TOWARDS A RESPONSIVE MODE OF POLICY IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

YARON KATZ

Research Scholar, Holon Institute of Technology, Israel

ABSTRACT

The controversy in the case of Elor Azaria, an Israeli soldier who shot a Palestinian assailant in the Palestinian city of Hebron, after he was wounded and neutralized, led to a highly emotional public debate in Israel. A video of the incident was uploaded on social media and caused a huge political storm. The incident divided the Israeli public and its leaders, with some expressing outrage over the killing of an incapacitated man, and others supporting even the most extreme response to a stabbing attack. The political involvement, through social media shows the impact that, social media has on the political arena. The research examines the way the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, reacted to the events. As one of the most popular of any world leader in social media, he executed a well-planned campaign, which helped him to mediate between the conflicting sides: the army, which opened an investigation against the solid and sentenced him to 18 months in jail; and public opinion, which widely supported the solider.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Security, Government, Army, Netanyahu

INTRODUCTION

One of the main dilemmas that Israeli society is dealing with, is the role of the army in defensive activity (El-Nawawy and Powers, 2010), since events are intensified by the media and the military and political elites (Fröhlich (2010). Media-state relations changed fundamentally, as social media changed the way the media and governments operate (Paterson, 2011). Maoz (2006) suggests that, media coverage is the main source that determines public opinion and has to be considered as a major force in public opinion change in social and security issues. However, the rise of social media is forcing politicians into an increasingly responsive mode, rather than the proactive agenda setting role, they would prefer to adopt. The shift in the media audience's use is triggering an adaptation to different channels of message delivery, in order to connect with Internet users (Gurevitch, Coleman, &Blumler, 2009).

As the Azaria case demonstrates, anyone with a camera or phone and access to the internet can be their own reporter. A video taken by a single man was able to influence and set the agenda about the issue. Immediately, after the explosion of the video online Israeli politicians, and the public expressed their views, via Twitter and Facebook. The incident shows how social media is crucial in shaping political discourse, and allowing people to interact with each other, by both sharing and consuming information (Nations, 2017). Unlike traditional media, social media also provides politicians the opportunity to promote their messages, as they intend for the information is unfiltered or censored (Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, &Wolfsfeld, 2015; Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, & Samuel-Azran, 2015).

Government and Social Media

The Azaria case demonstrates the complexity of security issues, and the tremendous impact of social media on the turn of events. On the one hand, Israel is a country with a pervading military culture as a result of its army and compulsory conscription (Katz, 2012). Throughout its history, Israel had to deal with the multitude of security issues, that arise naturally in a country with such a strong military culture (Deprez and Raeymaeckers, 2010). These issues include the portrayal of the military in the media, the role of the media and security and secrecy issues (Sucharov, 2005). On the other hand, Israeli society is widely connected to global policy, and the political developments are widely covered in the global media. The principle of free communications differentiates Israel from the countries, surrounding her and the media considered to be independent of the government, and enjoy wider freedom of expression in every field - except that of security. As a result of this conflict of interests, policy changes are required by governments. As technology changes, so too does the nature of these issues (Gustin, 2012), and the government and the army have the task of adapting technology, to suit the needs of the country (Zeizff, 2016). This situation requires limitations on publication of information that, relates to national security affairs, however, as evident in the Azaria case, with the development of technology, local organizations are able to make an influence on the turn of events (Bergman, 2016).

This is not unique to Israel, but more subnational than in other countries, as national security and freedom of the press are two grand domains of Israeli society (Peoria, 2006). The contrasts between social media and security issues are since, the strategy of Israel Defense Forces is defensive, while its operations and tactics are offensive and cut to the heart of national identity. The distinction between defensive values and offensive operations, demonstrates the unique role of the IDF in Israeli heritage and society, and the severe impact on society when such distinction is broken. The media have a long history of being closely associated, with government interests (Levi, 2016), which can be explained in that Israel is a modern example of a country, whose way of life has been molded by war (Zeevi, 2009). However, the solidarity is limited in time, and at the end of the security tension the median return to balanced and critical coverage of the government (Surkes, 2016).

The Azaria incident characterizes the increasing fraught impact of social media, on security issues. Social media provides enormous opportunities and challenges, for states and organizations as they seek to engage with new policy spaces developing around the Internet (Adesina, 2017). Hallams (2010) indicates that, Israel can benefit from social media since, the use of technology is widespread and Israelis are leading consumers of new media. As the research shows, political leaders can also benefit from the use of social media, and Prime Minister Netanyahu is perhaps the best example. He has been particularly aggressive in his use of Facebook and Twitter, dominating the political arena in Israel and worldwide. Netanyahu's social media strategy has been highly successful, with a recent study concluded that, his social media accounts are the third most popular of any world leader. He is actively involved in dialogue, with political leaders and ordinary citizens around the world, provoking global debate and often drawing widespread criticism. A recent study concluded that, his social media accounts are the third most popular of any world leader, following the President of Argentina and the Prime Minister of Cambodia (Keidar, 2016). In another study, Netanyahu was elected as the 10th-most-admired person in the United States, according to the "World's Most Admired 2016" YouGov poll, that gauged the popularity of famous people in 30 different countries.

Netanyahu and Social Media

To understand the influence of social media on Israeli politics, it is necessary to examine the way the Prime Minister reacted to the events. At first, Netanyahu termed the criticism of the shooting as "outrageous". Initially, he issued a statement that, "the IDF expects its soldiers to behave with composure and in accordance with the rules of engagement," adding that, the incident in Hebron does not "represent the values of the IDF." Two days later, he wrote a Facebook post saying: "The IDF is a moral army that does not execute people. IDF soldiers have absorbed by their bodies the terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens and deserve support."

However, he was quick to change his mind and acted based on public reaction, expressed in social media. Despite his earlier comments, he later phoned Azaria's father to express his support. He told the father that, he understood his distress as he himself was a father of a soldier. He also reassured him that, the difficult situations faced by soldiers confronting terrorists will be taken into account, and the system will be fair to his son. As the case progressed Netanyahu was criticized for his conflicting statements, although he called for a pardon for the soldier. During an interview with Channel 2 News, Netanyahu stated he had no regrets about calling Azaria's parents. When questioned whether he had made telephone calls to parents of other soldiers who had transgressed, he replied that, he didn't, but had talked to those parents of soldiers who were killed or missing. This created a controversy. Netanyahu was criticized by opposition politicians and the media, who saw it as comparing parents of fallen soldiers to Azaria's parents. The Prime Minister's Office, later issued a statement rejecting these claims and called them a "base, distorted and lying" misrepresentation. Netanyahu himself also denied these claims and apologized, if his words were misunderstood or misinterpreted (Keidar, 2017).

His conflicting public statements, perhaps reflect the conflicting opinions of the public on the matter and his desire as Prime Minister, to appease the citizens of his country. As the public gained access to information, it's become more important for the government to incorporate public opinion into policy and decisions. He later urged for "balance" in the trial, saying that, he is sure, that the court will act wisely in weighing Azaria's killing of the Palestinian attacker, and the context in which he operated (Lis, 2016).

Netanyahu continued to express his opinion, based on public reaction on social media. As he was torn down between the need to defend the decision of the army and the criticism of the public, he later had a few posts on Twitter, in relation to the situation but nothing was direct, as he focused more on the UN's opinion on this matter: "The Human Rights Council of the UN has become a circus of anti-Israeli, attacking the only democracy in the Middle East and ignoring the gross violations in Iran, Syria and North Korea" the values of the IDF. After the verdict, Netanyahu gave his backing to the calls for clemency, saying that, he supported granting Azaria a pardon. The Prime Minister tweeted: "My opinion has not changed on the question of granting a pardon. When the subject comes up, I will offer my recommendation for a pardon to the relevant authorities."

As can be seen, he changed his public opinion a few times, based on the circumstances, but had no impact on the turn of events (Keinon, 2017). After the verdict of Azaria, he led a chorus of social and political leaders, calling to issue a pardon, contrary to the position of the army: "It is a difficult and painful day for all of us", Netanyahu said in a statement issued eight hours after the conviction was announced. "First and foremost for Euler and his family, IDF soldiers, and many citizens and parents of our soldiers, myself included." Although, declaring his support for the idea of pardoning

Azaria, Netanyahu called on citizens to refrain from words and/or actions, which would be detrimental to the cohesion of the IDF or the broader Israeli society: "I call on all citizens to behave responsibly toward the IDF, its officers and the chief of staff," he said. "We have one army, which is the foundation of our existence. The IDF soldiers are the sons and daughters of all of us, and they must remain above all disagreements."

CONCLUSIONS

The policy of the Israeli security system was traditionally based on the need to prevent publication of information on the army and sensitive security issues. The perspective of security stems from a situation of prolonged war, between Israel and Arab states and armed fanatic organizations, and the daily exposure to terrorist attacks against civilians. For years, a wide national consent was created for the need to prevent information, that could endanger the national security. This stand was accepted by the public and the media, since the army and the security system were a principle factor in the gathering of information, on security subjects and as such controlled vital information. But social media influenced the change of coverage policy, on security matters. While in the past, the army had sole authority to ban advertisement of information in different fields, today social media bear most of the weight of preserving a balance between the right of the public to know, and the protection of state security.

The main issue here, is the role of social media. Whereas, in the past Israeli authorities could prohibit publication of classified information, for national security reasons, today's security issues are being discussed with almost no limitations on social media, including detailed descriptions of military operations and personal stories of soldiers. As evident in the Azaria case, social media are offering new opportunities for individuals and politicians, alike. The research examined the way the Prime Minister of Israel used social media in the Azaria case, concluding that, he managed to use a responsive mode rather than the active role, that politicians could use prior to social media. Netanyahu acknowledged the agenda, setting role of social media and used it to his benefit, to connect with Internet users and reach directly to the public, bypassing the traditional media. It is interesting to see, however, that although, he was active on Facebook and Twitter, he had no real impact on the end-result of the controversy, as he did not have full control over the media.

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