

SOCIAL MEDIA IS POWERFUL, BUT CAN IT CHANGE POLICIES OF INSTITUTIONALIZED ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE ISRAELI ARMY?

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ABSTRACT

One of the major public debates in recent years in Israel has been, the shooting of a Palestinian terrorist in the West Bank city of Hebron, as he lay wounded on the ground, 11 minutes after he was neutralized. The incident was recorded on a mobile device and uploaded to social media. It sparked widespread discussion, debate and outcry, over the actions of the soldier and the consequent actions, of the army and the government. The research argues that, the role of governments in preventing exposure of security information was badly shaken, following the inability to control information, as local organizations have assumed a new prominence, by providing information that previously had been limited by local authorities. Social media, dominated the entire process and determined its outcome, while the other forces had to comply with the new reality structure, by social media. However, in examining the impact of social media and public opinion, on the end-result of the case, it is evident that, although social media dominated the entire process, the position of the army was superior. This can prove that, despite the vocal role of the media, traditional and institutionalized organizations can still dominate public policies.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Israel, Army, Public Opinion

INTRODUCTION

On March 24th, 2016, an Israeli soldier, Elor Azaria, serving in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), shot a Palestinian assailant who had just stabbed an Israeli soldier, as he lay wounded on the ground (Levy, Zitun, and Kimon, 2016). The Hebron shooting incident occurred in the Tel Rumeida neighborhood. A Palestinian who attacked IDF soldiers, were shot and wounded. He was shut again by Azaria, 11 minutes after he was neutralized. Following the incident, Azaria was arrested and charged with manslaughter (for example: (Bob, 2016; Benovadia, 2016).

A video of the incident, released by human rights organization B'Tselem caused a huge political storm. The video footage was captured by a Hebron resident, Imad Abu Shamsiyeh, who sent it to B'Tselem, who then distributed the video on the internet. B'Tselem is the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. This group takes upon themselves, to document and educate policy-makers and the Israeli public, about human rights violations in the Occupied Territories (El-ad, 2016). In the posted video, Azaria is seen cocking his weapon and aiming it in the direction of the terrorist, on the ground. A truck passed in front, at the moment of the shooting. After it passes, the terrorist is seen, with blood flowing from his head down the pavement (Winer, 2016).

The video of the shooting prompted the IDF to launch an investigation, into the incident. The investigation stated that, the Azaria said that, the assailant "needs to die" before killing him. He claimed that, he feared the assailant had an explosive vest, hidden under his shirt. The IDF claimed that, the Palestinian was already checked for

explosives and Azaria had no reason to shut him, an action which brought to his death (Choen, 2016). He was sentenced to 18 months in jail (Steger, 2016).

Just as the O.J. The Simpson trial, exposed the fault lines and racial divisions in American society decades ago, the public reaction to Elor Azaria's trial and verdict, revealed how sharply Israelis are split into deeply divided political and social camps (Kaplan Sommer, 2017). The case characterizes a multitude of issues that pertain to security culture in Israel, mainly the pervading prevalence of social media, in every aspect of today's society (Harreldon, 2016). It proved that, social media is so embedded within people and their behavior that, it can no longer be ignored (Heemsbergen& Lindgren, 2014). The public opinion, debate that commenced involvement, through social media shows the impact social media has on the political arena. A video taken by a single man was able to influence and set the agenda about the issue. Immediately, after the explosion of the video online Israeli politicians expressed their views, via Twitter and Facebook, but were only able to respond to the situation, as they did not have full control over the media.

Social Media and the Army

The Azaria incident has been unique in the military history of Israel, but nevertheless it is a symbol of the conflict between security issues and social media. The incident also characterizes the unique status of the military environment in Israel and the contradiction between security needs and new technology.

Israel is a modern example of a country whose way of life has been molded by war (Zeevi, 2009), and the media are experiencing the intensity of the conflict, on a daily basis and particularly, during intense military and political events. This tension has identified Israel, since its establishment in 1948, but the new environment of free media and the domination of social media have determined new rules, under which all parties should work with – public opinion, the government, the army – and traditional media.

To better understand this conflict and the changes in the role of the army and the media, including social media, it is necessary to examine the traditional position of Israeli media and the changes in coverage policy, they have experienced. Although independence and autonomy from political influence are core values, among professional journalists in most western societies, research has shown that, news media organizations rely heavily on official information for the construction of news (Shehata, 2010). However, this is changing, as follows the rise of new media technologies and globalization of the media, there is a growing demand in Israel for investigative journalism, alternative voices, accurate information, and, in particular, specialization and in-depth interpretation (Nossak, 2009).

In trying to examine the role of the media in the Azaria case, it is evident that, the media maintained a neutral position, representing the different public views on the issue. This position can be explained in that, one of the main dilemmas that, Israeli society is dealing with is the role of the army in defensive and peace-oriented events (El-Nawawy and Powers, 2010). In recent years, as technology became a major source of policy-making decisions, the media faced new challenges, as public opinion became a major force through social media. As in other incidents in the last decade, the involvement of new technology created a debate, that focused on the imperative of providing full coverage of events, even during war times or other security threats, while not harming state security (Sucharov, 2005). However, as has been evident in the relationship of the media and the army, the media doesn't initiate policies, but intensifies the policy determined by the army (Surkes, 2016). This can lead to a conclusion that, the dominant force became social media, which dictates the policies of the other forces that used to dictate policy,

mainly the government and the army. The media, as explained, did not initiate policy and did not dictate policy-making decisions, taken by the stronger forces - government and the army, yet in the new environment of social media domination, the media are being forced to follow the new uncensored policy determined by social media.

Before getting into the special circumstances of the Azaria case, it needs to be explained that, Israel is a country with a pervading military culture, as a result of its army and compulsory conscription. Throughout its history Israel, had to deal with the multitude of security issues, that arise naturally in a country with such a strong military culture. These issues include the portrayal of the military, in the media, the role of the media and security and secrecy issues. But, also needs to be explained, is that as technology changes and develops, so too does the nature of these issues. As a result, the Israeli government and the army have the task of adapting technology, to suit the needs of the country (Webster, 2003). Other forces are also changing with the advent of new technology. The Israeli media are experiencing the intensity of the conflict, on a daily basis and particularly, during intense military and political events. During periods of tensed security, the media present unifying information, even though in other periods, it tends to be critical of the government (Peri, 2006). According to Murray, Parry, Robinson and Goddard (2008), this can be explained independence of the media upon official sources, patriotism, fear of flak (if reporting is seen as undermining security needs) and news values, rooted in dramatic episodic coverage.

Media-state relations changed fundamentally (Paterson, 2011), as global coverage and the impact of new technology, changed the way the media and governments operate. According to Fröhlich (2010), war events are intensified by the media and the military and political elites. As far as, the role of the media, war coverage is supposed to give an 'affective impulse'. Maoz (2006) suggests that, media coverage is the main source that determines public opinion, in political decisions and has to be considered as a major force in public opinion change, in social and security issues.

The debate in the Azaria case influenced society. Within hours of the video being uploaded to the Internet, the Israeli public was divided (Mazor and Mehager, 2016). Parts of society felt that, the soldier's actions were not within the "Rules of engagement" and that, the soldier was out of line, and murdering a man who no longer posed a risk, to the soldier himself and two other soldiers in the area. (Landes, 2017). Other people held the opinion that, the soldier was only acting in the interests of protecting himself and others and that, he felt there was still a significant danger (Harel, 2016).

Public opinion became a major influence, on the turn of events in the Azaria incident. Social media became the instrument of change, allowing public opinion to dominate. The vast range of opinions was spread, across Facebook forums, Whatsapp group messages and Internet news articles and op-eds (Nov, 2016). The fact that, the story gained such widespread attention determined that, government policy-makers and army officials had to react and respond to the issue, by releasing statements aligning themselves with one opinion. It simply could not be ignored. The Azaria incident demonstrated that, social media became so powerful and so influential, that, it can change the policies of institutionalized organizations, such as the Israeli army.

It is important to examine the impact of the incident on public opinion, as it developed into a huge public debate. Azaria enjoyed widespread public support and his trial became a public spectacle (Edmonton, 2016). Nearly half of Jewish Israelis supported the extrajudicial killing of a Palestinian attacker, who no longer pose a threat, according to a poll by the Israel Democracy Institute (Schaeffer Omer-Man, 2016).

The trial deeply divided the country, with politicians and current and former army generals alternately, supporting or condemning Azaria's actions (Harrelson, 2016). The incident divided the Israeli public and its leaders, with some expressing outrage over the killing of an incapacitated man, and others supporting even the most extreme response, to a stabbing attack (Edmonton, 2016). The Azaria case sparked widespread public debate, that became a continuation of an already widespread debate, over how one should implement the Rules of engagement orders in the wake of the wave of Palestinian political violence Demonstration, in support of Azaria in Rabin Square. Translation of text on the poster: "If we don't protect our soldiers, who will protect us?" The soldier also attracted widespread support of Israeli social media, with more than 13,000 people joining Facebook support groups and another 50,000, signing a petition backing his actions. Supporters of the soldier posted a video online of the moments, before the shooting, which they say, shows supports the soldier's claim that, he feared the assailant may have had an explosive device. Public reaction has proven that, following the rise of new media technologies and globalization of the media, there is a growing demand in Israel for investigative journalism, alternative voices, accurate information, and, in particular, specialization and in-depth interpretation (Nossak, 2009).

It is also important to examine the impact of public opinion and social media on the army. What identified most of the impact on the army is that, the debate was also within the army. While IDF Chief of Staff, GadiEizenkot, criticized those who described the shooter, as a "confused little kid" and claimed that demeaned the army's character (Benovadia, 2016), support for Azaria was expressed by three former generals, who testified for him, among them former Deputy Chief of Staff, Uzi Dayan. But also to be noted is that, despite the internal debate in the army, the official position of the army was in sharp contrast to public opinion, as the soldier was sentenced to 18 months in military prison (Rapoport, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

The research looks into the question of who was superior in the Hebron shooting incident: the army or public opinion?

The incident characterizes the increasing impact of technology over security issues, since today's soldiers can be held accountable for their actions and the world is aware of the inner workings and events, in the military. With access to information and the pervasiveness of social media, the army needs to develop protocols and precedents, to instruct within a different environment. Similarly, the case displays the fact that, controversial issues are unable to be ignored anymore. With the increasing accessibility of the public, with controversial events, these issues cannot be overlooked by the army and the government. Society and global media are no longer willing to allow these issues, to be ignored. The Azaria case also shows that, local events have been catapulted into the global spotlight. As technology develops and the spread of information globally occurs instantaneously, these issues are able to become worldwide news events. This fact too, needs to be considered by governments and policy-makers.

One further issue included within the Azaria case refers to the response of Israeli media and their role in the changing society. As information becomes accessible and nothing is hidden anymore, the media must analyze its changing role. Is this role to be pro-Israel and support the government, and the army in all of their decisions or is it more important, to present the facts as they are and open the events up to public scrutiny? Social media and developing technology, have a huge impact on security issues and censorship. The Elor Azaria case exemplifies

this completely and is an example of the new issues that, the army faces with the development of technology. New media is ever changing and it contains a strong influence. Security organizations are forced to deal with political situations, over more platforms than before, as ordinary people can interact with the media and generate new content with access to inexpensive communication technologies. What was unthinkable, years ago is now taking place, as the ability of the masses to intervene in political stories, with effectiveness. As the Azaria case demonstrates, anyone with a camera or phone and access to the internet, can be their own reporter, as was the case with the B'Tselem video.

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