Online Moral Disclosure and the Construction of Privacy Practices

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This study traces the rise of online moral disclosures (OMDs), social networking site postings in which individuals attest to personal pain, seeking to transform the harsh realities that transformed them. We demonstrate that their authors are attempting to undermine prevailing practices related to privacy, through OMD production and publication, especially the standard concealment of private information regarding wrongdoing, a practice that OMD authors perceive as exacerbating their own suffering and that of sufferers like them. The study shows that by authoring and disseminating OMDs, authors displace the symbolic boundaries that have been central to informational norms in modern society, including distances between private places and public arenas and among social groups. We observe OMD through the analytical lens of structuration theory, a powerful tool for generation of novel insights into the role human agents now play in constituting privacy-related practices.

Keywords: social networking site (SNS), self-disclosure, witnessing, privacy, structuration theory

The increase in private information self-disclosed on social networking site (SNS) platforms is well documented (e.g., Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Zhang & Daugherty, 2009). This article focuses on a specific type of revelation that we call *online moral disclosure* (OMD). OMDs are written statements published on personal Facebook pages by identifiable individuals who attest publicly to personal pain, seeking to alter their respective harsh, life-changing situations.

We perceive the producers of items in this distinct genre as *witnesses*: agents who mediate personal information and experiences in, by, and through media to recipients who were not present at the events and do not share the experience firsthand (e.g., Felman & Laub, 1992; Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009; Margalit, 2002).

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Clearly, OMDs share certain salient characteristics with other forms of mass media witnessing, such as testimony on daily television shows, in which lay persons reveal personal information in public (e.g., Illouz, 1999; Livingstone & Lunt, 1995). Nevertheless, the OMD genre remains distinctive primarily because SNSs enable witnessing agents to bypass institutional filters (e.g., television broadcasting organizations) and transform their testimony into public witnessing "that might transcend and transform that which is known" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010, p. 30; see discussion in Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014).

Highlighting the distinctive elements inherent in OMDs, we show how witnessing agents use the power afforded by SNS platforms to enter the "field of witnessing," thereby transforming private experience into public knowledge. We demonstrate that the act of bearing witness to personal experience undermines prevailing practices related to private information sharing, especially concealment of personal suffering unacknowledged or denied by others. Furthermore, we argue that the blurring of normative boundaries between private and public through the production and dissemination of OMDs represents a challenge to existing power structures. Thus, victims of similar misconduct obtain private information and thereby diminish the power of entities that seek to censor it.

We consider the processes involved in the challenging of private information-sharing practices by the witnesses to be inherently dynamic and anchored in their actions as knowledgeable and reflective agents. We study these processes of personal experience disclosure through the analytical lens of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), a conceptual framework that is conducive to an insightful analysis of the ways in which human agents, through their actions, either undermine or preserve social practices.

To illustrate the role witnesses of OMD play in challenging and maintaining privacy-related practices, we conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of OMD content published on Facebook (in Hebrew). We based our analysis on Giddens' (1984) typology articulated in his "duality of structure model," in which he elucidates how reflective and knowledgeable human agents discursively and recursively challenge prevailing practices.

The OMDs analyzed were published during the years 2014–2016. The rationale for choice of timeframe was derived from the study's chief objective: exploring how such testimony is used to challenge prevailing privacy practices. Consequently, the study focused on the period preceding the standardization of "testimonial rallies" (Shifman, 2018) in online SNS campaigns such as #MeToo.

To locate these testimonies, we used data-mining tools developed by an Israel-based firm, Buzzilla, that crawls content published on public Internet pages, especially SNSs. Buzzilla's tools enabled us to identify the online testimonies that, during the years investigated, were viewed, shared, and/or commented on (e.g., Facebook "likes") by Internet users, as well as those covered in mainstream online media (see detailed discussion in the Method section).

Self-Disclosure on SNSs

Participatory media—and SNSs in particular—offer individuals the option of expressing themselves in private statements that can be disseminated among numerous people. Consequently, with the

popularization of these platforms, online self-disclosure of private information has increased dramatically in both quantity and quality (e.g., Debatin et al., 2009; Tsay-Vogel, 2016; Zhang & Daugherty, 2009). In the practical sphere, data once shared with only a few people, such as social security numbers, health conditions, moods, and opinions, are now distributed to mass audiences. The expansion of disclosed information, particularly on popular SNSs such as Facebook, is demonstrated in a growing body of research (e.g., Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Shibchurn & Yan, 2015). A core theme in this literature is users' motivations to disclose sensitive private information online (e.g., Ashuri, Dvir-Gvirsman, & Halperin, 2018; Debatin et al., 2009). In this context, it has been shown that disclosure behaviors support goals such as social validation, relational development, social control, and resource gain. At the same time, however, self-disclosure on SNSs entails inherent risks. The poorly defined audience and the development of data extraction and analysis technologies that handle identifiable information create threats such as context collapse, loss of privacy, and emotional distress (e.g., jealousy), thereby limiting the benefits self-disclosure could provide (e.g., Ho, Hancock, & Miner, 2018).

This research corpus centers on users' self-reported perceptions of the pros and cons of self-disclosure but, by and large, lacks explorations of disclosers' conceptions regarding the societal effects of their behavior, namely, their views of how the target community may be served by their decision to disclose the information in question (e.g., Luo & Hancock, 2020). The present study focuses on disclosers' perceptions regarding the social contributions of their discursive deeds as reflected in the testimonies they publish on SNSs. Considering this objective, we concentrated on testimonies that met three criteria: (1) identifiable and linkable with their respective authors, (2) centered on private knowledge or private experiences shared in public with an undefined audience, and (3) personal and not produced in any organized campaign.

Our first two related objectives were to demarcate OMD as a genre and to account for its salience to privacy-related practices. In this regard, we relied on existing research that has identified the distinctive characteristics of *witnesses* and conceptualized their role in mediating knowledge and experience. To characterize witnessing agents who produce and circulate OMDs, we focused especially on studies concerned with so-called *moral witnesses*, a concept that is elaborated in the next section.

Next, we sought to establish the ways in which OMDs were used by the moral witnesses who produced and circulated such testimonies as a means to challenge discursive practices related to privacy. To this end, we applied Giddens' (1984) model called "the duality of structure," which explains how reflective and knowledgeable human agents (i.e., moral witnesses) discursively and recursively challenge prevailing practices (i.e., privacy-related practices).

Theoretical Foundations

Witnessing in, by, and Through Media

Witnessing and testifying are key elements of cultural and epistemological practices. In epistemological and legal discourse in particular, testimony is perceived as a reliable source of information and knowledge, as a piece of evidence promising "objectivity" (Krämer & Weigel, 2017). Accordingly, the

witness is perceived as one who has obtained unique access to required knowledge through presence at a given occurrence's venue. In this conceptualization, the eyewitness is a medium who mediates exclusive knowledge regarding an "observed" event to the uninformed (Peters, 2001).

These views have been contested in debates originating in scholarly fields such as cultural studies, literature, and history (e.g., Friedländer, 1992; Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009; Krämer & Weigel, 2017). The attempt at theorizing the witnessing of traumatic events—including genocide, war, abuse, and assault—has embodied a conceptual shift from perception of witnesses as creators of new knowledge to their treatment as participants in harsh experiences. Scholars who subscribe to this approach suggest that horrific events so overwhelm witnesses that they become incapable of "knowing" the occurrences that traumatized them and hence cannot express or document them in and by language as knowledge (Felman & Laub, 1992).

In his influential book *The Ethics of Memory*, philosopher Avishai Margalit (2002) nuances the role witnesses play in mediating suffering and pain by coining the term *moral witness*, which refers to a distinctive social role undertaken by persons who bear witness to painful experiences. In this connection, Margalit distinguishes between *witnessing agents*, who testify to suffering and evil they have observed, and *moral witnesses*, whose testimonies are about the suffering they have experienced personally and who speak, through their testimonies, against wrongdoings in the name of humanity. Margalit stresses that witnessing agents—professional journalists, for example—do not qualify as moral witnesses because their testimonies are about suffering they have observed but not experienced, and are thus not driven by personal pain. This conceptualization encompasses cases in which the moral witness points an accusing finger at people who have intentionally and knowingly harmed him or her (e.g., testifies to sexual harassment) and also at those who have harmed him or her unintentionally or unknowingly (e.g., testifies to unintended behaviors that indicate homophobia).

In his account, Margalit (2002) touches on an important component that stems not from the content of the testimony but from its objective. He argues that the testimony of the moral witness is essentially driven by a moral purpose. It reflects the hope for a society that will "hear" the cry and acknowledge the pain, and thereby usher in a new order. Thus, the testimony's efficacy is measured by the extent to which it establishes and maintains a sphere for moral engagement that persists beyond the moment of the utterance itself.

The conceptualization of the moral witness is highly relevant to the study at hand: Through an intentional act of bearing witness to private information regarding a painful and transformative experience, authors of OMDs seek to mobilize their addressees by calling on them to alter the conditions that caused such transformation.

We show that, by testifying in and through OMDs to a wrongdoing and personal pain that had remained unacknowledged or was outright denied, the (moral) witnessing agents studied establish a sphere for moral engagement. As already stated, the nature and implications of this process were explored through Giddens' (1984) analytical framework of the duality of structure.

Structuration Theory and the Duality of Structure Model

Structuration theory was developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984, 1991) in an attempt to bridge two major schools of sociological enquiry, one concerned with agency and the other with structure. Giddens suggested integration of these seemingly incompatible traditions by formulating structuration theory, an analytical framework that shows how the knowledgeable actions of human agents discursively and recursively form the sets of rules and resources that constitute social structures over time and space.

One major component in Giddens' (1984) theory is the "duality of structure model," which suggests that two previously independent elements, *structure* and *agency*, become interdependent and are produced recursively: "We create society at the same time as we are created by it" (p. 14).

In Giddens' view, the locus of interaction between the knowledgeable capacities of reflective actors and the structural features of social systems consists of three modalities facilitating linkage between agency and structure that are not perceived as independent and conflicting elements, but rather as mutually interacting constructs. He calls one such modality *interpretative schemes*. According to Giddens, as humans perform actions, they draw on interpretative schemes to help make sense of them. Simultaneously, those actions reproduce and modify interpretative schemes embedded in social structure. Another modality, which he terms *facility*, refers to human agents' capacity to allocate and exploit resources in producing and reproducing dominant social structures. Finally, *norms* are the moral codes on which human agents draw to determine the sanctionable actions that produce legitimation structures iteratively.

Examining the content of OMDs through the analytical lens of structuration theory, particularly using the typology offered by Giddens (1984) in his duality of structure model, we aim to shed new light on the role played by specific human agents, namely, the moral witnesses who produced OMDs in challenging private information-sharing practices. We focus on conventional concealment of private information regarding personal experience with harsh realities, a practice that arguably reinforces the suffering of the subjects who produce and disseminate these statements.

Our argument concerning the role that moral witnessing plays in challenging private information-sharing practices, notably, transforming private experience into public knowledge, is predicated on two long-standing trends in media theory. The first is so-called "media representation," which considers the ways in which identifiable content, decoded by individuals or groups (Hall, 1980), is displayed in the media, and the second is "media as mediation," a trend that perceives media not simply as technical carriers of preformulated meanings, but as a system that produces and shapes meanings (e.g., Couldry, 2019). We suggest that, by using SNSs as a space for representing their private knowledge and experience (the representation trend) and as a platform for circulating their personal messages to the masses (the mediation trend), the witnesses under investigation attempted to challenge fundamental privacy-related practices we term *allocation*, *framing*, and *authority.*

Allocation refers to the common assumption that the media maintain the symbolic boundary between the respective locations of media artifact production and consumption, wherein people operating in media organizations (professionals and others) create symbolic contents in and by various media that are

then consumed by the audiences in their own environments (e.g., Livingstone & Lunt, 1995). This is closely linked with the framing construct, which refers to the media's role in sustaining the frame in which experiences of the social occur (e.g., Silverstone, 1981). It refers primarily to mass media (e.g., television, radio, and the press) that allow carefully selected individuals and organizations to access the "media field" and affect the nature and contents of the frames created by and in them. The third construct, authority, addresses the media's authority as a principal source of social facts, especially as a provider of an essential flow of information and meanings that enable generation of new discursive resources at the societal level through both factual information and media fiction (see Figure 1, below).
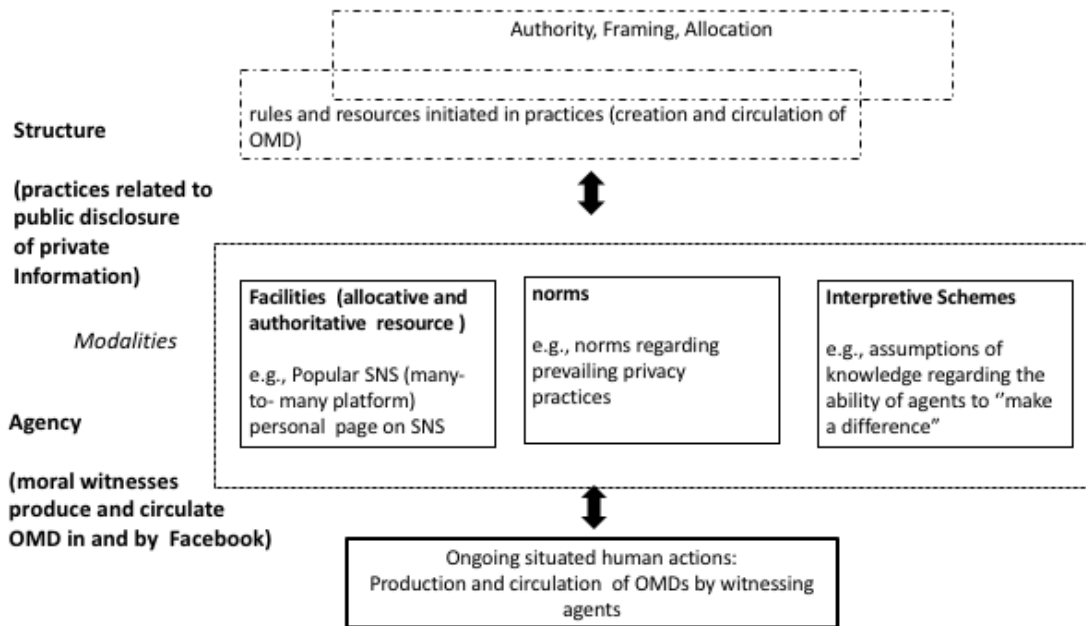

Figure 1. Theoretical conceptions. OMD = online moral disclosure; SNS = social networking site.

Method

The study is based on a qualitative critical discourse analysis of six posts by six individuals to their respective Facebook pages between 2014 and 2016. This period preceded the standardization of "testimonial rallies" (Shifman, 2018) in online SNS campaigns and therefore serves the purpose of this study: exploring the rise of such testimonies produced and circulated as a means to publicly disclose personal pain and in this way challenge prevailing privacy practices. As widely documented, testimonies on SNSs (particularly in the context of sexual abuse) have increased dramatically all over the world since 2017 (e.g., Anderson & Toor, 2018). Oprah Winfrey, in her inspirational Golden Globes speech in January 2018, called this upsurge "a new day on the horizon." The production and circulation of this kind of testimonies have had far-reaching implications for privacy-related practices, dramatically increasing their media coverage (e.g., De Benedictis et al., 2019), enhancing coordinated protest campaigns (e.g., Shifman, 2018), and encouraging more assault and rape victims to report to the police. An example is the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Criminal

Victimization report for 2018, which found that between 2016 and 2017, the incidence of sexual assaults and rapes in the United States increased only marginally, from 19.7 to 20.6 per 1,000 residents 12 years of age or older. The reporting of such crimes to police, on the other hand, jumped from 23% in 2016 to 40% the following year.

Acknowledging the substantive discursive impact of OMD in the context of sexual abuse, Orit Soliziano, CEO of the Association of Centers for Victims of Sexual Abuse, wrote on November 8, 2017, in the op-ed column of the most-read Israeli newspaper, *Israel Today*,

> It must be said in a clear voice: breaking the bond of silence and publishing the testimonies openly and shamelessly is a social revolution and a central goal in itself. Instead of blaming the victim, today an accusing finger is pointed at the offender. Instead of a bond of silence, the evidence flows like a raging river.

To identify the testimonies in the period preceding the "raging river," we used a monitoring system, developed by the Buzzilla firm, comprising a set of tools that facilitates Internet crawling. The system covers social media sites (e.g., Facebook), microblogs (Twitter), and articles published in blogs and online newspapers, as well as video sites, forums, groups, and message boards.

Before preforming the actual Internet search (using Buzzilla's tools), we nuanced the characteristics of the genre we termed *OMD*. As discussed above, testimonies that met our criteria of OMD contained the following features: (1) created by identified individuals on their publicly visible personal Facebook pages, (2) bore witness to evil and suffering experienced firsthand, (3) and were personal and not produced in any organized campaign.

In the next stage, we allocated the OMDs originally published on Facebook and later in major online mainstream media (online newspapers and online television websites) between 2014 and 2016. The rationale for selecting testimonies that received media attention stems from the study's core goal: exploring the role early OMDs played in challenging privacy practices.

The allocation of such testimonies was accomplished by entering the following keywords in Buzzilla's engine: *disclosure*, *I disclosed*, *exposed*, *privacy*, *private*, and *anonymity*. From this corpus, we omitted irrelevant items: (a) posts that did not match our predefined definition of OMDs, (b) posts that received fewer than two comments, and (c) posts that did not appear in online mainstream media coverage. We ended up with six posted testimonies. One item regarding sexual assault/abuse consisted of testimony authored by a young woman who attested to having been sexually abused by her army commander. It was posted on Facebook after the signing of a court order that the witness perceived to be unjust. Another item of sexual assault/abuse was composed by a young student who testified to sexual abuse by her university professor, and a third was authored by a woman in her 30s who declared she was raped by an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officer when she was performing compulsory military service. The search also yielded two posts regarding illness. One post of a young man attested to depression, focusing on his unjustified forced hospitalization in a mental institution and abusive treatment by the hospital staff. Another attested to bipolar disorder, criticizing society's irresponsible attitude toward the mentally ill. The last testimony posted about

LGTB discrimination was authored by a renowned journalist who described the social hardships that lesbians like her encounter in society at large. Although all witnesses opted for nonanonymous posts, this article identifies them by their initials only.

As indicated earlier, the testimonies of moral witnesses selected for this study were observed through the analytical lens of the structuration theory conceptualized by Giddens (1984), with specific attention to his duality of structure framework, which is comprised of three core analytical components: norms, interpretative scheme, and facility.

Results

The Modality of Facility

In Giddens' (1984) conception, the constitution of social structures is facilitated by the capacity of human agents to allocate and exploit resources. There are two kinds of resources at the core of his framework: authoritative and allocative.

We examine the resources employed by witnessing agents, with particular attention to in-use technological properties, considering the manner in which these tools became implicated in privacy-related structuration. Throughout the analysis, we note the agents' reflective accounts regarding in-use properties reflected in OMDs published on SNSs, as the structuration framework stresses the importance of human agents' knowledgeability and reflectivity.

SNSs constitute a major allocative resource (or facility) used by witnessing agents. In studies on witnessing in the digital era, SNSs (and other participatory media as well) are often perceived as essential resources that enable witnessing agents to accomplish their objectives. One sound example is Andén-Papadopoulos' (2014) study of citizen mobile camera witnessing, in which the author demonstrates that mobile digital media "have afforded individuals an extraordinary networking power they have never before enjoyed, enabling them to bypass established editorial and censorial filters and turn their personal record of an event into a public witness" (p. 754).

In the cases examined in this study, the witnessing agents exploited "allocative" resources imbedded in SNSs as a means of challenging symbolic allocation of media artifact. As discussed above, the term *allocation* makes reference to a common assumption that the media maintain a symbolic boundary between the locations of media production (television studios, etc.) and the locations of media consumption (consumers' private environments; e.g., Livingstone & Lunt, 1995). The witnesses who produced OMDs and disseminated them via Facebook undermined this boundary. Leveraging Facebook's free user-friendly services, they produced and circulated OMDs in their own environment, bypassing professional production sites and the practiced gatekeepers that occupy such spaces.

More importantly, the witnessing agents studied exploited allocative and authoritative resources imbedded in SNSs as a means of establishing witnessing authority, a position that amalgamates two substantial forms: seeing and saying. By seeing, witnesses lay claim to the factual authority gained from

presence at the event and to experiential authority acquired through experiencing the event first hand. Saying, in turn, asserts mediation authority, that is, their ability (and obligation) to state their personal knowledge and experience for the benefit of people who were not present at the event and did not share the experience (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009; Peters, 2001).

The chief allocative resource witnessing agents employed is the SNS owned and managed by Facebook. This prime resource encapsulates two types of properties: identification and authenticity. Insofar as identification properties are concerned, one outstanding characteristic of Facebook is its status as a largely nonanonymous space. Facebook architecture is designed to facilitate immediate connection between the content posted and the person who wrote it, shared it, liked it, and so on. Identification of this type is facilitated by various technological means, such as the ability to establish a personal profile, the option of posting identifiable photos on one's Facebook page, and the "public display of connections" (Donath & boyd, 2004), that allow members to see who other members of the network know, as well as how they treat others and are treated by them.

All witnesses under observation used the identification properties described above. First, they chose to compose and disseminate their OMDs in and by Facebook's nonanonymous platform. Like most network members, they posted their testimonies on their existing personal Facebook page, a disclosure that facilitates immediate identification of witnesses and their respective testimonies. Aiding this identification was their decision to post photos of themselves on their personal page. They also set the site's privacy options in ways that allow other members of the network, as well as network observers, to identify the posted OMDs with the person who wrote it. In Giddens' (1984) view, these decisions enhance structuration because agents "could have done otherwise" and sent anonymous posts. For example, they might have selected a different SNS platform that promotes anonymity or used the anonymous features Facebook offers by creating a false or unidentified profile, restricting the viewing of their messages.

Opting for identification properties involves knowledgeability and reflectivity, as manifested clearly in the witnesses' reflective OMDs. EJ, who attested to sexual harassment by her university professor, wrote, "For the first time, I opted for full public exposure using my real name." Similarly, MF wrote, "After much self-deliberation, I decided to go public: My name is [MF] and during my IDF service, I was sexually harassed by a senior officer for several months."

Finally, in her August 1, 2015, testimony, KN, a renowned journalist, revealed the hardship she and other lesbians experience: "My personal revelation does not come easy to me."

As the witnesses' reflective accounts show, identification properties were used intentionally. Arguably, the decision to undertake risky acts—giving up privacy, revealing weakness or victimhood, and exposing oneself to social denunciation—serves the witnesses by securing their witnessing authority. The witnesses' identities thus enable them to lay claim to the factual authority gained from presence at the harsh event and the experiential authority derived from experiencing the pain. In accordance with the structuration perspective, it is suggested that through the enactment of Facebook's identification properties (allocative resources in structuration terms), agents establish the witnessing authority necessary to effectively overcome conventional concealment of wrongdoings such as causing pain.

Authenticity properties were used in a closely related manner. We regard Facebook's "personal page" as a prime authenticity property, as it enables individuals to construct an authentic image of themselves by using personal style and language. As many studies have demonstrated, Facebook's personal page serves as an autobiographical space that facilitates distribution of a statement by the individual biographer who is simultaneously the author, narrator, and protagonist (Orkibi, 2015). In most cases, Facebook does not prohibit users from creating personal pages, nor does it filter user-generated content. Furthermore, the platform is user friendly and does not demand any professional training on the part of network members; writing and distribution of content on Facebook requires only minimal skills and the market entry cost is low compared with those of other media. Facebook, like most SNSs, allows individuals to bypass established editorial and censorial filters that jeopardize the "authentic" image they strive to construct.

As discussed above, in all six cases, the individual agents used personal pages to author and distribute their OMDs. In Giddens' (1984) terms, the authoring of an OMD in which private information is disclosed to an undefined audience constitutes use of authoritative resources, which facilitates the formation of witnessing authority in this case. This witnessing position is considered vital for structuration, as it facilitates the undermining of prevailing privacy practices, in this instance, the conventional concealment of wrongdoing and personal pain.

SNS use for establishment of witnessing authority as a means of undermining social evil was emphasized recently in Shifman's (2018) study of testimonial memes produced as part of a coordinated political protest. Shifman demonstrated that such memes "turn into powerful weapons of the weak" (p. 173) because of the amalgamation of "external authenticity," which relates to the exposure of factual proofs, and "internal authenticity," which relies on disclosure of personal experiences. This observation is particularly important regarding OMDs, as their creators' power to change social reality by challenging privacy practices originates in their witnessing authority, constructed though external and internal authenticity, the formation of which is reflected in all six OMDs analyzed. One young man, GB, attested to his harsh experience in a large mental institution, accusing the hospital's staff of unjustified forced hospitalization, addicting him to drugs, and compelling him to participate in intrusive staff training sessions. As in the cases of testimonial memes, GB established witnessing authority by asserting external authority:

> When I was 17, I suffered anxiety and depression when my girlfriend broke up with me. In a post to the Internet, I said I wanted to die and someone I knew called the police. The police contacted my parents and from there they took me to the ER at Geha [mental hospital]. I waited a long time to be interviewed for hospitalization. There was a young psychiatrist there. I sat opposite him and began to share what I was experiencing. . . . Several days later, I realized that I had to get out of there and spoke with whomever I could. Eventually, with my mother's assistance, we succeeded in making a deal with the staff, that included my consent to be studied as part of a class for some 50 psychology students. It lasted about two hours and I was crying and shuddering throughout. The psychiatrist continued to interrogate me and the students watched me and wrote in their notebooks. That's how I managed to get out of Ward D.

GB provided an account of his admissions process, revealing apparently useless information, such as the age group of the psychiatrist who treated him. He also included details of the training sessions he was forced to attend, such as number of students and duration, information that was not required *prima facie*.

Like GB, EJ, who testified to an abusive (sexual) relationship that her university professor forced on her, offered a detailed factual description of events, thus establishing external authenticity: "Mario [the professor] referred to my body in a hurtful, racist and humiliating manner. Numerous additional harassing comments were directed at me."

SS, who attested to having been raped, also established external authenticity by providing a detailed description of the events leading to the incident:

> It happened in the spring. I was a 19-year-old soldier, an outstanding instructor, while he was the handsomest officer on the base. It started as a perfect date. . . . A couple, his friends, joined the date. Toward the end of the evening he suggested that we go home with them and have a drink. They went into their bedroom, while we remained in the living room and he closed the door. When he turned around to face me, something had changed in his eyes. Suddenly, he had these satanic eyes. It was really scary!

The factual details identified in all six testimonies are essential for the establishment of witnessing authority. Externally, they demonstrate the crucial tie between a specific individual who was present at the event and his/her testimony regarding it; when people display insider knowledge of events, they reinforce the testimony's truth value in the factual sense.

Many scholars now believe that internal authenticity is also essential to the formation of knowledgeable witnesses, especially in the context of tremendous pain. As Harari (2009) explains in his discussion of war witnessing, "People must be physically and emotionally invested in what is happening in order to gain knowledge" (p. 218).

A reflective account of personal sensations and emotions is common to all six OMDs, with witnesses depicting themselves as unique beings who acquire exclusive experience and—by implication—exclusive knowledge. For example, MF wrote, "I am not compelled to cope with a humiliating accusation and a plea deal that is no less embarrassing than the case itself. I feel a horrible choking sensation in my throat." Similarly, EJ recalled, "I was unable to calm down. I was so frightened that I simply stopped coming to the campus for some time. He continued harassing me for about half a year." GB wrote, "To this day, I wake up from nightmares sweating and even now, nine years later, I'm still addicted to the psychotropic drugs they gave me." KN noted,

> When I went out with a girl, I understood for the first time how the entire world looks different from this angle. I realized how it is when you don't see female couples on ordinary television series, when you walk along the street hand in hand with your female partner they look at you differently and when you tell your friends or parents that you have a girlfriend. . . . Whoops! For a moment, they don't really know what to say.

Disclosure of emotions augments the inner authenticity of the witness. First, emotional self-expression, particularly when negative feelings are involved, is a significant manifestation of internal authenticity, as emotions are perceived as the property of the individual, a unique being, developed throughout the course of one's life. Second, emotions validate the witness' exclusive knowledge regarding the occurrence, an exclusivity that can be achieved only by experiencing the event.

In summation, analysis of witnesses' exploitation of available facilities and their reflective accounts of their actions are in accord with structuration theory. Use of both allocative and authoritative resources enabled the witnessing agents studied to break free from "authorized" mediators (e.g., mass media practitioners who produce media artifacts in designated sites) and to establish witnessing authority, a prerequisite for achieving their moral goal of undermining concealment practices through public disclosure of private information and experience.

The Modality of Norms

Norms—the codes that human agents use to determine the conventions reflected in common behavior and sanctionable conduct—constitute a core modality in Giddens' (1984) duality of structure model that interlinks structure and agency. Giddens distinguishes between status of norms (formal and informal) and degree of sanction (weak or strong).

Popular SNSs such as Facebook that allow individuals to disseminate personal information to numerous people have generated new privacy norms. Although there are powerful disagreements regarding the scope and characteristics of such changes, the upheavals brought about by SNSs can hardly be dismissed; in these online environments, interactions are public-by-default and private-through-effort. Arguably, this important shift contributes to the blurring of private and public, a phenomenon often termed *context collapse* (e.g., Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Papacharissi, 2012).

Analysis of the testimonies under scrutiny revealed that the witnessing agents were aware of the role they play in challenging prevailing privacy norms by contributing to the symbolic blurring between private and public. In their testimonies, they displayed their tacit knowledge regarding existing informational norms (Nissenbaum, 2011) and more importantly, their understanding that their actions are challenging such norms. We highlight three related elements that could serve as indicators for awareness of privacy norms and understanding the behaviors that challenge them: (1) the witnesses' interpretation of governing (informal) norms challenged by their public testimony and the possible sanctions to which such actions can lead, (2) the reflective account of a self-struggle that underscored the witnesses' decision to post testimonies (i.e., their awareness of the risk entailed in challenging privacy-related norms), and (3) construction of a system of reasoning underlying the ostensibly "abnormal" decision to share private information with undefined audiences. All three elements are evident in MF's testimony. Her post begins with a vindication of her decision to disclose censored information in public:

The Attorney-General's Office recently drew up an outlandish and painful plea deal that completely ignores the facts and the evidence. According to this deal, Lt. Col. Liran Hajbi, who admitted to all the accusations against him, will be discharged from the IDF but will not be tried for the severe sex crimes he perpetrated against me. He did not seek my consent, but exploited his position as my direct commander. The indictment was highly lenient because of his military contribution in wartime and in various operations.

MF knows that by disclosing information on Facebook that has been denied by military officials and censored by Israeli judicial institutions (e.g., the commander's name and misdeeds and the content of the signed plea deal), she is undermining prevailing privacy norms. One clear sign of her awareness is her reflective recollection of the self-struggle that preceded her disclosure: "After much self-deliberation, I decided to go public. About five months ago, you heard about me on the news and in the papers. I made up my mind to break the silence." Use of the idiom "break the silence" is significant, as it attests to MF's disclosure behavior and the challenge it poses to privacy norms, namely institutional concealment practices of sexual abuse for the sake of privacy protection.

MF also explained that by breaking the silence, she also gives voice to other victims of sexual abuse who adhere to prevailing conducts of sexual abuse concealment by keeping their harsh experiences to themselves: "Other young women who underwent what I experienced . . . do not file complaints because they already know the severity of sexual harassment sentences in the State of Israel."

MF also blames mainstream media for contributing to silencing practices by revealing, in their coverage of instances of abuse, only the initial of the victim's first name. Subverting to these journalistic norms, MF writes, "I do not want to hide behind an initial. That's why I'm telling my story."

Another important manifestation of knowledgeable agents' awareness of the norms contested by their actions is evident in MF's mention of a familiar quotation hanging on the wall of the IDF Chief of Staff's office: "With my own eyes, I read the adage on the wall of the Chief of Staff's Office: 'Every Hebrew mother should know that she has entrusted her sons to worthy commanders.' And I ask: 'Is that so?'"

In referring to this phrase, MF demonstrates awareness of social conventions according to which army officers are "worthy commanders" who oversee a fearless, nonchauvinistic military environment. Bearing witness to her private experiences, MF attempts to disrupt these false conventions, indicating that she hopes the verdict will let all mothers know that the IDF treats men and women equally, without discrimination, chauvinism, or fear. Note that the abnormal disclosure is framed by the witness as a moral deed, suggesting that the testimony was not motivated by a personal interest but rather by a social purpose: shattering social myths regarding commanders' merit for the sake of other women soldiers.

Similarly, EJ, who disclosed information regarding sexual abuse by her university instructor, demonstrates awareness of prevailing norms in institutions of higher education, showing that she perceives as routine cover-ups of sexual harassment and assault: "I fought to make the campus safe from *sexual harassment and assault* [emphasis added] and for recognition of the act and the injustice I endured."

EJ also justified her decision to undermine prevailing unofficial privacy norms, revealing her professor's name and the nature of their intimate relationship, for example, by framing her testimony as the product of a moral act. She makes it clear that in revealing information about her experience, she endorses a "safe campus" for present and future students.

The same pattern was identified in KN's testimony. Reflecting on the difficulties involved in her disclosure decision, she wrote, "Personal exposure does not come easy to me. Regarding any topic at all, it is easier for me to write detailed posts about gas [supply] or about the distress of contractors' employees." Disclosing personal information "does not come easy" to KN, who, as a journalist, usually covers items of collective interest (rather than revealing personal information). A clear sign of this perception is KN's avowed reasoning for her ostensibly unprofessional behavior: "There are days when what's personal is the most political issue of all and you must speak out. Today is one of those days."

The day to which KN is referring is August 1, 2015, when someone was stabbed to death in a Gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem. Mention of a horrific collective event serves to justify self-disclosure behavior with which NK does not feel comfortable. A clear manifestation of the witness's recognition of her seemingly unprofessional (abnormal) disclosure behavior is her decision to describe her experience in the second person (emphasis added in the following quote):

> When I went out with a girl, I understood for the first time how the entire world looks different from this angle. I realized how it is when *you* don't see female couples on ordinary television series, when *you* walk along the street hand in hand with *your* female partner they look at *you* differently and when *you* tell *your* friends or parents that *you* have a girlfriend. . . . Whoops! For a moment, they don't really know what to say.

By bundling her experience with those of other gay people, KN frames her behavior as a moral action, a discursive act that is not motivated by a personal interest, but rather driven by a social purpose: to enhance "normalization" of same-sex relationships by revealing them in public. She makes this clear in the following remarks:

> People who consider themselves LGTB-enlightened say things along the lines of: "I really am not concerned with what they do in their own bedroom, as long as I don't have to see it before my eyes." Now, stop for a moment and think about what we see all the time before our eyes: couples, more couples, boy and girl, girl and boy. They walk down the street hand in hand, embracing, kissing, demonstrating the affection and love they feel for one another. It's perfectly natural. That is exactly what a female couple wants to feel as they walk down the street and that's exactly what a male couple wants to feel.

Arguably, by framing her testimony as a moral obligation, KN can vindicate her behavior as a discursive act that attests to her awareness of the privacy norms she challenges.

Three salient elements—discussion of the difficulty involved in self-disclosure, acknowledgment of prevailing privacy norms, and a reflexive account of the witness's role in challenging these norms—were

found in all six testimonies selected for this study. By posting OMDs on Facebook, the witnesses performed an intentional discursive act that simultaneously preserved and challenged prevailing privacy norms. Maintenance of norms is affected by the witnesses' demonstrating awareness of them and by their justification of the behaviors that undermine them.

The Modality of Interpretative Schemes

Giddens (1984) uses the term *interpretative scheme* to describe agents' stocks of knowledge: a set of attitudes, assumptions, or opinions grounded in social cognitive research arguing that people's actions are a function of how they make sense of the world (Weick, 1979). In Giddens' conception, an interpretative scheme can be manifested in discursive accounts and behavior. Because of space limitations, we focus on only one of the constructs highlighted in Giddens' formulation: assumption and acceptance of one's ability to contribute to the formation of social structures by "making a difference." This notion is particularly important regarding OMDs, as such testimonies are essentially driven by a moral purpose: to undermine, by means of self-disclosure, the social concealment of pain and wrongdoings.

One clear "social difference" the witnesses strove to underscore relates to the lives of people who have suffered experiences similar to their own. Based on the analysis of the testimonies, the witnessing agents seem to believe that, by testifying to their own suffering, and by framing themselves in these testimonies as identifiable victims, they are giving voice to silenced victims whose harsh experiences remain under a veil of secrecy. MF's testimony provides a clear illustration: "I am going public for all those young women who experienced what I went through and are hiding behind an initial, if [they express anything] at all. I do not want to hide behind an initial."

SS's testimony expresses similar thoughts: "The only crime committed by the victims is shame. As far as I'm concerned, the ideal situation would be for *us* [emphasis added] to be frank and not be ashamed. They are rapists and we have nothing to be ashamed of."

The testimonies published were not designed solely to change the lives of silenced individuals with similar experiences. As discussed above, all six witnesses clarified, explicitly or otherwise, that by attesting to their personal pain in public, they are striving to modify the harsh realities that changed them. Analysis of their posts reveals their beliefs that the desired social change can be promoted by unveiling personal pain. One clear manifestation of this assumption is the testimony of a young man, ME, who described his everyday experiences as a bipolar person on July 14, 2015. His testimony begins with a paragraph that implicitly describes his condition but explicitly unveils the humiliating stigmatization he encounters:

1. I am entirely in charge of my life.
2. I am not weird or eccentric.
3. I do not manifest the stigmas generally attributed to [bipolar] people like me.

ME provided a detailed account of his painful experience:

Let me tell you about my day. Matthew is assertive, narcissistic, proud of himself, utter perfection, strongest of all, smartest of all, best of all, mighty and awesome. Matthew has mania and when it breaks out, he is so happy. It's stressful, because he's so tactless, annoying, irritating. He thinks so fast; he dreams grandiose dreams; he feels so good that it's enviable, because he knows what he's worth. He does a million things at the same time and plans another billion. . . . Then, when he falls, "Matanos" comes along, looks at him and kicks him strongly, powerfully, mercilessly.

By attesting to his own experience, ME assumes that his testimony contributes to the creation of a new social knowledge about people who, like him, are bipolar. But perhaps more important is the belief that his testimony will "make a difference" by means of mobilizing his addressees. And indeed, in the following section, ME provides a "behavioral formula" to his audiences: "When *you* see someone having an anxiety attack, for example, embrace that person closely and sincerely. That's what helps the most. Don't imagine that their minds are screwed up. Show them empathy and understanding."

By using the second person pronoun ("When *you* see . . ."), ME frames his addressees as agents who are capable of remedying the suffering (Entman, 1993). He thus appeals to them to act on the suffering that he and other people with his disorder experience. This request is a powerful indication of the witness's belief in his ability to effect a desired social change, in this case, promoting social acceptance of the mentally ill.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article points to the emergence of a genre labeled *online moral disclosure*. We suggest that witnesses who produce and disseminate OMDs act simultaneously as a conduit for transferring knowledge to the uninformed and as performers of a personal experience that transformed them. We demonstrate that bearing witness to a silenced reality of suffering serves two core functions: First, it constitutes a therapeutic act that facilitates reconciliation of disturbing experiences through reflective exposure of personal information (Herman, 1992); second, it is a moral act by which witnesses call on their audiences to embrace a sense of responsibility toward the silenced reality of the suffering that transformed them.

The study demonstrates that although OMDs share significant characteristics with moral disclosures in other media (e.g., radio and television), the significance of OMDs lies in their making sense of profound transformations in the realm of privacy. By authoring and disseminating OMDs on the personal pages of a nonanonymous and popular social network site, the knowledgeable and reflective witnessing agents displace the symbolic boundaries that have been central to "informational norms" (Nissenbaum, 2011) in modern society, including distances between private places (e.g., bedrooms, homes, personal offices) and public arenas (e.g., streets, hospitals, universities) and among social groups (e.g., patients–doctors, instructors–students, healthy–sick, gay–straight).

This study shows that by procuring and circulating OMDs on Facebook, witnesses attempt to challenge fundamental privacy-related practices, which we describe by the terms *allocation, framing*, and *authority*.

With regards to allocation, by divulging personal information and sharing exclusive knowledge and experience on SNSs, the witnessing agents challenge the symbolic boundary between locations of media production, accessible only to carefully selected individuals, and those of media consumption (i.e., media consumers' private spaces). The many-to-many architecture of SNSs enables witnesses to create their own media artifacts in their own environment and thereby alter their social roles: From consumers of "social salience," victims of what they perceive as misrepresentation of information in the name of privacy protection, they become empowered media "practitioners" who control the dissemination of their private information. This is closely linked with the framing construct, which refers to the media's role in sustaining the frame in which experiences of the social occur (Silverstone, 1981).

By revealing private knowledge and first-hand experiences on Facebook, the witnessing agents dictate (encode) the framing of the occurrences described, including who is presented as a victim and who is a perpetrator, and the portrayal of these protagonists; which stakeholder is identified as the agent responsible for suffering; and which agent is presented as capable or incapable of remedying the suffering. And crucially, through framing their suffering according to their perceptions, the witnesses who expose their intimate lives on OMDs liberate themselves (and perhaps others) from shame, from the once self-evident desire to hide, and from a basic need for privacy. As Koskela (2004) observes,

> To be (more) seen is not always to be less powerful. By rebelling against the shame embedded in the conception of the private, people refuse to be humble. They may gain power, but it does not head for control over others but, rather, blur and mix the lines of control. (p. 209)

The third construct, authority, addresses the media's authority as a principal source of social facts. In the case of OMDs, the witnesses undermine such authority and liberate themselves from normative and practical conventions of fact construction and depiction in mainstream media. As author, narrator, and protagonist of an artifact circulated by SNSs, each decides which information is presented as fact and how. By taking control over the construction, representation, and dissemination of "facts," the witnesses free themselves (and society at large) from institutions (the army, hospitals, the courts, universities, mainstream media, etc.) that conceal or misrepresent "facts" as a means of protecting those who bear direct or indirect responsibility for the suffering.

In addition conceptualizing OMDs as an empowering resource, we point to the dangers that these artifacts entail. For the individual agent, the decision to post and circulate private information through online platforms engenders personal strain. On the one hand, the act of bearing witness to wrongdoing and suffering serves as a therapeutic tool used by the witnesses to reconcile personal agony and to change the harsh realities that transformed them. On the other hand, the public revelation of private information, motivated by the desire to reveal "unknown truths" about evil and suffering, exposes witnesses to extensive risks, such as online and offline sanctions, humiliation, harassment, and persecution.

OMDs also generate conflicting social demands. Exposure of unknown realities of suffering requires the constitution of proper privacy behaviors that protect both the individual agent and the collective from information concealment practices. At the same time, the blurring of symbolic boundaries between the

private and the public by means of witnesses' activity on SNSs demands an up-to-date conceptualization of privacy. This should include a discussion about the importance of privacy for both the individual and the collective, as well as the institution of new normative and practical means to protect it.

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