

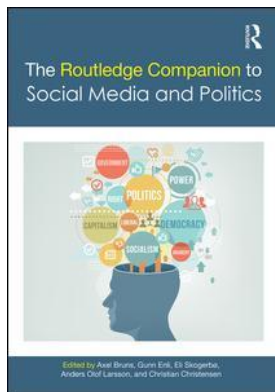
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### Electoral Politics on Social Media

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## ELECTORAL POLITICS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

### The Israeli Case

*Sharon Haleva-Amir and Karine Nahon*

#### Introduction

The elections to the 19th Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) were held on 23 January 2013. During the electoral campaign, which began in October 2012, social media and other IT platforms were buzzing with political activity by formal and informal groups, candidates, parties, supporters, and members of the general public. In this chapter, we report and analyse the daily Web and social media use patterns of political actors. Seven main themes arose from our findings: (1) predominantly personal politics; (2) prominence of anonymous and negative campaigning; (3) focus on one platform; (4) symbiotic relationship with traditional media; (5) increased use of custom-made technology; (6) high level of civic engagement; and (7) extensive use of memes and satire. A comparative literature analysis shows that some of these themes are consistent with other global political campaigns. Finally, we discuss the reasons for these behavioural practices.

#### Social Media and Political Uses

The Internet has created an opportunity to restructure communication between parliamentarians and their constituents (Zittel 2003; Castells 2009). However, studies have repeatedly shown that parliamentarians are still largely focused on promoting themselves through reporting their parliamentary activities (Williamson 2009b) and using the Web to produce an electorally advantageous impression (Stanyer 2008) rather than truly engaging with the public (Jackson 2003; Vegyte et al. 2008).

The expectations for the first wave of information technology affordances, specifically interactivity, to bridge the gap between politicians and citizens have been mostly disproven (Vergeer et al. 2011). These expectations were renewed, however, with the advent of Web 2.0 and social media. While the Web 1.0 era had been characterised by websites with largely static content and top-down messages, Web 2.0 provided more substantial affordances, such as interactivity, persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability, as well as a variety of social platforms which enabled users to share content and chat more easily (boyd 2010). This generational transition

was hoped to fundamentally change the way politicians communicated with their constituents.

Indeed, a comparative literature survey shows that the use of social media among candidates as well as incumbent parliamentarians has been on the rise in democracies such as Britain (Williamson 2009a), New Zealand (Busby & Bellamy 2011), Australia (Bruns & Burgess 2011), the US (Smith 2014) and Israel (Haleva-Amir 2014a). In the British context, for example, it was suggested that

by inhabiting the same online spaces as their constituents on a day-to-day basis, MPs will interact with them in much more normal conditions—when the MP is not the privileged voice of authority, but merely one member of a conversation among many. In doing so, perhaps they will get a much more realistic idea of what their constituents actually think. (Colville 2008: para. 6)

However, this hope was hardly fulfilled, as studies show that politicians use Web 1.0 and 2.0 platforms quite similarly: they focus on delivering messages and promoting themselves rather than on engaging with their constituents (Vergeer et al. 2011; Jackson & Lilleker 2009; Stromer-Galley 2013; Seggaard & Nielsen 2013).

### **Historical Background: Israeli Electoral Web Campaigns (1999–2009)**

Israel has an electoral system based on nation-wide proportional representation, where citizens vote for their preferred party and not for any individual candidates. Prior to the elections, each party submits its list of candidates for the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) in order of precedence. The parties select their candidates for the Knesset in primaries or by other procedures. After the elections, the 120 seats in the Knesset are then assigned proportionally to each party that received votes, provided that the party's share of the total votes met or exceeded the electoral threshold (currently 3.25 per cent). Elections must take place every four years unless the Knesset dissolves itself; the budget is not approved by the Knesset within three months of the start of the financial year; or a no-confidence vote has passed and a new government cannot be formed.

The structure of the Israeli electoral system makes the parties very powerful. However, since the 1990s the status of Israeli parties has deteriorated, for several reasons: (1) a loss of public trust (Hermann 2012); (2) the number of interest groups that are outside the traditional parties' control has grown; (3) a move to a primaries system has taken the power away from a small group in each party that used to decide who would be included in the party's candidate list for parliament, and passed it to the larger community of all party members; (4) finally, the global trend focusing on individual political leaders has also impacted the status of parties in Israel (Koren 1998).

The first use of the online medium for political purposes in Israel dates back to 1996: Member of Knesset (henceforth MK) Yael Dayan, who was running for the primary in the Labor party, created an information website. It was only in the 1999 elections, however, that other informational websites appeared: four out of five prime ministerial candidates maintained websites that provided biographical notes and information

about their views. In addition, seven out of 31 political parties used websites in the 1999 elections. These provided information about the parties and their prime ministerial candidates' positions on major issues, as well as biographical notes. At this point, websites functioned mainly as digital bulletins, delivering top-down information (Gilboa & Katz 2001). By the 2003 elections, 17 out of 27 parties had an online presence. However, these websites demonstrated a one-sided communication pattern, largely ignoring the Internet's interactive and dynamic potential (Lehman-Wilzig 2004; Serfaty 2010).

The 2006 elections were the first time the online sphere played a significant role in electoral strategies (Atmor 2008). Several behavioural patterns emerged. First, political parties used the Internet to circumvent legal restrictions on campaigning. For example, the law in Israel restricts election propaganda to the 21 days preceding the elections. However, it lacks specific reference to the online sphere, and parties took advantage of this lacuna to engage in propaganda. Second, political parties used websites to recruit members, create supporter databases, enrol volunteers, and raise funds. Third, several MKs and candidates used political blogging as a more personal and less formal tool to communicate—but still not truly interact—with prospective voters (Atmor 2008). Still, features encouraging civic engagement were rarely used in the 2006 elections. For example, the vast majority of party websites provided limited access, if any, to features encouraging discourse and involvement, such as discussion forums or chat spaces.

The 2009 general elections for the 18th Knesset proved a turning point in the Israeli political arena for two main reasons. For the first time, three major Israeli parties—Kadima (centrist), Likud (right wing), and Meretz (left wing)—acknowledged the Internet's importance as a campaigning tool and declared their intention to allocate a considerable portion of their budgets accordingly (Mualem et al. 2008). These intentions, however, were not fully realised as Internet campaigns were often allocated a smaller budget than planned, since the managers of the campaigns did not fully understand and believe in the power of the Internet as a marketing tool (Nahon 2009).

Nevertheless, the 2009 elections showed intensive and extensive Internet use during the various parties' campaigns. Besides the growing availability of broadband connections and other technological developments, which made the Web more accessible and central in voters' lives, the 2009 Israeli elections campaign started shortly after the tremendous success of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Obama's success—attributed by many to his brilliant use of the Web (Cain-Miller 2008)—drove local politicians to try and imitate his methods (Bronner & Cohen 2008; Keinan 2008; Pereg 2008) in both municipal and general election campaigns. This intensive use was characterised by seven trends:

1. *Dedicated websites that were abandoned after the elections.* Electoral campaigns in Israel are short-lived and end a few days after the elections. Consequently, a few days after the 2009 elections the parties and many of the elected candidates practically ceased their online activities (Nahon 2009; Haleva-Amir 2011b).
2. *Web tools were used for organisational purposes.* Parties have gradually begun to use web tools for organisational and regular party activities. For example, right-wing party HaBayit HaYehudi (The Jewish Home) was established and organised through the Internet: 10,000 people who participated in an online poll gave it

- its name, chose its logo, and suggested 560 electoral candidates, out of whom 40 final candidates were appointed by a special committee (Atmor 2009; Shragai 2008; Lev-On 2011). Atmor (2009) argued that this unprecedented popular involvement was an indirect cause of the party's split a few weeks later. Another party, Israel Hazaka (Strong Israel), held its primaries exclusively online (Wolf 2008).
3. *Multiple and extensive use of social media.* Most of the parties and candidates used numerous social media and other websites simultaneously and linked them together (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr, and local Israeli websites, such as The Marker Café). The rich variety of applications was intended to create an atmosphere of vivid and active campaigning. Facebook was the most commonly used social network, followed by the local blogging and social-business networking website The Marker Café (Haleva-Amir 2011a). Half the MKs who had active Facebook profiles by the time the electoral campaign began had joined it during the six weeks before the election. Consequently, most social media campaigns were short-lived and lacked engaging activities, as their Facebook walls were used mainly as billboards (Haleva-Amir 2011b).
  4. *Politics turned more personal,* following a global and local trend of leader- and candidate-centred—as opposed to party- and platform-centred—politics (Wattenberg 1992; Galili-Zucker 2004; Rahat & Sheaffer 2007). This led to an emphasis on personal websites during elections and primaries, as opposed to previous election periods where the parties' websites had served as the campaign anchor and the focus was on the general election only (Haleva-Amir 2011b).
  5. *User-generated content* was increasingly used, independent of the parties. This included such activities as uploading video clips or writing posts. Most of these social media applications were used to attract young voters via their favourite Web applications.
  6. *Dynamic campaigns.* Websites used in prior election campaigns had been rather static in nature, as they remained unchanged throughout the campaign and were infrequently updated. In the 2009 campaigns, however, they were dynamic and frequently updated.
  7. *Guerrilla websites.* An interesting trend that had begun with the 2006 general election campaign became more salient during the 2009 election campaign. Guerrilla websites were unofficial websites with anonymous operators that railed against politicians. One example was the *Bibi Bluff* website which portrayed Benjamin ('Bibi') Netanyahu, the incumbent prime minister and candidate, as an unreliable politician. Later on, it was revealed that the rival party Kadima had been behind this website (Wolf 2008).

### Social Media: The 2013 Election in Israel

The election to the 19th Knesset was held on 23 January 2013. This election was held in a context where social media were already embedded in the daily life of Israeli society, the digital literacy of users and candidates was quite high, and ready-to-use tools shifted the use of social media in elections from depending on professionals only (PR, advertising companies) to independent use. As elaborated below, some of the trends identified in the 2009 election campaign were intensified and enhanced; these

included personal politics, using Web tools for organisational purposes, dynamic websites, user-generated content, and guerrilla websites. Others, such as the discontinuation of websites after the elections and the use of multiple social media were reversed. Finally some patterns emerged for the first time, including meme usage and smart-phone campaigns.

### *Intensified Previous Trends: Personal Politics and Anonymous Campaigns*

Like the 2009 election, the 2013 election's online campaigns were characterised by a growing use of Web tools for organisational purposes, user-generated content, the presence of guerrilla websites and dynamism. Most party leaders updated their Facebook pages several times a day (Cabir 2012), and the traffic of new political content increased compared with the 2009 campaign. Both the growing role of social media and the deterioration of the status of Israeli parties (as mentioned above) contributed to the intensifying trend of personal politics.

In order to study the uses of social media in the 2013 election, we first examined 122 new candidates in the primaries or general election (51 from this list later became MKs). All candidates conducted online campaigns. Additionally, parties that conducted primary elections published a booklet listing the candidates, their contact information, their emails and Facebook pages (if any). Such online activity, even at a time when candidates were somewhat anonymous, became standard. In a broader sense, this development further deepened the trend towards personalised politics. The rapidly growing number of politicians using new online platforms could be seen as a form of personalisation—the shift of attention from political parties to individual politicians (van Santen & van Zoonen 2010).

Second, two parties (Yesh Atid and HaBayit HaYehudi) did not operate an official Facebook page. Instead, each party's Facebook page was actually its leader's, and the party's website linked to that page (see Figures 34.1 and 34.2).



Figure 34.1 HaBayit HaYehudi Facebook Homepage



Figure 34.2 Yesh Atid Facebook Homepage

This was no mere technicality. The total identification of the party with its leader reflected the continued weakening of parties as major institutions in Israeli politics and society—a process that had begun several decades ago and is evident also in other parliamentary democracies around the world (Bartolini & Mair 2001; Koren 1998). In November 2014 we revisited the Facebook pages of these two parties and found that both of them by now had an official Facebook page separate from their leaders. However, the website of Yesh Atid still linked to the Facebook page of its leader rather than the one affiliated with the party.

Third, the individual crowdfunding trend was also found to be strongly related to the personalisation trend. Donations were raised through popular Israeli crowdfunding websites such as HeadStart and Mimeoona. The first crowdfunding initiative was started by Likud's MK Michael Eitan, who used his personal website as a platform for donations for the 2009 elections and collected 53,000 NIS (approximately US\$13,500 at current exchange rates). In 2011, Shelly Yachimovich of the Labor Party raised 500,000 NIS from party members and supporters through her personal website (Schneider 2011). In the 2013 election it became common to use crowdfunding for primary and general election purposes. This demonstrates the shift of digital campaigns from amateur to professional digital campaigns. Candidates who lacked enough funding used existing crowdfunding platforms to reach out to the public (e.g. MK Nino Abesadze, journalist Merav Michaeli, and Tamar Zandberg).

A fourth trend that intensified compared to the 2009 election was the use of anonymous campaigns to criticise, stigmatise, and condemn the image and stance of opponents. As mentioned earlier, Israeli law does not specifically address Internet campaigns; this is one of the main reasons why social media were flooded with anonymous negative campaigns in the 2013 election. The main platform for distributing these campaigns was Facebook. Examples include the anti-right The Day after the Elections, the anti-left The Right Block, and the anti-former opposition leader Livni Has Failed (see Figure 34.3 for a number of examples).

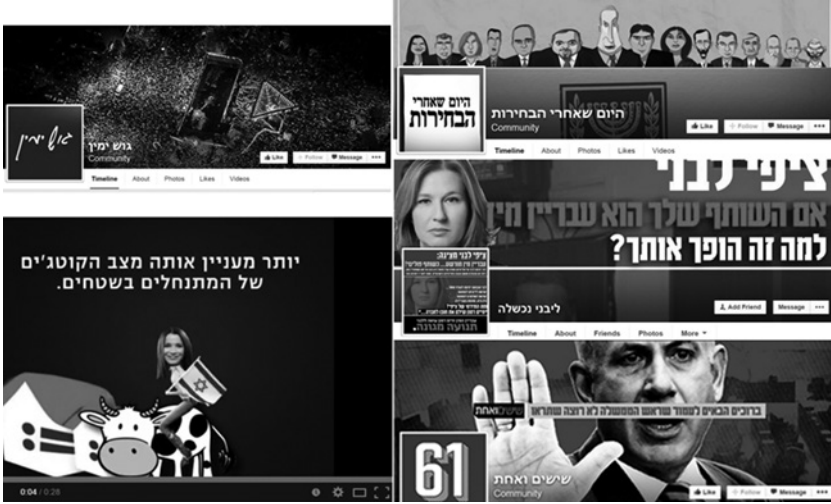


Figure 34.3 Negative Anonymous Campaigns

### Changing Trends: From Multiple to Single-Platform Focus

While the 2009 campaigns were characterised as frantic and overextended, involving all popular social media platforms available (Haleva-Amir 2011a; Lev-On 2011; Haleva-Amir 2013), most online campaigns in 2013 focused exclusively on Facebook. By the end of 2012, approximately 70 per cent of the Israeli population of 5.3 million were connected to the Internet, and 71 per cent of those (about half the total population, or 3.8 million) were active Facebook users (Internet World Stats 2013).

Several factors made Facebook an attractive platform for the 2013 election: (1) It is a social network with high traffic and thus high chances of attracting users' attention; (2) its features makes it easy to use by ordinary users and campaigners; (3) its advertising system is highly personalised, allowing politicians to easily reach both large and specific audiences in a way that would have been difficult if not impossible through traditional media—in particular, younger people reported getting their news mainly through social media (Mitchell et al. 2013); and (4) Facebook, like other social media platforms, can bypass regulatory campaign restrictions in the Israeli context. To varying degrees, all those factors are also applicable in election campaigns worldwide, and indeed, the trend of focusing on Facebook is a global one.

Table 34.1 shows the number of Facebook followers of the leaders of the major parties in Israel in December 2012, one month before the election.

For many parties, the campaign budgets allocated to the online channel increased to up to 50 per cent of the total (Haleva-Amir 2013). Campaign managers used Facebook to test public opinion on various issues. For example, Gil Samsonov, the Facebook campaign manager of Halikud-Beitenu (a party bloc of Likud and Israel Beitenu), opined that “Facebook is a cruel courthouse, it knows you, judges you, reaches a verdict and sentences you as a matter of minutes” (Haleva-Amir 2014b: 80).



Table 34.1 Party Leaders and Followers on Facebook (December 2012)\*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Political positioning</i>	<i>Followers</i>
Benjamin Netanyahu	PM and chair of Likud	Right	386,000
Avigdor Liberman	Chair of Israel Beitenu	Right	118,000
Yair Lapid	Chair of Yesh Atid	Centre	97,000
Shelly Yachimovich	Chair of the Labor Party	Left	56,000
Naftali Bennett	Chair of HaBayit HaYehudi	Right	56,000
Tzipi Livni	Chair of Hatnua	Centre	30,000
Zehava Galon	Chair of Meretz	Left	16,000
Eli Yishai	Chair of Shas	Ultra-orthodox	7,533
Shaul Mofaz	Chair of Kadima	Centre	6,221

\* The leader of the ultra-orthodox party, Yahadut Hatora, and the leaders of the Arab parties, Balad and Raam-Taal, did not have Facebook Accounts. Mohammad Barakeh, the leader of the Arab-Jewish party, Hadash, had a regular Facebook account, not a politician page.

## New Trends in the 2013 Election

### *Symbiotic Relationship: Social and Mainstream Media*

Social media, particularly Facebook, enabled candidates to avoid inconvenient journalist inquiries. In this campaign, more than ever before, candidates could circumvent traditional media and still reach and address the public directly. This forced journalists to regularly follow candidates' Facebook pages and use them as a primary source for political information. It became common to see journalists quoting statements of candidates from their Facebook pages, turning them into headlines. Social media became the forefront of electoral news, and Internet campaigns gained greater presence in traditional, mainstream media (Caspi 2013). Still, the former needed the latter to reach broader audiences, since only after reaching the traditional media did social media news go viral or spread in further networks on Facebook (Nahon & Hemsley 2013). In other words, the relationship between social and mainstream media became increasingly intimate and reciprocal.

A good example for this symbiotic relationship was Netanyahu's avoidance of debates with his rivals. On 24 December 2012, Shelly Yachimovich of the Labor Party invited the incumbent Prime Minister to a public debate by posting the following message on his and her Facebook walls:

I invite you to a debate on TV, as is the custom in the western world, and also used to be the custom in Israel. The public is entitled and we [politicians] are obliged to hold an earnest, in-depth discussion of two different worldviews. The only real choice voters have is between you and me. . . . I would like to debate with you and present our opposing views . . . above all: What is the meaning of the state and its roles in our eyes? What are our obligations toward the public? Any other issue that you would like to raise for discussion will be most welcome.

This post was reported immediately in the traditional media. Hours later, the head of the Likud campaign, Gilad Erdan, responded on Yachimovich's wall:

Hi Shelly, this is Gilad. Do you want a debate? As is the custom in the western world? I'm glad you remembered that it is a part of the game rules, because I wanted to remind you (since you've probably forgotten) that you had previously refused several debate offers while you ran for Labor Party chair. Here is a reminder what your number 2, Buji Hertzog, said about you [link to Hebrew news website]. In any case, what kind of debate do you want? Left wing vs. right-center? Great, but against who exactly? Against Livni? Galon? Lapid? You? Mofaz? When you finish squabbling among yourselves about who represents the left block, post another Facebook status and we will discuss it straight to the point.

### *Mobile Campaigns and Custom-Made Applications*

Another new trend that emerged in the 2013 elections was the use of mobile technologies and custom-made applications in social media campaigns. Candidates used such applications to send text messages to party members and supporters, asking for survey participation or support in primary elections. Furthermore, most prospective voters received text and recorded voice messages to their mobile phones as well as landlines. This upset many and raised questions regarding legitimacy, legality, and privacy (Crystal 2013). For example, a new group in the Likud, The New Likudniks, whose goal is to influence the identity of future Knesset members, initiated a Facebook counter-campaign against two senior Likud MKs— Danny Danon and Dr. Leah Ness—who ran a text message campaign. The New Likudniks wanted to raise public awareness of the importance of the primary election and to increase voter turnout on election day. They created a Facebook page which shared text messages sent by Danon and Ness alongside ironic and mocking replies (Kayris 2012). This campaign demonstrates the civic political and democratic activism that played an important role in the online sphere prior to the elections.

New applications were developed during the election period for the specific purpose of disseminating electoral messages. Some applications were generated to share political messages humorously, or in a unique way, for example by using gamification. For example, Kadima developed two games that were embedded on a Facebook platform. The games (see Figure 34.4) were based on the classic Pac-Man game, and aimed to demonstrate the unfair share of socioeconomic rights and obligations between the secular and ultra-Orthodox groups in Israeli society (Almog 2012). The Labor Party developed Shoogles—Shelly's Google—a search engine for Yachimovich's positions and opinions on various issues such as housing costs, food prices, etc. The Labor Party also developed The Future Timeline, which showed Facebook users what their future would look like if the Labor wins the election.

### *Civic Engagement for Electoral Purposes on Social Media*

The 2013 election campaigns were characterised by higher levels of civic engagement activities, manifested mainly on social media. These activities did not result in a big change in actual voter turnout, which was estimated at 67.8 per cent, only 2.6 percentage points more than the previous elections. Engagement activities were initiated mainly by civil society organisations. For example, The Public Knowledge Workshop,



Figure 34.4 A Game Developed by the Kadima Party

an NGO of programmers, designers and other volunteers, sought to develop applications to promote transparency and allow other democratic gatekeepers (such as journalists and citizens) to use the public information thus made available to increase democratic accountability. Over the three years before the election, the NGO developed websites such as Open Knesset (mainly to monitor legislation as well as other parliamentary activities) and Open Budget (to monitor budget allocation at the macro-level). For the election, The Public Knowledge Workshop developed easy-to-use Internet tools with relevant information regarding parties, candidates and agendas. One of these was The MK Meter, which helped users choose their candidates in the primary elections. Another was The Electro-Meter, an application that matched users' viewpoints with the party they should vote for. Other non-political individuals, activists and celebs opened Facebook pages or created videos in order to raise public awareness of the importance of voting and call for increasing voter turnout.<sup>1</sup>

Individuals and groups also undertook other civic engagement activities. Some of these were part of collaborations between parties, candidates and users, aiming to harness users to campaigns. For example, several private groups were formed on Facebook to aggregate all Facebook activities supporting Shelly Yachimovich while collaborating to form an active "Facebook brigade" (Schneider 2012). The members of such groups would monitor information flows on social media and join discussion threads whenever required to show support, answer questions or thwart attempts to use verbal violence against their candidate. Another example was the call by HaBayit HaYehudi to their Facebook supporters to help the party create campaign clips (Azulay & Yahav 2012). Meretz also used user-generated clips in their official campaign (Ronen 2013a).

Importantly, however, some of the civic engagement activities by individuals and groups were performed independently of parties and candidates. For example, the

Facebook page Naftali Bennett—The Unofficial Page, which was managed by a student supporter, had more followers than the official page of the HaBayit HaYehudi's leader. It was estimated that this unofficial campaign contributed immensely to the official campaign (Mor 2013; Yaron 2013).

Nevertheless, non-coordinated online activity could harm official campaigns and tarnish the party's image by conveying messages not correlated with the formal campaign strategy, and even impose penalties on the party due to violations of election regulations. This was the case when Likud activists ran various grassroots campaigns that damaged their party. One of these informal campaigns was published on the main website of the Likud supporters, and depicted right-wing rival Naftali Bennet in a ghetto, behind a barbed-wire fence, hinting that HaBayit HaYehudi was an Orthodox religious party not suitable for secular voters like those of the Likud (see Figure 34.5).

Another negative—and sexist—campaign referred to the only secular candidate in that party, Ayelet Shaked, calling upon her to 'Be Pretty and Keep Quiet', suggesting that she became a candidate just because of her pretty face since all the others were religious men (see Figure 34.6).



Figure 34.5 Likud Activists Sharing a Negative Advertisement about Naftali Bennet



Figure 34.6 'Be Pretty and Keep Quiet' Negative Campaign

Consequently, the HaBayit HaYehudi party appealed to the Central Election Committee for an urgent injunction warrant against the Likud and also demanded to expose the identity of the people behind the informal campaigns. The Likud, which was not coordinating these campaigns (at least not officially), had to appeal to the committee for an injunction warrant against its own supporters.

### *Memes, Humour, and Satire*

The final common theme, which featured strongly in the 2013 election period, was the use of satire and humour. Israeli cyberspace was filled with memes (cultural artefacts that spread, usually with alteration, from one person to another via the Internet) created and circulated by political actors, TV programmes, and individuals on a daily basis. The enormous flow of memes created rather odd situations in which one could not tell at first sight who was responsible for a specific meme, and whether it was for or against any specific candidate, party or agenda. In many cases memes were not ‘signed’ by their creators, thus further contributing to the general confusion. For example, a supporter captioned a video of football star Cristiano Ronaldo, creating a humorous support clip for Naftali Bennett. The clip was uploaded to Bennett’s official page once it became viral, but then began receiving angry reactions arguing that Ronaldo had supported Hamas during Israel’s attack on Gaza in November 2012 (Operation Pillar of Defense). Consequently, the campaign managers removed the clip from Bennett’s official Facebook page (Ronen 2013b).

Yachimovich used her satirical counterpart from Israel’s leading TV political satire programme, *Eretz Nehederet* (A Wonderful Country). Kadima leader Shaul Mofaz invited the actor who portrayed his character in the same TV show to a debate (Farbstein 2012). On Facebook, official pages were opened for fictitious characters running for the office of prime minister.<sup>2</sup> These allowed humorous comments, but were primarily used as a critical and satirical tool, which indicated high levels of civic engagement. Simultaneously, fake profiles of real politicians were created. Some of these were declared as satire, but others obfuscated the fact that they were fake accounts and misled voters by their appearance as well as their names (Yaron 2013; Kayris 2012). For example, Netanyahu’s fake page was called ‘Netanyahu Bibi’ (see Figure 34.7a), while his official page was called ‘Benjamin Netanyahu’ (see Figure 34.7b); the fake page used the same styling as the formal page. Only the humoristic content of the updates, the number of likes, shares and ‘people talking about this’ revealed the differences between the two pages. The Likud filed an official complaint and asked Facebook to remove the page. The party spokesperson claimed the problem was not the satire, but rather the fact that the page did not clearly state that it was a satire and thereby confused people. The page was removed by Facebook and reopened a few weeks later using a different design (Mor 2012).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the role of social media in the 2013 election in Israel. In 2013, social media emerged as the main public space where discussions, discourse, deliberations and debates around the topic of the election occurred—for the first time surpassing traditional media in terms of exposure and engagement. However, the potential of new media was still not fully exploited, as candidates and constituents did not engage

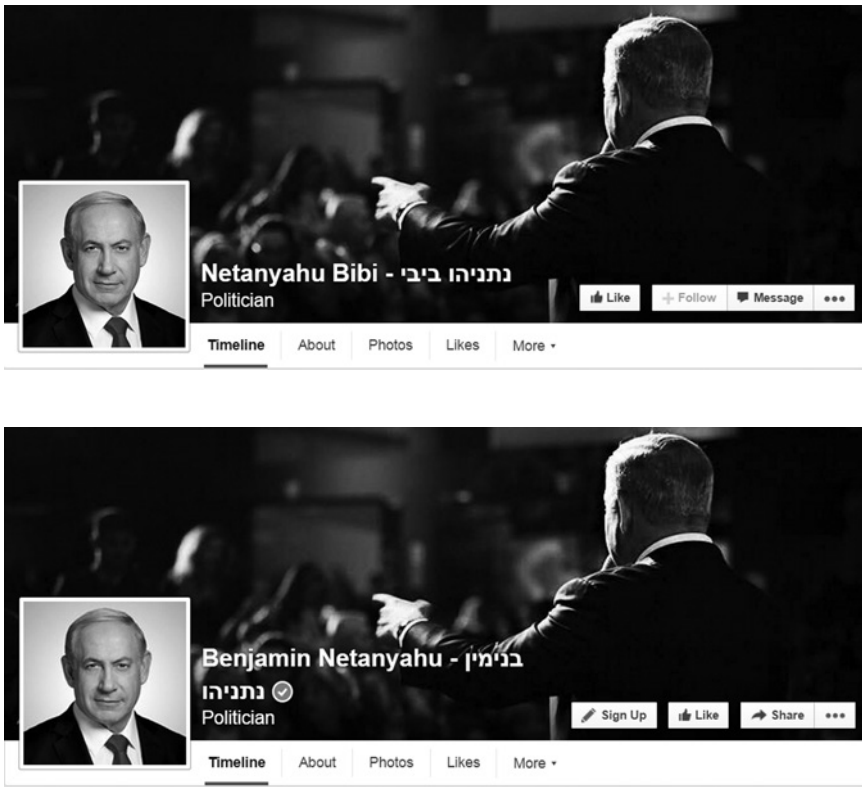


Figure 34.7 The Fake and Official Facebook Pages of PM Benjamin Netanyahu

interactively, political messages were mainly one-sided, and constituents' sharing practices supported the echo-chamber theory. Subsequently, in March 2015, Israel held its 20th election (two years earlier than planned). This also allows us to swiftly explore the results of this study in the context of the next election. According to this study, the main themes which characterised the 2013 election included:

1. An emphasis on personal politics. There is an ongoing deterioration in the status of parties, as the entities elected to the Knesset (Hermann 2012). As social media became the main space of political activity, it reflects and accelerates this deterioration process. In the 2013 election, politicians mainly developed their professional Facebook pages, at the expense of their and their parties' websites. In some cases the page of the party linked to that of the leader. In cases where parties did maintain their own Facebook pages, the content was poor and did not receive a great deal of traffic. In 2015, this trend of personalisation intensified further, and the Facebook pages of parties served merely to syndicate the pages of the politicians. This has turned the parties' pages into a shell without substance, while the locus of activity remained on the personal pages.
2. The flood of anonymous and negative campaigns, which characterised the 2013 election, changed in the 2015 elections. Anonymous campaigns were still thriving;

however, there were not anonymous any more, and in many cases were presented as part of the official campaigns. Studies have shown that negative campaigns usually backfire (Nahon & Hemsley 2014). This was the case in both the 2013 and the 2015 elections.

3. Politicians focused solely on the Facebook platform in the 2013 election. While Facebook remained the main platform for political discourse in the 2015 election, another two social media platforms emerged as popular: Whatsapp and Twitter. Whatsapp, an instant messaging platform, is one of the most popular platforms in Israel. It is used frequently to pass social media content between friends and groups. In the 2015 election it played a major role in helping content go viral. While Twitter adoption in Israel is very low (estimations are around 5 per cent), it is used frequently by journalists and, at the time of the 2015 election, by politicians. Nevertheless, Facebook still is the most popular space for political purposes in terms of the number active users and the amount of content produced.
4. The symbiotic relationship between social media and traditional media continued to be prominent in the 2013 and the 2015 elections. Most viral phenomena on social media were covered by mainstream media.
5. The development of custom-made applications, which characterised the 2013 election, happened to a lesser extent in the 2015 election. For example, MK Naftali Bennet requested that users make a rhyme for the phrase 'Bennet is a brother'. This resulted in a viral event where users used an application to rhyme the phrase with insulting words.
6. The 2013 election was characterised by a high level of civic engagement, but it also demonstrated that dialogue is still missing and better communication between political actors and ordinary users is yet to be achieved. In the 2015 campaign, the number of civic engagement projects grew. For example, the initiative of Kikar Hamedina, a website developed by The Public Knowledge Workshop, collects the posts of candidates and politicians on Facebook and provides statistics and patterns about their usage. Another example is Project 61, which accumulated all published polls before the elections and provides an easy way to analyse these polls. Civic engagement initiatives in the 2013 election were mainly used by social media users. However, in the 2015 elections the civic engagement initiatives were more interactive, useful and information-rich, and therefore were also used extensively by professionals such as journalists, campaign managers and politicians.
7. Finally, the extensive use of memes and satire also intensified in the 2015 election. In fact, all the campaigns consisted to a significant extent of videos and images in which politicians themselves played a role. For example, the viral video 'Bibi the Babysitter', with 880,000 views, showed PM Benjamin Netanyahu as a babysitter coming to help a young couple, while warning them not to take the leaders of the other party as babysitters.

## Notes

- 1 [www.facebook.com/ILvote2013](http://www.facebook.com/ILvote2013); [www.facebook.com/IL80p](http://www.facebook.com/IL80p); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJAF4DIUVCK&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJAF4DIUVCK&feature=youtu.be); <http://mizbala.com/?p=59704>
- 2 Some of these are: [www.facebook.com/Hugo.Woof](http://www.facebook.com/Hugo.Woof); [www.facebook.com/MshDzLrswtHmmslh](http://www.facebook.com/MshDzLrswtHmmslh); [www.facebook.com/shuali.kabab](http://www.facebook.com/shuali.kabab); [www.facebook.com/nofutureforisrael](http://www.facebook.com/nofutureforisrael); [www.facebook.com/MiriPaskalPM](http://www.facebook.com/MiriPaskalPM).

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