WHY DO ARAB-PALESTINIAN JOURNALISTS DELETE TWEETS?

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In Israel and Palestine, as in many countries, the majority of journalists operate an account on Twitter for different purposes, from news gathering and reporting to attracting new audiences and maintaining a relationship with their readers (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017). Many studies of Twitter's journalistic role have examined journalists' tweeting practices and the ways in which Twitter serves as an organizational and individual branding tool (e.g., Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2018). However, only a few studies have examined the patterns of tweet deletion among journalists. Ringel and Davidson (2022) conceptualized the practice of tweet deletion as an instance of "proactive ephemerality, a social media phenomenon that occurs when users intentionally remove their own content from their social media profiles manually or with the aid of mechanical tools" (p. 1218). In this study, we examine the motivations of Arab-Palestinian journalists who operate in Israel for deleting their tweets. Based on semi-structured interviews with Arab-Palestinian journalists working in Israel, we seek to understand why they proactively erase tweets. Further, we wish to consider the implications of such an act for Twitter's functioning as a public record.

Previous studies have demonstrated how social media users perceive this medium as dynamic and ephemeral, where new stories are pushing back old ones, encouraging users to forget rather than remember (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016; Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014). Evidence that politicians often delete tweets (Meeks, 2018) raises the question of how journalists, who also play a significant role in the public sphere, view and practice deletion. While one could argue that private citizens have the right to be forgotten (Yang, Quan-Haase, & Rannenberg, 2017), journalists' professional commitment in many countries to act as representatives of the public interest

(Waisbord, 2013), might create a public duty to retain at least some of their social media discourse (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017).

As journalists construct their presence on social media they must contend with various risks. Journalists face occupational risks in a precarious labor market in which news organizations easily hire and fire employees and many journalists work on a free-lance basis, continuously on the lookout for new employment opportunities (Davidson & Meyers, 2016). There is evidence that most workers feel a need to constantly craft their social media identity to serve their occupational goals (Gershon, 2017). Specifically, journalists are dependent on the impressions they manage online as they work outside stable organizational networks. The impression management work of minority and female journalists might be especially crucial to their economic well-being (Carlson & Usher, 2016). In addition, given their high public visibility, journalists face extensive online harassment. Such harassment is magnified by the rise of political polarization and authoritarianism in many societies. Women and minority journalists are especially likely to be harassed under such conditions (Waisbord, 2022).

In this context, deletion of tweets may be considered micro-level paradigmatic "repair work" (Bennett, Gressett, & Haltom, 1985) journalists do to correct the public record and retrospectively ensure their online presence conforms to professional norms and minimizes occupational and political risks. Interviews with American journalists suggested many journalists deleted tweets. Occupationally, they noted that the precarious nature of journalistic employment required them to constantly delete at least part of their online record to fit the preferences of future employers. Politically, they noted that the polarized and hate-ridden nature of social media motivated them to delete tweets. The American interviewees argued women as well as ethnic minorities faced more harassment, and were therefore more likely to delete tweets (Ringel & Davidson, 2022).

The online presence of Arab-Palestinian journalists reporting from Israel is especially important in an ethnically divided region in which they often serve as the voice of their community. If news is the first draft of history and news tweeting is "the first draft of the first draft"--as described by an American journalist in Ringel and Davidson's (2022)-- Arab-Palestinian journalistic tweets are an important and valuable primary source of knowledge on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, Arab-Palestinian journalists are facing many challenges that may lead them to self-censor and delete tweets on Twitter. In a polarized Israeli society, Arab citizens are conceived as a security threat, and Arab journalists are subject to harassment from both Israelis and Palestinians (Jamal & Awaisi, 2012). In recent years, Israel has experienced democratic backsliding within the 1967 borders (as it continued to occupy the west bank), with efforts to strengthen the power of the executive and the identity of Israel as a Jewish state while limiting human rights protections (Brandes, 2022), especially those enjoyed by non-Jews. Occupationally, Arab citizens of Israel experience systematic discrimination including lower earnings (Kristal & Rozenfeld-Kiner, 2022). Hence, the occupational precarity they experience is especially acute. Their political and occupational standing as a threatened minority has potentially significant implications for how Arab-Palestinian journalists work. In this study, we wish to consider how Arab-Palestinian journalists working in

Israel confront potential online threats and whether such threats shape their tendency to delete tweets.

Finally, Twitter as a platform may encourage users to delete their content. The affordances of Twitter do not allow users to edit tweets that involve typos and hence incentivize deletion. Following the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk in October 2022, the platform pared back some of the trust and safety mechanisms that reduced the prominence of hateful discourse online (The Associated Press, 2022). Therefore, we further ask how the changing ownership of the platform may be related to deletion practices among Arab-Palestinian journalists.

The study is based on 20 interviews conducted with Arab-Palestinian journalists who are active Twitter users and have more than 1,000 followers. We utilized a snowball sampling method to recruit journalists from three distinct groups. The first group comprises Arab-Palestinian journalists reporting for local Arabic news organizations. The second group consists of Arab-Palestinians working for Israeli news outlets, covering issues related to the Arab community in Hebrew. The third group comprises Arab-Palestinian journalists working for international news outlets, focusing on issues related to Israel and Palestine. The paper examines the deletion practices of each group and discusses their motivations for erasing their tweets. The interviews were conducted by a co-author who is a native Arabic speaker.

The initial findings of this research indicate that Arab-Palestinian journalists are adopting cautious tweeting practices and proactively deleting tweets that could potentially lead to their arrest or being blocked from the platform. While previous studies have underscored impression management as a primary motivator for tweet deletion, Arab-Palestinian journalists are navigating a delicate balance, operating "between the drops" of the harassment they endure and the imperative to tweet and report news while safeguarding themselves and others from potential harm.

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