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Israel's Social Media Elections

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Abstract

Social media has become a major tool to disseminate information, opinions and news, used for political campaigning and offering new opportunities for individuals and politicians alike. The Prime Minister of Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu, has been particularly aggressive in his use of social media to gather political support. Considered as the great survivor of Israeli politics, that flourished in the atmosphere of social protests and emerged from the old political mechanism, he derives his power from social networks, using them as alternative media to the traditional networks. As the research demonstrates, social media has determined dramatic changes in the balance of political power, and although the main channels of information remain the traditional media, the exposure of the public to social media is accelerating with a wide unmediated public debate. With social media, newcomers in Israeli politics could also create a presence and rise to become renowned politicians. It is interesting however, that the veteran politician—Netanyahu—was able to take advantage of disseminate information over the Internet and become active on his Facebook page, including engaging Internet users in direct dialogue. The paper examines the use of social media by newcomers and veteran politicians in the last two elections and analyzes the way Netanyahu used social media to accomplish his political goals, including high involvement of the public and motivating record-high voter turnout to maintain his own reelection and the domination of the Israeli Parliament by the Likud Party.

Keywords

Social Media, Elections, Israel, Facebook, Netanyahu

1. Introduction

The biggest winner in the 2013 and 2015 Israeli national elections was social media. Other big winners were politicians that knew how to use social media to boost their campaigns. As was evident in these elections, developing and ex-

ecuting a social media political campaign is a complex process that requires good strategy that identifies and addresses different target audiences and creates a stable platform to highlight the candidates and their political agenda. All of these components work together to compete with the opposing parties and convince the public to make a choice and vote for a particular party or candidate. This process becomes even more difficult when the goal is to change the status quo, when a new candidate needs to gain the trust of the people and persuade them that change is better than the current or past leadership, or when an incumbent veteran candidate needs to prove that his policies are still relevant in a changing world. As determined by this research, the experience in Israel demonstrates that politicians who used social media effectively gained success, while those politicians who took their campaigns to limited use of social media lost much of their political power.

Israel's political leadership changed dramatically within a span of just a few years. The last two elections were a watershed moment, dividing old politics from new (Haleva-Amir & Nahon, 2015). That well-worn term "new politics" did not necessarily refer to better, cleaner politics, as it simply meant a different kind of politics (Mualem, 2013). The 2013 Israeli elections were a revolution in presenting new politics into political campaigns (Kishik, 2012). The new media involved in these elections were only a start to what came in the 2015 elections, with debates between political leaders over social networks, presentation of videos over the Internet and advertising slogans in social media—thereby campaigning on top of the traditional media.

Social media is crucial in shaping political discourse and changing the electoral arena, allowing people to interact with each other by both sharing and consuming information (Nations, 2018). Unlike traditional media, social media provides politicians the opportunity to promote their messages as they intend since the information is unfiltered or censored (Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, & Wolfsfeld, 2015a; Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, & Samuel-Azran, 2015).

It is safe to say that Facebook and Twitter changed the world, both politically and socially, allowing people from different lifestyles to connect with one another. In more democratic nations, where freedom of speech is promoted, social media shifted the way average people interact and institute change. The novelty and success of social media campaigns, with political pages, current events and promotional ideas that spread through social networks, prove the extent to which people can influence one another, and ultimately the world as a whole. This has altered the manner in which the people of western societies conduct themselves, consume news, and live their everyday lives (Yarchi & Wolfsfeld, 2015). The significance of social media in political campaigns is not limited to the extraordinary and instantaneous reach they have, but also in encouraging young people to participate in some kind of political discussion or activity online (Cohen & Kahne, 2011). This was the case in Israel, when like-minded citizens and activists played a powerful role by sharing, commenting, "liking" and using

other forms of digital interaction, as they actively participated in the production, distribution and reception of news. The experience with social media in Israel is particularly notable, since the time spent on Facebook per visitor per month among Israelis is one of the highest in the world (Nissan, 2011).

In the age of new politics, politicians use a wide array of media, including traditional and social media, to get their message across. A defining characteristic of social media is dialogue, which enables people to share, comment on, and discuss a wide variety of topics, grounded on an interactive community (Theohary, 2015). Public behavior in Israel proved the validity of this analysis, since new media increase involvement in political processes and create an incentive to go to vote (Bermingham & Smeaton, 2011). Another study found that many young people participated in some kind of political discussion or activity online. Those users were much more likely to vote afterwards than those who were not gaged in sharing any Facebook and twitter messages or videos (Cohen & Kahne, 2011). This was the case in Israel, where a social network revolution is changing the face of politics and allows newcomers to join the political arena. Indeed, about a quarter of the people elected to the Knesset in the last two elections were newcomers.

As in election campaigns elsewhere, the role of social media became crucial in shaping political discourse (Bermingham & Smeaton, 2011). Social networks have made transparency even more exacting, and this evoked deep-rooted changes in the Israeli political system. Although it is fair to say that social networks will crown the next generation of political heroes, remarkable as it may be, it was the most veteran in Israeli political scene—Netanyahu—that was best promoted as a new brand through social media as he boasted his ability to mobilize his followers to high activity on his Facebook page (Bender, 2012a).

2. The 2013 Elections

Elections in Israel have become to be known as the "Facebook elections" (Epstein, 2012; Kishik, 2012). The major political parties and their leaders have traditionally gained dramatic advantages over the smaller parties and candidates through television 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. 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 (Blunder, 2015).

One of the biggest game-changers in Israeli elections is the advent of social media, which allow huge amounts of content to be uploaded by ordinary people, enabling everyone and anyone to have a voice. This has created potential avenues for campaigning, since Israel has laws that severely limit campaigning in terms of both budget and time (Shapira, 2016). This issue is especially problematic in Israel, known for its severe limitations on campaigning, however the

laws do not cover campaigning on the internet, where they are difficult to enforce (Haleva-Amir, 2011). This has allowed politicians to sidestep budget and campaign constraints and instead campaign with much greater success on social media. Thus, online campaigning had tremendous influence due to its ability to bypass the more traditional political restrictions (Shwartz Altshular & Lurie, 2015).

In the 2013 campaign, the leading candidate was Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who joined forces with Avigdor Liberman, a veteran politician, and they ran under the slogan: "*Israel needs strong leaders against terrorism and the threat of Iran*". On the other side, threatening the rule of Likud with Netanyahu in power, the "alliance of brothers"—the cooperation of Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennet—had more economic-social oriented approach. Bennet ran with the slogan: "*The start of a new beginning*", and Lapid had the slogan: "*We have come to make a change*".

There can be no argument that an election campaign where social media is paramount requires a new and fresh strategy to reach target audiences and maintain public support. Such a task is challenging for newcomers, when the opponent is more experienced and already holds the position. It is much more difficult to motivate people to change than to reinforce the current situation. Political campaigning is a rigorous process, especially when combating an incumbent party. It requires a substantial effort to completely transform a party's image and convince the public to make a change. However, as Gibson & McAllister (2014) argue, this is where the advantage of newcomers. They found that major parties dominate in the adoption of personal websites and minor parties are stronger users of social media. Both strategies are effective in gaining votes, suggesting that the web may be rebalancing if not equalizing party competition. This can explain the success of newcomers in Israeli politics, which could take advantage of the rise of social media and become renowned politicians with many seats on the Knesset. Lapid, considered as the "Minister of Facebook Affairs" (Maltz, 2013), was by far, the most engaged politician in these elections, and became the second biggest political party in his first elections with 19 seats, after the Likud lead by the veteran politician Netanyahu. Naftali Bennet, who was labeled "the Facebook Champion" (Kahana, 2014), also had a fantastic result, as his party increased its Knesset members from three to 12. With an alliance of the two young leaders, they both had 31 seats, equal to the ruling party, the Likud.

The importance of new media could be understood even before the campaign started officially. Netanyahu and Lieberman were well known politicians that went through many experiences before joining the political sphere, but Lapid and Bennet were newcomers into the political game. The social networks here played a fundamental role in getting the Israeli population to know whom these new candidates are, and the "behind the scenes" competition for likes was no less important. During the elections, the Likud party boasted that Prime Minis-

ter Netanyahu's Facebook posts generated more likes and shares than the posts of any other Israeli politician (Bender, 2012a). In response the opposition argued that Netanyahu "buys" his likes (Bender, 2012b). Furthermore, the candidates increased social media monitoring software that tracks the number of likes and shares their messages receive in real time, which allowed them to adjust their future messages for maximum appeal (Merica, 2013).

Lapit and Bennet are the best example of this trend: as a free content provider, Facebook offered them an inexpensive opportunity to spread their messages and create public awareness. Taking into account the limitations on new and small parties in Israel, which are limited in their budgets and exposure to the mainstream media, the role of new media was crucial to the results of the campaign. Haleva-Amir & Nahon (2015) found that first-time candidate Naftali Bennett achieved statistically similar engagement levels as the veteran politician Netanyahu. Similarly, first-time contender Yair Lapid's messages promoted equal levels of engagement as did the messages of opposition leader Shelly Yachimovich (Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, & Wolfsfeld, 2015a).

Perhaps the best example of the importance of social media is of a well-known candidate, former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. In 2009, she won the biggest number of votes and her party became the biggest party in the Israeli parliament, with 29 seats. However, in 2013 she initiated social media activities only five months before the formal elections, giving a wide range behind other politicians. With this lack of engagement in new media, Livni received the smallest number of likes and her posts were the least engaging. She ended up receiving only 6 seats (5% of the votes), in comparison with the newcomers—Bennet with 12 seats (9% of the votes) and Lapid with 19 seats (14% of the votes).

As oppose of Tzipi Livni, but in the same line of traditional politicians, Binyamin Netanyahu could understand the importance of social media and generate a more aggressive approach to social networks. According to Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, & Samuel-Azran (2015) , Netanyahu received the greatest number of likes and engagement in his posts, mainly since he was the authority figure (as acting Prime Minister) in combination with a wise use of social media. Here we have two veteran politicians with a completely opposite social media approach and political success. In 2009, using traditional media, Netanyahu won 28 seats and Livni 29, and in 2013, using social media, Netanyahu won 31 seats and Livni only 6.

As we can see, social media have determined dramatic changes in the balance of Israeli political power, and although the main channels for public debate remain the traditional media, the exposure of the public to social media is accelerating as a wide unmediated public debate that is taking place on Facebook and Twitter (Press, 2015). While the 2009 elections were accompanied by limited social media participation (Lev-On, 2011), in 2013 all the leading contenders maintained Facebook pages that allowed them to communicate intensely with their followers. Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, & Wolfsfeld (2015b) argue that in today's

high-choice media environment, individuals and groups with the highest level of political interest are more likely to develop richer political information repertoires that involve exploiting both digital and traditional ways of searching for political information. To illustrate the centrality of Facebook in the 2013 elections, only three of the five leading candidates used intensive Facebook activity, and they were the ones that emerged as winners. It is interesting however, that the veteran politician—Netanyahu—was able to take advantage of using information over the Internet and be active on his Facebook page, including engaging Internet users in direct dialogue. This demonstrates a calculated and savvy use of new media platforms, as his accounts were able to motivate high rates of interaction and interest among followers and others who could view the posts.

3. The 2015 Elections

The use of new media strategy was evident throughout the 2015 campaign. Prime Minister Netanyahu was particularly aggressive in his use of new media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter to gather support. This is the great success of Netanyahu, which could flourish in the atmosphere of social protests and emerge from the old political mechanism to compete with newcomers politicians. He derives his power from changes in technology and draws his strength from social networks, using them as alternative media to the traditional networks. His strategy was highly successful, using social media to campaign on top of the traditional media and to accomplish his political goals, including high involvement of the public and motivating record-high voter turnout to maintain his own reelection and the domination of the Israeli Parliament by the Likud Party.

Leading up to the elections, Netanyahu released videos to help with his struggle against the "evil ones", offering salvation to the nation based on strength. In one of the videos, he depicted as a giant cuddly teddy bear protecting the nation against all evil doers—real or imaginary. This may seem like an odd way to view the election, but given the way the Likud campaign operated, it really is not. Likud published few election-related videos, messages and slogans on the Internet, designed for virility, either by being amusing (Netanyahu as a baby-sitter to the rest of the candidates) or scary (Iran and a second Holocaust and ISIS on Israel's borders).

In the baby-sitter video he announced to a couple that he was the "Bibi-sitter"—the only one in the nation who could look after the country's children—while Zionist Camp Party leaders Tzipi Livni and Isaac Herzog, his political opponents, were not to be trusted. "*This election, vote for whom that will care for your children*," he said to camera. Then the parents left, only to return to their house moments later to find Netanyahu nesting on the sofa and their children nowhere to be seen.

The scary video showed a short spoof of Islamic State fighters in a pickup truck who are told to "take a left" as a way to destroy Jerusalem. This video went

viral and garnered severe backlash.

Another video was filmed by a professional home designer and television personality depicting Netanyahu bearing the burdens of state while living in apparent decrepitude. On the eve of a long-awaited report from Israel's state comptroller into tales of alleged extravagance at the prime minister's official Jerusalem residence, the 15-minute film shot by Moshik Galamin and posted on Netanyahu's Facebook page—painted a picture of domestic austerity bordering on squalor. Guided around the residence by Netanyahu's wife, Sara, Galamin homed in on mildewed curtains, broken doorframes, peeling paint and a leaking patio roof where the Israeli leader is expected to entertain guests. The exercise seemed designed to counter claims that the Netanyahus have embarked on an unparalleled spending spree—lavishing taxpayers' funds on scented candles, ice-cream contracts, garden furnishings and gourmet food.

The Likud Party posted a commercial on YouTube. Styled after an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, the commercial showed a group of people sitting in a circle and complaining how reforms initiated by Netanyahu had undermined their companies. One actor impersonated a worker from the Israel Port Authority, who said that he used to get paid much a month for three hours of work. "*Then the reform came along, and all of a sudden we had to really work,*" he whined. Next was an "employee" of the Israel Broadcasting Authority. She complained about legislation that dismantled the IBA and set into motion the establishment of a new Israel Broadcasting Corporation. "*From whom will we now collect money for no reason?*", the IBA employee asked the group. Next was an actor dressed as a Hamas terrorist, who in a poor attempt to speak Hebrew with an Arab accent, said that he was also there "because of Bibi"—a reference to the Gaza war fought the previous summer. At the end of the commercial, Netanyahu appeared on screen and said that only the Likud and a government led by him would continue to push through economic reforms and confront the security challenges looming on Israel's horizon. After the commercial aired, the Likud came under fire for likening port workers and IBA employees to Hamas terrorists, but the message was clear: Netanyahu took credit for the reforms, since he believed they could win him votes (Katz, 2017).

Bennet also launched a satirical campaign titled "Stop Apologizing", featuring himself disguised as a Tel Aviv hipster. He uploaded the video to YouTube and then posted it on Facebook. It was shared repeatedly, quickly went viral and won numerous satirical takes by others. The video was even picked up by international media.

As we can see, the significance of new media in political campaigns is not limited to the extraordinary and instantaneous reach they have. Like-minded citizens and activists also played a powerful role by sharing, commenting, "liking", and other forms of digital interaction, as they actively participated in the production, distribution and reception of news. Voters eagerly anticipated new videos as they tried to outdo one another with clever puns, creative ideas and not-so-subtle jabs at their rivals (Press, 2015).

Netanyahu even made a pioneering move, introducing the first crowd-sourced primaries election—or, rather, a candidate reality show. Netanyahu opened up two reserved slots on the list of his party, Likud, for popular choice, and invited the public to submit suggestions and recommendations for the reserved 11th and 23rd slots, which the Likud members approved to reserve for candidates of the prime minister's choice. Netanyahu's request brought hundreds of replies—according to Likud, which leaked some of the names to the press—they included former Bank of Israel governor Stanley Fisher, Jewish Agency chair Natan Sharansky, journalists and TV and sport stars.

The most vigorous use of new media, bypassing the legal limitations of traditional media, was on election day, just a few hours before the polls closed, as Netanyahu posted a controversial video on Facebook in which he claimed that: "*The right-wing government is in danger. Arab voters are going in masse to the polls. Left-wing NGOs are bringing them on buses. Get out to vote, bring your friends and family, vote Likud in order to close the gap between us and Labor Zionist Union. With your help and God's help, we will form a nationalist government that will protect the State of Israel.*"

After the elections, Netanyahu said that he regrets issuing a warning to his supporters that Arab voters were heading to the polls in buses: "*I wasn't trying to block anyone from voting. I was trying to mobilize my own forces. And that mobilization was based on Arab money—sorry, on foreign money, a lot of foreign money that was coming in.*"

Netanyahu was referring to efforts by left-leaning groups to increase voter-turnout among Israeli Arabs, a group that often claims that Netanyahu's party is xenophobic and hostile toward Arabs. Indeed, Arab voters broke turnout records during the election, but Netanyahu's warning had its desired effect, increasing right-leaning voter-turnout to record levels and winning the election for Likud (Harkov, 2015).

In the age of traditional media, it was highly unlikely that this urgent appeal would reach conservative voters in the hours during which polls were open. Traditional media relies not only on the decision of media organizations to print or televise content, but also on the ability of the public to view such broadcasts in the brief minutes as they are being aired (Epstein, 2012). However, as surprising as it may be, almost the same scenario occurred 19 years earlier. Netanyahu first came to office in May 1996, six months after his rival, Yitzhak Rabin, was shot dead by an ultranationalist Israeli assassin. The nationalist right-wing camp, headed by Netanyahu, was blamed by much of Israeli society for the incitement that led to Rabin's assassination. Netanyahu was about 30 points behind Shimon Peres, but on election night six months later, he achieved the impossible: Israelis went to sleep with Peres still leading in the polls but woke up to find that the Netanyahu era had begun (Mendel, 2017).

In a surprising move a day before election day, thousands of his supporters went to the streets with slogans of "*Netanyahu is good for the Jews*". This cam-

paign would have been condemned as racist had it been launched earlier, in the fragile atmosphere after the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin. Yet the labor party was surprised with no time to react before election day—and the initiative was highly successful.

19 years apart—the same tactic, with different technology. In both cases, it was a right-wing message that encouraged voters in the last minute in a surprising move for the rivals. In terms of the significance of new media, Netanyahu was able to take advantage of instantaneous digital technology to disseminate his message in a matter of hours. The campaign gathered data on people who were Likud members and people who had the propensity to vote for right-of-center parties. It focused on mobile because smart phone penetration in Israel is high. A big thing in Israel is WhatsApp, and the campaign gathered mobile numbers and feed that data to the field team, which had a system that could blast WhatsApp messages to people and get them to the polls.

In the final hours of the election campaign that Netanyahu looked certain to lose, his Likud party went into crisis mode, sending out distress signals to rally rightwing supporters. Messages were sent via texts to masses of likely conservative voters: "*Friends, this is the time for a final effort, a Zionist Tzav* 8", Netanyahu wrote to Likud supporters on the party's Facebook page, referring to the command used by Israel's military to call up soldiers and reservists in times of war. "*This is a close race. Convince people to vote Likud. Every voice is important,*" *said the message, which was signed,* "*Bibi*".

With final pre-election opinion polls, as Likud was trailing Herzog's Zionist Union by four seats, some Likud members were panicking, and the center-left was priming journalists to join victory celebrations at its Tel Aviv headquarters on election night. However, in a blitz of Facebook postings, text messages to supporters and interviews in the final three days of the campaign, the prime minister turned this around and put his party in first place to form a coalition and serve fourth term in office. This demonstrates a calculated and well-informed use of new media platforms that could motivate high rates of interaction and interest among his followers.

Netanyahu made use of the media's chief ideological weapon: satire. The sarcastic videos and text messages were viewed as going "too far," but at the end of the day Netanyahu was viewed as one of the most engaging political presences on social media, and his campaign successfully adopted new media in historic manner, which will be emulated by political entities from now on. After winning the elections, Netanyahu immediately took to twitter to claim a "*great victory against all odds*". The claim was repeated later in the evening in person when the Prime Minister, grinning ear to ear, took center stage at the Likud camp and told his supporters: "*I love you.*"

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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