

# StateTube: Anthropological Reflections on Social Media and the Israeli State

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Computers and keyboards are the weapons—Facebook and Twitter are the battlefields. It is there that we fight, each and every day.

—Israel Defense Forces spokesman, New Media Division

Facebook pages...have as much impact as a tank—and sometimes even more.

—Israeli Member of Parliament, Danny Danon (Likud)

Consider, as a point of departure, a set of images that went viral on Israeli social networks in October of 2011. Their occasion was the release of abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, held for five years by Hamas and freed in exchange for over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli custody.<sup>1</sup> Popular Israeli criticism quickly mounted about the ways Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu had mobilized Shalit's release for electoral gain. Some Israelis voiced their disapproval in the language of the "meme"—that is, an image, video, or phrase that circulates virally between social media users "in the form of parody, pastiche, mashup, or other derivative work" (Shifman 2011). The basis of this pastiche was a photograph issued by the Israeli government on the event of Shalit's release, picturing Shalit embracing his father against the background of the smiling Prime Minister

PHOTO PROPERTY OF APF/GETTY IMAGES.



**Figure 1: Gilad Shalit's Release: Origin of the Meme.**

(see Figure 1). Only Netanyahu's smile remained intact in the photo-shopped memes that ensued, while the remaining image was playfully altered in accordance with the authorial vision of its remixer. "Bibi-bombing," as this widespread practice was named (playing alliteratively with the Prime Minister's nick-name), flooded Israeli social networks, Facebook and Flickr in particular. The range of remakes was wide: from key moments in Israeli history to iconic popular cultural events (looking on at the wedding of William and Kate, joining the cast of *The Matrix*, etc.), all overlaid with Netanyahu's cheshire smile (see Figures 2-4).

This meme culture generated little surprise among Israeli social media users. Yet the involvement of the Prime Minister's office in these viral circuits precipitated considerably more commentary. As Israeli newspapers noted, Netanyahu had "post[ed] his own 'Bibi-bomb' on Facebook" within days of the meme's inception—a photoshopped image of the now iconic smile against the background of Netanyahu's recent United Nations



**Figures 2-4: The "Bibi-Bomb" Memes.**

ALL IMAGES CAPTURED FROM HAARETZ.COM. REPRODUCED UNDER EDUCATIONAL FAIR USE GUIDELINES.

address during the controversial Palestinian membership bid. American Jewish bloggers praised the effort as a welcomed shift from the “dour and humorless” tenor of the PM’s office, as a refreshing refusal of the premise that social networking was “conduct unbecoming” of a head of state.<sup>2</sup>

A similar buzz was generated in March of 2011, when Netanyahu became the third world leader to appear on YouTube’s live interview format, “World View” (see Figure 5). The user response was substantial, as thousands of viewers from over 90 countries posted video and text questions and Netanyahu responded in his well-honed American English and flair for conversational address.<sup>3</sup> The substance of his comments was nothing new, including his standard defense of settlement building and celebration of Israel’s multicultural democracy. YouTube, however, constituted the difference—that is, the ways this social media platform altered the structure and performance of his address. Joining Netanyahu in his Jerusalem living room where the event was staged were both the interviewer and a large computer screen on which video questions from YouTube viewers were screened. Most conformed to the platform’s protocols for amateur

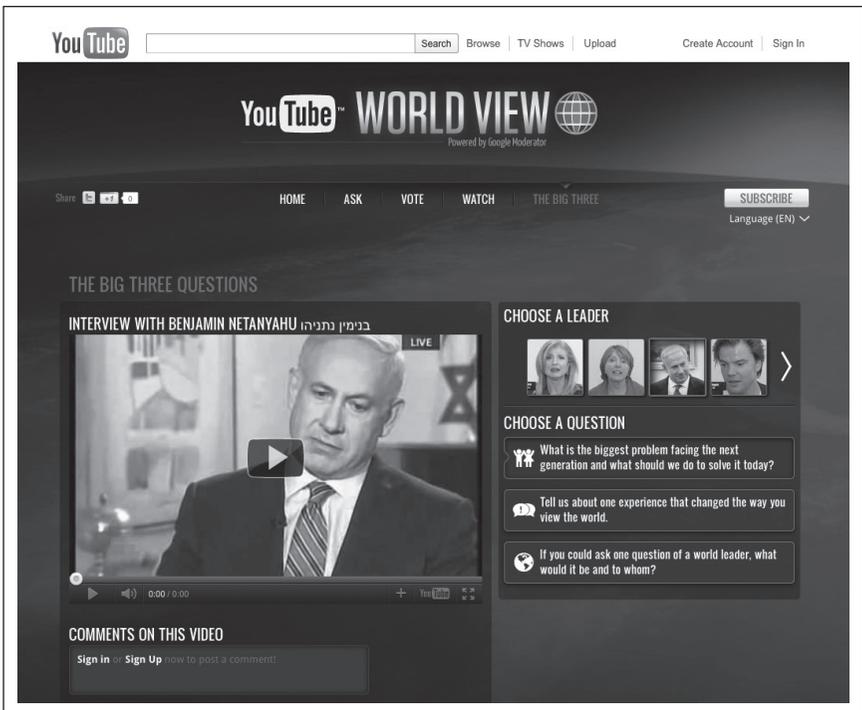


Figure 5: Prime Minister Netanyahu on YouTube.

video production, including poor lighting and shaking cameras. Netanyahu responded in kind, often speaking directly to the screen as he employed the exaggerated informality that is social media's hallmark. The event was hailed as a success by members of the prime minister's staff who praised the Prime Minister's ability to address the international Internet public "without filters" (Ha'aretz 2011).

Within the broader context of Israeli state practices where new media are concerned, these two incidents are by no means anomalous. Rather, over the course of the last few years, numerous Israeli state ministries and institutions have begun employing social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr as tools of state. The hybrid forms that are produced by Israeli state users—a mix of popular new media practices and more traditional modes of statecraft—are by no means unique to the Israeli case. For its part, the Israeli governmental model borrows directly from the kind of "digital diplomacy" practiced in the US White House and Department of State, where government 2.0 has been pioneered (what Secretary Hillary Clinton has also referred to as "21st century statecraft").<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the first fact-finding trip made by the head of the Israeli "Internet and New Media" department in 2010 was to Washington, DC where they met with members of Obama and Clinton's new media teams. Israeli efforts in the sphere of digital diplomacy have grown considerably in recent years. Israeli state budgets for social media work have increased dramatically, as have the number of ministries and state institutions employing these tools to do official work—chiefly disseminating the official line and managing Israel's international reputation, tasks deemed particularly essential during episodes of military confrontation.

All of this is to suggest that the prominence of social media within the so-called "Arab Spring" context confirmed what many Israeli state officials already knew—namely, the political potential and indeed urgency of such technologies and platforms within regional theaters.<sup>5</sup> Yet the example of Israeli state usage of such technologies stands in sharp contrast to the regional case, challenging the media narrative of technological determinism that was frequently marshaled to explain the success of populist uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia—a narrative embraced by CNN and Al Jazeera alike and which echoed accounts of Iran's supposed "Twitter Revolution" in 2009, so dubbed by eager pundits. Many commentators went further, particularly in the early stages of these revolts, to suggest that the digital tools employed by demonstrators and activists were somehow *naturally* suited

to liberatory politics from below—painting a picture of grassroots movements in the Middle East that were organically driven and given shape by Facebook, Twitter, and the mobile technologies that enabled them.<sup>6</sup> This variant of the digital democracy theorem depended on a companion narrative about Middle Eastern states as strictly repressive actors where digital tools were concerned—a narrative that stressed the investment of these states in monitoring, infiltrating, and/or repressing social media as a means of maintaining authoritarian control (Egypt’s Internet blockade in the midst of the popular protests in Cairo was marshaled as the central example of such a state project).

The case of Israeli state usage complicates both poles of this popular narrative about digital media—that is, both the notion of new technologies that organically liberate from below, and of states invested chiefly in their repression from above. Rather, the Israeli state case illuminates the political flexibility of digital tools and platforms, illustrating the highly variable political functions and ends that social media can serve (a corrective most famously associated with the work of Evgeny Morozov in *The Net Delusion* [2011]). For while the Israeli state does employ social media for means of classic counter-insurgency—by means of digital monitoring, surveillance, and the like—numerous state institutions are also positioning themselves as *lateral* social media users in their own right, generating their own user-generating content as they labor to creatively exploit social networking and new technologies in ways that advance state PR and political aims while also abiding by the emerging popular protocols and vocabularies of these platforms. In my interviews with Israeli state officials, they proudly trumpeted their difference from neighboring Arab states where state social media policy was concerned, pointing to their own creative engagement with these tools and platforms as yet another instance of Israeli regional exceptionalism.

This essay provides an anthropological window onto the Israeli state’s recent work in social networking, with a focus on the everyday labor of which it is comprised. The state’s quotidian labor in this domain illustrates what has long been true of states, and long evident to anthropologists—namely, that states are made and sustained through daily practices.<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic research conducted among lower-level officials in Israeli governmental and military institutions, and with the digital documents and social media debates that their labor generates, reveals a state that is slowly and sometimes reluctantly learning to incorporate these

platforms into their official toolbox by means of considerable experimentation, improvisation, and gradual on-the-job training.<sup>8</sup> Despite efforts to coordinate Internet and social media usage across various government branches and ministries (enabled by sizeable state investment), and to foster a culture of social networking fluency, the state learning curve is steep and uneven, and the margin of error is high. On any given day, success is mixed and the subject of considerable scrutiny from civilian social networkers and bloggers. For despite the US precedent where digital statecraft is concerned, the Israeli playbook remains a work in progress. “There are no rules about how to bring the government into Facebook,” I was told by a senior official from the Prime Minister’s office, tasked with heading up its new media efforts. “We have to invent them.” The long-term political effects of the state’s still-experimental engagement with social media remain to be seen—including how such digital projects might impact Israeli relations with neighboring Arab countries, international perceptions of the Israeli regime and its military occupation, and the lives of Palestinians living in its grip.

The politically instrumental nature of Israeli state usage is undeniable; social media is employed for everything from political campaigning to public relations work in times of military engagement. Yet ethnography conducted within state ministries highlights the ways that state users are laboring to adopt the discursive and aesthetic norms of social networking—dimensions of digital usage that can be overlooked when strict political instrumentalism is attributed to the state’s digital investments. When focusing one’s attention on a state *learning digital labor* and corresponding norms of intelligibility, what becomes evident are the ultimately indeterminate political effects of such usage—indeterminacy that runs counter to prevailing wisdom about both state hegemony in general terms, and the supposed supremacy of the Israeli state in particular.

More broadly, at stake in this inquiry is a rethinking of the story we conventionally tell about Israeli state power, both its means and effects—a rethinking made possible by Foucault’s invitation to complicate the default account of repressive state power in favor of power conceptualized in productive terms and studied at the scale of daily practices and technologies. Considered through this lens, social media might be received not merely as a new domain of statecraft, but as a Foucauldian “art of government” in its own right.<sup>9</sup>

## Social Media as Battlefield

In March of 2011, I visited the Israeli Defense Force's (IDF) new media headquarters. Their unassuming office is housed in a nondescript high-rise above a coffee shop, several blocks from Jerusalem's central bus station—a place full of young, uniformed soldiers bent over their desktop computers. I was meeting with the IDF's head of the “new media desk” (since replaced), who worked on a Mac laptop in a windowless corner office. During the course of our interview, she received calls and SMS updates from IDF personnel in the field—some about the aftermath of that day's bombing in West Jerusalem's central bus station (the result of an explosive placed in a suitcase); some about the Qassem rockets being fired from Gaza into southern Israel. Once verified and given security clearance, much of this information would be translated and abbreviated into English-language Tweets (the IDF's followers then numbered some 24,000) and posted to the military's official blog. Breaking news about incoming Qassem rockets interrupts our interview. She calls in her young associate, “Can we tweet this, Tal?” The news came back a minute later. No, the details in the report were unconfirmed. For the IDF, the new media buck stopped with her; after confirming its non-classified status, she decided what should be posted to subscribers.

Like others at the new media headquarters, she was young, in her early 20s having assumed the position a mere four years after her immigration to Israel from the United States. She was the perfect candidate for the job, her superiors told me, as her native English, youth, and digital fluency were deemed crucial to the position. Despite her uniform, there was a casual air about her—with hair in a ponytail, and an unceremonious mode of address. Indeed, this posture of informality is what the IDF has strived to project in their new media work, albeit within limits. This balance between the official and the casual—one that undergirds all Israeli efforts at digital statecraft—is difficult to maintain. For the IDF, it involves the conjoining of the hierarchical and highly regulated work of the army with digital platforms demanding lateral engagement with civilian social media users, often in the idiom of casual intimacy. Senior representatives from the IDF spokesman's office, for whom this tension is a primary source of concern as they advance their new media work, described the challenge to me in this way:

They [social media] are contradictory to the military institution. Any army is a closed organization, and usually it keeps its secrets and

operational details inside. And new media works on the opposite [sic], also the language is different. The military language is very strict—there’s a lot of abbreviations, it has very specific intonations. And the new media is exactly the opposite—a lot of emotions, a lot of questions...Informality. So it’s a bit difficult to teach the military how new media is really an asset, but we’ve been doing it for the past two years.

While she touted the potential of new media as a means of information dissemination, reaching audiences that traditional media cannot, she conceded that it has been difficult persuading high-ranking military officials to embrace this shift, given its departure from conventional military structures, protocols, and modes of public address. The army increasingly employs internal education, chiefly through officer’s courses, to address this challenge. But both considerable IDF skepticism and ignorance has remained, particularly in senior echelons. At times, this ignorance has resulted in embarrassing public missteps. Such was the outcome in the spring of 2011, when senior IDF spokesman Avi Benayahu spoke publicly of military intentions to enlist “little hackers who were born and raised online,” young people whom the IDF would “screen with special care and train...to serve the state.”<sup>10</sup> His comments were immortalized through YouTube capture. But the IDF’s spokesman later clarified their error by email, explaining that Benayahu meant “an army of *bloggers*” (this when I pressed for further details). When I looked for his remarks on YouTube at a later date, they were gone—having been scrubbed, I presumed, in the interest of IDF professionalism.

Belying the prevailing notion of the omniscient Israeli state, the military’s early engagement with social media began almost accidentally (as per the IDF’s own telling)—the result of an experimental YouTube venture undertaken by two young soldiers in the early days of the Israeli incursion into Gaza in 2008-2009. One of these soldiers would be subsequently named the “head” of the IDF “New Media Desk.” The first videos uploaded to YouTube showcased aerial footage of the Israeli assault and video blogs (vlogs) from IDF spokespersons. Ironically, the manifest amateurism of such vlogs articulated closely with YouTube visual protocols governing everyman production and arguably bolstered their popularity. The success of this initiative, with some videos viewed more than 2 million times, resulted in the launch of an IDF informational blog,<sup>11</sup> YouTube

channel, Flickr<sup>12</sup> and Twitter accounts, and formal inauguration of the military's New Media Desk—all in 2009.

The deadly IDF raid on the Freedom Flotilla in May 2010, in which Israeli commandos attacked a humanitarian aid convoy attempting to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, was the next time the Israeli military would use YouTube for a sustained public campaign. Yet the broad circulation of IDF videos in the aftermath of the raid did little to temper the fierce international condemnation of Israeli actions—resulting in a military operation that many Israeli government officials privately described to me as a colossal state failure where PR was concerned, and fueling state interest in savvy social media work. Since the Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009, the IDF spokesman's office has actively courted international bloggers, many of whom would turn to the Israeli military as a regular source of information—particularly urgent, they say, during times of military confrontation. Official IDF briefings and press conferences with bloggers are frequent as are efforts to find “good soldiers” for blogger interviews—an investment in biography echoed by the IDF blog, which increasingly addresses its cyberpublics in the personalized language that social media mandates, including intimate portraits of everyday life in the military (e.g., “A Day in the Life of Captain Z”).<sup>13</sup> Remarkably, as I learned from interviews with a senior spokesman, the IDF plans to embed Israeli officers-cum-bloggers on future military missions.

### **Facebook State**

Israeli government ministries trace their history with social media differently. For them, the social media embrace aligns with Israel's failed military campaign in Lebanon in 2006, resulting in a set of new directives concerning coordination of the media message during times of military crisis.<sup>14</sup> In January 2010, such efforts coalesced into an “Internet and New Media” department housed within the Prime Minister's office and charged with coordinating Internet work across government branches and ministries with the aim of improving “public relations advocacy.” By August 2010, the Prime Minister's office had launched its own YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and Facebook accounts—the latter updated in Hebrew, English, and Arabic.

Consider, for example, the Israeli Foreign Ministry. The Ministry was a pioneer of social media usage within the Israeli government with a web presence that dates to the mid-1990s—a time when almost no state

ministries in Israel were cyber-engaged. I first joined members of their growing new media team (which, at the time of this writing, numbers ten people) in the spring of 2011 to observe their daily work and discuss the challenges of conducting government via social networking. Today, the Ministry works with multiple platforms—Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Facebook (MySpace having been abandoned when the cyberpublic moved elsewhere), and in multiple languages (chiefly English, Hebrew, Russian, Arabic, and Persian). Its social media work is both centralized and distributed. In addition to Ministry pages in multiple languages, every Israeli embassy now has an operating Facebook account, each working with a standard Ministry template, modified to suit local needs (the Israeli embassy in Amman opened its account belatedly, timed to coincide with the Palestinian UN bid).<sup>15</sup> Total Ministry Facebook pages now exceed 100. Several Ministry YouTube channels are active via a pilot program. In the spring of 2011, Ministry officials spoke of plans to launch additional channels in Russian, Spanish, and Chinese. Their Twitter account initially proved challenging, as the handle “Israel” belonged to a Miami “porn peddler” (thus described by the Israeli media) (Shefler 2010). In 2009, the handle was purchased by the Ministry for a sizeable, undisclosed sum.

Facebook has represented the most substantial challenge for the Israeli Foreign Ministry where social media is concerned—just as it has for other state institutions. In March 2011, I spent a morning with the administrator of their Arabic Twitter and Facebook account. At the time, she was the only full-time employee tasked with such efforts, although occasionally aided by native Arabic speakers in the Ministry who would assist when demand was particularly high.<sup>16</sup> The volume of labor was, she confessed, overwhelming—her job complicated considerably by her lack of prior experience with digital technologies. Facebook moderation constituted the bulk of her job, this on a page with some 70,000 “likes” from the Arab Middle East (the number has since risen to nearly 100,000). Posts from any day generated hundreds and sometimes thousands of comments, many of them hostile.<sup>17</sup> The Ministry’s output on both Arabic platforms has been highly varied, ranging from weekly reports about Israeli state aid transfers into the Gaza Strip—a narrative of humanitarianism on which both the IDF and government place considerable emphasis—to videos of Israeli pop stars. In the winter of 2011, a link to the mash-up of Moammar Gadhafi’s public address, his voice auto-tuned by an Israeli amateur producer into a rhythmic rap beat, had generated a particularly high volume of Facebook

commentary, with users expressing their surprise and sometimes rancor that an *Israeli* was responsible for a video that went viral in the Arab World.<sup>18</sup>

The labor of surveying and removing inflammatory rhetoric was perpetual, as this staff member noted with considerable fatigue. Due to budgetary constraints, the “wall” could only be surveyed during working hours and thus something was always missed. In other words, commentary deemed inflammatory could be assured a Facebook life of several hours when posted in the evening, only to be removed in the morning by Foreign Ministry staff—this break in the state’s hold on the rhetorical field being a byproduct of ordinary bureaucratic limitations (“We don’t have the possibility to have people monitor the website 24 hours a day,” one Ministry staff member noted during our interview. “People come to work, they do their job, they go home in the evening, and that’s it.”). In times of political crisis, the byproducts of such limitations—namely, anti-state rhetoric hosted by a state-sponsored platform—fly in the face of state priorities and PR policies. At such moments, those staffing the Facebook page have been chided from senior members of the Ministry staff about the lack of immediate response on blogs and social networks, only to be reminded about the banalities of state bureaucracy, its regulations and budgetary constraints.

This sense of a steep Facebook learning curve was also evident in my conversations with the then head of the Ministry Information and Internet department—his office chiefly tasked with advancing the so-called “Brand Israel” campaign in the digital sphere. His chief job was administering the Ministry’s English-language Facebook account. And again, it was evident that the sheer volume of interactivity was more than he or his small staff could handle. Together, we perused a two week span of Ministry postings and the tens of reader responses that such posts have generated, often in multiple languages. Pointing to a profane comment from one user, I asked, “Shouldn’t you delete that?” The user’s vulgarity housed between such comments as “Bravo to the IDF” and “Muslim initiate and Jews retaliate; nuff said.” Scanning the page, I found the same user one day later, also employing profanity. “Well, yes,” he said. “Let’s block this user.” In this editing session, the comment “I hate Israel” was allowed to stand. In the spring of 2011, the Ministry’s Facebook page revealed little language critical of Israeli policy—such commentary having been, it seemed, deliberately expunged (indeed at times, their traces were evident in the posts of others). Months later, by contrast, Ministry officials would articulate a

different position where public critics were concerned, embracing a more tolerant approach to Facebook dissent (and more on this follows, below).

The Ministry's more orthodox editing strategy, however uneven in practice, can be understood as a response to lessons learned from other state institutions—in particular, the Israeli Government Press Office. They removed their Facebook page a mere two days after its launch in March 2011 following public criticism of its failure to effectively manage “the anti-Israeli propagandists and hate spreaders” whose postings dominated their “wall” (where comments like “Israel operates an entrenched system of racial apartheid” had been rampant, much to the confusion of its loyal subscribers who called for more active monitoring). In the same week, the state scored a social networking victory when Facebook agreed to remove a page entitled “The Third Palestinian Intifada” after pressure from Israel's Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs Ministry, who had charged the page with anti-Israeli incitement. The charge generated considerable popular outrage and concern within Israel. Such outrage was a measure of both national anxiety about the ways that social networking platforms mobilize “anti-Israeli” sentiment and the breadth of Israeli support for state positions favoring strict monitoring-cum-control of social media discourse.

Yet for the Foreign Ministry, the Facebook challenge lay not merely in monitoring incitement nor administering a page without adequate staff. Rather, many officials have raised concerns about the Ministry's defacto blueprint for permissible Facebook content. Indeed, this blueprint was the subject of considerable disagreement. The head of the Information and Internet department was among the detractors, expressing dismay about the wildly varied nature of Ministry posts on any given day—from news of Justin Bieber's Jerusalem visit, to condolences for the Israeli victims of a suicide bombing. The wide range of posted information was both hard to manage and, he proposed, ineffective as a “country branding” strategy. Many Israeli bloggers agreed with this proposition, lampooning the seemingly incoherent logic of Facebook postings as signs of state amateurism in the new media field. Echoing the IDF, this official laid blame on the ill-fit between conventional state practices and those required of new media users, reiterating the “inherent contradiction between officialdom and social media.”

And yet, other Ministry officials argued that the contradiction was being bridged through everyday dialogues in social media space. Even a quick perusal of the personal Facebook pages of some such officials, pages

which bear their name and picture but are relegated to matters of state, broadly conceived, rendered this evident. It can be argued that these pages occasion everyday diplomacy in the form of quotidian social media exchange—exchanges by which officialdom is rendered personal through adherence to Facebook norms of informality and discursive conventions. One senior official, whose personal-cum-state page featured a smiling image with thumbs raised, put it this way in an interview with me:

The Foreign Ministry is an institution. It's like Kafka's castle. It scares you—unless you know your way around. A face with a name, that's something different. If it's a friendly face, which I hope I have, then people feel they can connect. So they don't think—"This is the Foreign Ministry." No, this is a person.

In purely numerical terms, the strategy appeared successful. At the time of our interview, this particular official received numerous state-related queries every month on his personal Facebook page. While most were from the usual suspects—chiefly, American Jews who identify with the Zionist project—he noted a growing number of inquiries from residents of the Arab Middle East. In the spring of 2011, it was a phenomenon about which both the Foreign Ministry and Prime Minister's office proudly boasted: since the revolution in Egypt, they claimed, far greater numbers of Arabs within the greater Middle East were commenting upon and "liking" their Facebook pages. They were no longer afraid of their intelligence services, these officials speculated. Now, they could identify publically with Israel without fear of reprisal. By the fall of 2011, this Ministry official was receiving nearly 100 requests per month from residents of neighboring countries—mainly, requests for Israeli work permits and access to Israeli medical facilities. Some queries were more obscure, like that of the Somali tribe claiming Jewish ancestry who sought permission to emigrate—and using Yiddish expressions, no less. "And they want to meet Israeli women. There are lots of those" (a claim that replays a prominent Israeli trope about the "Arab" desire for "their" women). It need hardly be remarked that such claims bolstered prevailing state discourse about the liberatory potential of Israeli democracy vis-à-vis neighboring countries.

The IDF is also involved in Facebook, an involvement that followed much deliberation at senior levels. On August 14, 2011, the first official IDF page was launched in English and within one day boasted 90,000

followers (the IDF's Arabic-language page, with far fewer followers, would follow shortly thereafter). With its highly interactive logic, this platform has long been considered the military's biggest risk and opportunity where social media is concerned—risk attributed to the ways that the Facebook wall could function as a site of anti-state attacks. The standard Facebook template, with a wall open to public commentary, was deemed unfeasible due to the anticipated barrage from detractors—a lesson learned during the 2008-2009 Gaza incursion, when the IDF's YouTube channel was initially left open for public commentary (closed one day later). Instead, Facebook users are invited to respond to official IDF posts and engage in dialogue with other users, but are advised that “[w]hile this is an open forum, we reserve the right to remove posts that violate our posting guidelines,” namely, those that employ “racial, xenophobic, graphic, derogatory, abusive, obscene or explicit comments” or “defamation of other users.” Nonetheless, even a quick glance reveals numerous “derogatory” texts of a particular political stripe. On any given day, comments such as “Kill everyone in Gaza. No more rockets, simple solution!” or “Filthy Arabs. Bomb gaza into the sea” proliferate—this in response to news of rocket fire from Gaza—while voices critical of Israeli policy in its occupied territories are, by and large, conspicuously absent.<sup>19</sup> As with the Foreign Ministry's account, the traces of selective editing by the IDF's administrators are manifest throughout.

For the IDF, the turn to Facebook has represented a substantial change in everyday military practices within the spokesman's office. In the fall of 2011, IDF officials lauded plans to administer the wall around the clock, noting the need for “specific night shifts” on this platform alone—a change enabled by newly appointed staff. This engagement with Facebook has also required creative manipulation of platform protocols, such that they might articulate with military priorities and messages. The IDF's retooling of the “like” button is a case in point: “Click ‘Like’ if you support the IDF's right to defend the state of Israel from those who attempt to harm Israelis.” Over 1,700 users did.

## **Of Graffiti and Hackivism**

The contours of Israeli digital statecraft looked a bit different in November 2011 when I conducted additional ethnographic research. The initial Israeli shock following the Arab Spring's early months had waned, as had the

optimism of lower level state officials about social media's potential as a bridge to everyday users in the Arab world. In the intervening months, state institutions had come under increased scrutiny for intelligence gathering via social media—episodes of Palestinian activism and solidarity actions which had been conducted and monitored via digital platforms.<sup>20</sup> Activists decried new media bully tactics, while the state publically defended its policies in the language of open access: “They announced the operation on websites and on Facebook,” officials from the Foreign Ministry noted to me in an interview. “We did not send spies to steal information from their Watergate, as it were. No, it was just public information.”<sup>21</sup>

In the last year, within branches of both the government and military, additional personnel have been added to respective new media teams, enabled by a greater allocation of state funds for such purposes. In tandem, one sees an increasing number of platforms and pages designated for state usage, a growing volume of social-media content produced by state bodies, and the more widespread social media savvy among state personnel—the latter enabled by regular educational sessions for state employees, covering everything from “What is Facebook?” to the informal norms governing social media engagement. In the fall of 2011, the IDF boasted of four officials tweeting in the army's name. Increasingly aware of the time-sensitive nature of social media content, the new media team was preparing Twitter content in advance of need—formulating, for example, tweets that might be used during periods of military engagement in the occupied territories (such as stats on IDF's history of humanitarian intervention among Palestinian populations), material intended to advance the central PR message and deflate public critique. The increasing usage of these digital tools and platforms by state institutions, officials, and employees was generating new kinds of questions where state policy was concerned. What are the terms of appropriate Facebook conduct for state officials? Does a Facebook posting on one's personal page constitute public speech? And if so, must all digital content, however personal in nature, be in compliance with state policy governing public speech? These and other questions were being raised before answers could be generated—or more precisely, well in advance of any codified policy on the matter. In the words of a Foreign Ministry official, “It's being defined as we go.”

The state's approach to the Facebook wall had also changed considerably in the intervening months. Both the Foreign Ministry and IDF now employed the metaphor of “graffiti” to articulate this new conception—an

articulation which, in literalizing a Facebook “wall” as a wall, allowed for more variability in the discursive contours of user responses.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while both new media teams still strived to delete “abusive language,” they now articulated a policy of allowing “criticism” to stand<sup>23</sup>—a new conceptualization that marked a substantial shift from the early days of Israeli usage, when state pages were roundly decried by Facebook “friends” at moments when political slander was left unchecked. Yet ethnographic research revealed considerable discrepancies where the line between “abuse” and “criticism” was concerned—this being a highly subjective assessment which depended on the moderator in question. And in practice, the IDF’s touted policy of monitoring its wall around the clock for “abusive commentary” was belied by the everyday actions of its new media team, for whom the Facebook account was deemed a relatively low priority; as such, “abusive language” often went unchecked.

Within the shabby Jerusalem offices of the IDF’s new media team, the military occupation of Palestinian territories is discussed in highly circumscribed terms. The term “occupation” itself is never employed, while the Israeli military presence in the Palestinian territories is only invoked in ways that serve the army’s larger PR project. Facebook posts pay tribute to those serving in the nation’s armed forces (“The final challenge of a paratrooper in training”), publicize threats mounted against the state by Israel’s foes, and defend military policy in the language of deterrence, necessity, and humanitarian engagement. The IDF’s twitter’s agenda focuses on responding to and correcting fellow users who make claims in the state’s name—including occasional direct engagement with Palestinian activists who direct questions and accusations to the IDF’s spokesman on this platform. Within an Israeli state social media landscape orchestrated to deflect attention from Israeli repressive policy and practice in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, these exchanges have the potential to bring the military occupation into sharp relief.

In the fall of 2011, my final interview with members of the IDF new media team was suddenly interrupted by voices from the hallway. It seemed that the IDF websites were down. Rumors flew that *Anonymous*, the international hackivist organization, had taken responsibility.<sup>24</sup> Some in the office questioned the attribution. The timing didn’t make much sense, they mused. The actions of these hackers were usually precipitated by very recent political events, but the last naval convoy to the Gaza Strip (Flotilla) was last week. Didn’t they usually work faster? Some ran to their

computers to check the websites of other state institutions. “What about the Foreign Ministry? Or the *Shabak* (internal secret services)?” “Down!” As were all security sites, it seemed, including those of the *Mossad* (covert intelligence services) and several government ministries. Some got on their cellphones to make calls to relevant government parties. One senior member of the team, his eyes on Anonymous’ YouTube channel, was chided for an amused response: “I’m not *mabsut* [happy, Arabic slang] but it’s funny. [He laughs] Listen, even the *Shabak* fell. Did you see the video?” That night on the evening news, Israeli television showed clips from the Anonymous video uploaded to YouTube, claiming responsibility for the attack—a response, said the computer generated voice, to Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip. The following day, the Israeli government employed its Twitter platforms to deny the attribution: “All of the Israeli government websites which were down yesterday are now back up. Once again—it wasn’t a cyber attack but a server glitch” (Schwartz 2011).

### **The Vernacular State**

What does this research tell us about the Israeli state? What has become clear in my interviews with both IDF and other state officials is the nascent and sometimes improvisational state of the social media project at the state level—a fact that, interestingly, runs contrary to both the advanced state of the Israeli high-tech sector, with its much-touted innovation fed by the military, but also the high levels of Internet and cellular technology penetration within the Israeli population. In the new media field, one witnesses a varied population of lower-level state officials who are struggling, to varying degrees, to understand the salience of these new technologies and incorporate them into the existing structures of statecraft—PR work in particular. In part, the challenge is an offshoot of the “disconnect” articulated so frequently in my conversations with state officials in both military and government contexts; that is, the notion of a manifest gap between social media and the state, as traditionally configured and organized. This isn’t what armies conventionally do, I was repeatedly told by IDF officials, as social media platforms, and required modes of populist engagement, are grossly at odds with the highly formalized and regulated ways in which armies operate. The same story was told by officials in the Foreign Ministry, who spoke of the “inherent contradiction between officialdom and social media”—a contradiction evident from even a passing glimpse at the state’s

various Facebook initiatives. For even as the IDF labors speak in a language that will be intelligible to a general public, largely abandoning the technicalities and formalities that are typically employed by an army, it concurrently attempts to assert control over the interactive field—a challenge exacerbated by the lack of adequate staffing. As officials navigate this divide, errors frequently ensue, sometimes with comic results (among them, the IDF spokesman’s public confusion of bloggers and hackers); such errors suggest the scale and depth of state adjustment to a technological field replete with its own norms and nomenclature, much of it unfamiliar.

As such, the turn to social media demonstrates an anthropological proposition that has now been elevated to the status of a truism: namely, that states are composed of their daily practices, made by the quotidian bundles of acts, deeds, and actors that do not combine neatly in the ways that our singular articulation of “*the state*” would suggest. To say this differently, the case yet again demystifies the remarkably recalcitrant fiction of the state as a monolithic entity, singular, an “it”—a proposition that Michael Taussig (1992) has termed “state fetishism,” and that Akhil Gupta (1995) has spoken of as the “reification inherent in unitary descriptions of ‘the state.’”<sup>25</sup> The story of the Israeli state’s adoption of social media challenges this account—a challenge manifest when one follows lower level state actors as they riffle through their Facebook accounts, deleting obscenities on the wall or acknowledging their failure to catch others; when deliberating uncertainly over the public-ness of Facebook; when caught unaware in the face of a cyber-attack done in the name of the very political reality (military occupation) that these digital tools seek to obscure.

Here, another myth about the Israeli state is upended—a myth that couples popular truisms about “the state” as a monolith with popular stories about *this* state in particular. In the Israeli case, the fiction of the monolith is often bolstered—arguably, on both the political right and left—by a narrative of Israeli omnipotence, variously configured as defensible and righteous by those on the right, or of a repressive colonial variety by those on the left. The critique of Israel’s ongoing occupation often harnesses the image of a univocally militaristic state—one which makes no errors where its own military blueprint is concerned, with all acts read as calculated ones. Within the logic of this critique, an accounting for the complexity of the state form is thought to function as (to borrow from Ann Stoler in a very different context) a “distraction...from the ‘realpolitik’ of [the colonial apparatus], its underlying agenda, and its true plot” (Stoler 2004:6).

My study of the state's engagement with social media is an attempt to trouble such simplified renderings. This is not to disavow the state's repressive militarism; indeed, as I have outlined in detail elsewhere, state institutions are currently laboring to harness new media to serve the military occupation.<sup>26</sup> Instead, it is to propose a more complex rendering of the state form that can accommodate the micropractices of power evident in this ethnography—practices that belie the fiction of the monolith and demand a more qualified account of state supremacy. For the state's turn to the digital field is anything but sovereign: rather it is awkward, filled with errors and miscalculations that evidence not merely the lack of omnipotence, but also, in many instances, a basic lack of digital proficiency. Consider, for example, the case of the inexperienced state cameraman who photographed (what the state termed) "weapons" discovered on-board the naval aid convoys sent to break the Gaza siege in 2010. These images became the subject of heated suspicion among anti-occupation activists, who noticed dubious time-stamps on the photographs uploaded to the Foreign Ministry's Flickr account, and charged the state with doctoring the digital evidence (Kuntsman and Stein 2011). The story that emerged online was conspiratorial—of a sovereign state seeking to cover its tracks where issues of Palestine and human rights were concerned. Yet Ministry officials gloss the event differently—describing the inexperienced cameraman who simply programmed the camera incorrectly. "I noticed the error," a Foreign Ministry spokesman told me, "and changed the time-stamp after the fact." And here digital suspicion ensued.

Or consider again the matter of the Ministry's everyday bureaucratic constraints—its inability to monitor its web and social media platforms after working hours. What this produces, particularly where social media is concerned, is discursive excess—governed by temporal-cum-bureaucratic logics. That is, after working hours and on weekends, one can depend upon the Ministry's Arabic Facebook page to host anti-state rancor of varying kinds, to varying degrees, via multiple media (text, image, video). In these hours, the political fabric and arguably the effects of the page thus change, in a manifest abandonment of the laudatory pro-state tributes for which the page was meant. Social media activists tend to see only ideologically-constrained orchestration of information where Israel's new media output is concerned. Yet this after-hours excess is an instance in which the daily constraints of bureaucracy draw attention to the inadequacies of such logics of ideological determinism. After 5:00 pm and on

weekends, the limits of everyday statecraft becomes dramatically, and sometimes quite provocatively, manifest.

I have proposed that the state's shift to digital platforms illustrates what has long been true of states, and long evident to anthropologists—namely, that they are made and sustained through daily practices. But it also suggests something more—that states are also transformed through such technological shifts and attendant practices. The status of voice is but one instance of this transformation. The issue can be articulated as a question: namely, how does the state adjust its language, its idiom, and mode of address when generating social media output? What does this do to what might be termed “state talk”? And what about all the peripheral output of which these popular platforms are comprised—the image of somebody's cat, the pictures from a kid's birthday party, the auto-tuned video mash-ups? They are here, too—and cohabit, often awkwardly, with the more official language we expect from state officials, particularly so when these same officials employ semi-personal Facebook pages to conduct state work. Extant state hierarchies and formal structures notwithstanding, the state must alter its mode of engagement and tenor of address on these platforms in order to be heard by the publics they seek to reach, in order to appear a viable player in these digital worlds. Netanyahu's YouTube interview is a case in point—an instance in which, it could be argued, the aesthetics of amateurism which dominated the video-questions posed by everyday users rebounded onto the Prime Minister himself, conferring on him a kind of authenticity within this platform for user-generated content. What is at work in all these instances is what might be termed “digital vernacularization”—a highly strategic state endeavor to open new PR channels. While a state culture of informality has long been an Israeli hallmark, the move to social media marks a new stage in this culture's development, even if not always well executed, believable, or impervious to politically-minded attack (as per the Anonymous hack).<sup>27</sup> State work on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube employs a new set of rhetorics, modes of address, and aesthetics that endeavor to vernacularize or personalize the state through social media platforms, lending it a new kind of every-man valence—this being a particularly important project, officials argue, in times of unpopular military interventions. At times, digital vernacularization yields manifestly positive results; the IDF's YouTube initiative during the 2008-2009 Gaza War was a case in point (recall the massive audiences

their videos reached). Yet arguably, digital vernacularization also carries a set of risks where the State's PR message is concerned—risks associated with greater state involvement in a digital field saturated with anti-occupation activists who have far greater digital proficiency. Within this digital field, home of the meme and the mashup, the outcomes of state generated content are neither certain nor static.

While the state's blueprints for the social media future are currently being imagined by officials in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the political effects of this project are far from certain. What will digital statecraft mean for Israel's relations with neighboring Arab states? How might it impact the everyday functioning of the Israeli military occupation and the everyday lives of Palestinians living under its thumb? For even as events in Egypt and Tunisia concretized state investment in social media as an information platform, and also as a tool for counter-insurgency, these revolutions raised other political specters as well. "We cannot but be impressed," IDF spokesman Avi Benayahu noted recently in relation to current events in the Arab World, "at how Western technology harms regimes...one cell phone camera can harm a regime more than any intelligence operation can" (Fyler 2011). The fact that social media are concurrently employed by anti-occupation activists, Jewish and Palestinian, on both sides of the Green Line separating Israel proper from its occupied territories, is something that state officials interviewed for this article did not wish to address—and herein lie the risks. When viewed with the Arab Spring in mind, these countervailing digital trends raise the possibility of a very different digital future in Israel—far from that imagined in the IDF's new media offices. ■

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Hamas is the Palestinian political party that controls that Gaza Strip.

<sup>2</sup>For example, see the "Jewlicious" blog (Jewlicious 2011).

<sup>3</sup>These 90 countries represented a "World View" record—as noted in the introduction to the interview.

<sup>4</sup>See Lichtenstein 2010. For an elaboration on US Department of State policies, see Hillary Clinton's address on "Internet Freedom," February 2011. Available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156619.htm>. For a critique of US Department of State policies and practices where social media are concerned, see Morozov 2011.

<sup>5</sup>For onlookers in Israel, the so-called “Arab Spring” was received with a mixture of apprehension and abject terror. In the first few days, state operatives were instructed to say nothing about the unfolding events, lest these events be pinned on the Israeli state (so said one of my state informants). When official state responses were finally sanctioned, they were mixed. Many feared the fall of Mubarak; as days passed, with a sense of the inevitability of the tide of revolution, Netanyahu and others spoke of the promises that a democratic Arab world would bring.

<sup>6</sup>In time, correctives to both accounts would circulate, as the media became more attuned to the complex socio-economic and political factors that enabled these popular revolutions—factors that rendered “technological determinism” inadequate as explanation.

<sup>7</sup>Over the course of the last two decades, numerous anthropologists have turned their attention to everyday state practices, producing a sizable literature in this area. See, for example, Sharma and Gupta 2006.

<sup>8</sup>This article is based on two periods of short-term ethnography conducted in March and October, 2011.

<sup>9</sup>Mitchell Dean (1999:18) defines the “art of government” this way: “To refer to the art of government is to suggest that governing is an activity which requires craft, imagination, shrewd fashioning, the use of practical skills and tactical know how, the employment of intuition, and so on.”

<sup>10</sup>See Fyler 2011.

<sup>11</sup>The blog was launched on January 1, 2009—in the early days of the Israeli Gaza incursion. Available at <http://menorahblog.typepad.com/menorah/2009/01/idf-launches-blog.html>.

<sup>12</sup>Available at <http://idfspokesperson.com/2010/10/27/idf-opens-official-flickr-account-27-oct-2010/>.

<sup>13</sup>A transcript of a 2009 “blogger press conference” with the IDF spokesman is available at <http://muqata.blogspot.com/2009/11/idf-spokesman-blogger-press-conference.html>.

<sup>14</sup>These efforts were centralized in a new body called the National Information Directorate. For more discussion of this history, see Kuntsman and Stein 2010.

<sup>15</sup>This page was opened in September 2011 and has been largely inactive since. The upbeat, apolitical tone of infrequent embassy posts is belied by the anti-Israel rhetoric that appears on its “wall”: “What are the hottest places in Aqaba? We’ll be happy to get to know the best coffee shops, restaurants, markets and shopping centers and any other recommendation that comes to your mind! We look forward to reading your comments and ideas! Thank you, Embassy of Israel, Jordan.” See <http://www.facebook.com/IsraeliinJordan?sk=wall>.

<sup>16</sup>In October of 2011, the Ministry was beginning to train a second person for this job.

<sup>17</sup>Recent press interviews with the Foreign Ministry put the number in the low thousands. See Tsoref 2011.

<sup>18</sup>For more on this auto-tuned remix, see Kershner 2011.

<sup>19</sup>Comments from a post on August 25, 2011. Available at <http://www.facebook.com/idfonline?sk=wall>.

<sup>20</sup>In part, the State’s social media vigilance was a response to their missteps on *Nakba* day, May 15, 2011—the day Palestinians commemorate the 1948 dispossession. Massive transnational Palestinian protests erupted, resulting in a breaching of Israel’s northern border by activists from Syria; at least 13 activists were killed by Israeli fire. Critics, both Israeli and international, decried Israel’s failure to read the proverbial writing on the Facebook walls, social media being the key locus of Palestinian organizing, the lesson learned from the Arab Spring. Subsequent hearings in the Knesset on the subject of public diplomacy stressed the need for savvy social media engagement by the state, particularly during times of military crisis or offensive engagement. In the words of Likud Chairman Danny Danon, “Facebook pages and interviews in Arabic are worth as much and have as much impact as a tank—and sometimes even more” (Stoil 2011).

<sup>21</sup>The State was under particular scrutiny for its response to the “Welcome to Palestine” solidarity actions of April 2012 in which hundreds of international activists planned flights into Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion airport as a means of drawing attention to defacto Israeli policies where pro-Palestinian activists are concerned—namely, state efforts to block activists’ entry into Israel. The action was planned primarily on unrestricted Facebook pages. In response, the Foreign Ministry centralized its intelligence work on social media, generating airline blacklists and on-site detentions in the airports involved.

<sup>22</sup>This metaphor is becoming increasingly prevalent as a way to articulate the discursive space of the Facebook wall. See, for example, <http://stickyjesus.com/2012/01/what-christian-parents-need-to-know-about-facebook/>.

<sup>23</sup>A senior representative from the Foreign Ministry delineated the categories this way in an interview with me: "We leave all the criticism, but when they use abusive language, like, 'You're all sons of pigs or monkeys or so on,' there's no point in leaving that on the wall. If it's, 'You are occupying Palestine and you need to leave now,' OK, we'll leave that. Sometimes we will respond, sometimes not, but that's OK. When it's, 'You're a bunch of murders and god will send you all to hell,' then no."

<sup>24</sup>For sustained ethnographic work on Anonymous, see Coleman 2010.

<sup>25</sup>As Taussig (1992:111) has proposed, "[t]o look at State fetishism, we need to look at...the peculiar sacred and erotic attraction, even thralldom, combined with disgust, which the State holds for its subjects."

<sup>26</sup>See Kuntsman and Stein 2010.

<sup>27</sup>On the legacy of state informality, see Meyers 2009.

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**Foreign language translations:**

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Mahshevot Antropologiot al Tikshoret ha-Hevratit ve Medinat Yisrael

国家视频：关于社交媒体与以色列国家机制的人类学反思

ГосТуб: Антропологические записки о социальных медиа и израильским государством

StateTube: Reflexões Antropológicas sobre Mídia e o Estado do Israel

انبوب الدولة: تأملات انثروبولوجية في الاعلام الاجتماعي في دولة إسرائيل