"IMAGINE WE'RE ALL IN THE LIVING ROOM TALKING ABOUT POLITICS": ISRAELI WHATSAPP GROUPS DEVOTED TO INFORMAL POLITICAL TALK

Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Theorists point to informal political talk as a way for citizens to deepen their understanding of why the political world matters to them, form opinions, and set the ground for collective action (Barber, 1984). In particular, scholars stress the benefits of cross-cutting conversation, involving exchange of dissimilar perspectives (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Yet informal political talk is recognized as a challenging endeavor (e.g. Eliasoph, 1998).

The promises and perils of informal political talk cannot be treated as equal across geographical and cultural contexts. In comparison to the US context, Israeli society exhibits greater openness towards political talk (e.g. Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik & Maoz, 2015). At the same time, Israeli political talk has its own challenges, many of which are mirrored in online spaces. Online discourse in Israel often takes up extremely volatile tones (The Berl Katznelson Foundation, 2015), making the challenge to achieve talk that is civil (Papacharissi, 2004), that involves listening to opposing points of view while maintaining mutual respect.

Over the past two decades, the rise of digital media has afforded additional contexts for political conversation. In the study of naturally-occurring online political talk, the early optimism of scholars excited about the deliberative potential of online spaces (see, e.g., Papacharissi, 2002) soon gave way to more realistic and nuanced analyses, investigating the nature of actual political talk online, where most discussion groups consist of people with similar political views (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Against this backdrop, more recent technological advances offer innovative contexts for political talk. One such context is WhatsApp—a mobile instant messaging application, both cell-based and web-based, that has gained immense popularity in Israel (Vidal, Ziv & Orpaz, 2015). In Israel, it is particularly the (free) group messaging affordance that has proliferated. WhatsApp groups have become a prevalent phenomenon among school-children, parent groups, families, workplaces and more (Fisher, 2013).

Case Study and Method

This project investigates two WhatsApp groups specifically dedicated to informal political talk among a heterogeneous group of Israeli citizens. Leading up to the 2015 Israeli election, prominent political blogger Tal Schneider created WhatsApp groups dedicated to informal political conversation with the pitch: "imagine we're all sitting in the living room and talking about politics" (Schneider, 2015). The groups are open to anyone, through payment of a nominal monthly fee of 15 NIS, and are extremely active. Group members are heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, religion/religiosity, and political identification, spanning the full spectrum of Israeli politics, from far right to far left.

These political discussion groups are a unique case study in that they are a naturally-occurring site of informal political talk across significant political difference. Yet, unlike much of Israeli political discourse online, these groups are generally characterized by a willingness to talk to others, hear their viewpoints, and attempt to persuade rationally.

Moreover, the characteristics of the mobile instant-messaging medium make this a fascinating context for political conversation. An app embedded within the mobile phone, the WhatsApp group accompanies participants everywhere they go, and for many is always-on, creating a heightened sense of intimacy and presence (Rosenberg, 2014).

The research method for this project is threefold. First, group conversations are qualitatively content analyzed to identify instances of disagreement, serving as the units of analysis, and within them, mechanisms of conflict management and resolution are identified. The second method consists of in-depth interviews with group participants, with the goal of capturing participants' experience with the groups. A third method entails participant-observation, both in the WhatsApp group, and in face-to-face gatherings.

Initial findings – Mediated mechanisms of conflict management and resolution

1. What can we agree on and where do we part

In instances of disagreement, participants often employ a method of hashing out areas of agreement, even when it seems initially unlikely, to then hone in on areas of disagreement left. In the course of sometimes long exchanges of WhatsApp messages, often between a dyad, what starts out as a fundamental disagreement on core beliefs is often "downgraded" to civil disagreements on "personal preference," where members agree to disagree while respecting each other's point of view.

2. Brute force / persistence

Not in all cases are disagreements settled so civilly. In some cases, some members keep repeating and rehashing their point of view, in a way that finally "crushes" the view of the disagreeing participant. In cases like this, the WhatsApp medium plays a key role. As the mobile phone accompanies participants in their daily lives, some participants will often give up a long-lasting conversation because they have to attend to other matters, or are simply fed up with texting messages. In these cases, the more persistent participants—often these with the more ideologically extreme views—will often be seen as dominating the discussion space.

3. Governing the boundaries of acceptable speech

Schneider, the group administrator, takes a neutral role, so far having never banned participants. Yet the group governs the boundaries of acceptable speech, not so much by pushing out deviant participants, but rather by highlighting their deviant behavior by the decision of "normative" members to exit the group in response. In this way, while deviant members are left as participants, they recognize their own behavior as having crossed the line and may, at least for a time, self-correct.

Through identifying these mechanisms, this research seeks to open up the "black box" of political disagreement and identify mechanisms of conflict management or resolution. While much work investigates political disagreement (e.g. Kim & Kim, 2008), this work usually relies on self-reported disagreement, and we have a surprisingly limited understanding of what political disagreement looks like, and how one can move beyond it, particularly in the Israeli context. Furthermore, this research pinpoints the characteristics and potential of the WhatsApp medium as a new and understudied site for heterogeneous political talk.

References

Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: UC Press.

Delli Carpini, M.X., Cook, F.L. & Jacobs, R. (2004). Public deliberation, discursive participation, and citizen engagement: A review of the empirical literature. *Annual Review of Political Science,7*(1), 315-344.

Eliasoph, N. (1998). *Avoiding politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Fisher, I. (2013, September 26). Facebook is dead: Long live the new king – the WhatsApp group. *TheMarker* (Hebrew).

The Berl Katznelson Foundation (2015). "The Hate Report", available http://hasata.berl.co.il/

Kim, J. & Kim, E.J. (2008). Theorizing dialogic deliberation: Everyday political talk as communicative action and dialogue. Communication Theory, 18, 51-70.

Mor, Y., Kligler-Vilenchik, N. & Maoz, I. (2015). Political expression on Facebook in a context of conflict: Dilemmas and coping strategies of Jewish-Israeli youth. *Social Media + Society, 1*(2), 1-10.

Papacharissi, Z. (2004). Democracy online: Civility, politeness, and the democratic potential of online political discussion groups. *New Media & Society, 6*(2), 259-283.

Rosenberg, H. (2014). Taking mom in the backpack with me: The cellular phone and the backpacking experience. *Media Frames, 13*, 39-62. (Hebrew)

Schneider, T. (2015, January 5). My first WhatsApp group (Hebrew). The Plog: Tal Schneider's political blog. Available: http://www.talschneider.com/2015/01/05/theplogwhatsapp/

Vidal, E., Ziv, A. & Orpaz, I. (2015, December 29). Tech Nation: WhatsApp top Israeli mobile app, poll finds. Haaretz.com. Available: http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/.premium-1.694289