samuel-Azran, 2015).

The study aims to contribute to the equalization/normalization debate by analyzing the Facebook popularity of five leading Israeli political candidates during the 2013 Israeli general elections—three incumbents (including the prime minister in office) and two first-time candidates, who are by definition categorized as challengers. We analyzed the popularity of their Facebook posts by counting the number of Likes and Shares that their Facebook messages generated.

The next section, “Web 1.0 political campaigns,” expands on the emergence of the normalization/equalization debate and its transition from the Web 1.0 era to the Web 2.0 era, particularly in the context of election campaigning on online social networks.

**Web 1.0 Political Campaigns**

Since the 1990s, technological and communication developments have played an important role in shaping campaigning techniques (Wring & Horrocks, 2000), with many political candidates creating websites and other online applications in order to establish online presence and communicate more directly with citizens (Bimber & Davies, 2003). During this period, when websites were static and reflected a unilateral mode of communication, political parties accordingly launched basic, static websites that focused mainly on conveying information about the party to a wide audience (Dulio, Goff, & Thurber, 1999; Williamson, Miller, & Fallon, 2010).

The increasing use of Web 1.0 technologies by political parties and candidates spurred many examinations into the implications of this new form of political communication for traditional election power-plays. A key question addressed
by these studies was whether the Internet creates a more level field for communications between major and minor parties and candidates and the public.

This question gave rise to two contrasting hypothesis. The equalization hypothesis (Margolis et al., 1999) regards the web as a democratic technology that levels the political playing field by reducing the gaps in campaigning costs between minor and major parties (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). Proponents of the web as an equalizing factor argue that the Internet, with its low entry-cost and rapid, unmediated reach into people’s homes, provided an opportunity for minor political parties and candidates to gain extensive public exposure, get their message across, and attract increased support (Corrado & Firestone, 1996; Gibson & Ward, 1998).

Critics of this position argued that the web reproduces the traditional power-play as candidates with better resources retain their advantage, and therefore, web campaigns maintain the status quo. This hypothesis, known as the politics-as-usual or normalization thesis (Margolis & Resnick, 2000), predicts that, because of their increased resources, major parties and candidates will have a significantly greater web presence and are more likely to engage in a sophisticated use of web resources than minor parties and candidates. Advocates of the normalization hypothesis contend that as competition increased in the online arena, many political parties were forced to enhance their website’s appearance by increasing their investments in updated content and advanced presentation technologies (Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2007; Spyridou & Veglis, 2011), thus giving resource-rich parties and candidates an advantage and maintaining the traditional power-play.

Indeed, the majority of early studies conducted on the Web1.0 era suggests that while websites facilitate peripheral politicians’ access to the public realm, a pattern of normalization had become established, with larger parties having better designed and more advanced websites that generated more traffic throughout election campaigns (Bowers-Brown & Gunter, 2002; Gibson & Ward, 1998, 2000; Norris, 2001; Ward & Gibson, 2003).

**Web 2.0—Social Networking and Political Elections**

Web 2.0 describes the era in which websites moved beyond static webpages into more interactive environments in the forms of blogs and social networking platforms. According to Gueorguieva (2007), US candidates’ use of technologies in political campaigns evolved as follows: websites in 1996, e-mail in 1998 (e.g., the Jesse Ventura campaign), online fundraising in 2000 (e.g., the John McCain campaign), and blogs in 2004 (e.g., the Howard Dean campaign). However, it was the 2008 US elections, and specifically Barak Obama’s successful use of the Internet and social media (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010) that positioned online social networks as the main election campaign platform and caused scholars to assert that political campaigns are moving toward a Web 2.0 campaigning phase. This Web 2.0 campaigning era is characterized by sophisticated campaign tools that are used for “informing, targeting advertising, recruiting, engaging, and fundraising” (Spyridou & Veglis, 2011, p. 138), particularly via online social networking activities (Spyridou & Veglis, 2011; Strandberg, 2013). This represents a shift from traditional Web 1.0 technologies, where the web was used mainly as a publishing medium on static websites and a one-way communications platform (Carlson & Strandberg, 2008; Strandberg, 2013).

The expansion of Web 2.0 technologies, and particularly Facebook’s inception in 2004, has given fresh impetus to questions of whether or not the web can level the political playing field and equalize power relations between political parties and candidates (Gibson & McAllister, 2011a). For example, the fact that social media sites (including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, the three most popular networks) are comparably inexpensive to use may reduce the importance of financial resources and create a more equal campaign environment (Gibson & McAllister, 2011b).

Furthermore, the viral nature of messages posted on these platforms and the ability to use social networking sites for targeted messages are seen as important new resources for weaker fringe players who lack a communications infrastructure and access to mainstream news outlets (Carlson & Strandberg, 2008; Gueorguieva, 2007). Thus, given their freely available and widespread uptake and popularity, social media platforms are considered particularly helpful in increasing the exposure of smaller players’ profiles (Gueorguieva, 2007).

Indeed, politicians and political parties worldwide have been taking advantage of the rising penetration of the Internet and social networking sites, and have incorporated online tools, such as real-time metrics of their success, to promote engagement and popularity on social networks as part of sophisticated “Web 2.0 campaigning” (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010; Stětka & Vochocová, 2014). Consequently, the normalization/equalization question in the Web 2.0 campaigning era has become the topic of many studies worldwide, and major studies have been conducted in the United States (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010) as well as other European contexts including the United Kingdom (Gibson, 2010), Germany (Zittel, 2009), Italy (Vaccari et al., 2013), France (Koc-Michalska et al., 2014), southern European and Scandinavian countries (Enli et al., 2013; Kalnes, 2009; Strandberg, 2013), and the Czech Republic (Stětka & Vochocová, 2014). Studies on this topic have also been conducted in Asia (Xu, 2015) and Australia (Gibson & McAllister, 2011a).

Several studies found evidence of the equalizing power of Web 2.0 technologies on elections. Notably, evidence from Australia examining trends in web campaigning over time by minor and major party candidates confirms that it is the former that are more actively exploiting the Web 2.0 and its social media channels (Gibson & McAllister, 2011a, 2014).
The Australian study further showed that the Web 2.0 campaigning was particularly beneficial for candidates of the (formerly minor) Green party in the 2007 Australian election, and helped the party attain leading party status in Australian politics (Gibson & McAllister, 2011b). In Singapore, Xu (2014) examined the effect of Twitter on the 2011 Singapore general elections and found evidence of an equalization effect in that the new media empowered the opposition parties (although it did not appear to have an effect on the final election outcome).

In other studies, weaker signs of equalization were identified. Carlson and Strandberg (2008) found that although incumbents were more likely than challengers to campaign on YouTube in the 2007 Finnish national elections, there was evidence of equalization in the fact that small (mostly right-wing populist) candidates used YouTube extensively to spread their campaign messages. Similarly, Kalnes’ (2009) study of the online Norwegian elections illustrated that while normalization was mostly maintained, Web 2.0 lowered the entry barriers for parties running on a single-issue campaign platform.

Finally, in some countries, studies produced contradicting results in the Web 1.0 and the Web 2.0 eras. Notably, Zittel (2009), reporting on the 2005 German elections, found that young candidates and those running in districts with a high share of young voters in particular were the more likely to have an extensive social media campaign. However, Schweitzer’s (2011) longitudinal analysis of German online campaigns in the 2002–2009 elections, which includes campaigns executed in the Web 2.0 era, found that the gap between incumbents and challengers actually increased over this period. Thus, it can be summed that although there is evidence of some equalization in the Web 2.0 era, with the exception of Australia, such evidence is often limited and anecdotal, and studies have failed to conclusively show that any dramatic equalization effect is taking place.

In contrast, other studies found strong evidence of the normalization hypothesis. Studies in the United Kingdom and United States, countries that operate a two-party political system, regularly point in the direction of normalization. In one of the earlier studies on this issue in the United States, Williams and Gulati (2007) report that having better financial resources significantly influenced the decision to campaign on Facebook in the 2006 US midterm elections, and to campaign on YouTube in the 2008 US elections (Gulati & Williams, 2010). Reporting on the use of social networking platforms in the 2010 British general elections, Gibson (2010) also found that the major parties and their candidates had clear dominance of the social media realm. Klinger’s (2013) study of the Swiss 2011 elections also found that the parties use social media only as a complementary and secondary tool, leading to the conclusion that normalization is maintained.

In line with all the above, the study aims to answer the following research question: did social media promote equalization or normalization in the Israeli 2013 political elections?

Methodology

The study examines the online engagement of Facebook users with messages conveyed by five leading Israeli political candidates during the 2013 national elections, measured by the number of Likes and Shares their Facebook posts received. The candidates are incumbents Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud Beitenu), opposition leader Shelley Yachimovich (Labor) and former opposition leader Tzipi Livni (Ha’ma’ua), and challengers (first-time runners) Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid) and Naftali Bennett (Habait Hayehudy). Data were collected between 7 December 2012 (one day after the final registration date for the 2013 elections, thus the date of the official launch of the election campaigns) and Election Day (22 January 2013).

The social media trend tracking company, MAKAM, was used to collect all the candidate posts that gained more than 500 Likes between 7 December 2012 and 22 January 2013. Of the total 493 posts with more than 500 Likes included in our analysis, 102 posts appeared on Netanyahu’s Facebook page, 76 appeared on Lapid’s page, 101 appeared on Bennett’s page, 106 on Yachimovich’s page, and 108 on Livni’s page. The study analyzes politicians’ ability to promote online engagement on Facebook, as measured by the public’s engagement with candidates’ messages posted on their Facebook walls. Two indicators were used: (1) the number of Likes each post received and (2) the number of Shares a post received (the number of people who are willing to post the message on their own Facebook wall). Those indicators provide us with a broad measure of engagement on Facebook; both Likes and Shares serve as indicators of engagement with posts. In addition, the Share measure, which reflects a reader’s willingness to post a message on their own Facebook wall, offers insight into the discussions surrounding a post, as it indicates higher levels of engagement (Malhotra, Kubowicz Malhotra, & See, 2013).

Candidate success on social media during the election campaign was also measured through two additional indicators: (1) Facebook’s “talking about it” (TAT) scale, which is Facebook’s measurement of users’ interaction on a page. The TAT metric was launched in October 2011 to help brands track their pages’ user engagement. TAT is the total number of people who responded to a post on a page (mainly by Sharing, Liking, or Commenting on it) within the preceding 7 days, and is therefore a method of measuring the magnitude of a brand’s “word of mouth.” For our purposes, we calculated (1) the average TAT for each candidate’s Facebook page and (2) The number of Likes added to the Facebook page during the campaign, which represents the number of times individual users indicated that they Liked the candidate’s page during the campaign. For each candidate, we calculated the number of Likes added during the campaign, by subtracting the number of Likes on 7 December (the official launch of the election campaigns) from the number of Likes on the day of the elections. This measure offers a general...
overview of a candidate page’s ability to engage Facebook users. To place our findings into perspective and enhance our understanding of candidates’ success in generating Likes on their Facebook pages during the campaign, the number of Likes on their page before the election campaign is also presented as well.

**Findings**

To examine whether social media promoted equalization or normalization in the Israeli 2013 political elections, we conducted a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (including Scheffe post hoc analysis) on differences between the number of Likes and Shares candidates received. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Findings (as presented in Table 1) indicate that both Netanyahu’s and Bennett’s posts received the greatest number of Likes on their Facebook posts compared to other candidates. Next, in terms of their Facebook engagement measured by the number of Likes, we find challenger Lapid and incumbent Yachimovich, followed by incumbent Livni, whose Facebook posts were least engaging in the 2013 elections. Livni attracted the smallest number of Likes. Shares exhibit similar trends: Netanyahu and Bennett received the greatest number of Shares on their posts. The similar levels of Facebook engagement of Prime Minister Netanyahu and challenger Bennett in the Like and Share realms offer support for the equalization hypothesis. Furthermore, challenger Lapid’s online engagement is similar to the engagement level generated by opposition leader Yachimovich.

Table 2 presents additional descriptive information that enhances our understanding of the candidates’ Facebook success throughout the campaign period.

Possibly, even more telling than the findings presented in Table 1, the descriptive information regarding the candidates’ Facebook pages (Table 2) indicates that Bennett’s online engagement is similar to Prime Minister Netanyahu’s engagement. Bennett received the highest TAT score (74,882) closely followed by Netanyahu (70,428), with the remaining candidates far behind. Looking at the number of Likes added to their page during the campaign, Bennett again leads with an impressive 70,880 Likes added to his page (with a starting point of only 94,193 Likes at the beginning of the campaign). Only 17,949 Likes were added to Netanyahu’s page during the campaign, but his starting point was much higher (394,947). Again, these findings suggest that social media give challengers an opportunity to engage in communications with the public on an equal footing with incumbents, and support the equalization hypothesis.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The study examines the ability of Israel’s top five candidates—three incumbents, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, and two challengers—to generate Facebook engagement in the forms of Likes and Shares. The analysis shows that challenger Bennett exhibited a similar level of online engagement as incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu, on all measures. The findings demonstrate that Bennett also generated the greatest number of Likes during his campaign and was ranked the highest on Facebook’s TAT scale, which measures user engagement and word of mouth. Challenger Yair Lapid attracted a similar level of online engagement as did incumbent opposition leader Shelley Yachimovich. The findings clearly illustrate that incumbents and challengers achieved similar level of success in engaging Facebook members with their messages in the Facebook realm. These findings strengthen the equalization hypothesis, by demonstrating that challengers in the online campaigning era have greater opportunities to reach potential voters in comparison to the television era.

The study contributes to previous research into the potentially democratizing power of Web 2.0 technologies. So far, few studies have shown clear signs of equalization, such as Gibson and McAllister’s (2011a, 2014) studies of Australian elections, which found that minor parties use Web 2.0 applications significantly more than major parties and that the Green Party’s web activities also accounted for this party’s

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**Table 1.** Popularity of candidates’ Facebook posts (Likes and Shares).

|       | Netanyahu | Lapid | Yachimovich | Bennett | Livni |
|-------|-----------|-------|-------------|---------|-------|
| **Like** | 5920.97^* | 2534.02^b | 1637.87^ab | 5048.91^c | 820.18^c |
| **Share** | 505.05^a | 219.02^a | 253.68^a | 486.89^c | 57.42^c |

Entries are means. Groups marked with the same letter do not have significant differences. All other differences are significant (p <= .05).

**Table 2.** Popularity of candidates on Facebook (TAT scale and Likes per page).

|       | Netanyahu | Lapid | Yachimovich | Bennett | Livni |
|-------|-----------|-------|-------------|---------|-------|
| **TAT** | 70,428    | 21,852| 26,391      | 74,882  | 14,499|
| **Number of page Likes at the beginning of the campaign** | 394,947 | 107,642 | 67,778     | 94,193  | 43,430 |
| **Number of page Likes added during the campaign** | 17,949   | 22,288| 13,822      | 70,880  | 8,757 |
rise to prominence. The majority of the remaining studies that offer support for equalization in election campaigns in various countries produced either anecdotal evidence (Carlson & Strandberg, 2008; Kalnes, 2009; Xu, 2014) or contradicting evidence, as illustrated above in the case of the German elections (Schweitzer, 2011; Zittel, 2009). This study, then, contributes to existing knowledge by providing what may be the strongest support to date for the potentially equalizing power of Web 2.0 technologies. Specifically, the study illustrates the equalizing potential of the web for first-time challengers in relation to incumbent candidates.

Challengers’ success in attracting potential voters’ attention on Facebook may be explained by several factors; first, the fact that all the information the audience receives about new parties or candidates through the media is new, allows the public to form new attitudes, rather than modify their existing views—which is considered to be a much more difficult psychological process. In addition, studies in democracies have reported retrospective voting, which is voters’ tendency to choose on the basis of parties’ and candidates’ past behavior (Healy & Malhotra, 2013). The fact that voters have no information about challengers’ past political behavior may give challengers an advantage with potential voters who are disappointed by the incumbents and their policies.

Second, whereas former studies note that normalization and equalization may be dependent on institutional factors (Anstead & Chadwick, 2009), such as the electoral system (Farrell, Kolodny, & Medvic, 2001) or campaign financial system (Anstead, 2008), this study highlights the potential relevance of the political system, specifically, the differences between two-party and multi-party systems. Whereas many studies conducted in multi-party systems such as Germany (Zittel, 2009) and Scandinavian countries (Carlson & Strandberg, 2008; Kalnes, 2009) offer indications, albeit weak, of equalization, studies in the United States (Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010) and the United Kingdom (Gibson, 2010), which have two-party systems, strongly indicate normalization. Thus, the study of Israel’s multi-party system indicates that pluralism of parties and candidates could be entangled with equalization via social media, particularly when compared to two-party system election campaigns. Future studies should conduct comparative analyses between several two-party versus multi-party political systems to determine the extent which the political system affects equalization versus normalization.

A third possible factor that may explain the equalization trend in the Israeli case study is the increased personalization turn in Israeli politics (Balmas et al., 2014). As mentioned earlier, many candidates currently use social media technologies to campaign at a more individual level, which is less tied to the overall party campaign. By 2010, more than one-half of all Israeli parliament members had Facebook presence, and in September 2010, 70% of them (84) were active on Facebook (Haleva-Amir, 2011; Livak et al., 2011). Moreover, the fact that all five politicians analyzed in this study maintained a personal Facebook page—indeed of their party Facebook page—further strengthens the notion that election campaigns ultimately center on candidates’ personality. According to Vergeer and Hermans (2013), individualized campaigns coincide with an increasing trend in politics to personalize politicians and to present politicians as ordinary, likeable people, and not remote or distant. Thus, the use of Web 2.0 technologies—which allows uploading personal images and daily observations—may help politicians achieve this goal. Findings of this study emphasize that the social nature of the Internet, and specifically social media networks, can sometimes indeed act as a “game changer” and assist challengers.

Fourth, in addition to the potential effects of the political system, the personalization trend, and the potential advantage to first-time contenders, several potential factors may have contributed to equalization of the specific challenger candidates in the Israeli 2013 elections. Such factors may most strongly affect Naftali Bennett, whose online engagement levels were similar to those of Prime Minister Netanyahu, and close to the engagement levels generated by the messages of Yair Lapid. Naftali Bennett is by far more web-savvy than any other candidates. Since starting his hi-tech career in 1999, he has headed two technology companies (Cyota and Soluto), which were sold to US companies for USD$145 and USD$130 million dollars, respectively. Considering the results of our study and Bennett’s background, it can be argued that his ultra-successful career in the hi-tech industry compensated for his relative lack of experience in politics, at least as far as generating support from Israeli potential voters on Facebook goes. On the same token, Livni’s failure to generate engagement on Facebook might stem from the fact that she is less familiar with technology compared with the other candidates (she initiated social media activities only 5 months before the elections).

All this suggests that online engagement was potentially influenced by the political system, and by other factors, such as candidates’ digital communication skills and young age.

Finally, another potential factor is the public’s prior familiarity with the candidate, which is relevant in the case of Yair Lapid, the second popular challenger who previously worked in the media (as a journalist, author, TV presenter, and news anchor), before entering politics. Lapid’s ability to generate engagement on Facebook was similar to Yachimovich, herself a media persona before entering politics and becoming leader of the Labor party and the opposition. The comparative analysis between Lapid and Yachimovich also indicates that overall, it can be argued that incumbency did not play a major role in generating Likes and Shares throughout the 2013 Israeli elections.

Importantly, our study examines the equalization versus normalization hypothesis only on Facebook, and does not aim to claim that Facebook engagement necessarily carried over to the ballots. Nonetheless, examining politicians’
success in terms of the number of seats each party won points to interesting findings: Netanyahu’s party won 31 seats while Bennett’s party won only 12 seats; yet, compared to the 2009 elections, Netanyahu’s party gained only four seats while Bennett’s party gained nine seats.

As suggested, further studies should examine political elections across political systems to further establish the roles of institutional factors on the process of normalization or equalization. Further studies should also include in their analyses factors that might affect the candidates’ online engagement identified here, as well as additional factors such as age, level of web expertise, and level of public familiarity with the challenger, as well as other potentially relevant factors such as gender.

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Notes
1. In Israel, similar to other recent social protests around the world, social media played a viable tool of communication in the 2011 social protest (Rosenhek & Shalev, 2014).
2. A random sample of 150 politicians’ Facebook posts reveals that over 85% of the posts received over 500 Likes each.
3. Yachimovich received significantly more Shares than Livni, but the study found no significant differences between the two in the number of Likes their posts received.
4. Our study examines the equalization versus normalization hypothesis only on Facebook, but even while examining the politicians’ success in terms of the number of seats each party achieved, findings are interesting; Netanyahu’s party won 31 seats and Bennett’s won only 12 seats, but the interesting fact is the change in the number of seats compared to the 2009 elections: Netanyahu’s party gained only four seats; yet Bennett’s gained nine seats.

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Author Biographies

Tal Samuel-Azran (PhD, University of Melbourne) is a Senior Lecturer and the Academic Director of the International Communications Program at the Sammy Ofer School of Communication, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya. His main fields of research are new media, international communication, and political communication.

Moran Yarchi (PhD, Hebrew University) is an Assistant Professor at the Sammy Ofer School of Communications, Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya. Her main fields of research are public diplomacy, political communication, and new media.

Gadi Wolfsfeld (PhD, MIT) is a Full Professor in the Sammy Ofer School of Communication. His major research interests are in the field of political communication with a special focus on the role of the media in political conflicts. His most recent book is entitled, Making Sense of Media and Politics: Five Principles in Political Communication.