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## TRANSPARENCY, RESEARCH AND FACEBOOK: THE CASE OF FACEBOOK.COM/PEACE

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An important body of literature has laid out a series of critiques of the ways that social media platforms enable (or not) access to the enormous quantities of data that their users produce (e.g. Bodle, 2011; Bruns & Burgess, 2016), and calls have been made for greater access to such data (e.g. Burgess & Bruns, 2015; Rieder, 2016). Research into political Facebook unfriending, for instance, has found that data can only be attained by surveying Facebook users (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), a state of affairs that itself is a function of the bias towards connectivity among social media and their APIs (John & Nissenbaum, 2016). The current paper builds on these critical approaches to social media data by examining data provided directly by Facebook regarding users' friending behaviors. As I shall show, there are multiple reasons for being skeptical as to the validity of some these data, but hard and fast proof remains perpetually out of reach. This, I argue, is an essential component of the research politics of social media platforms.

The data under question are published at [facebook.com/peace](https://facebook.com/peace). The page, which is updated daily, is titled "A World of Friends", and includes the text: "Facebook connects people from all over the world even in unexpected places. Here's a look at how many new friendships formed just yesterday" (see Figure 1). Part of Peace Dot, "the first technology based initiative to measure peace on the internet",<sup>1</sup> the page was set up in October 2009 (then at [peace.facebook.com](https://peace.facebook.com)), the fruits of a partnership between Facebook and the Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://peaceinnovation.stanford.edu/projects/peacedot/peace-facebook-com-case-study/>

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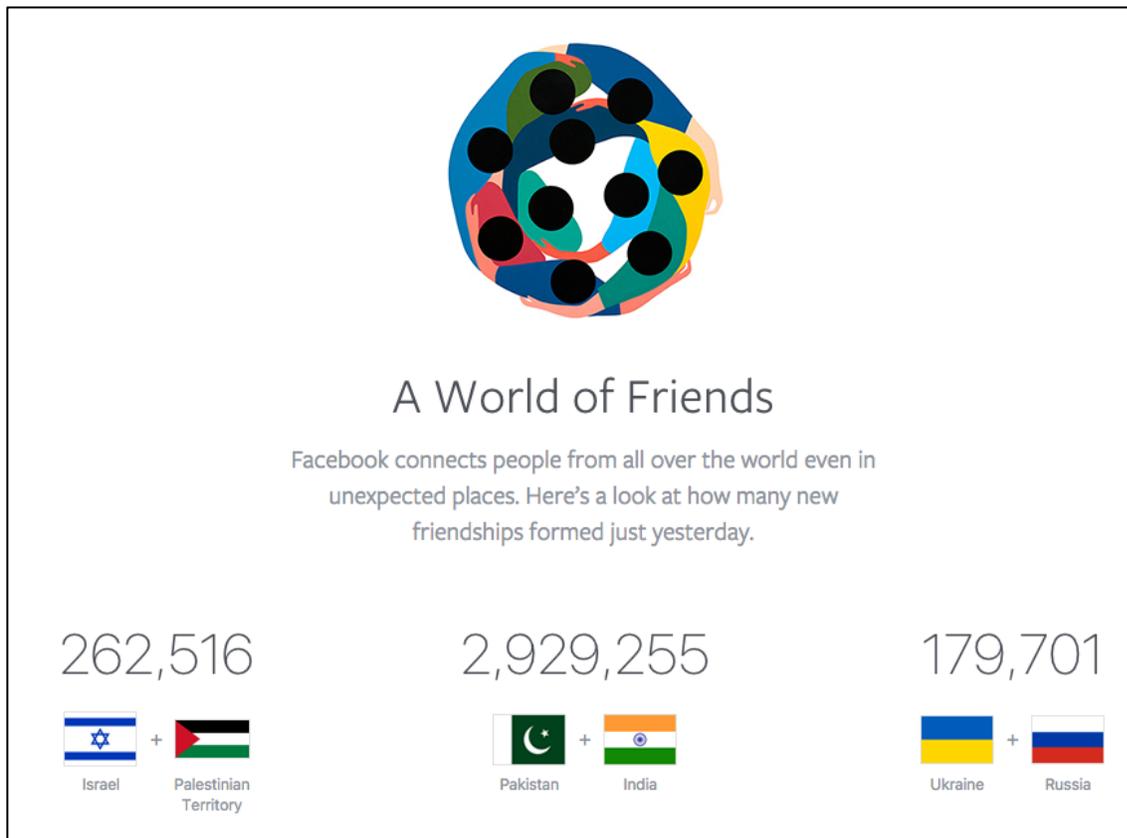


Figure 1: [www.facebook.com/peace](http://www.facebook.com/peace), 26/2/2017

The Stanford Peace Innovation Lab suggests that friending between Israelis and Palestinians declined during the escalation of armed conflict between Israel and the Gaza Strip in 2012, before picking up again once a cease fire was agreed upon (Figure 2). Several other texts other have referred to the page in discussions of the place of social media in fostering closer ties among people in situations of conflict (examples include Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Kampf, 2011; Lee, 2014, 2015).

# Israel Palestine Friending Activities

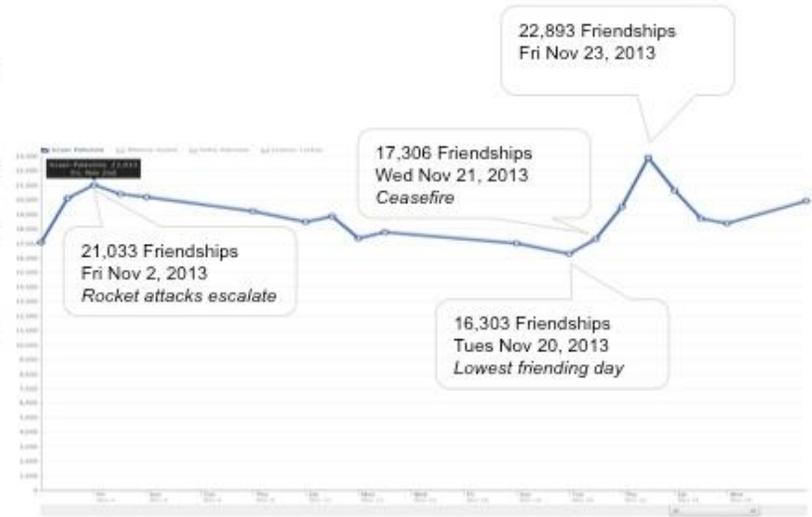
**Operation Pillar of Defense**  
lasted from 14 – 21 Nov 2012

- Friending data between Israelis and Palestinians decline during this period
- Friending activity resumes from 21 November onward peaking on Friday and declining over the weekend

**Total Conflict casualties (worst estimates)**

- 122 combatants killed
- 49 combatants wounded
- 117 civilians killed
- 1190 civilians injured

1478 total casualties



Sources: [peace.facebook.com](http://peace.facebook.com), [www.pchrgaza.org](http://www.pchrgaza.org), [Times of Israel](http://TimesofIsrael.com), [Operation Pillar Defense](http://OperationPillarDefense.com), [BBC News](http://BBCNews.com), [The Guardian](http://TheGuardian.com), [Israel Under Fire](http://IsraelUnderFire.com).

Stanford | Peace Innovation Lab

Figure 2: <https://peaceinnovation.stanford.edu/projects/peacedot/peace-facebook-com-case-study/>

However, as mentioned, while potentially fascinating, closer observation of the data raises many questions. Accordingly, starting on 4 August, 2016, the published data were systematically collected every day, and the Wayback Machine was used to gather as much data as is available from before then (68 days' worth between October 2009 and June 2013).

Focusing my attention on the Israel/Palestine case (though the others are equally mysterious), the following are some of the reasons for treating with deep skepticism the data as published by Facebook:

1. The numbers of friendings reported today are far higher than they were in 2010 in proportion to the number of Israeli Facebook users (see Table 1), and the increase has not been gradual: see the huge leap around the beginning of 2016 in Figure 3. The Stanford Peace Innovation Lab itself says it does not know “the precise reason for the drastic increase in friending numbers”.<sup>2</sup> It does not seem likely that the page is today reporting what it was reporting when it was first launched.
2. My own survey of a representative sample of the Israel’s Jewish online population (n=1005) found that 93.3% of Jewish Israeli Facebook users made no

<sup>2</sup> <https://peaceinnovation.stanford.edu/projects/peacedot/peace-facebook-com-case-study/>

friendships with Facebook users in the Palestinian Territories in the last six months, and 97.6% made 5 or less. The average for the last 6 months was 2.83. A survey of Palestinian citizens of Israel is underway, but in order to reach the numbers published by Facebook, each of them will need to have friended over 30 Palestinians in the Palestinian Territories in the last six months. Meanwhile, in January 2017 alone, the 1.7m Facebook users in the Palestinian Territories would, on average, *all* have had to have friended 4.6 Israelis *each* if, as published, around 7.9m friendships were made during the course of that month. (As a thought experiment, think about how many people you friend every month.)

3. Friending between Israelis and Palestinians appears to follow a weekly cycle, with some days seeing statistically significantly greater numbers of friendings than others (Figure 4). However, this cycle does not accord with the knowledge of social media marketing experts in Israel regarding Facebook use by day, whereby all days enjoy roughly equal numbers of log-ins. Further data on numbers of friendings by day are not provided by Facebook.
4. The numbers appear to fluctuate entirely independently of events. For instance, in October 2016, a month with several important Jewish holidays, the weekly cyclicity of friending by Israelis and Palestinians is not affected by a series of Jewish (and Israeli national) holidays (see Figure 5).

	<b>Daily average of friendships made</b>	<b>Annual extrapolation</b>	<b>No. of Israeli Facebook users (internetwordstats.com)</b>	<b>New Palestinian friends per Israeli Facebook user per year</b>
<b>2010</b>	10,813	3,946,745	3,209,040 (August 2010)	1.23
<b>2012</b>	20,304	7,410,960	3,693,260 (September 2012)	2.01
<b>2016</b>	236,303	86,250,595	4,900,000 (June 2016)	17.60

?

Table 1

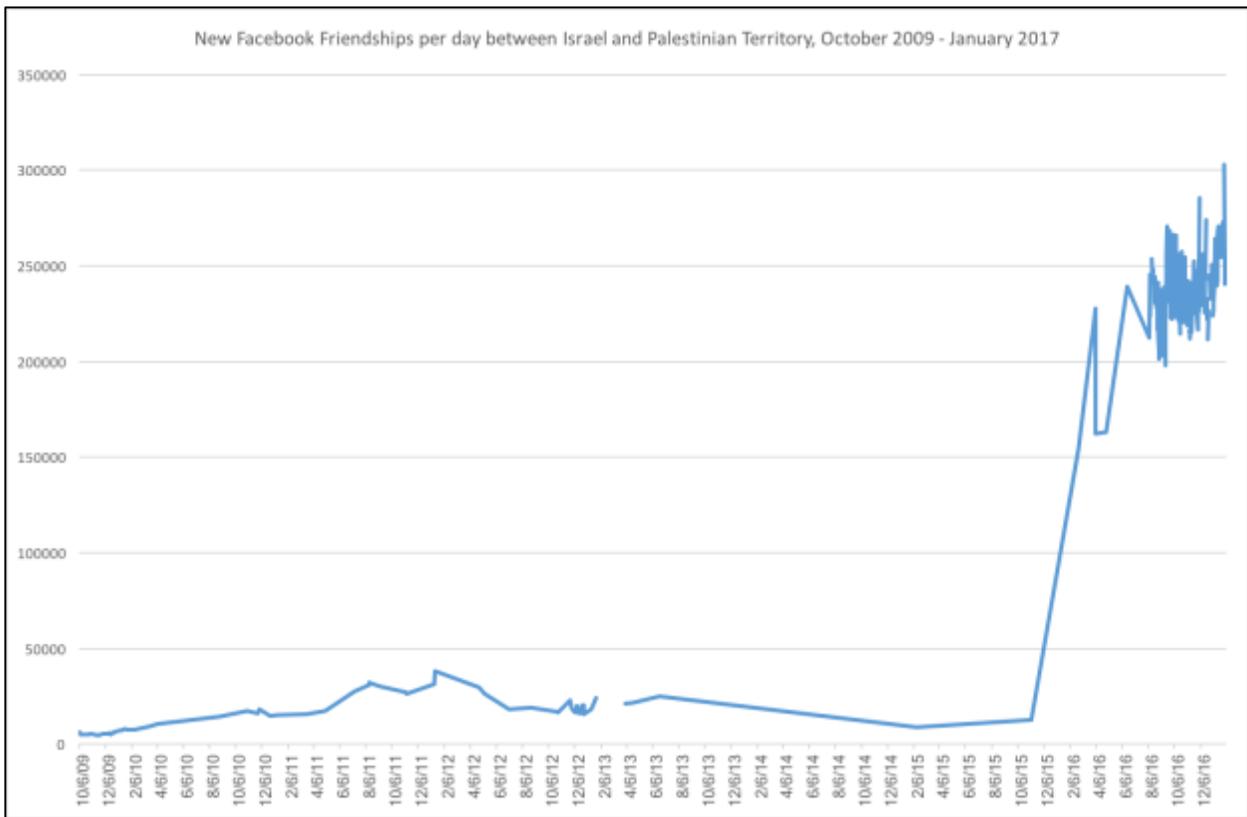


Figure 3

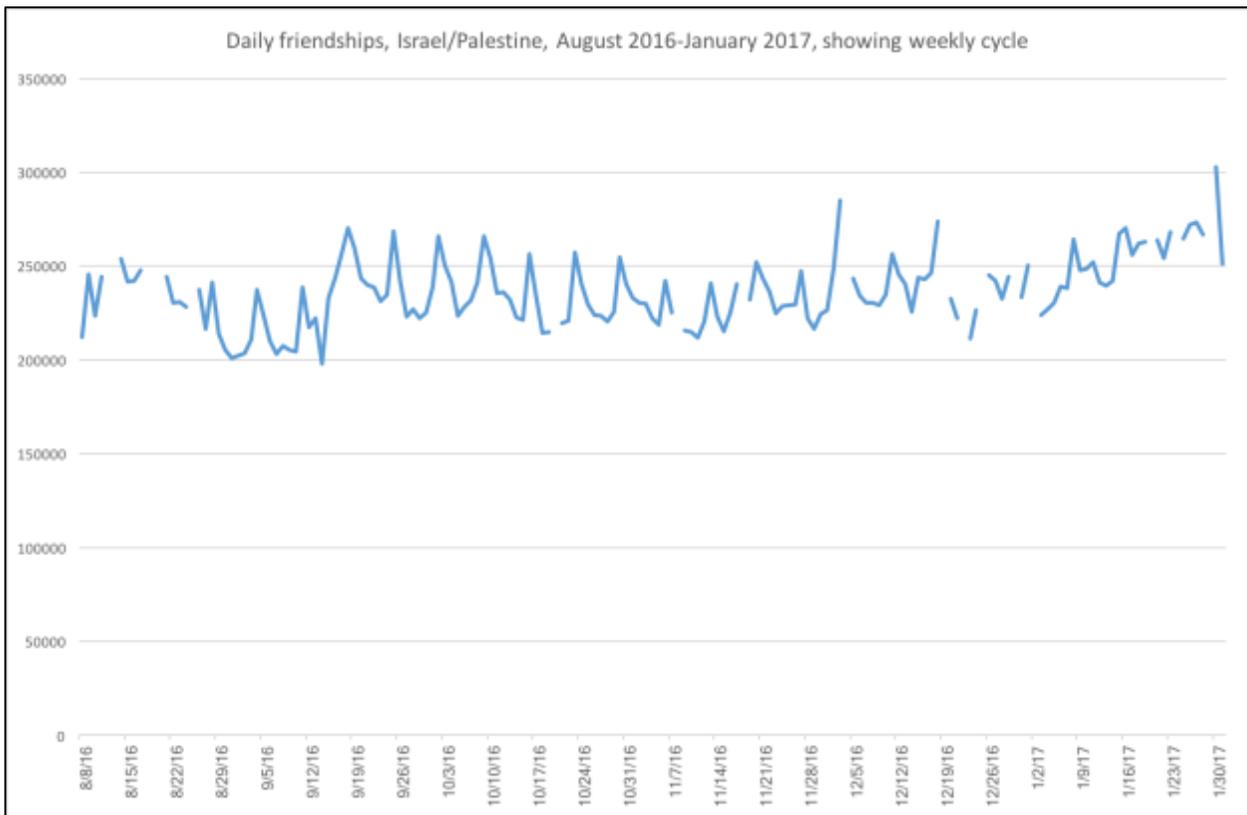


Figure 4

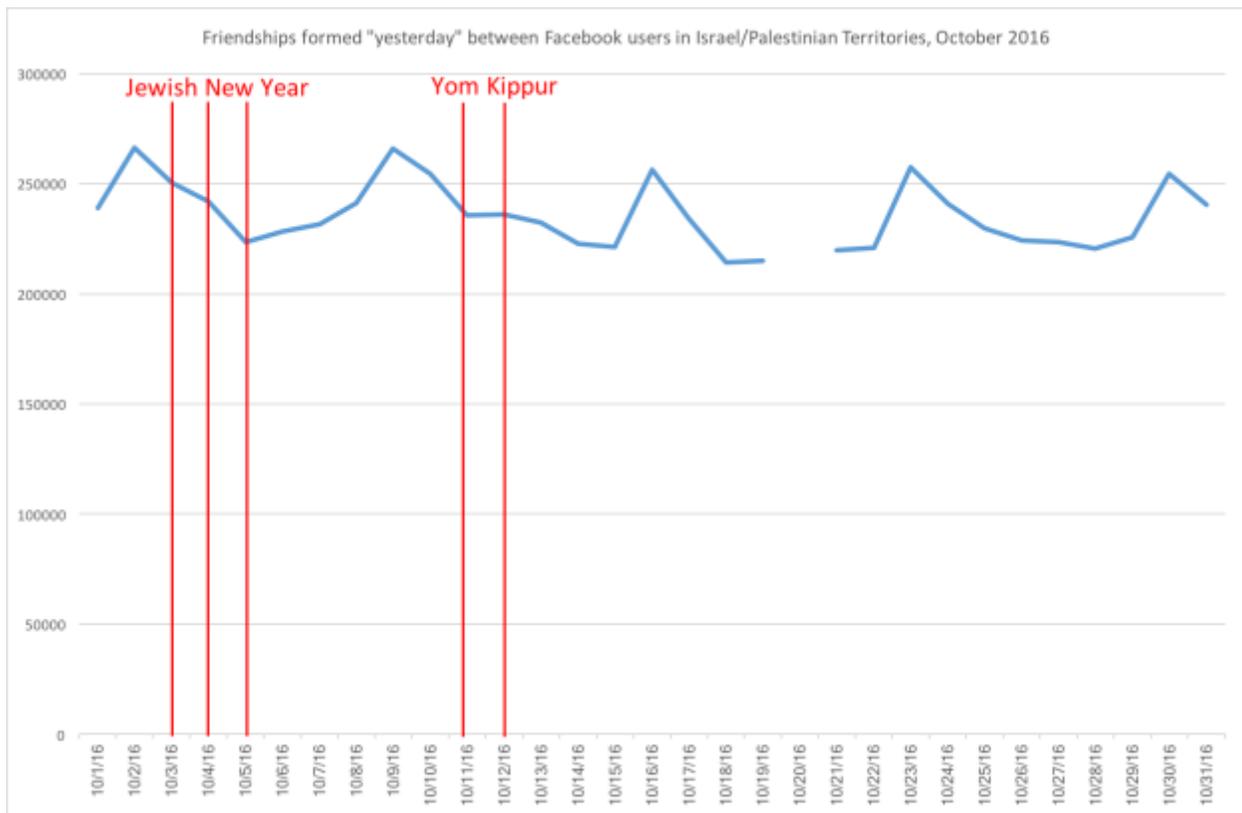


Figure 5

At the time of writing I still do not know where the numbers come from, and over a month's emailing to various position-holders within Facebook (in the US and in Israel) has yielded no answers. Indeed, I do not expect answers. Theoretically speaking, therefore, this research contributes to critical studies of the research politics of social media platforms, and especially those that call for greater transparency on the part of Facebook and others (Langlois & Elmer, 2013; Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014)

Moreover, with Facebook positioning itself as the key infrastructure for the development of "global community",<sup>3</sup> and its increased power via the growing platformization of the web (Helmond, 2015), it is behoven on internet researchers to demand accountability from Facebook for data it publishes, especially when those data are claimed to support Facebook's ideological position and its political agenda.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634>

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