

Social mobilization and conflict mediation online: Israel loves Iran

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ABSTRACT

The *Israel loves Iran* campaign was created from a publication of Israeli designer Ronny Edry on his Facebook profile. Example of the social global mobilizations that emerge on the net, it is a movement that nowadays brings together more than one hundred thousand internet users calling for the peace in the Middle East. Understanding the Internet as a "digital agora", the work intends to discuss its potential for conflict mediation. The idea of representativity gains another dimension on the web. Ambassador of himself, the Internet user finds in the network an alternative space for diplomacy, multiplying the number of voices at the negotiating table. This dialog allows individuals to reformulate ideas in relation to the "other" that served as the basis for their own identity. Its efficacy, however, happens more in the field of political imagination than in spheres of power.

Key words: identity, speech, diplomacy

Introduction

It is understood that both conflicts and the attempts to overcome them through diplomatic means are processes that happen through communication. In formal diplomacy, which involves an actor to play a role of mediator between the parties, there is an attempt to make divergent speeches enter into an agreement, that the arguments of the parties can be understood and, thereafter, to seek peaceful and respectful manners to find a way out of deadlock.

Conflicts are not necessarily a problem. Instead, the diversity of ideas, opinions and projects is a positive factor for the functioning of societies. It enables people to express relevant points so that changes can take place, making the world more plural and dynamic. According the analysis of Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, the problem lies when there are negative conflicts, that is, leading to the use of violence,



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which is “caused by unresolved conflict and polarization which leads to dehumanization” (GALTUNG *apud* HANSEN; BRAMSEN; NIELSEN, 2012, p.16).

Since the construction of dialogue is understood as a way to overcome impasses that can lead to violence, what is sought in this study is to understand how the internet can be inserted in the process. The Internet is a space where contact and dialogue are under constant construction. On the network, individuals can interact with each other without the need for a third-party mediation. How the Internet could offer alternatives to traditional diplomatic channels? These issues will be further elaborated through the analysis of the “Israel loves Iran” campaign.

The campaign

On March 14, 2012, the Israeli designer Ronny Edry, 41 years old at the time, did what until then seemed to be an ordinary activity among Internet users: published a post on his Facebook profile. The publication was a picture of him carrying his daughter. She, in turn, held in her hands a small Israeli flag. A colorful stripe covered part of the image with the words “Iranians, we will never bomb your country. We love you”. Along the picture, Edry wrote a note in which he said:

For there to be a war between us, first we must be afraid of each other, we must hate. I'm not afraid of you, I don't hate you... I don't even know you. No Iranian ever did me no harm. I never even met an Iranian[...]

Following the text, Edry made critics to the speech delivered by representatives of both countries, the Iranian President at the time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the Israeli Prime-Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Both gave statements of hatred and exchanged threats of attack, a discussion concerning the issues of limits of uranium enrichment by Iran. According to the Israeli government, the neighboring country would be overcoming the limits of uranium enrichment established by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which would allow the manufacture of nuclear bombs.



Image 1: Poster that originated the campaign. Source: facebook.com/israellovesiran

Amid the inflammatory speeches that gained space in the mainstream media, Ronny Edry saw on the Internet a space for another speech - his own- to be presented, although only for the circle of friends in the social network. In his publication on Facebook, the designer made an appeal for everyone who shared the same feeling to help spreading the message in the network so it could reach the Iranians. Within hours, the reaction to the post gained what, until then, would be considered unimaginable proportions: thousands of likes and endless thank you messages began to appear in Edry's inbox.

What followed from there was a proliferation of requests from people close to the designer to have their photos published with the same message. Since his wife, also a teacher of design Michal Tamir, to his neighbors, friends and students from prep design school, Pushpin Mechina. The huge demand was surprising for the couple Edry and Tamir. Biggest surprise came, however, from responses sent by Iranians, whether through private messages or posters made by them. Initially the answers were shy, with photos that never showed their face, only parts of the body or the face covered by shadows. Such discretion can be explained by the fact that fear is still present among Internet users in Iran, a country where the web is not an independent space and free from the control and censorship of the government. But that did not stop the messages

to arrive, either from the Persian country or from Europe and the United States, for example.

Silent majority and global solidarity

In one week, the first post published by Edry exceeded 7 thousand likes and this result led the designer and a small team to create a Facebook page called Israel loves Iran, in an attempt to establish a direct communication channel among people. From the relationship that was consolidated in the network, the Israel loves Iran page started to define itself as “a bridge in the Middle East between the people”. On the Internet, more precisely in a Facebook page, thousands of individuals founded a space to express their feelings and opinions regarding the war and the relationship with the others. The disruption of this sense of isolation, the break of the idea of a silent majority is of utmost importance for conflict transformation. One of the reasons can be explained by the argument of sociologist Manuel Castells that fear, which enables action, occurs when there is a sense of loneliness, of isolation. Once the individual finds support for his/hers views in the expression of others, that is, once people stop feeling alone, it is created a "global solidarity" (AOURAGH 2012 p.531). This solidarity has been important in the organization of current events, such as the Arab Spring. The ability to foster this feeling of solidarity makes the Internet a space for the construction of political identity, “where people met other people who relate to their opposition and shared information about protests, or disseminate messages that further ignited their anger and determination.” (*Ib*)

Creative transformation

Realizing that a community was being formed, Ronny and Michal decided to transform Israel loves Iran into a movement that seeks to perform different actions beyond the Internet, always related to the theme of peace and respect between people of the Middle East. It was then created the Peace Factory, a brand that uses communication, images and advertising to promote the love and respect among people - creatively fighting the idea that advertising can only be used to spread fear and hate speech. Following this idea, the Peace Factory team created a campaign to bring posters and billboards to buses and streets of Tel Aviv. By making a campaign to raise money

online, Edry's team managed to make some of the photos that had already been circulating on the page to be disseminated also on bus lines of the Israeli town.

The creativity in dealing with such a serious topic (as the crisis in the Middle East) is pointed out by Galtung as a key aspect in conflict transformation. The sociologist argues that conflicts have three axes that could be translated as vertices of a pyramid: A (attitude); B (behavior) and C (contradiction) (GALTUNG, 2000 p.13). Understanding conflict as a possibility for people to move forward, he presents the idea to transform and transcend these three axis that are on the basis of conflict through peaceful approaches. According to Galtung, "it is the failure to transform conflicts that leads to violence" (2000, p.15). In this sense, the aggressive attitude (A) towards the other should be transformed into empathy; the behavior (B) that many times leads to physical violence should be replaced by a non-violent way of acting; and, finally, the contradiction (C) that is at the foundation of the disagreements should be transcended through creative ways.

Associating Galtung's approach to Israel loves Iran, it is possible to state that the Internet and image were, respectively, the space and way of creative communication used to address a subject that until then was only commented in the traditional spheres of public diplomacy and the mainstream media. Example of the humor and creativity used by Edry and his team was the image published right after Israeli Prime-Minister's speech at the UN General Assembly, in September 2012. At the occasion, he showed a diagram of a bomb, demonstrating the limits needed for Iran to develop nuclear weapons. While pictures of Bibi, as the prime minister is known, and his diagram flooded televisions and pages of major newspapers, Edry rushed to present, on the Internet, his own diagram.

In a photo that alluded to the stage upon which Netanyahu gave his speech, the designer showed a diagram in the shape of heart, where the dashed lines showed the limits of "love" that could be achieved by Iranians. Such image illustrates what is one of the main characteristics of our Israel loves Iran: to deconstruct speeches that lead to hatred and violence and, from then on, establish new direct relations between individuals.



Image2: different visions: diagram presented by Netanyahu (left) and Edry Source: UNPhoto/J. Carrier e facebook.com/israellovesiran

The power of speech

The study of Internet's power of mobilization in conflict situation between nation states is also interesting because it allows us to understand the scenario of international relations from the perspective of communication. Thus, the symbolic meanings of discourses constructed and disseminated gain strength, activities that are considered essential to the structure and relationships of society.

It is possible to think about the communication process in a society by drawing a parallel to the linear model that involves a sender, who encodes a message to a receiver, who decodes it. In the case of social structures that are established from this unilateral model, the role of the sender would correspond to the actors (individuals or collectives) who are in the condition of formulating speeches, often related to the states. The message sent would correspond to the speech given by these actors, loaded with meanings and intentions, which will be received, on the other hand, by the other actors of society, which are subject to certain laws and rules. In this communication structure, only the speeches by certain actors have space for repercussion. It is from the acceptance of such speeches that social actors can legitimize their high position of power.

Castells argues that the legitimization "depends largely on the consent obtained through the construction of shared meaning" (2009, p.36)¹ and this meanings, in turn, are built "through the process of communicative action" (Ib)². Following this analysis, the

¹ [...] depende en gran medida del consentimiento obtenido mediante la construcción de significado compartido.

² El significado se construye en la sociedad a través del proceso de la acción comunicativa.

speeches that define this relations would not be expressions of the society, but rather crystallized forms of power that “allow some actors to exercise power over other social actors in order to achieve their goals” (2009, p.38)³. Therefore, what we think is the society thinking would, in fact, be what certain social actors want people to think, so they can have control over other actors. This idea approaches the theory presented by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that public opinion does not exist. According to him, the creation of a sense of "society" or "public opinion" would be a form of power that some actors use to legitimize their position.

When new voices emerge in this public space that Internet has become, new visions, thoughts and speeches are also disseminated. The emergence of new voices modifies the dynamics of unilateral communication, on which many states base themselves to remain in power, as it allows a reconfiguration of thoughts, ideas contestation, deconstruction and reconstruction of preconceived images. It is thanks to this emergence of ideas that discordant images of prejudice and hatred towards the other can be deconstructed, surpassed and even reformulated. The construction of a dialogue between people, societies and cultures gains strength in this moment of reframing the discourse.

This reformulation of concepts is related to the very idea of coexistence. In a report published in 2009, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that “In a globalizing world, cultural identities often derive from multiple sources; the increasing plasticity of cultural identities reflects the growing complexity of the globalized flows of people, goods and information” (2009, p.7).

As an example of what happened to Israel loves Iran, individuals can find posts on the Internet that deconstruct homogenizers speeches and which encourage distancing between cultures. From this contact, they can also have more curiosity about each other, about other views and cultures. As the analysis of social movements on the Internet show gatherings around one cause, without entailing the loss or abdication of beliefs and individual identities, the meeting of cultures that is facilitated also does not present a threat to culture - understood here as well as a construction of each one.

³ [...] permiten a unos actores ejercitar el poder *sobre* otros actores sociales a fin de tener el poder para lograr sus objetivos.

Own ambassador

The subject of representation and the construction of speeches, indicated as essential to communication and power in times of online mobilization, are also present when analyzing the movement of Israel loves Iran. In commenting on the power of social networks, Ronny Edry said that they allow individuals to be "their own ambassadors", that is, the speeches and the opinions may be submitted by each one. The very concept of representation can be rethought in this dynamic. On the Internet, individuals find space to convey their views and interact with others; it is a direct dialogue, in which we speak "to someone" and not "on behalf of someone."

One of the benefits of this self-communication regards the question of identity. This digital representation, under the eyes of political communication expert Stephen Coleman, covers all the complexity and multiplicity of aspects that carries the concept of identity that characterizes the social life (2005, p.193). "When people communicate digitally their identities are more fluid; they can have more than one address, draw upon diverse sources of information and belong to a range of social networks" (*Ib*).

Regarding political participation in this new public sphere, Pierre Levy says it is a "digital agora", in which the political identity of an individual is not unique and immutable. According to his analysis, it is not about increasing or removing the power, but increasing potencies of mobilization of human groups. We would be heading, therefore, from a democratic ideal to an ideal of "demo dynamic" (Levy, 2007 p.82).

The political identity "is not marked anymore by the fact it belongs to a category, but by an unique and temporary distribution in the open space of problems, positions and arguments, a space that each contributes to form and reform in real time" (LEVY, 2007 p. 70). It is the subjectivity of the narrative, the personal experiences that have made the Internet such an interesting space. This subjectivity of speeches reproduced in the network and how information and communication technologies are used to give legitimacy to the voices that previously did not find a place in the mainstream press

[...] in empowering organizations, groups and individuals to produce and share information [...] helps bring a greater degree of cohesion, transparency and accountability to processes of conflict transformation that were hitherto unthinkable. (HATTOTUWA *apud* HANSEN.; BRAMSEN; NIELSEN, 2012 p.61)

New diplomacy

Another aspect that emerges from the discussion within the actions conducted in Israel loves Iran is the fact that it is a movement that intends to transcend and modify a conflict that was initiated by one of the sides involved. Formal negotiations always seek to establish a dialogue between the parties in the presence of a moderator who is not directly involved in the situation. From there, there is a search for a common and consented output by both parties (in the event of a conflict involving only two fronts in contradiction). In the case of Israel loves Iran movement, it is an initiative that came from an Israeli, an ordinary citizen who finds a place to express his opinion. It is as if Internet could give voice to ordinary citizens, placing them in the roundtable of discussions.

If diplomacy is the official way to search for solutions to impasses through negotiations involving official representatives of governments, then it is possible to think how this diplomatic dynamic takes place on the web, where issues of representation, mediation and legitimacy are fluid.

Regarding the new ways of doing traditional mediation in international relations, it is interesting to analyze the concept of public diplomacy. While the idea of traditional diplomacy would correspond to an actor trying to manage an international environment based on the relationship with other international actor, public diplomacy would be a way to promote a positive image of a country's population to another through events and academic exchange programs, for example. The new technologies and the Internet had an impact in the relations between states, leading to the emergence of a "new public diplomacy", also called by some scholars in the field of "Public Diplomacy 2.0". One of the main changes presented by the researcher Nicholas Cull in the book *Public Diplomacy: lessons from the past* would be the fact that this new public diplomacy, that was previously exercised unilaterally (involving government and target audience of a certain country) is now transferred in cyberspace to a dialogue that involves the very people of the countries concerned. In this way, the first task of a new public diplomacy would be characterized as a relationship building. This idea approaches Castells arguments when he analyses the issue of the power of the states from the perspective of relations established through communication.

Criticisms

One of the main criticisms that are made to movements that, like Israel loves Iran, emerged and grew in the virtual space, is precisely the fact that changes in the network have little or no influence on the discussions that happen outside it. Their effects would be felt more in the imaginary sphere than, in fact, in the field of political action.

Although the creators of Israel loves Iran and more than a hundred thousand members of the community affirm daily their anti-war and pro-dialogue position between Israelis and Iranians, these speeches caused no alterations in the aggressive tone that continues to be used by governments. In an article published in the electronic page of British newspaper The Guardian, Russian writer Evgeny Morozov affirms that the problem of the analysis of the movements that happen on Facebook or Twitter lies in the fact that these networks are just tools and “these digital tools are simply, well, tools, and social change continues to involve many painstaking, longer-term efforts to engage with political institutions and reform movements.” (MOROZOV, 2011).

Another point raised by the writer is the fact that the analysis of revolutionary movements in the Middle East, such as the Arab Spring and the Israel loves Iran, gives utmost importance to tools like Facebook and Twitter, which implies a power shift from East to the Western powers. Morozov argues that the emphasis on the liberating power of these tools underestimate the role of human actions and makes “Americans feel proud of their own contribution to events in the Middle East” (*Ib*).

Another question that raises concerns is the dissemination of inequalities in the network, that is, problems are reproduced on the web, for example, in the case of Internet access. Researcher Miriyam Aouragh describes in the article *Social Media, Mediation and the Arab Revolutions* the Internet as being a tool and space for activism, making possible a counter-hegemonic organization. According to Aouragh, if Internet is related to what happens outside it, that is, to the social-political context of societies, then the existing problems that occur in the “offline community” will also be reflected in the net’s organization. The inequality in the access to connectivity would be an example of how the network would perpetuate a pre-existent model of (digital and social) exclusion. Aouragh argues that:

The precondition for internet activism should at least be affordable availability and infrastructural access and reach. This is a far cry from space-less and border-less myths and the very point of struggle over self determination and territorial autonomy. (AOURAGH, 2012, p.528)

In this sense, it is important to think about the matter of digital inclusion. Access to connectivity, the guarantee of freedom of expression were highlighted during the research as being key issues that should be on government's agenda, including the participation of civil society. This should be so to ensure that Internet is a space entirely free for the circulation of ideas and so everyone have access to and know how to navigate through it. It is interesting to think how far online mobilizations can result in changes beyond the web, deconstructing power structures and giving rise to new ways of organization.

Reflections on a new space

If the counter-movements that occur in cyberspace can be seen with some skepticism when analyzing the real impacts they have beyond the virtual world, the mainstream media, on the other hand, is increasingly playing a key role as a bridge between these two spheres. When a movement like Israel loves Iran gains great attention on social networks, being shared by more and more Internet users and gaining thousands of followers, it becomes an agenda for these large vehicles. Journalism, in an attempt to reinvent itself facing a new context, is aware of the actions taking place on the network. And when one of them becomes viral, it can no longer be ignored by traditional media.

As Edry and his page became known by Internet users, more vehicles like CNN, Al Jazeera and Haaretz published reports and articles about the campaign. And as the articles were published by these vehicles – who have visibility and credibility with their audience – they arouse curiosity and disseminated the movement at the same time, contributing to the growth of the campaign. It was from repercussion of Edry's campaign in the media, for example, that the Iranian Majid Nowrouzi became aware of the Israel loves Iran. Also concerned about the possible war involving his country and surprised by the friendly and positive message coming from the "other" part, Nowrouzi decided to create a page in response to Iran loves Israel, so that he could establish a channel from Iran, transmitting their messages to the new Israeli friends.

Although this is initially a movement for peace between Israelis and Iranians, Israel loves Iran soon became a space for pledging the end of war between different nations. In November 2012, Israel and the region of the Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas, initiated a period of conflict with rockets being launched by both parties. Amid sirens and tension, Edry used space on Facebook as a diary to report his daily routine

amid violence and strengthen the wish for peace, this time between Israelis and Palestinians. With the conflict at hand, the Israeli-Palestinian tension gained attention on the campaign's page, with a growing number of messages of support sent to Ronny, many of them asking for the end of the war.

From a movement, Israel loves Iran has been directed as a place to ask for peace wherever there is conflict, beyond the Middle East: earthquakes in Pakistan, crackdown on protesters in Turkey or bombing threats made by North Korea against the United States. All events that threaten the peaceful order of national states gain space and attention in the community created by Edry.

Conclusions

In the case of mediation and conflict transformation in the network, a learning curve that can be drawn is that the Internet is not so much a new tool for diplomacy. The question that seems to have more relevance in this regard is the fact that the emergence of new discourses, breaking the idea of "silent majority", breaking with fear are determinants for civil society to restructure certain ideas and visions support the legitimization of power through the use of violence. The dialogue emerged in the network does not replace the formal diplomacy, but can be seen as a space to break stigmas, prejudices and restructuring of the very idea of identity.

This part of the network can be better exploited by supranational agencies, like the United Nations, that works to find conflict resolution through peaceful means. Treating the network with a distinct attention, but not detached from the mainstream media, could help in the field of diplomacy and international relations and has emerged as a potential in future researches.

A metaphor that seems to illustrate well the encounters that take place in the network is the "message in a bottle". You can think, still alluding to this interpretation, that Internet is like a sea, where there are several bottles floating with messages inside, written by someone. The sender does not know for sure where or by whom the message will be received - but that does not mean he/she will not be heard. It is precisely this possibility of contact between individuals, the possibility of meeting people, ideas and thoughts on this huge space that makes the Internet a place conducive to think about the new. And there is much to explore when navigating these waters.

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