The Go-Betweens: Political Discussion Management Practices on Social Media Among Political Aides—A Comparative Study

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Research on social media political communication with the public has neglected the important role of the intermediate layer. This article bridges the gap to enable an insider reflection on online political discussions between members of parliament (MPs) and the public. Using quantitative questionnaires, this study surveys intermediaries in Israel, Germany, and the United States to examine their political discussion management practices on social media, which indirectly reflect their MPs' attitudes. Reading and responding to users' comments, reflect a more tolerant and pro-discussion attitude, while the blocking of users and the deletion of comments reflect censorship and anti-discussion attitudes. Findings expose the political aides' "deletion paradox," which differentiates oppositional comments' deletions, which they disapprove of, from plain comments' deletion, which is an unavoidable necessity. The two-sided scale, developed for this study, on which each country is situated twice, according to its positive and negative political discussion management practices, reveals that the countries' positions, on both sides of the scale, are an exact mirror image, the greater the pro-political discussion, the less the anti-political discussion, and vice versa.

Keywords: political discussion, political discussion management, political aides, deletion paradox, social media, comparative research

Research on social media political communication between members of parliament (MPs) and the public has focused on MPs' activities and attitudes and the public's reactions and participation (Bürger & Ross, 2014; Congressional Management Foundation, 2011; Tenscher, 2014) while neglecting the important role of the intermediate layer—to which we refer throughout this article by using the general designation of

"political aides"[2] (henceforth PAs), that is, parliamentary assistants, advisers, and spokespersons. In most cases, it is these individuals who manage the MPs' official pages. This research aims to fill that gap. By focusing on three liberal democracies, Israel, the United States, and Germany, this study looks at intermediary-level political discussion management practices on social media. As PAs, rather than the MPs themselves, are those people who practically interact with the public, their influence on social media political discussion with the public is clear as they may be the actual agenda setters. This study, a part of a larger project, surveys intermediaries in Israel, Germany, and the United States using a quantitative methodology of questionnaires and statistical analysis that focuses on deleting opposition responses, blocking users and references to insults, curses, and criticism. It is assumed that these PAs, in turn, reflect their own, and indirectly also their MPs', attitudes to political discussion. Our presupposition is that PAs' reading users' comments and responding to them reflect a more tolerant and pro-discussion attitude. However, blocking users and deleting comments reflects both their censorship and anti-discussion attitudes (Sabag-Ben Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2019, 2021). This study aims to examine PAs' political discussion management practices on MPs' official pages. We also look at differences in political discussion management practices of PAs in Germany, Israel, and the United States while referring to factors such as gender, political perception, and socioeconomic perception.

Online Political Participation

The Internet enables interactive, effective, and direct communication among users, facilitates discussion, and has the potential to flatten the power gaps between politicians and citizens (Marland, Lawlor, & Giasson, 2018). In addition, social media are specifically aimed at engagement and discussion (Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). As such, social media offer engagement opportunities with a wide range of civically oriented activities, each of which can contribute to deeper democratic engagement (Hofmann, 2019). It is argued that conventional acts of political participation are primarily driven by intrinsic motivations relating to self-efficacy and empowerment, with participants feeling that they can have influence over decision makers. (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). It was found that the use of social media has had a stronger effect on political participation than the use of online news sites, party websites (Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2014), and sites without social information (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2016).

A recent study (Kalsnes, Larsson, & Enli, 2017) argues that social media logic can be operationalized into three types of user practices on Facebook and Twitter— "connected affordances": Redistributing, interacting, and acknowledging. According to this study, Facebook is a service on which "ordinary" people engage in political interaction with politicians—and receive replies from them. Therefore, Facebook's popularity enables new connections between citizens and politicians while making the role of news media as mediators redundant. The study's findings suggest that the stronger the political interest that citizens express, the more connective affordances—such as commenting and sharing—are used (Kalsnes, Larsson, & Enli, 2017).

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[2] Political aides is the general term used to describe parliamentary/congressional office staff members in the United States. Other terms are parliamentary assistants and political assistants.

Indeed, social media are convenient and approachable for the public to convey attitudes, complaints, support, or criticism in an immediate and unmediated fashion (Gibson, 2012). Data show high penetration rates in all three countries. As of January 2022, Israel's Internet penetration rate was 90%, the number of social media users was 7.7 million, and the overall social media penetration rate was almost 64% (mostly WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram; Internet World Stats, 2023; Statista, 2022).

Facebook, with a penetration rate of 78% (as of January 2022; Internet World Stats, 2023) in Israel, has thus become the prominent platform for interactions between the public and Members of Knesset (Israeli Parliament; hence MKs; Haleva-Amir, 2016; Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018; Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2022). Politics-oriented Facebook use in Israel is thus a significant phenomenon (Mann & Lev-On, 2017). Internet penetration rate in the United States is 93.5% (as of March 2022; Internet World Stats, 2023) and Facebook's penetration rate stands at 90%, whereas Germany's general penetration rate stands at 94% (as of January 2022; Internet World Stats, 2023), but its Facebook penetration rate, of 55%, is lower than that of Israel and the United States.

One study examined the interactions between the public and MKs while identifying the profiles of the typical active commenter on MKs' Facebook pages and their main motives for political interactions via social media (Zeltzer-Volshtein, 2017). This research found that the political activity of commenters on MKs' Facebook pages is driven by sincere interest and not, as is often perceived, as a form of "slacktivism." This liking or sharing of posts, commenting, or conducting serious discussions is premeditated and directed by the commenters' desire to influence the political sphere and their awareness of their role as political activists. Moreover, the "heavy" political commenters were found to be active on the pages of MKs with whom they were in political alignment as well as on the pages of MKs with opposing political views.

These findings further stress that commenters are indeed serious political activists as they simultaneously operate on numerous Facebook pages. Most of these commenters believe that the actual response of the MK (rather than that of his staff members) is necessary and this increases their motivation to continue their online political efforts. Most political commenters on Facebook view the platform as a significant tool to promote democracy in Israel and to conduct an "actual discussion" with politicians (Zeltzer-Volshtein, 2017).

An up-to-date study found that the MKs' Facebook sphere is non-egalitarian since it follows skewed distributions—posts, by pages, receive more engagement than posts by users, suggesting that MKs' abilities to set the agenda that is manifested on their pages are top-down (Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2022). The consequences related to political participation on social media are devastating from the users' perspective since their abilities to convey messages to the politician, as well as to other users, are scarce and practically nonexistent. In that sense, social media are yet another *top-down* platform, rather than being the anticipated *bottom-up* agent of change.

MPs' Offices and the Interaction Between MPs and Their PAs

Belkacem and Busby (2013) examined the role of office staff in the European Parliament, together with the ways in which PAs help MPs cope with a vast amount of information. They argue that

PAs play an important role for their MPs, but they are not sufficiently appreciated. PAs are referred to as "hidden actors," which means that they deal with a variety of interfaces that are of great importance to the MP, and they are therefore an important part of the decision-making mechanism: Filtering the information, synthesizing relevant information from several sources, and maintaining the MP's image and positive branding.

A study conducted among members of the U.S. Congressional staff revealed that PAs played an important role in their congressional offices by focusing on social media activity to cultivate public opinion. One of the main goals of the PAs is to recognize voters' opinions and reactions. Facebook was perceived to be the most effective tool to achieve that goal, followed by Twitter and, finally, YouTube (Congressional Management Foundation, 2011).

A study (Romzek & Utter, 1996), conducted in the U.S. Congress indicated that congressional PAs can be given a relatively high degree of responsibility in a very short time. The seniority of each staff member influences the relationships among staff members, their professional norms, and the amount of autonomy they are given in relation to office policy. The scholars conducted interviews with 40 congressional staff members in 1995, and found that they share common characteristics: Self-perceptions of high status and political expertise, professionalism, prestige, autonomy, and a commitment to political and public service.

There is considerable variation in the office employment of PAs among members of the Senate and House of Representatives. In the Senate, hiring assistants is based on the senator's state budget, so the number of assistants in a senator's office can range from 20 to 60 PAs. The manner of their employment and their qualifications also depend on the senator's desire to emphasize legislation or public service. Members of the House of Representatives are limited to a maximum number of 18 full-time PAs and four part-timers (Congressional Management Foundation, 2011).

As there are differences in social media use among politicians with different profiles, there are also differences in the ways that their PAs use the Internet. For example, many PAs were frustrated that members of Congress did not use the Internet sufficiently and thought that the use of the Internet should be increased, especially in relation to interactive actions: Blogs, video calls, and personal sites (Congressional Management Foundation, 2011). Another study found that many British MPs were dissatisfied with the levels of their PAs' Internet knowledge, believing that the staff should undergo further training in this regard (Williamson, 2009).

In Israel, before 2015, every MK was legally entitled to employ up to two PAs, one professional PA (with a relevant academic degree, or a minimum of four years of experience) and one administrative PA (Ben-David, 2011). In 2015, due to a legal amendment, the maximum number of PAs per MK rose to three. In addition, MKs who serve as committee chairpersons or who hold ministerial positions are now entitled to a maximum number of four PAs. Israeli MKs have a special *public engagement* budget, which is designated for costs: PA employment, website maintenance, social media activity, and other such services. Formally, Knesset PA status is not defined by law but, rather, is determined by the House

Committee's decisions. However, the committee has never specified the nature of the PA's role and what their duties are (Shperman, 2010).

Usually, there is no clear distinction between the communicative and other parliamentary functions of the PAs and no specific role defined for them. In most cases, at least one of the PAs is responsible for communications, public relations, and spokesmanship. One of the greatest PA challenges is to work with MPs who have little media experience. When the MP has professional media experience, the PA's role is mainly technical and is largely intended to convey the MP's words (Saranga, 2001).[3]

Wandhoefer, Thamm, and Mutschke (2011) found that in Germany, PAs focused on social media updates for their MPs. However, this study's interviews stressed a major issue: The PAs write on behalf of their MPs on their official social media accounts, mostly without assigning their own names to the text, except in specific cases. The rationale of assigning PA names when they are personally writing on the MP's behalf is that this avoids misleading the public as users may otherwise think they are interacting with the parliamentarians themselves while they are actually engaging with their staff. As social media engagement requires intensity, it cannot be assigned to the MPs themselves due to lack of time. Most MPs were highly aware of the social media authenticity issue. Nevertheless, in attesting to the ethical problem, PAs emphasized their reluctance to expose users to the fact that they do not interact with the MPs themselves but, rather, with their staff members although most users are probably aware of that practice. Furthermore, previous studies conducted in Israel have found that when PAs wrote a post, they almost always used the MP's name and not their own (Haleva-Amir, 2011a; Sabag-Ben Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2019, 2020). However, prominent political commentators were found to assign great importance to direct communication with the MPs themselves rather than to communication with their PAs (Zeltzer-Volshtein, 2017).

Members of the Bundestag determine what is relevant to their parliamentary work, and they, therefore, determine the character and number of PAs: Clerks, secretaries, consultants, researchers, and so on. The Bundestag PAs are not a part of the administrative system (Ben-David, 2011); each MP chooses how much to set aside from the office budget for these PAs. These MPs also determine the professional skills and prior knowledge required of their PAs, employing them directly through a contract that is made exclusively between the MP and the PA.

Regarding new media use, PAs must know which channels to use (and how to use them) to maximize the MP's success (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2011). As such, it is very important to recruit staff with prior experience or training in the field. Lack of training can be extremely problematic, especially when a multitasking PA has an MP who does not understand the operation of a Facebook account (Tenscher, 2014). Notably, prior knowledge of traditional public relations will not, by itself, necessarily contribute to an understanding of online operations (Pattison, 2009). MPs themselves argue that a lack of staff and training are the main obstacles between them and the effective operation of their social media channels (The Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2012) MPs thus tend to be self-reliant on social media operations, especially

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[3] Note that this has not changed historically.

when their personal character tends toward perfectionism (Lev-On, Sabag-Ben Porat, & Lehman-Wilzig, 2017, Sabag-Ben Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2020, 2021).

Interaction Patterns on Social Media Between Parliamentarians and the Public

The current decade has seen politicians flooding social media as they have gradually perceived the importance and advantages of these compared with personal websites, especially Facebook, as the fastest way to partner with the public (Larsson, 2020).

Social media enable the circumvention of both traditional media gatekeepers and political institutions while addressing the public in an unmediated manner (Lev-On & Haleva-Amir, 2018). Politicians tend to use social media platforms, not only during electoral campaigns (Vissers & Stolle, 2014) but also during the whole period of their incumbency, though less extensively (Haleva-Amir, 2011b, 2013, 2016; Larsson, 2016).

Some of the main goals of Facebook, as a political platform, are to increase a politician's popularity, create a sense of public visibility, and run a permanent campaigning activity (Lev-On et al., 2017, Sabag-Ben Porat, Lev-On, & Lehman-Wilzig, 2020; Williamson, 2009). Most politicians testify to their use of Facebook for political purposes, while only a few also mention private matters. Their main intent in updating posts is to display their presence on Facebook rather than to engage in a political discussion, especially since most of them are afraid of any public debate that will become inflamed and out of control (Joshi, Thamm, & Wandhoefer, 2011). Other possible disadvantages are hostility, a lack of public interest, time consumed in monitoring content, subordination to external sites, and the investment of resources in updating content (Goldschmidt, 2011).

As a result, most politicians on social media fail to use the interactive potential of Web 2.0 platforms, sticking to the old routine of top-down messaging and mainly broadcasting information (Chadwick, 2013; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van't Haar, 2013; Haleva-Amir, 2011a, 2013, 2016). They use social media platforms in a *Web 1.5* manner (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009): Regardless of how lively the discussion on their pages is, political actors only seldom respond, let alone engage in a serious exchange of thoughts or opinions. Tromble (2018) explains that politicians are not "punished for" restricting themselves to top-down communication as citizens are not used to receiving responses from political actors. They thus do not feel obliged to respond to citizens' comments. Keller and Kleinen-von Konigslow (2018) indicate that, since political actors choose not to invest many resources in responding to comments, and since users—chiefly lurking (Schneider, von Krogh, & Jager, 2013)—do not call for discussion, the single-sided communication from politicians prompts a single-sided feedback from users. They opine that reactions such as likes, comments, retweets, etc. that followers give, are a clearer representation of users' habits than the prospect of dynamic public political discourse (Keller & Kleinen-von Konigslow, 2018).

As the use of social media has a powerful effect on political participation (Boulianne, 2020), and as their follower networks tend to consist of like-minded peers (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), one can assume that political actors are eager to spread their messages to as many citizens as possible rather than the opposite.

Most studies on politics and social media have focused on different perceptions of social media used by elected officials (Bürger & Ross, 2014; Congressional Management Foundation, 2011; Tenscher, 2014). Several studies have even argued that the connection between the public and politicians on social media is essential to democracy (Sørensen, 2016). In contrast, the actual *process* of creating the politician's presence on Facebook has been neglected.

"Political Discussion Management" Practices on Official Social Media Pages of MPs

Most studies, as previously mentioned in referring to social media political discussion between citizens and politicians, address the issue of MPs' communication styles (e.g., Keller & Kleinen-von Konigslow, 2018) and users' access to MPs (Spierings, Jacobs, & Linders, 2019). However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has referred to the issue of MPs' social media political discussion management practices. Our study addresses this lacuna.

It is important to note that we refer to the concrete, operational level of political discussion management rather than to the level of discourse management, which represents the meta-narrative layer designed as a result of these operational practices (Lebel & Masad, 2021).

During the last decade, we have increasingly witnessed documented incidents of deletion of specific undesired (from the politician's perspective) comments (pertaining to inconvenient issues, rude or insulting comments, tough questions, and so on) as well as the complete blocking of those users from politicians' formal social media pages due to the views they expressed. In addition, politicians can use latent techniques to conceal these unwanted texts, such as the options "hide comment" or "report as spam" (Haleva-Amir, 2018).

Our choice of Facebook stems from the fact that it is still considered the social network that allows for livelier political discussion between the elected and the voters. Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor (2018) mention that all the practitioners interviewed cited that Facebook had the widest audience reach compared with other social media platforms. Additionally, it remains the largest and most diverse platform; candidates use it for many different purposes as it is their biggest source of traffic and engagement (Kreiss et al., 2018). Furthermore, Facebook is not limited by Instagram's visual focus and Twitter's character count. Different platforms have different user bases and different "imagined audiences" (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Kreiss and colleagues (2018) maintain that politicians use Twitter to speak to journalists, whereas Facebook's use is to reach, engage, and mobilize a more expanded audience. We thus found that Facebook was a more suitable arena when studying political discussion management practices.

We assume that discussion management practices reflect the censorship and tolerance of attitudes to the ongoing political discussion on the page. As the persons who actually administer the official accounts of the MPs are the PAs, receiving information regarding their daily routine discussion management practices can reveal, even if indirectly, their MPs' attitudes toward political engagement on their formal pages. While reading users' comments and responding to them reflect a more tolerant and pro-discussion attitude, blocking users and deleting comments both reflect censorship and an anti-discussion attitude.

We have therefore also referred to three factors: Gender, political perception (liberal or conservative), and socioeconomic perception. In a previous study (Sabag-Ben Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2021), we found that there was a correlation between PAs' socioeconomic ideology and their attitude toward engagement with the public. The greater the PA's socioeconomic ideology tends toward social welfare, the higher the level of liberal perception and engagement (Sabag-Ben Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2021). As this is a comparative research project, its findings will enable a comparison among three countries: Germany, Israel, and the United States.

Research Questions

RQ1:   *What are the PAs' political discussion management practices for MPs' official pages?*

RQ2:   *What are the differences in the political discussion management practices of PAs in Germany, Israel, and the United States?*

RQ3:   *Do demographic factors, including gender, political perception, and the socioeconomic perception of PAs, influence PAs' political discussion management practices?*

Participant Recruitment Limitations

The participant recruitment process was lengthy and complex, and it entailed problems along the way. First, we sent individual messages via Facebook Messenger to all the MPs who were then in office in each of the three parliaments, requesting that the official page moderator answer the attached questionnaire. Unfortunately, due to Facebook's platform design, these messages automatically reached Facebook Messenger's "Other" folder rather than its main inbox. Consequently, most MPs did not see it at all. Furthermore, applying to all of the MPs via Facebook Messenger, we found that many of them had removed the feature that enabled the receiving of messages, thus rendering it impossible to send them a message at all. This is a very interesting collateral finding that symbolizes the representatives' unwillingness to engage with users. As a result, we opted for an alternative, and we sent them the questionnaire by e-mail. After retrieving the email addresses of Israeli Members of Parliament (MKs) from the Knesset website, we contacted them and received a 47% response rate (56 of 120). Germany's Bundestag website did not include an e-mail address list. However, we went to their personal websites and sent them the questionnaire via their site's feedback form, indicating that the questionnaire was intended exclusively for PAs, advisers, or spokespersons. The response rate was small, with a total of 53 of 709 (7%) PAs responding. In the United States, there were no representative e-mail addresses listed, and there was no way to communicate through their sites. Due to a heavy load of messages, only people who lived in the same district as the congressperson could contact him/her through the site. To reassure ourselves about this, we carried out an authentication process, which required detailing a zip code on entering. Ultimately, we were only able to obtain responses from 32 PAs of 538 (6%).

It must be noted that although we guaranteed complete anonymity, the PAs in all three countries were very cautious about answering the questionnaire as it dealt with personal aspects and sensitive interactions between them and their MPs as well as the relationships among staff members. This set up

another obstacle, which reduced the questionnaire response rate: Many respondents did not answer certain questions; others started to respond and then immediately left. This made it difficult to conduct multivariate regressions, which could only be performed with fully answered questionnaires. Notwithstanding this, and as this is a pioneering study, it is still worthwhile despite its sample size limitations.

Method

The three test case countries, Germany, Israel, and the United States, were chosen according to the following parameters: All three countries are democratic and liberal states that share an equivalent democracy index grade. However, each of them is situated on a different continent (it should be stressed that this has been done only for sampling purposes as these states do not serve as designated representatives of the entire continent), as well as have different sizes of population and parliament. The questionnaire was initially drafted in Hebrew. Translations into English and German were intended to increase the response rate, and it went through a validation process.

Closed quantitative questionnaires were sent to PAs from Israel, Germany, and the United States, as follows: Hebrew questionnaires were sent to all the PAs of MKs. German questionnaires were sent only to the Bundestag PAs since the Bundesrat's (upper house's) members are not elected by the public. English questionnaires in the United States were sent solely to the House of Representatives' PAs due to their number compared with the equivalent number of PAs in the Senate, as mentioned earlier. Requests indicated that the questionnaires were intended exclusively for PAs, advisers, or spokespersons.

This study is part of a larger project. The questionnaires thus surveyed a variety of issues, some of which, including the current ones, have never before been researched. For this article, a cluster of discussion management practices was surveyed. The cluster included the following practices: Reading user comments, responding to user comments, deleting opposing comments, deleting curses or inappropriate-language comments, and blocking users. While the first two statements reflect a pro-discussion attitude that aims to encourage public engagement, the last three reflect an anti-discussion attitude that aims to censor uncomfortable responses rather than address them. It is important to say that it is *not* within the remit of the study to address what should be granted free speech immunity and what erased immediately. These dilemmas deserve a lengthy and elaborate discussion since they involve social, ethical, and legal questions that we do not presume to answer in this article.

The internal reliability of the questionnaire was high; internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was $a = .91$; the reliability of each index separately was also high. The reliability of the pro-discussion and anti-discussion levels was $a = .83$ and .95, respectively. To ensure actual reliability, several reversed statements in each index were added.

We stipulated that respondents could answer these questions anonymously, and neither their identity nor that of their MPs would be divulged—a critical element, as many PAs expressed their unease with such sensitive questions being related to their MPs and the scope of the public communication in which the latter were (or were not) involved.

Testing the questionnaire's structural validity through a pilot study was not feasible, given the difficulty of obtaining responses, as each potential PA respondent was extremely busy and, as mentioned above, the PAs were also quite hesitant to answer. The questionnaire's content, therefore, was validated by three scholars who work in this research field.

During the study, we developed a two-sided scale, on which each country was situated twice, according to its positive and negative political discussion management practices. Practices that are expressed as reading responses and responding to users point to a pro-discussion attitude, while practices that block users and delete responses point to an anti-discussion attitude.

The questionnaire's statements were based on an ordinal scale of 6 degrees so that the informants would not automatically choose the default middle degree, which would have indicated neutrality. According to the indexed responses of both the pro-discussion statements and the anti-discussion statements, we created two separate averages for each country and then placed these on the scale to develop a broad picture of the nature of the political discussion management practices on MPs' official social media pages in a given country.

In addition, multivariate regression was conducted to examine whether age, gender, political perception, and socioeconomic perception of both PAs and their MPs influenced the nature of these discussion management practices. Each factor (variable) was tested separately against the dependent variables: The level of pro-discussion and the level of anti-discussion.

Findings

Table 1 details all the pro- and anti-discussion statements and their relative figures. These suggest that the PAs perceive themselves to be pro-discussion while operating their MPs' social media accounts rather than anti-discussion. The mean results of the pro-discussion statements are relatively high, and they range between 4.05 and 5.11 on a scale of one to six, while the anti-discussion statements' mean results range between 1.49 and 3.31. PAs assert that they try to be continuously and regularly involved despite the obvious obstacles that arise from having to deal with a flood of reactions.

The rather low means of the anti-discussion practices may also be supportive of the notion that a *free speech arena* assertion is held by the PAs. As a result, the vast majority of PAs strongly objected to the statement "I delete oppositional comments or those that make stern criticism." The 1.49 mean indicates that almost none of the informants admitted deletion, essentially claiming that they were completely open to opposing positions.

Concurrently, a significant positive attitude toward blocking users and deleting comments illustrates the prevalence of this practice. A mean of 2.45 was reported by the PAs who said that they block users. This indicates the normalization and legitimacy of this practice in the eyes of the informants. This figure indicates how often this practice is used among the PAs. The same applies to the practice of comment deletion (2.57). It seems that PAs perceive the practices of blocking users and comment deletion as an intermittent necessity. However, these figures contrast with PAs' positions on the issue

of "oppositional comment deletion." This is perceived as being a very problematic practice, which PAs oppose, and hence, it demonstrates the lowest mean (1.49). The last finding is very important as it presents a tolerance scale, differentiating the unavoidable procedural actions to which the PAs are committed from the "oppositional comments" deletion practice from which they try to refrain. PAs perceive themselves to be the facilitators of a diverse political discussion although they fully understand how they should manage the page. They consider the practice of deleting oppositional reactions to be the gagging and curbing of political free speech, thereby viewing it as a much more negative and draconian measure than all other practices. This can be explained by their normative image making. They do not want to be perceived as censors, so they renounce this action. The practical "deletion paradox," through which deleting mundane comments and blocking trolls seem both inevitable and necessary whereas deleting opposing comments seems to be both improper and negative, reflects both a concern for their image and a highly tolerant and pro-discussion stand. We want to emphasize that as this is a pioneering study, the findings are preliminary and descriptive.

Table 1. The Mean of the Statements in the Discussion Practices Questionnaire.

Pro-Discussion	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
I try to read all the comments on the page	1	6	4.54	1.366
I try to answer all the comments on the page	1	6	4.05	1.649
I am in favor of trying to allow diverse discussions	1	6	5.11	1.220

Anti-discussion	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
I block users on the Facebook page	1	5	2.54	1.260
I delete comments on the Facebook page	1	5	2.57	1.214
I block "trolls"	1	6	2.81	1.266
I delete oppositional comments or those that make stern criticism	1	4	1.49	.870
I erase curses	1	6	4.70	1.450
I will delete a post we have already published if we regret it	1	6	3.31	1.348

Next, we divided the average results of PA stances on each statement by country, and we placed them on a two-sided scale on which each country was situated twice, according to its positive and negative political discussion management practices. As shown in Figure 1, there is indeed an inverse relationship between political discussion management practices that are pro-discussion and those that are anti-discussion. Subsequently, the more PAs support open discussion, aim to read posts, and respond to comments, the less they block users and delete comments. The twofold scale gives a broad picture of the nature of political discussion management practices on the MPs' social media accounts in each of the countries.
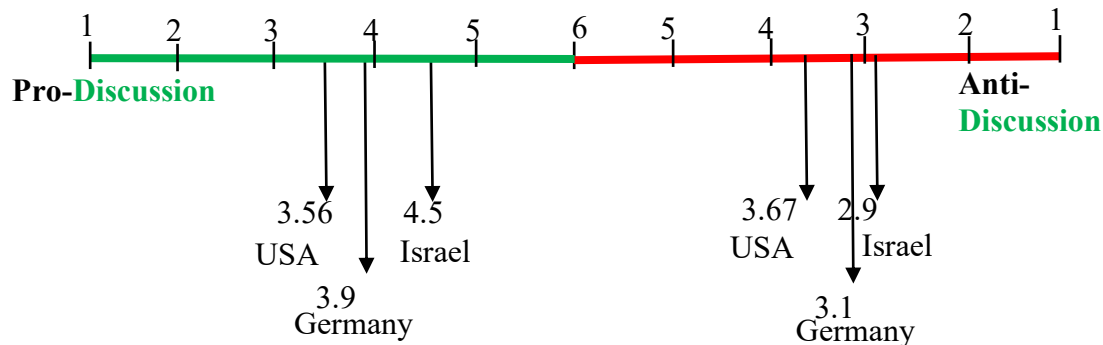
Figure 1. Overall results for discussion practices by country.

In comparing the countries, the scale shows that PA discussion practices in the United States are the lowest, thus showing it to be the least tolerant country of the three. Hence, the United States is the country in which political discussion management practices on MPs' social media accounts are shown to be the most anti-discussion and the least pro-discussion. Israel is the most tolerant country in terms of political discussion management practices and has been found to be the least anti-discussion and the most pro-discussion country, while Germany is situated between the United States and Israel. When illustrating the nature of the relationships between politicians and the public, while outlining their strengths and weaknesses, these findings enable a better understanding of what happens in actuality in each of the countries in this respect. For instance, in the case of the United States, it seems that despite the high standing that free speech has as a constitutional right, it does not necessarily serve as a guiding principle when referring to political discussion on representatives' official social media accounts.

After placing each country on the scale, according to its average scores for pro- and anti-discussion practices, we performed a multivariate regression on several independent variables to test whether they influenced the nature of political discussion management practices and could therefore serve as predictors. Our presupposition was that, in most cases, PAs share the same stances as the MPs for whom they work. The variables examined were socioeconomic position, political position, PA gender, MP gender, PA age, and MP age.

The multivariate regression results indicate that none of the variables are shown to be either predictive or significant. That is, demographic variables such as age and gender cannot predict the nature of political discussion practices. Furthermore, there is no connection between socioeconomic and political positions and the practices of tolerance or censorship. Even variables that we thought would have an effect, such as a tendency toward liberalism/conservatism, are found to have no effect on the discussion practices on social media. That is, tolerance is not necessarily more liberal, and the effects on the nature of the actions are probably not personal but, rather, they are affected by the specific political culture and what is customary in that country, as well as among other MPs.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings reveal that the countries' positions on both sides of the scale are exact mirror images: The greater the pro-discussion, the less the anti-discussion, and vice versa. Israel presents a tolerant political discussion as being the most "pro-discussion" (4.56) and the least "anti-discussion" (2.9) country of all three of the countries. The United States presents as having a rather censorial practice as it is positioned as the most "anti-discussion" country (3.67) and as the least "pro-discussion" (3.56), whereas Germany is in between the two (3.9 pro-discussion; 3.1 anti-discussion).

This is not as obvious a conclusion as it may seem to be at first glance as the issue of managing a social media political discussion is not bipolar but, rather, is multivariate. For example, a PA may read user comments and even try to respond and engage in troll blocking on a daily basis. The findings raise the question of the differences among countries. In other words, how can we explain the differences in the political discussion management practices of Germany, Israel, and the United States? Multivariate regression has proven that demographic variables, such as age and gender, cannot predict the nature of political discussion management practices. Furthermore, no connection has been found between socioeconomic and political positions and the practices of tolerance or censorship.

One of the parameters according to which we have chosen our case study countries was their population size. The United States, Germany, and Israel represent three different types of population sizes. Israel has the smallest population (approximately 8 million people), Germany is in the middle, with a population of 83 million people, and the United States has the largest population (approximately 327 million people). Another parameter relates to the parliament's size in terms of the number of parliamentarians. Here, we see different proportions. Israel has the smallest parliament (120 MKs), Germany's Bundestag is the largest, with 709 seats (Germany's electoral system incorporates relational and proportional systems and therefore integrates the Israeli parliament's features, as well as that of the U.S. Congress), and the U.S. Congress has 535 seats between both houses: The House of Representatives (435) and the Senate (100). The impact of these parameters on political discussion management practices is twofold:

1. The level of engagement between MPs and their constituents on social media.
2. The practical aspects of this engagement—PA work overload.

In terms of engagement, the smaller the population, the better it is for the MP to maintain a more positive connection with social media users, thus trying to prevent antagonism on their part. User blocking and comment deletion practices will be much more noticeable in a country where the number of followers of the most popular politicians reaches a maximum number of several hundred thousand compared with a country in which the maximum number of followers amounts to millions. The former case requires the practice of more tolerant discussion as one's followers can monitor one's actions more closely than they can in the latter case.

This conclusion resonates with Lilleker and Koc-Michalska's (2013) study of legislators' modes of communication, suggesting that proactive communicators who offer participatory opportunities are more likely to build an online following. Hence, it is not only that MPs' activities on social media are of importance

to both sides but also their discussion management practices. While deletion and blocking practices are difficult to track and detect when there is a million-scale audience size, these will be much more apparent where there are audiences of a much smaller scale.

Practically speaking, PAs' political discussion management practices (writing posts on behalf of the MPs, responding to users' comments, keeping a *clean* discussion, blocking users, and deleting comments) are much more difficult to perform in a country with a large population while the work overload is greater. In such a situation, discussion practices may have a more urgent nature as PAs are sometimes compelled to respond hastily to control and manage the discussion, whereas a country with a small population may have a lower traffic rate. Although only a few people in the MP's office are responsible for these operations, surely, the level of activity of a country with a population of several hundred million will be more intense than that of a country with a population of just a few million.

However, this does not have to be the case. Public engagement on social media is not only a matter of population size but, rather, results from a variety of reasons. This deserves a lengthy, separate discussion. We can see that issue-based discussions on social media platforms remain the exception rather than the rule (Kalsnes et al., 2017). Another interesting conclusion refers to PAs' professional and normative self-perception. Exposing the deletion paradox suggests that PAs depict themselves as moderators and facilitators of diverse and varied political discussions rather than as online censors, thereby trying to distance themselves from the practice of deleting oppositional comments. Lack of transparency in moderation practices, therefore, can breed distrust and suspicion between facilitators and users as well as hinder potential learning among those who break the participation rules (Schwartz, 2015).

One of the most distinct conclusions of the study relates to the importance of the intermediary level in influencing the nature of the MPs' discussions with the public on their official social media venues. Although the MP sets the tone for a tolerant or intolerant discussion management attitude, on an hourly basis, it is the PA who practically manages and moderates the discussion, blocks trolling, and maintains an appealing and engaging conversation. As a result, PAs are greatly responsible for the practices and appearance of online political discussions on MPs' official accounts on social networks. The effect of PAs as the agents who, in most cases, operate the social media pages of MPs is undervalued. They constitute a group that has been scientifically overlooked, and their power has not been properly grasped. Moreover, PAs hold real decisive political power over their MPs. In fact, at least where the online sphere is concerned, they are the MPs' proxies, and the practices they use, or do not use, may determine their MPs' political futures. Even so, in most cases, PAs work according to the "commander's spirit." The PAs aim to implement their MPs' policy by following their "imagined" steps. Nevertheless, they are fully aware that the notion of MPs exclusively operating their own social media accounts is unrealistic (Lev-On et al., 2017).

The practical implications of the study call for further involvement by MPs, which may improve political discussion on both sides, lower "anti-discussion" practices, and advance "pro-discussion" practices, as follows: Currently, parliamentarians use social media primarily as permanent campaigning platforms, while public engagement is just a by-product. However, the political discussion that is reflected on these official pages greatly contributes to the ongoing efforts of MPs and their staff to maintain a positive impression.

Assuming that some of the problems of managing political discussions on MPs' official social media accounts stem from their inadequate involvement (Lev-On et al., 2017), their reluctance to be actively engaged in (or, at least, aware of) the online discussions on their pages creates distrust between them and the public. At present, a downward spiral in an MP's low-level involvement in their official page leads to greater public distrust. This distrust induces more negative discussion, which then requires frequent deletion and user blocking practices.

All the same, the more the MPs' direct communication with the public on social media deepens, the more they become familiar with the public's feelings and desires. Consequently, this enables the MPs to improve their service to their constituency, which, in turn, may lead to greater legitimacy in the public's eyes in relation to the PA-initiated posts and responses, which emanate from an understanding and appreciation of the MPs' legislative workload, which is itself a function of the greater awareness of the public discussion on their page.

Future studies might use the two-sided scale for variable comparisons: Countries, parties within a specific country, in the constituency period—electoral campaign period, two consecutive electoral campaigns, and so on. Furthermore, other variables could be used for multivariate regression, including more general and nonpersonal variables, such as the country's media freedom index, various economic variables, and social metrics variables, to predict the nature of political discussion management practices in the country. The findings may be of assistance to the MPs themselves as well as in improving their social media engagement with the public.

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