

מדיה חברתיים ניידים כפלטפורמות בהתאגדויות עובדים

Mobile Social Media as Platforms in Workers' Unionization

מגישה:

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המאמר נכתב במסגרת עבודת הדוקטורט בחוג לתקשורת, אוניברסיטת חיפה

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תקציר

המחקר בוחן את השימוש במדיה חברתיים ניידים כפלטפורמות במאמצי התאגדויות העובדים בין השנים 2012-2014 בחברות התקשורת הסלולרית בישראל: פלאפון, סלקום ופרטנר. המחקר מאמץ גישה סוציו-מטריאלית כדי ללמוד על הדרכים בהן מינפו המתאגדים מדיה חברתיים (פייסבוק וווטסאפ) ומכשירים ניידים (סמרטפון) במהלך השלב המכריע של 'התאגדות ראשונית' – המאבק לצרף לפחות שליש מהעובדים כחברים בהתאגדות, כנדרש לכינונו של ארגון עובדים יציג בישראל.

הניתוח הינו חלק ממחקר רחב יותר, הבוחן את שיח ההתאגדות העכשווי, המבוסס על 582 פוסטים (כולל תגובות ושיתופים) שהתפרסמו בעמודי פייסבוק ששימשו את העובדים (התומכים בהתאגדות והמתנגדים לה) ועל ראיונות עם 10 פעילים בהתאגדויות הנ"ל. ממצאיו חושפים את הדרכים השונות בהן השתמשו המתאגדים במדיה חברתיים ניידים במטרה לעודד את העובדים לחתום על טפסי חברות בהתאגדות, לשכנעם לא לבטל את הצטרפותם, ולהאיץ בהם להשתתף בתקשורת המקוונת כמו גם בפעילויות בשטח כגון כנסים, הפגנות ושביתות.

המתאגדים מינפו את הנכחות והנכדיות של מדיה חברתיים ניידים לגיוס העובדים ולהשגת הכרה על ידי ההנהלה. זאת תוך מאמץ מתמשך לתחזוקת נוכחות ותעבורת השתתפות גבוהה לאורך זמן באמצעות מגוון פרקטיקות ייצור ועריכה. הניתוח מאיר את המתחים הנוצרים משימוש בטכנולוגיות נאו-ליברליות, המקדמות אינדיבידואליזם ומיתוג עצמי, בתהליך שמטרתו הגברת סולידריות וגיבוש קולם הקולקטיבי של העובדים למול ההנהלה. שימוש אשר סייע אמנם למאמצי ההתאגדות, אך בה בעת הציב אתגרים לוגיסטיים וערכיים.

Introduction

Contemporary social movements make strategic use of social media when organizing extended grassroots efforts of social protests, relying in particular on their mobile capabilities (e.g. Costanza-Chock, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Monterde & Postill, 2014; Postill, 2014; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This study examines a bottom-up struggle of organizational resistance (Putnam, Grant, Michelson, & Cutcher, 2005): it analyzes how workers utilize mobile social media in mobilizing labor unionization.

Half a century ago, Hirschman (Hirschman, 1970) theorized that in a state of dissatisfaction, members of an organization may choose to either *exit* – leave the organization – or *voice* – stay and express concerns in order to mobilize change within the organization. In this model, *loyalty* – continued trust in and support of the organization – may explain or predict the preference to respond to hardship with voice rather than exit. Hirschman's model informs Freeman & Medoff's (1984) classic study "what do unions do?" in which they analyze unions as the workers' collective voice vis-a-vis the management. The metaphoric use of "voice" has acquired more concrete shape in the decades to follow: By the turn of the millennium, Diamond & Freeman (2002, p. 583) predicted that unions will use the internet to "bridge the gap between individualistic workers and collective voice and action." Indeed, recent work (e.g. Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015) suggests that unions are expanding their use of social media and mobile devices in this direction. Nevertheless, one of the key obstacles to workers' unionization in neoliberal times, especially in such decentralized organizations, is the lack of solidarity between workers (Harvey, 2007; Rodino-Colocino, 2007).

Social media networks and mobile devices enable bottom-up discourse as part of "the everyday practices of ordinary people" (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011, p. 360) such as workers. In studying unionization efforts, I am interested less in cases when workers use the internet to vent their individual workplace problems, often anonymously (Richards, 2008) and

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more, in cases where workers cooperate online overtly (Putnam et al., 2005) to change their collective situation. An early example of such collective effort can be found in the way RadioShack workers used the alternative website RadioShackSucks.com to promote a class action suit against the company for avoiding overtime payment (Gossett & Kilker, 2006).

The study adopts a *sociomaterial* approach (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) that views the *social* and *material* as separate yet imbricated, agencies (Leonardi, 2012). In this spirit it explores how workers leverage the affordances (Earl & Kimport, 2011) of *visibility* (Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, & Stohl, 2016; Treem & Leonardi, 2012) and *portability* (Schrock, 2015) of mobile social media across organizational temporal and spatial boundaries. It studies the practical, ideological, and structural, tensions which workers face when utilizing these technologies within the organization for unionizing; it examines how the neoliberal market logic (Marwick, 2013) of these platforms (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2016) intermediates workers' collective voice and shapes their individual conversational "participant structures" (Gershon, 2014).

Research Questions

Viewing the organizational communicative practice of unionization as a sociomaterial process of organizing, which involves the leveraging of *visibility* and *portability* as the root affordances of mobile social media, this study asks: How did union activists approach and use mobile social media during their unionization efforts? How did they leverage the visibility and portability root affordances of mobile social media to create and express their collective voice? What are the tensions that arise from utilizing these platforms in an organizational setting? Finally, what are the challenges and ironies of using these arguably neoliberal technologies for enhancing unionization struggles?

The Case Study

In 2012, only 25% of Israeli salaried workers were union members. This figure indicated a continued decline in union density since its peak in the 1980s, when 80% of the Israeli labor force was unionized (Cohen, Haberfeld, Kristal, & Mundlak, 2007). The wave of social justice protests in the Summer of 2011 responding to decades of neoliberalization and a hollowing out of the middle class (Ram & Filc, 2017) involved a demand for more equal distribution of capital between employers and workers. This provided the backdrop for a new wave of unionization, mainly in the business sector, led by workers employed by prosperous communication and technology companies. Their union leaders were working in professional-technical occupations, positioned in intermediate levels within the organization with some years of seniority (Ozana, 2015; Swirski, Konor-Atias, Dagan-Buzaglo, & Lazar-Shoef, 2015).

This study focuses on the unionization efforts in the three major mobile telephony companies in Israel – Pelephone (founded 1986) Cellcom (1994) and Partner (1997) – which employ a few thousand workers, un-unionized until recently. The significance of communication technologies to these recent unionization efforts was given recognition and legal protections in a landmark decision (Bior, 2013; Ozana, 2015) of Israel's National Labor Court ruling in the case of The Histadrut workers trade union vs. the mobile telephony company Pelephone (2013). The court ruling emphasized the importance of providing intra-organizational online networks (such as email and intranet) as well as extra-organizational media (such as text messages via mobile phones) particularly during the sensitive phase of "initial unionization".¹

Method

This study focuses on the initial unionization phase at Pelephone (August 29th, 2012 – January 6th, 2013), Cellcom (April 4th, 2013 – July 2nd, 2013) and Partner (February 25th, 2014

¹ The effort to enroll at least one third of the company's workforce as union members, which is the threshold to establishing a representative union as required by the Israeli law.

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– September 8th, 2014). For the purpose of this study, four unionization-related Facebook pages were identified: three which were opened by the union activists in Pelephone², Cellcom³ and Partner⁴, and one anti-union Facebook page, opened by opponents of the unionization effort in Partner, named Real Partners⁵. To learn how workers approached and utilized mobile social media during unionization efforts, 582 text units (each unit including the original post, comments, graphics, documents, internet links, audio, and video files) were sampled and analyzed as a multimodal phenomenon (van Leeuwen & Kress, 2011) with attention to metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005). In addition, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders and activists who were involved in the unionization social media communication. They provided retrospective personal insights about their motivations, considerations, decisions, and practices during the unionization efforts.

Analysis

Some union organizers believed at first that unionization would be effortless: "I thought to myself: in one day we can recruit all the workers to the union... We will send a phone text message with a link to the online union membership form... and why not get all five thousand workers to sign in? One hundred percent in two hours" (in6)⁶

Utilizing mobile social media for workers' initial unionization is a distinct form of bottom-up organizational communicative practice. Mobile social media are structurally separate yet discursively intertwined with centralized and controlled organizational networks, such as Enterprise Social Media. Hence, they enable personal expression and self-organization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Contrary to the informants' prior expectations, union activists leveraged mobile social media for unionization in conjunction with personal Facebook and

² <https://he-il.facebook.com/hitagdut.pele>

³ <https://he-il.facebook.com/vahadcellcom>

⁴ <https://he-il.facebook.com/partner.hitagdut>

⁵ <https://heil.facebook.com/pages/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%98%D7%A0%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9D/196728320496148>

⁶ Informants are numbered (in1, in2...). Informants in group interview meetings are numbered (in.1.1, in1.2...).

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WhatsApp accounts, as well as face to face and telephone conversations, encouraging workers to sign in, convincing them not to withdraw their membership, urging them to participate in mobile social media communication as well as in offline activities such as assemblies, demonstrations, and strikes.

The analysis shows that union activists leveraged the visibility and portability affordances of mobile social media to achieve and maintain three key objectives: 1. Establishing *autonomy* in communication – creating distribution lists and social networks for ongoing conversation with different audiences; 2. Gaining *commitment* of workers – enhancing internal and external solidarity through union membership and social media participation; and, 3. Obtaining *recognition* by management – sustaining social media traffic and persistence through various production and editorial practices. (see table 1 for the theoretical framework).

Conclusion

This study reveals that *autonomy*, *commitment*, and *recognition* are key objectives in the bottom-up organizational communicative practice of creating and expressing workers' collective voice. Compared with other public extended grassroots social protests, in the organizational setting these key objectives are more accurately measurable because the total number of organizational members is known to all parties in the struggle. Therefore, I propose that figures such as the amounts of contacts in distribution lists, signed forms, followers and "likes" on Facebook, and other visible signals of participation, constitute collective voice. In other words, these are indicators of the "collectiveness" of the collective voice.

Setting out to studying the sociomaterial process of unionizing, I suggested that *visibility* and *portability* comprise the root affordance of mobile social media. In line with this notion, the analysis reveals that the portability of mobile media devices, mainly smartphones, is a pivotal component in leveraging the visibility which social media networks such as

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Facebook and WhatsApp afford activists. Therefore, I propose that "portable-visibility" is the root affordance of mobile media in organizational contexts.

The analysis also shows that, when union activists leveraged the portable-visibility of mobile social media, this affordance not only intermediated their collective voice but also challenged their individual "participant structures" in social media conversation (Gershon, 2014). As the unionization effort proceeded, the activists communicated much more intensively with growing audiences, exceeding their original circles of personal Facebook and WhatsApp contacts; they constantly navigated between different identities and roles by using multiple communication networks and parallel mobile devices; and, they adopted new discursive behaviors, production skills, and editorial styles, which were not necessarily in accordance with their own capabilities and values. In some instances, such as when using provocative texts, their online presence may have been compromised. In other examples, such as the use of self-introductory posts, they adopted neoliberal self-branding strategies (Gershon, 2014; Marwick, 2013) to obtain recognition.

Finally, I suggest that when unionizing workers leveraged Facebook and WhatsApp for labor struggles they ironically uncovered new, unintended, and even counter-productive qualities of these platforms: These technologies reflect the neoliberal values and commercial goals of their developers who promote individual status over collective action (Marwick, 2013) and are extensively utilized by companies for branding, marketing and sales (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010) as well as for tracking workers' information and interactions (Andrejevic, 2010) including the materials produced and disseminated during such organizational resistance campaigns. Hence, while these social media platforms and devices aided unionizations efforts they might open workers to new risks in the future. Further research directions would be, for example, to trace over time how workers' online participation in unionization discourse implicates with the construction of their own employable self (Gershon, 2017) and coherent identity (van Dijck, 2013) across social media networks.

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Table 1 – Theoretical Framework

	Autonomy	Commitment	Recognition
How union activists leveraged mobile social Media affordances	- Distribution lists - Social networks - Simultaneous communication - Compartmentalization - Selective visibility - Deception	- Online access to union membership form - Traffic figures - Support from external stakeholders - Solidarity around common events, traditions, and values	- Self-introductory posts - Tolerance of forceful debates - Amateur production - Editorial manipulation - Provocation - Legacy
The tensions which union activists faced	- Navigating work/unionization - Expanding the networks - Management's Surveillance	- Anti-union communication - Context collapse	- Personal exposure - Lurking - Anti-union participation - Limited resources - Persistence

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