'I CAN'T SEE YOU ANY MORE':
A PHENOMENOLOGY OF POLITICAL FACEBOOK UNFRIENDING

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The summer of 2014 saw a flare up in the ongoing violent conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Social media played an important role throughout the fighting, be that in recruiting support for one side of the conflict or the other, distributing news, images and propaganda, and as a platform for the expression of individuals' opinions on the events. Israeli Facebook users' News Feeds were dominated by content pertaining to the conflict to the extent that it was even considered inappropriate to post content about anything else. As is typical of online political debates, discussions were very polarized (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Himelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013), and the press reported high levels of Facebook unfriending.

In a quantitative survey-based study, John & Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) established that one in six Jewish Israeli Facebook users unfriended or unfollowed a Facebook friend during the 50 days of fighting in 2014. It was also found that unfriending was more prevalent among more ideologically extreme and more politically active Facebook users. Building on that research, the current study explores the phenomenology of Facebook unfriending and is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 Jewish Israeli Facebook users who unfriended at least one Facebook friend during the conflict.

This research contributes to two main theoretical concerns. The first is the emerging study of disconnectivity (Karppi, 2014; Light, 2014; Light & Cassidy, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), and particularly unfriending (Peña & Brody, 2014; Quercia, Bodaghi, & Crowcroft, 2012; Sibona, 2014; Sibona & Walczak, 2011), which is an understudied aspect of the use of social network sites (SNSs).

The second relates to the potential for social media to serve as platforms for political discussion (Papacharissi, 2002). On the face of it, at stake here would appear to be one of the classic issues of political communication, at least since the emergence of multiple TV news channels in the US, namely, the democratizing potential of exposure to varied

political positions versus the tendency to selective exposure and its implications for polarization (Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2009). This raises the question, which we try to answer, as to how to conceptualize unfriending. Is it part of a trend towards polarization, whereby we screen out political views we find unpalatable? Is it a normative statement about the acceptable limits of discourse? Or is it an apolitical act of consumer choice, more akin to changing channels on the TV than voting in an election?

18 interviewees were recruited. Apart from two Skype interviews, interviews were carried out face to face. Interviews lasted between 35-90 minutes. All interviews were recorded (with the interviewees' permission) and transcribed. The transcriptions were imported into MAXQDA for coding and analysis following the principles of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Two main groups of findings emerge from analysis of the interviews. First, unfriending can be conceptualized as metacommunicative. Through unfriending, users are saying something about unacceptable types of talk. For some interviewees, it was to do with how one should talk during wartime; others said they had unfriended someone for posting idiotic content, or in a style that they considered inferior. In this regard, they are saying something about the 'protocols' (Gitelman, 2006) of Facebook communication. Others described unfriending as a recognition that dialogue with such a person is impossible, either because they are perceived as lying, because they won't change their mind, or because the disagreements are too profound to bridge.

Second, *all* of the interviewees said they unfriended someone because they simply couldn't deal with seeing that person's content any more. This was very often accompanied by metaphors of cleanliness, and was related to the fact that Facebook is on their phone in their pocket or on their PC in their living room. Unfriending was a way of decontaminating what was perceived as a domestic (and not political) space. While interviewees unfriended people whose political views they disagreed with (as reported by Author 1, 2015), the unfriending was non-political in that it was not an attempt to change the world out there: interviewees did not think that the people they unfriended knew about it; they did not tell them they had unfriended them; and it was not especially important to them that they knew they had been unfriended.

Through unfriending, Facebook users shape both the content and the style of expression to which they are exposed on their feed. Unfriending is thus conceptualized as a kind of boundary maintenance. However, unlike previous work that relates boundary maintenance to privacy and looks at what information about ourselves we allow out (Vitak, Blasiola, Litt, & Patil, 2015), here we see unfriending as a mechanism for controlling what we allow in within a context of networked sociality.

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