

**‘I don’t Like you any more’: Facebook unfriending by
Israelis during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014
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Abstract

This paper explores Facebook unfriending during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014. We suggest that politically-motivated unfriending is a new kind of political gesture. We present an analysis of a survey of 1,013 Jewish Israeli Facebook users. 16% of users unfriended or unfollowed a Facebook friend during the fighting. Unfriending was more prevalent among more ideologically extreme and more politically active Facebook users. Weak ties were those most likely to be broken, and respondents mostly unfriended people because they took offense at what they had posted or disagreed with it. While social network sites may expose people to diverse opinions, precisely by virtue of the many weak ties users have on them, our findings show these ties to be susceptible to dissolution.

Keywords

Deliberation and political conversation

Internet / New technology

Social network sites

Ideologies / values

Homophily

Weak ties

Unfriending

Disconnection

Facebook

‘I don’t Like you any more’: Facebook unfriending by Israelis during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014

Political interactions within social networks have been of interest to scholars for over half a century (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Nir, 2011). Recently, social network sites (SNSs) have become a major arena in which social relations and politics are mixed together (Himmelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013; Yardi & boyd, 2010). Research into political expression in online contexts has mostly examined the formation of connections and asked why people choose to link to others, be that to people, political sites, pressure groups, and so on (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Himmelboim et al., 2013; Stroud, 2010). This article adds to this field of work, but with an innovative focus on *disconnective* political behaviors. As posited by Light (2014), disconnection is an indispensable aspect of our use (and non-use) of SNSs, yet remains virtually unstudied. In this article we develop the idea of political disconnectivity by analyzing a new kind of political gesture: politically-motivated Facebook unfriending and unfollowing. We ask three main questions about this phenomenon—Who is unfriending? Whom are they unfriending? And why are they unfriending them?—which we answer in relation to the context of the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict.

Unfriending and unfollowing in general, and for political reasons in particular, have hardly been investigated. However, these practices would appear to be increasingly common among SNS users: for instance, between 18% to 26% of American SNS users (including, but not limited to Facebook) have disconnected a tie for reasons to do with politics (Pew Research Center, 2014; Rainie & Smith, 2012a, p. 6). Unfriending is also starting to gain public recognition as an impactful political gesture: recently, in Germany, a campaign encouraging Facebook users to unfriend friends who had ‘Liked’ the right-wing ‘Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West’ (or Pegida) movement went viral.¹ We focus on two main explanations for the dissolution of network ties: homophily, and strength of tie,

thus expanding the study of homophily to include disconnective practices as well.

Politically-motivated Facebook unfriending has significant implications. To the extent that people's political unfriending is of others whose views oppose their own, such acts of disconnectivity will create a more politically homogenous Facebook environment for the user who unfriended, and even for their Facebook friends. The outcome of this may be similar to the documented implications of other echo chambers (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), that is, a polarization of political opinions and a deterioration of political discourse and civic deliberation (Mutz, 2006; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2009). To the extent that Facebook and other SNSs are becoming increasingly important sites for political exposure and debate, this concern will only become more acute.

This article is based on a sample of 1,013 Jewish Israeli Facebook users. The case study centers on Facebook activity during the combat between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip in July-August, 2014. Focusing on an extreme event such as the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014 may help to expand scholarly understanding of political uses of SNSs beyond the usual settings adopted in such line of research, namely, election periods (Eveland & Hutchens, 2013).

Disconnectivity and Facebook Unfriending

In research of the Internet to date, the notion of the Internet as a technology of connectivity and sharing is pervasive (John, 2013; van Dijck, 2013). This is equally true of the extensive literature about SNSs in particular. However, in this article we take our cue from a new strand of research into the Internet and explore a particular type of disconnective act—that of Facebook unfriending and unfollowing. We focus on Facebook for two main reasons. First, it is by far the most popular SNS in Israel, with around 3.9m registered users (out of a population of about 8m). Twitter, by way of comparison, has around 155,000 users in Israel.² Facebook is thus much more central to Israeli Internet users' daily lives than other

SNSs. The second reason is to do with the way ties are formed on Facebook, and specifically the fact that they are reciprocal. In theory, anyone can follow anyone else on Twitter, but on Facebook a friendship requires the consent of both parties. Relatedly, Facebook is much more profile-oriented than Twitter, and offers a far richer presentation of self.

So far, work that explicitly addresses digital disconnectivity is scant (Light, 2014; Light & Cassidy, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013), despite Walther's (2004) appeal over a decade ago to pay attention to how we terminate online relations. However, disconnectivity is as important as connectivity, not least because it serves as a 'lubricant' (Light & Cassidy, 2014) for our ongoing online activities and improving our experiences on SNSs. It could be argued that past studies of connectivity implicitly address disconnectivity, since every act of connection also entails a decision not to form other connections. However, we maintain that all acts of disconnectivity—such as breaking social ties, discontinuing a newspaper subscription, or leaving a political party—are fundamentally different from decisions about who or what to connect with in the first place (on this see Light and Cassidy's (2014) distinction between preventing and suspending connections).

Sibona defines unfriending on Facebook as 'a conscious act by one person to end the dyadic relationship and manifests itself through the removal of a link between the dyad' (Sibona, 2014, p. 1677). Another, milder, act of disconnectivity that Facebook affords is 'unfollowing' (formerly 'hiding'), by which one user filters out another, but without terminating their Facebook friendship.³ Both practices serve to remove certain content from a user's News Feed (the flow of stories that Facebook presents to its users). In neither instance does the user who has been unfriended or unfollowed receive any notification of this from Facebook.

Political Homophily

'Homophily is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher

rate than among dissimilar people' (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001, p. 416). It is well established that people tend to form homophilic social networks (Noel & Nyhan, 2011). Although debated (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Yardi & boyd, 2010), there is evidence to suggest that, in the digital world, it is easier than ever for users to filter out dissonant voices, consequently facilitating political detachment (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Himelboim et al., 2013; Sunstein, 2009). If the principle of homophily holds that 'friends who are less similar are more likely to stop being friends' (Noel & Nyhan, 2011, p. 211), then politically-motivated Facebook unfriending is yet another instance of it. Unfriending can thus be conceptualized as a mechanism of disconnectivity that contributes to the formation of homogeneous networks. Put differently, if research into the formation of homogeneous networks has tried to account for the ways in which 'birds of a feather flock together' (McPherson et al., 2001), our study—to continue this metaphor—focuses on the way that individual birds not only choose not to associate with birds of a different feather, but actually expel them from the flock. The act of disconnecting can thus be seen as aimed at creating a 'clean' environment where there are no (or fewer) voices that you would rather not hear. Thus, we propose expanding the study of homophily to include mechanisms of disconnectivity (Noel & Nyhan, 2011).

In the context of politics, homophilic preferences can be either topic- or ideology-oriented. Topic-oriented homophily refers to links between two people who share a mutual interest in a specific topic, in this case, politics (Hutto, Yardi, & Gilbert, 2013; Wang & Kraut, 2012). Ideology-oriented homophily refers to links between two people who share the same ideology. These two types of homophily can account for the two main reasons given for political SNS unfriending, namely, seeing too many political posts, and disagreeing with or taking offense at political posts (Rainie & Smith, 2012a, p. 19).

Existing research does not currently offer a clear answer as to whether people with

little interest in politics will break ties with others on the grounds of topic-oriented homophily. On the one hand, Sibona (2014) has demonstrated that people tend to unfriend others who post too much on unimportant issues, and that posting polarizing content (of a political or religious nature) is the second most commonly given reason for unfriending (Sibona & Walczak, 2011). One can extrapolate that for people with little interest in politics, posts about politics fall into the category of unimportant issues. Similarly, Rainie and Smith (2012a) report that the primary reason for disconnecting with someone on an SNS is that they ‘posted too frequently’ about political subjects, though their study does not refer to a politically charged period of time when political posts might be seen as more appropriate. On the other hand, in both Hutto et al. (2013) and Wang and Kraut (2012), topic-oriented homophily was not detected.

Therefore we ask:

RQ1. Is politically-motivated unfriending driven by topic-oriented homophily, whereby users with little political interest will unfriend other users because they feel they comment on politics too much?

There is support from various fields of research for the claim that people with more extreme political attitudes are more prone to ideological homophily (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2014; Garrett et al., 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Stroud, 2010). For instance, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that people with more extreme views prefer like-minded news outlets (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Stroud, 2010). As for forming connections on SNSs, there are findings to suggest that people connect with like-minded others, as well as findings suggesting the opposite (e.g. Himelboim et al., 2013; Yardi & boyd, 2010). The same inconsistency is evident in the few findings available about disconnectivity. Fix (2013, pp. 21-23), for instance, did not find conclusive support for the idea that strength of political identity predicts politically-motivated Facebook unfriending. However, looking at the data

from a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, it would appear that Americans with a strongly partisan identity are more likely to have unfriended or unfollowed users with whom they disagreed politically (Pew Research Center, 2014, p. 7), but these are only descriptive findings that have not been empirically tested.

In accordance with the principle of homophily, we put forward the two following complementary hypotheses:

H1. People with more extreme political ideology will tend to unfriend and unfollow more frequently than those holding moderate ideological positions.

H2. When people unfriend for political reasons they will be more likely to be breaking a tie with someone holding different views than someone with similar views.

Weak Ties

Generally, weak ties are disconnected at a higher rate. For instance, based on an analysis of over 34,000 Facebook relationships, Quercia et al. (2012) state that, among other reasons, ‘a relationship is more likely to break if it is not embedded in the same social circle’ (p. 251). Importantly, weak ties may break because they are more ‘brittle’ in political arguments (Grevet, Terveen, & Gilbert, 2014). Added to this, it should be noted that the political inclinations of weak ties are often unknown (Grevet et al., 2014; Rainie & Smith, 2012a). However, under extreme political circumstances, such as war, there is more intense political discussion in general, thus raising the likelihood of discovering that some of one’s weak ties have views that differ from one’s own, perhaps even drastically. Moreover, it would seem that the price to be paid for terminating such an online relationship is relatively low; at the same time, stronger relationships, with family members or close friends, for instance, are better able to withstand political disagreements (Grevet et al., 2014).

Research suggests that dissolving a tie on Facebook has a lower cost for face than blanking that same tie in other social settings (Lopez & Ovaska, 2013). The reason for this is

twofold: First, online, people cultivate weak ties (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). For instance, people have an average of 338 friends on Facebook (Smith, 2014), far more than one can maintain offline (Hill & Dunbar, 2003). Weak ties are more easily broken because one's level of social engagement with them is lower. Indeed, it has been reported that the ties broken on SNSs tend to be weak, be that in the context of friend 'culling' (Light, 2014), SNS maintenance (Sibona, 2014), or explicitly because of politics (Rainie & Smith, 2012b). A corollary of this is that the political views of one's weak ties tend to remain unknown. Because we often assume that our weak ties' views are similar to our own, discovering that they are not threatens the continuation of the tie (Bevan, Ang, & Fearn, 2014; Grevet et al., 2014). Second, it is easier, technologically speaking, to break an online tie.

We therefore hypothesize:

H3. People will be more likely to unfriend or unfollow weak ties than strong ties.

H4. People with more weak ties among their Facebook friends will be more likely to unfriend or unfollow than those with less weak ties.

Case Study

This study examines politically-motivated Facebook unfriending among Jewish Israelis during the fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip between 8 July and 26 August 2014. Despite the regularity of Israel's involvement in military campaigns, there is no doubt that the period of fighting in the summer of 2014—termed Operation 'Protective Edge' by the Israeli army—was extremely fraught and experienced as exceptional within Israel. The operation enjoyed remarkable levels of public support among Jewish Israelis, to the extent that a number of (Jewish) public figures who stepped outside the consensus found themselves paying a high personal price (Booth & Eglash, 2014).

For Israeli users, Facebook was dominated by content relating to the combat, including posts written by Facebook users, and content created by various bodies (non-governmental

and governmental) that users shared. As is typical of online political debates, discussions were very polarized (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Himelboim et al., 2013). The 50 days of armed conflict would seem to have instantiated claims that at times of high-intensity political conflict, political controversy and disagreement are known to rise, while tolerance and acceptance of the other side decline dramatically (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). In fact, the question, ‘How to block people on Facebook?’ was the tenth most trending search on Google.co.il during 2014 in the ‘How to...’ category after the search peaked dramatically during the fighting.⁴

The reason for selecting this case study is twofold: First, all that is known about unfriending so far concerns American Facebook users (or users of unspecified nationality). Thus, it is our hope that this contribution will expand the field of research beyond the US. Second, as mentioned above, the majority of studies addressing political discussions on Facebook have either studied routine life, where political activity is expected to be low, or they have focused on election periods (Eveland & Hutchens, 2013). Here, though, we study an instance of a flare up of a protracted and intractable conflict (Coleman, 2003).

Method

Sample

We conducted an online survey among Jewish Israeli Facebook users. The survey was carried out between 3-7 September 2014 (between one week and ten days after the open-ended ceasefire of 26 August). iPanel, a survey company specializing in Internet-based research, collected the data for this study. iPanel recruits its large pool of respondents through sponsored links on Google, Facebook, and other websites. Respondents are asked to take part in periodic surveys, in exchange for incentives (gift vouchers). The entire pool comprises more than 100,000 participants, and an average panelist answers 2-3 surveys per month (no minimum is required). Random members of iPanel’s panel were sent an email with a link

inviting them to participate in the survey. The response rate for this survey was around 15%, which is standard for surveys with sampling requirements similar to ours.

iPanel tailors the sample to suit the study's aims. In this instance, the sample—of 1,013 respondents—is not representative of the Jewish population of Israel, but rather of the Jewish Israeli population of Facebook (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The sample matches almost perfectly what we know about the age and gender composition of Israeli Facebook users (age $M=34.6$ $SD=13.3$; 52.1% male; 4.1% ultra-Orthodox; income $M=3.0$ $SD=1.25$ using a five-point scale).

Measures

Dependent variables

Unfriending and unfollowing. Forming the central focus of the survey, respondents were asked, 'Had you ever unfriended or unfollowed someone on Facebook before Operation "Protective Edge"?'⁵ and, 'During Operation "Protective Edge", did you unfriend or unfollow anyone because of comments or posts related to the operation?'. We also asked, 'During Operation "Protective Edge", did you consider unfriending or unfollowing someone before ultimately deciding not to?', and, 'To the best of your knowledge, did anyone unfriend you during Operation "Protective Edge"?'.

Reasons for unfriending and unfollowing. To gauge topic-homophily and political disagreement, respondents who said that they had unfriended/unfollowed during the fighting were asked why they had done so. One question (adapted from Rainie & Smith, 2012a) offered a number of options, from which respondents could choose more than one (They posted about the operation too much; They published offensive posts; They published posts with content that I disagreed with; They argued with me about Operation 'Protective Edge'; They published posts that could have offended other friends of mine on Facebook). There was also an open question, inviting respondents to reply in their own words ('Please try to

describe the kinds of comments or posts that made you unfriend or unfollow someone during Operation “Protective Edge”. You can illustrate with examples’). Respondents’ answers to the open question about why they unfriended were coded by the two authors (n=163, Krippendorff’s alpha=.85). We extrapolated the political views of the person who had been unfriended from the respondents’ answers to the open question. For instance, a comparison of Israeli soldiers to Nazis would be indicative of left-wing views, and calls for death to Arabs would be indicative of right-wing views. We then cross-referenced these answers with the respondents’ declared political attitudes, enabling us to determine whether they had unfriended someone with contrasting political views to their own.

Identity of the people who were unfriended. In order to learn about weak ties, respondents who said that they had unfriended/unfollowed during the fighting were asked whom they had unfriended and were offered the following categories (respondents could mark more than one (adapted from Rainie & Smith, 2012a)): I unfriended someone from my close social circles; I unfriended someone from my family; I unfriended a colleague from work; I unfriended someone I study with; I unfriended an acquaintance I'm not very close to; I unfriended someone I've never met outside of Facebook; I unfriended someone whom I'm hardly in touch with.

Independent variables

Ideological homophily

Ideological extremity. This measure was based on a recoding of the *political leaning* scale. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a continuum ranging from 1 for extremely left wing to 7 for extremely right wing. Then, by means of folding, political extremity was gauged. The ends of the scale were recoded as indicating the highest level of ideological extremity (with a score of 4) and the middle of the scale was recoded to mark the least extreme score (1) (M=2.5, SD=1.05).

Perceived exposure to cross-cutting opinions. Respondents were asked, ‘When you think about the posts and status updates you saw on Facebook during Operation “Protective Edge”, how would you characterize them?’ They were offered a 7-point Likert-type scale, where 1=Only left-wing content and 7=Only right-wing content (M=4.9; SD=1.21). In order to measure the extent to which respondents saw cross-cutting content or content that accorded with their ideology, the distance between each respondent’s ideology (measured on the same scale as just described) and the reported political leaning of the material they saw on Facebook during the conflict was calculated in absolute terms (M=1.1; SD=1.12 on a scale from 0-6).

Topic homophily

Political activity on Facebook. RQ1 inquires as to whether political unfriending is associated with topic homophily. Therefore we asked respondents to rate their political behavior on Facebook during the operation and in the year leading up to it using four items (see Table 1 for wording; adapted from Pew Research Center, 2014). Respondents answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1=Not at all and 7=A great deal. These four questions were consolidated into a measure of political activity on Facebook, with values from 4-28 (M=11.4; SD=5.87; Cronbach’s alpha=.83).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Also, in order to assess the background against which we tested our hypotheses (that is, to evaluate how political the atmosphere was on Facebook) we also asked respondents: ‘How active were you on Facebook during Operation “Protective Edge”?’ (on a scale of 1-5, where 1=I hardly used Facebook at all, and 5=Facebook was open nearly all the time, M=3.1; SD=1.24); and ‘During Operation “Protective Edge” did you use Facebook more or less than usual?’ (on a scale of 1-7, where 1=Much less and 7=Much more, M=4.6; SD=1.43).

Weak ties. To tap into the amount of weak ties a user has, we assume that people with

more Facebook friends have more weak ties among their Facebook friends (Hill & Dunbar, 2003). Thus, respondents were asked ‘Roughly, how many friends do you have on Facebook?’ (M=356; SD=482.34).

Control variables

A host of controls were used, based on the existing literature. We controlled for demographic variables, such as age, gender, income and religiosity. All of these variables were measured using the common measurements in Israel. In addition, past work has suggested that right-wingers have a stronger tendency towards homophily (Garrett et al., 2014) and that political tolerance declines during armed conflict (Peffley, Hutchison, & Shamir, Forthcoming). Therefore, we also included the following variables in our analyses:

Political orientation. As mentioned, respondents were asked to place themselves on a continuum ranging from 1 for extremely left wing to 7 for extremely right wing (M=4.9, SD=1.59).

Democratic values. These were measured by asking for degree of agreement or disagreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale with four statements (adapted from Finkel, Sigelman, & Humphries, 1999). The statements were: ‘In a democratic country, it is important that citizens are exposed to as wide a range of views as possible’; ‘I believe that all people should be allowed to express their views about any subject regardless of what their views are’; ‘People shouldn’t be allowed to say things in support or encouragement of an enemy of the state’; and ‘During military action, very critical talk about the army should not be allowed’. From these statements, and after reversing the scale for the final two statements, we created a single measure for democratic values, with values between 4 and 28 (the higher the score, the more supportive of democratic values the respondent; M=16.0; SD=4.57, Cronbach’s alpha=.52).

Statistical analysis

We begin by providing a short description of the reported behavior of Facebook users during the fighting. To test who unfriended or unfollowed, we conducted a logistic regression using the independent variables and all control variables mentioned above (the linked function employed was logit). We then supply a description of respondents' answers as to whom they unfriended. Lastly, we clustered the reasons for unfriending (using two-step cluster analysis (for details, see Chiu, Fang, Chen, Wang, & Jeris, 2001)), and then ran a logistic regression to test whether reasons for unfriending are predicted by political orientation. All analyses were conducted using SPSS package 21.

Results

For Israeli users, Facebook was a vibrant political arena during the 50 days of combat in the summer of 2014. 50% of respondents reported being more active on Facebook during the fighting, 37% said that their level of activity remained unchanged, and only 13% reported being less active on the site. Although people reported being more active, the majority (60%) claimed that they did not post anything about the operation (92% of those also reported that they had not posted any political comments in the 12 months prior to the fighting, compared to 73% among the entire sample). Among those who regularly posted content (8% of the entire sample), 15% refrained from posting content about the operation. If posting content was an activity pursued by the minority, why then did respondents report being more active? The answer lies in the other activities afforded by Facebook. As has been documented (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012), Facebook users comment on other people's statuses far more often than they update their own. Likewise with our data, although most people did not write original posts of their own, 57% reported sharing, commenting on or liking other people's posts or comments.

16% of people unfriended or unfollowed a Facebook friend for political reasons during the period of fighting, while a further 19% considered doing so before ultimately deciding not

to (see Figure 1). For almost a third of those who unfriended, this was the first time they had taken such a step. Interestingly, only 3% reported thinking that they themselves had been unfriended, suggesting that this is indeed a one-directional act.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

As stated in the Introduction, our study of political Facebook unfriending centers around three main questions: Who unfriended? Whom? And, why? We now turn to these questions.

Who unfriended?

To test who unfriended we conducted a logistic regression, the results of which are presented in Table 2 ($\chi^2=89.9$, $df=11$, $p<.01$; Cox and Snell $R^2=.10$).⁶ The evidence supports the presented hypotheses. Regarding ideological homophily we found that people who were more ideologically extreme (as per H1, $b=.31$, $s.e=.15$, $p <.05$; see Figure 2) and who felt they were more exposed to cross-cutting views ($b=.17$, $s.e=.08$, $p<.05$) were more likely to unfriend. In addition, unfriending was also more common among those who were less supportive of free speech ($b=-.04$, $s.e=.02$, $p<.10$), and who were more active on Facebook ($b=.35$, $s.e=.098$, $p<.01$) as well as specifically more politically active during the fighting ($b=.35$, $s.e=.08$, $p<.01$). The profile that emerges is of politically engaged yet relatively closed-minded activists.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

We also found that people with more Facebook friends were more likely to unfriend ($b=.00$, $s.e.=0.00$, $p<.01$). As argued above, having more Facebook friends is indicative of a greater number of weak ties. Support is thus found for the claim that people with more weak ties are more likely to unfriend (H4).

Lastly, we ran a multinomial regression to compare those who unfriended ($N=163$),

those who considered unfriending (but did not) (N=197), and those who did not consider it (N=653). The main distinction between the first and second groups was that those who unfriended had more friends than those who had considered doing so ($b=.00$, $se.= 0.0$, $p<.06$). Specifically, for every 10 friends a person had, the likelihood of their actually unfriending (instead of just considering it) rose by 4%. This is at least partly explained by the finding, reported below, that it was mainly weak ties that were broken by the act of unfriending.

Who was unfriended?

When unfriending, people overwhelmingly broke off weak ties, such as people they are not close to (67%) and with whom they have little contact (38%), or whom they have never met outside of Facebook (39%). Few respondents reported unfriending someone they interact with on a regular basis, such as a colleague (12%), a close friend (12%), or a family member (2%). This finding supports H3.

In addition, we found that 73% of respondents reported unfriending Facebook friends whose views differed from their own. These responses were more frequent among those at the political extremes (86%) than those holding more moderate ideological positions (50%). In fact, political extremity was the only significant predictor of unfriending someone who held opposite views ($b=.66$, $se=.22$, $p<.01$; using the same predictors as presented in Table 2). This adds yet more support for the ideology-oriented homophily hypothesis (H2).

Why unfriend?

The two main reasons given for unfriending or unfollowing someone were that they had posted either offensive posts (52%) or content with which the unfriender disagreed (60%). 17% unfriended someone who posted content that might offend other of their Facebook friends, and 7% unfriended someone for arguing with them about the conflict. Interestingly, in contrast to findings reported by Pew Research Center (Rainie & Smith, 2012a), only a small minority reported unfriending due to being flooded with political

information (13%). This finding may have one of two explanations: the extremity of the political context, or the difference in political culture between the US and Israel. Either way, the small number of respondents who selected this option made it hard to test our hypothesis regarding topic-oriented homophily. However, we did find that those who unfriended people because they posted too much about politics held less extreme ideological positions ($b=-.594$, $se=.32$, $p<.05$) and were less politically active on Facebook ($b=-.073$, $se=.044$, $p<.10$; both coefficients obtained using logistic regression, controlling for the variables outlined in Table 2, with the exception of exposure to cross-cutting opinions; $\chi^2=36.2$, $df=11$, $p<.01$; Cox and Snell $R^2=.29$). These findings support the idea of topic homophily (RQ1).

Two-step cluster analysis using SPSS (see Chiu et al., 2001) revealed two distinct types of reasoning (silhouette measure=.60). One group ($N=106$) reported unfriending people who had posted offensive comments (i.e. they were more likely to have unfriended because of content that they found offensive or that they thought might offend other of their Facebook friends). The second group ($N=51$) reported unfriending people with whom they disagreed. Although this distinction was not hypothesized, we wished to further explore whether there were any significant distinctions between the two groups. We once more carried out a logistic regression with all of the abovementioned variables as predictors. Table 3 presents the results of the model ($\chi^2=36.2$, $df=11$, $p<.01$; Cox and Snell $R^2=.29$). As can be seen, the difference between the two groups mostly lies in their political orientation. Those who unfriended friends who had posted content they disagreed with were more ideologically extreme, held right-wing views (both are strong predictors), and reported less support for democratic values (which was a significant predictor yet smaller in magnitude). Those who unfriended friends who had posted material they found offensive had more Facebook friends.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Overall, the data presented here show that acts of disconnectivity were quite common

during the violence between Israel and Hamas in the summer of 2014. Furthermore, our analysis supports the two main explanations for politically-motivated unfriending and unfollowing. In keeping with the principle of homophily, people with stronger political inclinations removed others from their network more frequently. In addition, the friends they removed held opposing political views. The end result of this process was a more homogeneous list of Facebook friends, and, it would seem reasonable to deduce, a more homogenous Facebook News Feed. When people with less interest in politics unfriended people, they tended to do so to minimize the political content in their feed, another finding in support of homophily (this time, topic-oriented). In addition, we also found evidence to support the claim that weak ties were broken more easily: people who had more friends were more likely to disconnect, and the people whom they unfriended did not play a significant role in their life.

Discussion

Research into unfriending is very much in its infancy. This, we suggest, is related to a bias towards connectivity in research of social network sites and digital culture more generally (as also noted by Light, 2014). For the last 50 years or so, electronic networking technologies have been making people more connected, and researchers have paid a great deal of attention to these new forms and patterns of connectivity. However, with the rise of SNSs and their APIs (application programming interfaces), which give researchers (and marketers) access to some of the data they contain, we have seen the emergence of a synergy between the economic interests of commercial SNSs, their APIs, and the research carried out into those SNSs. Thus, while the Facebook API, for instance, enables researchers to learn about who a user's friends are or what pages they have Liked, it does not let us know whom someone has unfriended or unfollowed, or which pages they have unliked recently. In other words, the focus of academic research has been on precisely those practices—of

connectivity—that SNSs also highlight.

Given the state of infancy of unfriending research, it is hard to comment on the quantity of unfriending among Jewish Israeli Facebook users during the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2014. Yet it does appear from this study that Jewish Israelis adopted unfriending as a Facebook practice quite heavily during the summer of 2014. One third of those who unfriended or unfollowed during the time under study had never done so before, which explains the surge of searches for ‘How to block people on Facebook’ that Google’s review of trending searches in Israel in 2014 shows us. For want of a better benchmark, various Pew Research Center publications claim that 18-26% of SNS users have unfriended or unfollowed for reasons to do with political posts (Pew Research Center, 2014; Rainie & Smith, 2012a). Significantly, though, the Pew data refer to users’ *entire history* of SNS use, and they are not Facebook specific (they include blocking comments on YouTube, for instance). In light of this, our finding that one in six respondents unfriended or unfollowed someone on Facebook in a period of only 50 days is indicative of high levels of unfriending, especially given that unfriending (for reasons other than politics) is much *less* common among Israeli Facebook users than among their American counterparts (Madden, 2012). Only further studies of unfriending in relation to clearly demarcated events in other areas of the world will allow us to state whether the unfriending documented here constitutes a large amount. It is our hope that the current study will provide a springboard for such efforts.

Unfriending is a new kind of political gesture that can be conceived of as a practice through which individuals shape their political surroundings at an extremely high level of granularity. Understood this way, unfriending can be seen to be contributing to the formation of echo chambers in two distinct ways. First, when one Facebook user unfriends another, they are filtering out certain views, or muting the person voicing them. In this sense, unfriending and unfollowing are one of the micro-mechanisms by which online echo chambers are

created. Second, unfriending might give EdgeRank—the algorithm used by Facebook in deciding what to present on users’ News Feeds, and with what prominence—a richer set of inputs from which to learn what users prefer to see. In this sense, unfriending might provide fuel for the more efficient functioning of algorithmically-driven filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011). Unfriending, then, is both reflective of, and a contributor to, the homogeneity of online political environments, and, as such, may promote polarization. Of course, without knowing the precise composition of users’ networks, the impact of the ways we tweak our feed (i.e., without knowing the workings of the EdgeRank algorithm), or the impacts of varying amounts of unfriending on the overall network, it is impossible to state precisely the impact of unfriending on political discourse on Facebook, though it would seem very reasonable to assume that there should be some.

Our findings align with this notion in two main ways, both of which have the outcome of ‘cleaning’ one’s feed of disharmonic voices: first, by suggesting both topic- and ideology-oriented homophily; and second, by demonstrating the fragility of weak ties. Unfriending and unfollowing were more characteristic of respondents with more extreme political views, with more Facebook ties, and who were more politically active on Facebook, and they unfriended people who expressed contradictory opinions to theirs. In other words, the people most involved in political debate, and whose own views are reaching relatively greater numbers of other Facebook users, are also the most likely to show intolerance towards other users. If it is commonly argued that greater civic engagement is good for democracy, the findings presented here imply a worrying connection between having strong political views, voicing those views, and silencing competing positions (Mutz, 2006; Sunstein, 2009).

Although, typically, it was the politically extreme and engaged who disconnected others, our data also hint at topic-oriented homophily (the sample size here limits our statistical ability to make this point more forcefully). While this type of homophily might not

promote political polarization, its possible implications for political discourse are alarming nonetheless (Levendusky, 2013; Mutz, 2006). In both types of homophily the end result could be the formation of ‘sphericules’ (Gitlin, 1998), which replace the public sphere. It may be that the process described here only holds true at times when political and national stakes are high, and environmental stresses mean that people’s patience is running low. However, it is exactly at such times when deliberation between the two sides of a debate is most important.

Our findings show that Facebook users unfriended weak ties far more than close friends or family members during the summer’s violence. While this in itself does not directly contradict the argument that greater exposure to weak ties defuses polarization, it does suggest that its application might be limited to calmer times and that it might not hold in extreme political environments. This draws attention to a flaw in the ‘weak ties’ argumentation: even if it is true that our weak ties expose us to a variety of opinions, and that greater SNS use promotes network heterogeneity (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014) and the formation of weak ties, implying that SNSs expand our ‘political horizons’ (Barberá, 2013), if these weak ties are fragile and are broken in the face of political crisis, what good are they? This would seem to suggest a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ approach to the weak ties literature, at least during periods of intense political debate: you are more likely to encounter cross-cutting views if you have more weak ties, but you are also more likely to be less tolerant of them.

In other words, it would seem that precisely the conditions that encourage network heterogeneity are the conditions that nurture disconnective practices. Since people hardly address politics in their everyday Facebook usage (Rainie & Smith, 2012a; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; Yardi & boyd, 2010), the chances of engaging in alteration of opinion are low. However, when a major political event, such as a war, occurs and everybody is talking

politics, political tolerance disappears and weak ties are broken, thus reducing the chances of political deliberation. Furthermore, as debates become ever more heated and uncivil, people's expectations of public deliberation would appear to decline (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014).

This implies that not only should we take political context into account when considering the role played by weak ties in computer-mediated political debate, but also that we should strive for diachronic research. After all, the participants in this study who unfriended Facebook friends during the war thereby created a new political reality for themselves (at least on Facebook). Acknowledging this has the potential to contribute to matters concerning political uses of social media and online discussion. The study raises questions about the impact of unfriending on people's ongoing political use of the platform and the re-accumulation of weak ties. It could be, for instance, that there are patterns to the accumulation and culling of weak ties, and that these patterns might have something to teach us about political discussion. For example, discussing politics with weak ties is a stronger predictor of political participation than talking politics with strong ties (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011), however, when stressing the importance of weak ties for civic engagement their seeming fragility should be taken into account.

This work—much like any research of uncharted territories—calls for further investigation that will address some of its limitations. First, several of our analyses relied on a small sample ($n=163$). This is a result of the fact that we did not specifically target only people who had unfriended others. As information about acts of disconnectivity and dissociation starts to accumulate, future research could potentially study only this segment of users.

Second, we have only limited information about the people who were unfriended, and the information we do have was not gathered directly from them. A more elaborate research program might combine surveys and web-tracking data.

Third, we used a limited set of control variables. We did not ask respondents extensively about their political involvement outside of Facebook, nor did we ask them about interactions with others outside of Facebook or other SNSs. Therefore, we are limited in our ability to identify the affinity between offline and online relationships and political behaviors (Wojcieszak & Price, 2012).

Fourth, because this study is based on survey data, we are exposed to the limitations of this methodology. While participation in the survey was anonymous, some respondents may have felt uncomfortable about admitting to unfriending. If this feeling was more prevalent among centrists than those on the political extremes, it could be that our findings reflect norms regarding unfriending rather than measuring the practice itself. This is the case with all self-reported behaviors in surveys. We hope that in the future Facebook makes unfriending data available to the scientific community. Another limitation of surveys is the necessary trade off between length of survey and response rate. Future research should endeavor to inquire into unfriending and unfollowing as entirely separate behaviors.

Finally, we selected extreme circumstances as a case study. This choice contributes to and expands scholarly knowledge, but at the same time it places limits on the generalizability of our results. For instance, as mentioned above, in some regards the responses in our survey were dramatically different from those of American users. Only with further research we will be able to determine whether this is because of different cultural systems and different norms regarding political engagement on social networks, or whether it is to do with the extreme political context of violent conflict. (Even for a country as embroiled in violence as Israel, the events of the summer of 2014 were extreme.) Our ability to generalize is also harmed by the fact we only asked respondents about Facebook and did not investigate their use of other SNSs. Among Israelis, Facebook is by far the most dominant social network site. However, each SNS has its own idiosyncratic features that may influence how people interact—or

decide to stop interacting—with others. For instance, people's reactions to photos on Instagram (of a violent demonstration or the outcome of a bombing raid, say) may differ from their reactions to a textual report of the same event.

In this paper we have explored the phenomenon of politically-motivated Facebook unfriending, which we conceptualize as a new kind of political gesture that demands both empirical and theoretical attention. Our focus on Facebook unfriending aligns us with a small but growing group of Internet researchers who see value in understanding the dissociative aspects of a technology that is so often studied because of its affordances for connectivity. By focusing more specifically on political unfriending we hope to contribute to key debates surrounding the place of social network sites in politics and the ability (or inability) of weak ties to moderate trends towards polarization.

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Table 1.
Political activity on Facebook before and during the fighting.

	M	SD
During Operation 'Protective Edge' I published posts about the operation	2.6	1.96
In the 12 months prior to Operation 'Protective Edge' I published posts about the political and/or security situation in Israel	2.0	1.44
During Operation 'Protective Edge', I liked, shared and wrote comments to other people's posts about the operation	3.9	2.07
In the 12 months prior to Operation 'Protective Edge', I liked, shared and wrote comments to other people's posts about the operation	2.9	1.70

Table 2.
Predicting political unfriending.

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender	-.07	0.19	.691	0.93
Age	-.02	0.01	.018	0.98
Religiosity	.01	0.12	.939	1.01
Income	.03	0.06	.560	1.03
Level activity on FB during the operation	.35	0.08	.000	1.41
Number of FB friends	.00	0.00	.007	1.00
Political activity on FB	.06	0.02	.000	1.06
Ideological extremity	.31	0.15	.036	1.36
Political leaning	-.11	0.09	.238	0.90
Democratic values	-.04	0.02	.069	0.96
Perceived exposure to cross-cutting opinions	.17	0.08	.036	1.19
Constant	-3.05	0.82	.000	0.05

Note: A logistic regression, Unfriending=1, did not unfriend=0. $\chi^2=89.9$, $df=11$, $p<.01$; Cox and Snell $R^2=.10$. $N=1013$. FB= Facebook.

Table 3.
Predicting cluster membership: reasons for political unfriending.

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender	0.0	0.55	.940	1.04
Age	0.0	0.03	.678	1.01
Religiosity	-1.4	0.42	.001	0.25
Income	-0.1	0.16	.381	0.87
Level of activity on FB during the operation	-0.1	0.27	.783	0.93
Number of friends on FB	0.0	0.00	.020	1.00
Political activity on FB	0.0	0.04	.725	1.02
Ideological extremity	1.0	0.40	.016	2.61
Political leaning	0.4	0.24	.081	1.53
Democratic values	-0.1	0.06	.008	0.86
Perceived exposure to cross-cutting opinions	0.1	0.23	.722	1.08
Constant	2.1	2.45	.391	8.20

Note: A logistic regression Disagreed=1, Took offense=0. $\chi^2=36.2$, $df=11$, $p<.01$; Cox and Snell $R^2=.29$. $N= 157$. FB= Facebook.

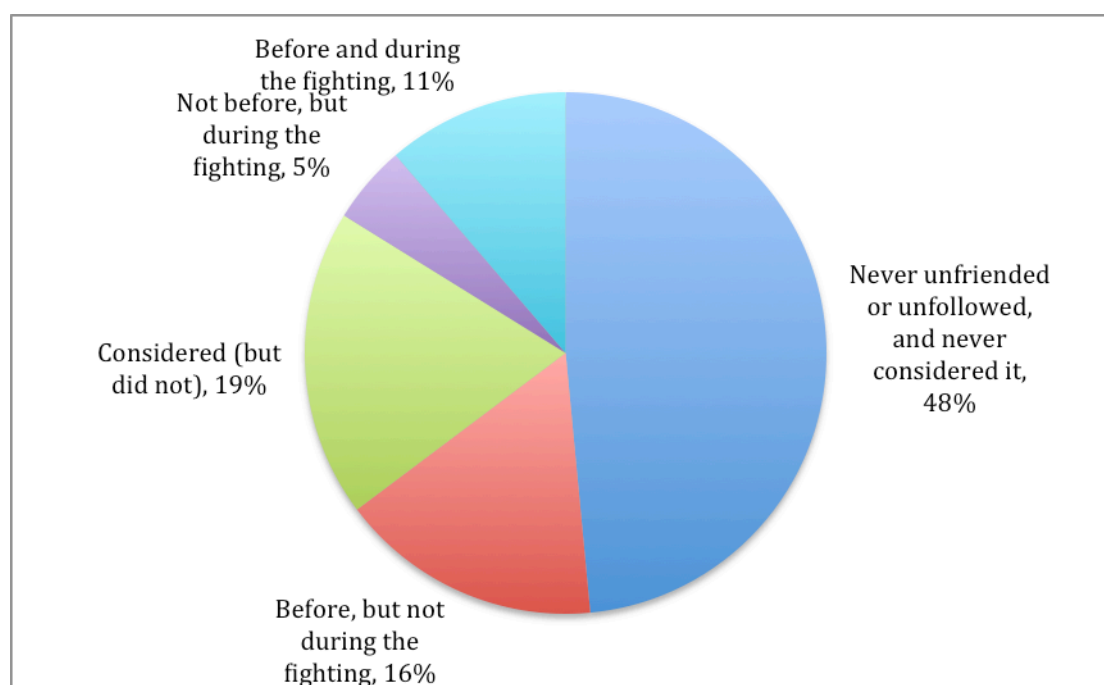


Figure 1. Percentage of people who unfriended/unfollowed before and during the fighting, or thought about unfriending/unfollowing.

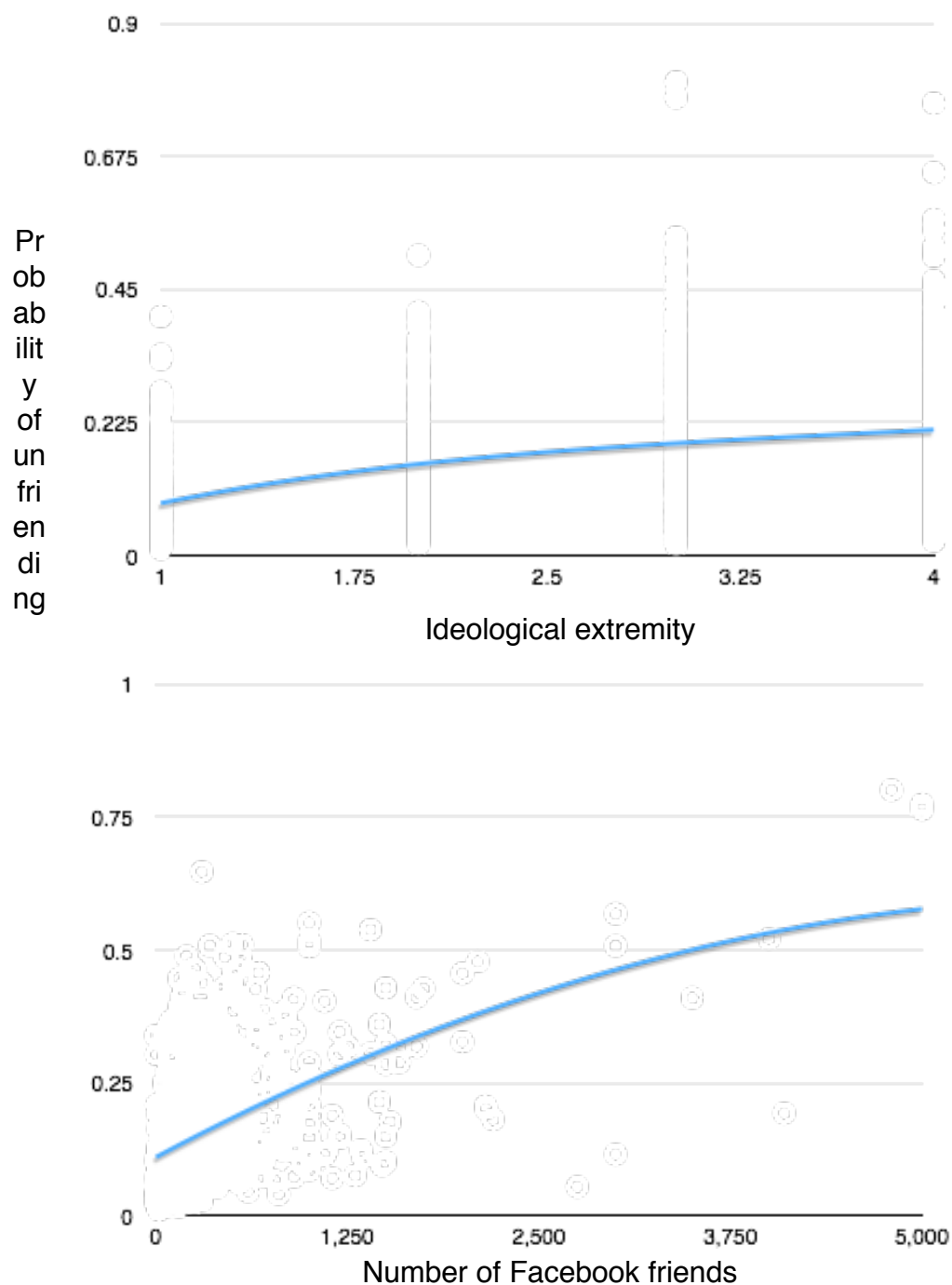


Figure 2: The relationship between number of Facebook friends, level of ideological extremism and the probability of unfriending, based on the results of logistic regression.

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¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-30724845>, accessed 9/2/15.

² <http://net.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=1035380>, accessed 26/10/2014 (in Hebrew).

³ This implies that unfollowing is more readily reversible. Refriending requires issuing a new friend request; refollowing does not.

⁴ <https://www.google.com/trends/topcharts?hl=en&geo=US&date=2014#vm=trendingchart&cid=574b5ffb-200f-4a15-a27e-560e2dba27ab&geo=IL&date=2014&cat=>, accessed 17/12/14 (in Hebrew).

⁵ For this question, and the others that asked about unfriending/unfollowing, we specified that we were referring to Facebook friends and not celebrities or public figures.

⁶ For all tables, see online appendix: <http://www.shiradvir.com/#!appendix-for-publications-/c106w>.