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‘GUERRILLA ANALYSIS’ AND THE INSTITUTIONAL VOICE: THE PRODUCTIVE MESO-SPACE OF CORONAVIRUS VISUALIZATIONS ON ISRAELI TELEGRAM

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Introduction

In Spring of 2020, Israeli Telegram became a staple venue of civic-minded news consumption, as the platform served as the Ministry of Health’s primary official output in updating about new COVID-19 patients and measures (Nossek, 2022). The MoH channel, set up in 2018, was until then used primarily for the circulation of press releases, utilizing the platform’s “*unsend everything*” affordances (Urman & Katz, 2020; Rogers, 2020) in order to correct and edit such releases over time. But as contagion numbers rose, a new, less professionalized audience joined in: civic-minded audiences looking to be instantly informed about the trajectory of what will become the first waves of the pandemic in Israel. In July 2021, a group of ‘*Guerilla Analysts*,’ private citizens who pooled together their analytical resources to collect and co-create analyses and visualizations of pandemic data, migrated from Twitter and set up their own channel. Replacing traditional gatekeepers such as medical correspondents and scientists, this ragtag crew of data-driven citizens created a space in which literacies are co-developed through shared analysis of pandemic data. In this paper, I explore the informational ecosystem created by both institutional and ‘guerilla’ Telegram channels engaging in informing the public about the unfolding crisis through data visualizations, by comparing their visualizations of MoH data, and the discursive patterns that they provoke.

Through distinct formulations of actors, platforms, rules, and topics, messaging apps can create “news meso-space(s)” (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020), in which they offer sociable, semi-intimate, often reciprocal venues of news consumption. At times, they serve as fertile ground for digital collaborative information-making practices such as co-creation, collaborative fact-checking and co-production (e.g., Luengo & García-Marín, 2020; Noain-Sánchez, 2020), in which traditional journalist-audience dynamics may prove more fluid, and knowledge is produced by all. While meso-spaces have been examined as news sources and evaluated as disinformative and subversive venues, this paper offers insight into the ways in which such channels may be used to communally expand, evaluate and stretch the limits of knowledge in uncertainty through informational discourse triggered by data visualizations.

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This venture is informed by works that suggest that visualizations enjoy an association with the authority of the numbers that foreground them, as they may serve to empower political actors as vessels of rhetoric, or amplify voices in igniting deliberative systems around their informational subject matter (Amit-Danhi, 2022; Nærland & Engebretsen, 2021). By highlighting both the different visualization approaches taken with pandemic data in both groups, and the discursive dynamics that followed in interaction with audience, I seek to highlight a confluence of technological, informational and social practices that resulted in the empowering informational eco-system of a 'productive meso space'.

Method

To unfold the discursive framework that formed in Israeli Telegram during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, I collected a sample of two Telegram channels' discourse utilizing Telegram's API: The MoH channel, and "The National Graph Headquarters" (henceforth: GraphHQ), formed in July 2021 as a platform expanding Twitter discourse by its founders, all private citizens, led by a Twitter personality named "LittleMoiz", a sushi restaurant owner from the suburbs of central Israel. Both channels generally relied on the same governmental data resources, and their visualizations were featured prominently across Israeli social and news media, making their output highly impactful. I collected all visualizations posted to both channels between July 2021 and May 2022, and matched visualizations from "GraphHQ" with their same-day MoH counterparts, making sure to match visualizations of the same current data, to facilitate comparisons. I then randomly selected 100 visualization pairs, which serve as the main database. I then applied qualitative visualization rhetoric analysis to locate similarities and differences in informational, narrative and visual approaches between the Ministry and 'GraphHQ' visualizations. Finally, I selected a sub-sample of the 30 most discursively-engaging visualizations in order to apply qualitative discourse analysis to the comments posted to visualizations in order to document the 'Guerilla Analysts' practices of audience inclusion, literacy-sharing, mentorship and moderation.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary findings reveal that while the MoH's 'Institutional Voice' remained focused on conservative visualizations of present and past progression of the pandemic, GraphHQ's visualizations often chose to re-visualize government data, incorporating predictive narratives. See, for example, Fig. 1, comparing two visualizations from the same day, 27 July 2021. While 1A, MoH's visualization utilizes a future-oriented metric (the R value), it stops at the water's edge and does not highlight its tangible meanings, while in 1B, that same day's visualization by GraphHQ, visualizers extend the visual and conceptual trajectory in order to make tangible the scenarios suggested by the data. The willingness to venture into the future highlights that GraphHQ's team are 'Guerilla Analysts' – they utilize whatever epistemic, analytic and computational resources they come across to fight the sense of uncertainty that engulfed them. They correct and re-visualize institutional visualizations, often taking bolder swings in proposing actionable narratives missing or edited out of MoH visualizations. They produce bolder and starker visualizations to negate the risk of myocarditis in vaccination (7 October, 2021), simplify vaccine efficacy with easy-to-comprehend visualizations (21 October, 2021), and are willing to venture a first guess as to where Omicron is headed in December 2021, stating "*errors and omissions excepted*" to indicate that the analysis is preliminary.

While their leadership and rule-structure is clearly designed to keep disinformation away, they maintain the same sense of sociability documented in journalistic and professional news meso-space(s), even in discussions engaging partisan politics. While primarily focused on elucidation of complex analyses, the audience also challenges 'Guerilla' narratives, primarily by engaging in further re-visualizing, but also through collaborative fact-checking and cross-referencing with other agents' data. Most importantly, the two channels are linked – by way of shared data and shared purpose – to reveal what is upcoming, inform about what is unknown, and warn the public of dis/misinformation. Although they follow patterns of what are essentially re-visualizations conducted by peripheral actors (Guerilla Visualizers), of visualizations created and posted by an empowered actor (MoH) during an unfolding crisis, the discursive and rhetorical patterns found in this study suggest that the sociability and reciprocity embedded in productive meso-spaces do not follow dynamics of rhetorical revisualization (Amit-Danhi, 2022). Instead of revisualizing in order to reclaim powerful or institutional narratives, GraphHQ visualizers revisualize in order to expand and enrich its informational modalities.

Thus, I suggest that Telegram's affordances may have served GraphHQ to complement and enrich public debate by promoting civic engagement and data-driven deliberation, supplementing the structural, political limitations that dictate an analytically conservative 'Institutional Voice' with bolder, though analytically robust statements, by laypeople as civic actors. In doing, it amalgamates meso-space practices with visualizations' abilities to transcend literacy gap and invite laypeople into closed-off venues of analysis and knowledge. Predominantly conceptualized as a venue for subversive and dissident discourse, these findings highlight Telegram as a potentially civic platform and proposes that messaging apps may offer an array of linked, informationally *productive* news meso-spaces, in which citizens are empowered to go beyond consumption and take data into their own hands, creating civic-minded narratives and making recommendations in support of a collective common good.

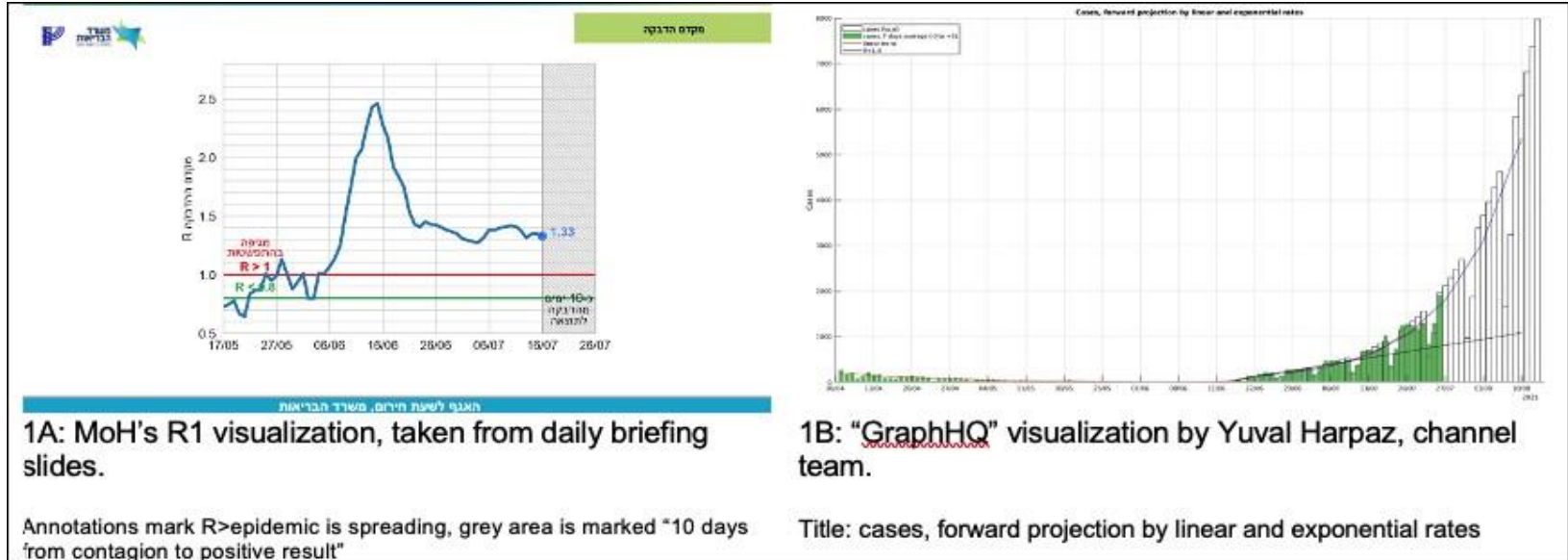


Figure 1: visualizations from July 27th, 2021

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