"He's Got His Own Sea":
Political Facebook Unfriending in the Personal Public Sphere

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This article explores the meaning of political unfriending and proposes the concept of the personal public sphere. Interviews with Jewish Israeli Facebook users who unfriended during the Israel–Gaza conflict of 2014 show unfriending to be a form of boundary management for the self in conditions of networked sociality. They shed light on deeply rooted perceptions of the "networkedness" of society as a fundamental organizing principle for the self and collective. Thus, we conceptualize unfriending as exercising sovereignty over one's personal public sphere while also acknowledging that everyone else has their own personal public sphere too. The concept of the personal public sphere accounts for a crucial feature of politically motivated unfriending: the dissonance between the justifications for unfriending and the act itself.

Keywords: Facebook, unfriending, defriending, disconnection, political conversation, social media, personal public sphere

The summer of 2014 saw a six-week-long flare-up in the ongoing violent conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. As with all major political events nowadays, social media played an important role throughout the fighting, and Israeli Facebook users' news feeds were dominated by content pertaining to the conflict. The mainstream media devoted a great deal of coverage to Facebook, which is by far the most popular social media platform in Israel, and to what was seen to be an unprecedented wave of politically motivated Facebook unfriending.

Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 Jewish Israeli Facebook users, this article explores the meaning of political Facebook unfriending for those who do it, and in doing so proposes the concept of the *personal public sphere*. This new theoretical concept was suggested by comments made by interviewees. One spoke about "other people's public spheres," and another explained that he had unfriended because of content he did not want "in my public sphere." This oxymoron is surprisingly productive, and paraphrased as the personal public sphere, it helps explain why Facebook users unfriend certain Friends (we use capital-F *Friends* to refer to Facebook ties). It also advances the emerging literature on disconnectivity (Light, 2014; Light & Cassidy, 2014) and unfriending (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015;

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Schwarz & Shani, 2016; Sibona & Walczak, 2014). Additionally, the concept of the personal public sphere is an attempt to theorize the kind of communicative space that is opened up for political discussion on social network sites (SNSs), and especially Facebook. In this regard, we see it as building on concepts such as the networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006), the private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010), and personal publics (Schmidt, 2014).

In what follows we first position our research in the context of online boundary management, disconnectivity and unfriending, and theories of online public spheres. These will be the theoretical foundations on which we construct the concept of the personal public sphere as the communicative space in which political unfriending is carried out. We then describe the methods for our data collection and analysis. When presenting our findings, we focus on the posts and status updates that led to unfriending— what was said, how it was said, and when it was said—before showing that these crucially interact with who said it. The findings lead us to formulate the novel concept of the personal public sphere, whose dimensions we articulate in the final sections of this article.

Background

Boundaries and Disconnectivity

In his classic text on boundary maintenance, Barth (1969) stated that "interaction both requires and generates a congruence of codes and values" (p. 16). Therefore, it is not surprising that the context collapse on SNSs (boyd, 2008) demands enhanced regulation of boundaries; put differently, the "increased socio-technical mediation" brought about by Facebook "challenges individuals to define and manage new boundaries" (Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012, p. 771). We conceive of unfriending as part of this online boundary management.

Boundary regulation on SNSs has primarily been researched in the context of privacy rather than identity construction (e.g., Karr-Wisniewski, Wilson, & Richter-Lipford, 2011; Malinen, 2015; Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012). Some scholars have addressed questions of personal and collective identity construction, but mainly through the prism of impression management (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Maoz, 2015; Vitak, Blasiola, Litt, & Patil, 2015), the imagined audience (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak et al., 2015), or context collapse (boyd, 2008). However, the dominant theoretical perspective has been that of privacy rather than collective identity construction. Other work on boundary regulation has focused on the creation of homogeneous discursive arenas such as filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) and the creation of echo chambers (Sunstein, 2009).

In other words, existing research into boundary regulation on SNSs has dealt with users' output (their personal profiles, their appearance on their Friends' news feeds, etc.) on the one hand and input (the content they are exposed to on their own news feeds) on the other, termed by Karr-Wisniewski et al. (2011) as "outward-facing" and "inward-facing territories" (p. 3), respectively. Both of these approaches focus on the news feed but without paying sufficient attention to the feature of Facebook (and other SNSs) that underlies it and structures it, namely, the Friends list, which, as this article progresses, will be shown to be crucial for understanding political unfriending. More specifically, we shall see how one's Friends list is an

important part of one's Facebook identity and that, sometimes, questions of who knows what about me are less important than the issue of with whom I am connected.

This study contributes to a growing literature on disconnectivity in the context of social media (Karppi, 2011; Light, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). As Light (2014) observed, our use of SNSs cannot be fully understood without reference to disconnection, if only because we do not Like all of the content we consume and do not create online ties with everyone we ever meet. "Connection," argues Light, "cannot exist without disconnection" (p. 159); the ability to disconnect is what gives our connections meaning. Accordingly, Light ultimately argues that disconnection "is just as fundamental to our understanding of what SNSs can be and how we make sense of them" (p. 159). Or as Gutierrez Lopez and Ovaska (2013) put it, "unsociability is an integral part of 'being social'" because "people use the unsocial features [unfriending, blocking, etc.] to manage their self-presentation and privacy concerns" (p. 6) on SNSs. Given Facebook's position as the largest social network site, unfriending has attracted particular attention (Bode, 2016; Gutierrez Lopez, 2012; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Schwarz & Shani, 2016; Sibona, 2014b; Sibona & Walczak, 2011; Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017) and is the focus of this article.

Questions of social media unfriending are never far from issues of politics. Both Sibona (2014b) and Pew Research Center (2014) point to the expression of polarizing views as a central reason for Facebook unfriending (see also Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015), whereas Fix (2013) and John and Dvir-Gvirsman (2015) have shown that the unfriender's distance from the political center is a predictor of politically motivated unfriending. Some scholars have thus focused specifically on unfriending in contentious contexts (see esp. Fox & Warber, 2015; Grevet, Terveen, & Gilbert, 2014; John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Kwak, Chun, & Moon, 2011; Zhu, Skoric, & Shen, 2016). More recently, Schwarz and Shani (2016) have reported on the findings of their interviews with Jewish Israeli Facebook users' unfriendings during the Israel–Gaza conflict of 2014. Their argument is that Facebook's "algorithmic structure" produces "the collapse of imagined homogeneity" (p. 406) in our networks by confronting us with alternative "group styles" (à la Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003). Rather than promoting networked individualism, argue Schwarz and Shani (2016), the unfriending they analyzed points to an intensification of group-based boundary work, based primarily on the style (rather than content) of other users' contributions. Facebook users unfriend, they posit, in response to the "exposure of hidden political heterogeneity within their social networks" (p. 416).

However, researchers have tended not to acknowledge the dissonance between people's declared aims behind unfriending and the act of unfriending itself. For instance, Sibona (2014a) notes that the reasons his survey participants gave for unfriending "could each be resolved by hiding the offending person's posts" (p. 1712). Gutierrez Lopez and Ovaska (2013) found that focus group participants adopted what they called a "social-over-technical" approach when explaining their unsociable behavior on SNSs, such that users "base their interactions on their social understanding of [Facebook] instead of on its technical capabilities" (p. 1). This leads us to ask whether the objectives of unfriending corresponded with the act itself, and if not, why not. Thus, although this article is about unfriending, it is crucial to recognize that unfriending is not the only form of unsociability enabled by Facebook. Others include hiding, unfollowing, blocking, creating lists, preventing tagging, and more. In fact, we believe that acknowledging this enables us to talk about unfriending more precisely than has previously been the case. The various options for disconnectivity have

different implications for the visibility of Facebook users in one another's feeds.[1] This control over visibility, of both output and input, serves as a central tool in users' shaping of the public sphere, or their spheres, as created in online spaces such as SNSs. These spheres are discussed in the next section.

Public Spheres Online

Students of political communication have long questioned what kind of public sphere the internet has brought about, with virtually all discussion taking its lead from Habermas (1991). Although he was not the first to use the term, Yochai Benkler's (2006) work on the networked public sphere has been especially influential (see esp. chapter 7). For him, the key elements of the networked public sphere are a new "network architecture" and the almost negligible "cost of becoming a speaker" (p. 377). Accordingly, Benkler focused on the emergent blogosphere. More generally, writing about the networked public sphere has looked at ways in which the Habermasian public sphere was going online and what that has meant for communicative power (Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006). This literature, however, has aged somewhat since the emergence of social media, and especially Facebook.

Another important theorization of the public sphere in the digital age is found in the writings of Zizi Papacharissi. She said that "Cyberspace is public and private space" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 20), and developed the notion of the (online) private sphere "to offer an alternative explanation for how people connect to others in contemporary democracies" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. vii). Although our focus is on how people disconnect from others, Papacharissi's work is nonetheless extremely useful in this regard in three main ways. First, Papacharissi describes the private sphere as comprising a "peculiar mixture" of the personal and political, "neither [of which] are prevalent" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 162). Elsewhere she refers to a "private sphere of interaction" as one in which "the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual's personal and private space" (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 244). Second, her emphasis on the autonomy of action within the private sphere is also useful in that it neatly sets up our discussion of unfriending as an expression of sovereignty. Even if people have "recoil[ed] into their mobile and networked cocoons" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 22), they still act according to rules and notions from the broader public sphere, as we shall see. And third, Papacharissi (2010) does not see the individual as isolated, but rather as embedded in a social network comprising other individuals who are each embedded in their own social networks.

It is this idea that has led scholars to question whether we can even talk about *the* public sphere, with Bruns and Highfield (2016) suggesting that there are "diverging yet potentially overlapping publics" (p. 59). Even here, though, the idea of a public is of something you can see from the outside. Schmidt's (2014) concept of "personal publics" takes us closer to the theoretical idea we posit here. Personal publics are "a new kind of publicness which consists of information selected and presented according to personal relevance, shared with an (intended) audience of articulated social ties in a conversational mode" (p. 11). Rojas (2015) points to something similar with the term "egocentric publics," which are a "new type of public, one revolving

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[1] We lack the space to present a detailed account of the differences between unfollowing, unfriending, and blocking, but refer the reader to Facebook's Help Center (www.facebook.com/help).

around social connections" (p. 93), and adds the crucial observation that "our egocentric network is connected to other egocentric networks" (p. 94).[2]

These theories, however, require some rethinking when considered in relation to unfriending. Thus, even though Schmidt (2014) refers to the selection of information, implying some kind of filtering process, his emphasis remains on what users share with their audience. For the personal public sphere, though, what other users share is of greater significance, as it provides important signals concerning their continued membership of the individual's personal public sphere. Furthermore, to Rojas, and indeed to all of those mentioned above, we add the notion of sovereignty: As we shall show, people understand that their personal public sphere intersects with others—or in other words, that other people can see what is going on in their personal public sphere—and this creates a sense of obligation toward one's personal public sphere that goes beyond impression management. In other words, and as will be expanded on as we present our findings, we see Facebook users treating the Facebook news feed not only as a source of content but as a sphere over which they have both power and responsibility: power because they can decide what they see on it, and responsibility because other people's Facebook experiences are impacted by one's own feed. The notion of sovereignty as we use it here suggests that not only are Facebook users interested in controlling inputs or managing their audiences but that they also feel accountable for the content that other people may encounter on their feeds. This is an important feature of intersecting egocentric networks that has not yet been explored.

In this article, we are seeking to make room in an already crowded conceptual space for a new way of thinking about the kind of space that Facebook users feel they inhabit as they manage political disagreement. As we shall show, two main types of justification emerge for unfriending (and not unfriending): one personal in nature, and the other public. We also inquire into users' attitudes toward their personal public sphere: What rights do they have over it? And, innovatively, what obligations? Have social media users internalized these views of personal publics or egocentric networks, and if so, how?

Method

This study follows the principles of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which is particularly appropriate when wishing to understand the meanings that social actors attribute to their actions. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 Jewish Israeli Facebook users who had unfriended during the weeks of the conflict in 2014. We recruited the first wave of interviewees through our own separate networks, and we also enlisted the assistance of a market research company that specializes in recruiting focus group participants. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes and workplaces or in cafes chosen by the interviewees. Two interviews were conducted over Skype. The interviews lasted between 35 to 90 minutes, with most lasting around an hour. Interviewees' informed consent to participate in this study was obtained. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were imported into MAXQDA for coding and analysis. Interviews were analyzed through a

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[2] Our focus is on the kind of space people (feel like they) occupy when discussing politics on Facebook, but Lüders' (2008) concept of "personal media" also speaks to the tension addressed here in that it raises the question of whether users are involved in interpersonal or mass communication.

process of multiple readings, by each author individually and the authors together. Interviewees' comments were coded, and then the codes were collected into families of codes, following the stages of coding known as open and axial coding, respectively (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

John and Dvir-Gvirsman's (2015) survey of Jewish Israeli Facebook users who unfriended during the conflict showed that people with more extreme political views had a propensity to unfriend. This guided our decision to seek interviewees who strongly self-identified with either the left or the right political wing in Israel.[3] We sought equal numbers of men and women (eight interviewees were men, 10 were women); ensured we had interviewees of a range of ages (24–63 years, average 41), levels of education, and incomes; and ensured that the sample covered at least some of the spectrum of ethnicities among Israel's Jewish population. We also sought roughly equal numbers of left and right wingers, though the sample includes slightly more interviewees who identify as left wing. All names and some occupations have been changed.

Findings

In this section we lay the empirical grounds for the concept of the personal public sphere, led by what the interviewees said about the content that drove them to unfriend some of their Facebook Friends. We present the participants' accounts in terms of what was said, how it was said, when it was said, and importantly, who said it. These groups of findings are presented with reference to two kinds of justification: on the one hand, the subjective and personal feelings and opinions of the interviewees (as they expressed them), and on the other, claims of a more absolute, objective, and public nature. However, because these two forms of justification are inextricable, we also show how they operate together.

Before that, however, let us note that all of the interviewees expressed a general belief in the power of dialogue and talk to overcome differences. Accordingly, many[4] of them said they had unfriended when they felt that dialogue was futile (cf. Grevet et al., 2014). For instance, Dima justified unfriending someone on the grounds that "no matter what I did . . . you couldn't budge him a millimeter." More specifically, Shlomo said, "I can't persuade someone on Facebook that it's not OK to say that a good Arab is a dead Arab. Not a chance." The inability to engage in discussion described by these and other interviewees would seem to absolve them of what they themselves perceive as the requirement of inclusivity.

An important part of our argument is that political Facebook unfriending is mainly about managing input to one's Facebook space. Thus, although some interviewees did talk about their Facebook audiences, for the majority of them, boundary regulation was not about impression management, context collapse, and privacy, but rather was aimed at controlling who would be allowed to participate in the discourse in what we are calling their personal public sphere. As Stas said, "This is *my* Facebook. I'm not obliged to let every

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[3] In Israel, "left wing" refers to people who hold dovish views on the Israel–Palestine conflict, whereas "right wing" refers to people with hawkish views.

[4] We do not specify exactly how many interviewees. This is because our sample is not a representative one, so the precise proportion of interviewees who made this or that point is not entirely pertinent.

single person have their say." Indeed, Facebook was often perceived as a personal, domestic space, or at least as a semiprivate arena. Alongside direct references to "on my page" (Shiran) or to the enemy being "inside my Facebook" (Hamutal), interviewees referred to Facebook as "my space" (Maya), "my environment" (Michal), "my world" (Eran), and "my home" (Mirit).

Not only is the online space created by Facebook conceptualized as an extension of the home or of the self, but the physical spaces in which the interviewees used Facebook were also referred to. Moran, for instance, said that "I didn't want to see that in my house, on my phone, on my computer, in my space." Hamutal made a similar point by comparing the Israel–Gaza conflict to previous wars: "It got to the point where you say, hang on, in the Six Day War [1967], the Yom Kippur War [1973], they went off to fight the enemy, the enemy wasn't inside their home." Given that her husband was serving as a reservist at the time and was not at home, Hamutal found this situation intolerable.

This theme of Facebook being both like a home and a platform that is often accessed when one is at home invites the use of metaphors of cleanliness (Schwarz & Shani, 2016, note this too). For example, Hadas stressed her desire to "clean him from my Facebook," and Michal explained her unfriending by stating that "I need my environment to be cleaner." Related to these metaphors of cleanliness and domestic space was the use of versions of the phrase, "I didn't want to see it anymore," among nearly all of the interviewees. For instance, Itzik explained his unfriending by saying, "I didn't want to see that woman's posts." However, it was put most strikingly by Liora, a religious community worker: "There's this kind of verbal diarrhea on Facebook, so you say to yourself, why do I need to see this? And also I deeply believe in *shmirat eynayim* [literally, guarding your eyes] as a Jewish value." Similarly, several respondents talked about unfriending as simply removing something (or someone) from their lives. For example, Hadas said about the people she unfriended, "I'm not going to fight them. . . . The most I can do is to remove them from my life."

If the interviewees were committed to inclusive dialogue, and if their boundary regulation was especially aimed at preventing "dirty" content getting into a personal space, what did they say about the content that ultimately led them to unfriend? It is to these accounts that we now turn.

What Was Said

Multiple interviewees reported unfriending because of content that went beyond what they considered to be the limits of acceptable discourse. Maya, for example, said that she believes in being exposed to a range of opinions but that "the moment it crosses the line, then it's important not to be exposed to it." Mirit unfriended someone whose writing about the conflict "totally ignored what had brought it all about"; this, according to Mirit, was "unacceptable [and] one-sided."

Some interviewees actually characterized the content that led them to unfriend as lacking content, in that it did not express (what they considered) a coherent view or argument. As Moran put it, "sometimes the content doesn't even have any content." Similarly, Moshe said that he has "no problem hearing other points of view" but that he unfriended someone who had expressed something that he did not consider to be an opinion: "To say that this guy smells, and that guy should be killed . . . that's not an opinion in my book."

These excerpts represent appeals to what the interviewees consider to be objective rules of participation in the public sphere, but the interviewees also talked in more personal terms. For example, Hamutal said that there were "things that I'm not prepared" to have in her news feed. She was not looking to punish the people she unfriended; rather, she said, she simply "didn't want to be exposed to it." Likewise, rather than saying that racist comments are bad, Moran said that she "didn't want to be exposed to . . . racism." In such instances, the interviewee does not say that the content that led them to unfriend was objectively objectionable, but rather that it was not to their liking. The rhetoric here is of personal taste, and the obligation is to one's personal well-being. In contrast to the examples presented in the previous paragraph, these justifications for unfriending refer to Facebook as a private sphere.

Sometimes, though, it was not exactly clear whether interviewees were talking about universal rules or their own personal standards, but this is precisely the point. For example, Liora told us that during the conflict she published a post in which she said:

> It looks like I have to remind people of the rules. Anyone who talks in a way that is racist, misogynist, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, I'm sorry. Even if we've known each other for 25 years and we used to [go to the same kindergarten], it's like . . . our conversation ends here. I mean, there's got to be some rules here.

Here, Liora posits rules for discussion in a public sphere: Interlocutors must refrain from racist, misogynist, and other such types of talk. However, the consequence of violating those rules is the cessation of conversation with Liora, even if there has been a long friendship beforehand. Her rules are not rules for all talk—she is not threatening to report racists to Facebook—but rather they are rules for talk with her. Many of our interviewees demonstrated this mixture between a violation of absolute rules and a violation of personal preferences as the justificatory logic of unfriending. As we shall argue at greater length below, it is this mixture that leads us to suggest the concept of the personal public sphere.

How It Was Said

Interviewees were also concerned with the *form* of their Friends' interventions. Indeed, sometimes what was said was seen as less significant as the way it was said. For instance, Liora mentioned "when there are more than eight exclamation marks," and Michal unfriended someone whose talk she considered to be barely literate, or plebian. It is no coincidence that these are among the more educated of our interviewees, and they are clearly using linguistic ability as a marker of identity and social position.

Other interviewees were harshly critical of styles of talk that they found unpleasant in various ways, talking not in general terms about poor style but in personal terms about their responses to certain styles (Vraga et al., 2015). Eran, for instance, unfriended someone who had written "something about leftists," though he makes it clear that it was not the content that was problematic for him but rather that it had been written "in a disgusting way." Moran protested against people who posted obscenities, and Ran unfriended a woman who had written against Israeli soldiers using "ugly words."

When It Was Said

In addition to what was said and how it was said, the timing of what was being said was also critical. As Mirit put it, "You don't have to change your political opinions . . . but don't come out against your nation during a time of war. . . . During wartime people should lower their profile and be united." This kind of "rallying round the flag" was also conveyed by Dima, who bluntly noted that during wartime "it's better that you keep your mouth shut." These are clear normative statements about the kind of talk that is appropriate for wartime, and they highlight the "public" aspect of the personal public sphere.[5]

Mirit and Dima were quite clear about what should or should not be said when the country is at war, and other interviewees described themselves as having been in a heightened emotional state because of the war and said that this explained why they unfriended. For example, Hamutal's husband had been called up to serve in the reserves and was posted on the Israel–Gaza border, leaving her home alone to look after their five young children. Hamutal said that she is usually a very tolerant person, but during the war she had less tolerance for opposing viewpoints, which she at least partly attributed to "the emotional state I was in at the time." Similarly, Moshe said that "when the people closest to me are in danger on a day-to-day basis, I lose my objectivity."

Here too, then, we can see outward-facing, universal assertions about what may or may not be said while soldiers are active alongside personal statements about how interviewees felt during the weeks of the conflict.

Who Said It

Some of our interviewees' unfriendings had nothing to do with specific content at all and had everything to do with the identities of the unfriendees. Hamutal and Hadas, for instance, were both part of a mutual collective unfriending by Jews and Arabs in their respective places of study and work, and Ran unfriended all of his Arab Friends. For these interviewees, it was enough that someone belonged to the other side in the conflict for them to be unfriended. The flip side of this was that Ran, Hamutal, and Hadas all said that they did not (and would not) unfriend Jewish Friends. For instance, Ran said he would never unfriend another Jew over politics ("No way!" he said); instead, "You deal with it." These instances are of unfriending (or not) having nothing to do with content but functioning solely as the expression of collective (national) identity.

In other instances, collective identity worked the other way round, making Jewish Israelis more exposed to unfriending and Palestinians immune from it. For instance, an in-group figure might be expected to express loyalty and to be held accountable when failing to do so. Mirit, for example, said, "Don't come out against your own people at a time of war. For me it's a kind of betrayal." In this case, a combination of

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[5] It is worth noting that this view was not universally held. Michal, for instance, said: "There are people who think that you shouldn't write things [that are critical of the army or the state] during wartime. And I don't agree with them."

the unfriendee's membership of a collective and the content of that person's utterance provided grounds for unfriending.

In other cases, interviewees refrained from unfriending based on social categorization. Michal and Alexandra said they had not unfriended Palestinian Friends despite their talk on Facebook making them candidates for it according to their rules for participation in their personal public spheres. Michal, showing awareness that "there are always power relations" between Jews and Palestinians in Israel, said: "I let them get away with it. . . . I somehow had more compassion." Alexandra, on their other hand, acknowledged Palestinians' loyalty to their national collective: "I had a higher degree of tolerance [for Arab Friends'] opinions because I would accept [that this is] how they should feel." In both cases, existing social categories softened the interviewees' stances toward the other.

The category of substandard (or lowbrow, vulgar) people (as opposed to similarly described content or form) was also mentioned as a reason for refraining from unfriending. Mirit said, "Some people are less developed in some senses . . . and so I get less angry with them." And Eran said: "He is a substandard [lowbrow] person, so I let him off." In other words, the Friend is excused, but other Friends are held accountable for their utterances. Such instances involved left-wing interviewees not unfriending right-wing Friends, which resonates with the dynamics described above regarding form and social status. Hence, these justifications too are related not only to personal identity but also to deeper issues of social identity. For example, Yael stressed more than once the fact that the people she had unfriended, whom she described as "mainstream" and as talking in clichés, had been significant figures in her life in the past but that "they do not contribute to me anymore . . . I'm not that person anymore." The line here is between the old and new Yael.

Yael's boundary work is suggestive of a new category of relationship that we call *significant weak ties*. A significant weak tie is someone with whom the interviewee is not in regular contact but for whom they nevertheless maintain deep feelings of connection or identification. When a significant weak tie is unfriended, it is the relationship between unfriender and unfriendee that is crucial (as opposed to their collective identities or to the personal identity of the unfriendee), making this kind of unfriending unpredictable and idiosyncratic: We cannot know, or even guess, who someone's significant weak ties will be. Examples from our interviews include Ran unfriending his former army officer, whom Ran described as "like a father" to him; Liora unfriending the brother of a childhood friend; Michal unfriending the daughter of a very close friend of her mother's; Moshe unfriending the nephew of his ex-sister-in-law; and Yael unfriending both a former roommate who had been an influential role model and a deeply admired high school teacher. In other words, the unfriending of significant weak ties cannot be attributed to their belonging to preexisting social categories. The unfriendee will have expressed views that the interviewee found objectionable, but it is the history of the interpersonal relationship that is crucial, not any social characteristic of the unfriendee.

Accordingly, the emotional terminology used to describe unfriending of this kind also differed from that for most acts of unfriending. All of the interviewees who had unfriended a significant weak tie expressed disappointment and surprise after being exposed to the unfriendee's views on Facebook. Alexandra, for example, said that by disappointing her like that, her cousin had "broken the bond" between them. In most

of these instances, unfriending was described as an emotional act; as Liora put it, "It's at the most emotional level. It's like giving the finger." Although most interviewees described feelings of anger in relation to the act of unfriending, these instances of significant weak ties involved heavier emotional baggage and a more significant threat to face (for the interviewees and their unfriendees). As the existing literature addresses mainly strong or weak ties in SNSs, we found the emergence of this unique category substantial to the understanding of disconnective activities. Furthermore, it adds another dimension to the personalness of the personal public sphere.

Discussion: The Personal Public Sphere

This article has presented the reasons that people who have unfriended for political reasons gave for their actions and posits a theoretical concept that can account for our findings. Indeed, the concept of the personal public sphere helps us to account for a crucial feature of politically motivated unfriending, namely, the dissonance between the justifications of and reasons for unfriending that were given to us by the interviewees and the act of unfriending itself. This has two aspects. If the objective is a personal desire not to be exposed to certain content anymore, then unfollowing or hiding afford that outcome, making unfriending seem a step too far.[6] Importantly, almost all of the interviewees were aware of this, and several reported having used the unfollow or hide features to achieve precisely the results that they discussed when asked about unfriending: They hid vegans who posted abattoir images, spammers, and more.[7] Moreover, if the content is reprehensible (because it is hate speech or traitorous), then one could report it, which can ultimately lead to its removal from Facebook (and not just one's news feed or those of one's Friends). In this case, unfriending would appear to fall short. That is, acts such as hide or unfollow seem appropriate to the logic of a private sphere and the right to mold it according to one's personal taste; the act of report, on the other hand, follows the logic of a public sphere, namely the obligation to monitor the maintenance of universal normative rules. Our interviewees, though, appear to be operating in an in-between space, where Facebook users are accountable for the social conduct within their personal public spheres.

However, our interviewees did unfriend. More than that, they explained why they did not unfriend when unfriending seemed a logical option, and they distinguished unfriending from other strategies of disconnectivity. In other words, although we are pointing to a possible inconsistency between interviewees' accounts of their behavior and their behavior itself, we are taking both the accounts and the behavior seriously. Faced with a similar inconsistency, Gutierrez Lopez and Ovaska (2013) proffered the social-over-technical approach, using this term to account for the dissonance between how users talked about their behavior and the actual features of the behavior they chose. In particular, they argued that people's "social understanding" of the features for disconnectivity is more pertinent to their unfriending decisions than

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[6] Unfriending also has the consequence of diminishing one's own voice, but this was very rarely mentioned by interviewees.

[7] We note here that hiding or unfollowing would be insufficient in preventing conflicting Friends from arguing with or offending one another on one's Facebook feed, as non-Friends can still comment on one's posts. To stop that from happening, one would have to block at least one of the parties, which would prevent that person from interacting with me, and therefore with my Friends. The fact that the interviewees unfriended in this situation once more reiterates the hybrid nature of unfriending.

platforms' actual technical capacities. Although sympathetic to this position, we suggest that it nonetheless prompts the question: What are users' social understandings of politically motivated unfriending on Facebook?

Our argument is that political unfriending involves regulating the boundaries of the personal public sphere. The point of regulating these boundaries is to control who is inside one's personal public sphere, and thus able to contribute to political discussion, and who is kept outside. Unfriending can thus be conceptualized as the exercise of sovereignty over the personal public sphere, and specifically as a form of social exclusion.[8]

This, though, leads us to perhaps the most crucial aspect of the personal public sphere: the knowledge that everyone else also has their own personal public sphere, the boundaries of which they have both the right and the obligation to regulate and for which they are accountable, notions that are not mentioned in earlier conceptualizations of personal publics or egocentric networks (Rojas, 2015; Schmidt, 2014). Some of the interviewees made this explicit. Asaf pointed us in the direction of the personal public sphere by describing what he called "my public sphere," and Yael spoke about "other people's public spheres." If unfriending acts only on one's personal public sphere, then it is limited in scope. This was expressed in Asaf's comments about what unfriending does to the unfriendee:

> It's not as if he won't have friends anymore. It's not like he's left behind, say, in the neighborhood by himself and everyone's gone to the beach. No, he's got his own sea. There's as many as you want. No one is left by themselves.

A similar notion was conveyed by Maya, who said of a person she unfriended: "I've got no interest in preventing him from publishing in public. If there's things that he wants to publish—fine. It's not my problem. I, I don't want to see it." In both of these excerpts, the interviewees show that they are aware that unfriending does not detach their unfriendees from their own networks. Moreover, they do not seem in any way put out or upset by this. Echoing this refrain, Hadas said about unfriending: "That's all I could do, because beyond that there's nothing I can do. . . . The most I can do is to get them out of my life." Once they are out of her life, it would seem that what they do is no longer of any concern to her. Mirit similarly said, "At the end of the day, it doesn't do anything to him." The case of Facebook unfriending reveals the thoroughgoing internalization of a network model of sociality, by which we refer to everyday people's conceptualizations of their social ties as networked (on network sociality, see Wittel, 2001).

However, our conception here is not of atomistic individuals, each living in his or her own isolated personal public sphere, but rather of overlapping and intermeshed networks. As Rojas (2015) puts it: "While I experience 'my' public and you experience 'your' public, these publics are ultimately a networked phenomenon" (p. 96). Take Yael, for example, who decided against unfriending a relative so that the relative would continue to be exposed to Yael's views and those of Yael's Friends (in their comments on Yael's posts, in Yael's likes and shares of their posts). As Yael put it:

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[8] We do not view unfollowing as the exercise of sovereignty in the same way because it serves only to filter incoming content.

> Just as I can see the things she writes, it was important for me that she can see what I'm writing, because she obviously doesn't have any other crazy leftists on her feed, so . . . I thought about deleting her but I said I won't delete her if only so that she'll see things from our side.

Here, Yael conceives of herself as a node—or, more accurately, as the only node—connecting her relative to a network full of cross-cutting views (for the relative). If the price of keeping this network intact is remaining Facebook Friends with the relative, it is one that Yael is willing to pay.

Related, interviewees expressed a sense of responsibility for the content presented by their friends on their Facebook pages. Shiran said, "I also don't want my friends to see pages like these that are uploaded on my [Facebook]." Some interviewees were preoccupied with the encounters of various groups within their Friends' lists. Both Moshe and Asaf were concerned for the feelings of their Arab Friends. Moshe said, as part of his reasoning for unfriending, "I've got [Friends] . . . including Arabs." He goes on, "I don't have to be a platform for incitement," a concern also expressed by Asaf and others. This concern frames Facebook, the user's Facebook, as a public sphere over which the user holds responsibility. In a similar vein, Liora said, "It's a kind of feeling that I can't, you know, that you can't just ignore it. It's like if you see something in the street and you carry on walking." As expressed in other parts of her interview, Liora feels obliged to manage the activity on her Facebook feed and profile (and recall her declaration of rules for communication described above). She struggles between the commitment to freedom of expression and the maintenance of open dialogue on the one hand, and the commitment to place normative limits on the discourse on the other. In addition, she expressed the distress caused to her by the extreme utterances she was exposed to and even talked about guarding her eyes as a religious value, as mentioned above, types of justification that point at personal well-being as the grounds for unfriending. Liora's perception of her rights and obligations here demonstrates the unique hybridity emerging from Facebook as a personal public sphere: Liora feels a publicly oriented obligation to monitor the content on her Facebook wall and news feed and thus cannot ignore the goings-on there, and at the same time she has the right to maintain the sphere as a safe space for herself.

Conclusion

In this article we have put forward a new theoretical concept that has heuristic value in understanding people's political behavior within SNSs and that also conveys how Facebook users themselves understand the communicative space in which they are acting when engaging with politics on Facebook. The notion of the personal public sphere also addresses other theoretical issues. First, it takes Facebook users at their moment of listening (Crawford, 2009), positioning them primarily as addressees and not addressors. As such, our emphasis on the boundary regulation carried out by Facebook users is less on what goes out and is much more on what comes in. Second, it shifts focus from the news feed to the Friends list. In their Definition 2.0 of SNSs, Ellison and boyd (2013) highlight the increasingly important role played by the news feed. To be sure, our interviewees spoke a great deal about the content on their feeds and talked about unfriending as a mechanism for filtering content. However, unfriending actually operates on the Friends list. Indeed, one of the contributions of this article is to show that unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking are quite different actions. It is true that they all influence what users see on Facebook, but the kinds of reasons behind

these behaviors differ in important ways that are fundamentally to do with affiliation and relationships, and not (only) content. Observing these behaviors through the prism of the personal public sphere helps us to see this. Third, and related, the concept of the personal public sphere offers a new way of conceiving of the convergence of the public and private on social media in terms of justifications for people's actions (and not in terms of audiences). One's Facebook space is a personal public sphere because of how users justify including and excluding other people from it.

However, this does not mean that all online politics takes place within personal public spheres. Online forums and Facebook groups and pages are out of its scope, as those are spaces that are run by administrators according to public sphere–type rules; they are not personal public spaces in the way that a Facebook news feed is. Also, it is certainly the case that Facebook users sometimes are concerned about issues of privacy and audiences when discussing politics online (Mor et al., 2015; Thorson, Vraga, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2014), raising the question of whether users conceive of a personal public sphere when acting as addressors. The personal public sphere is a concept for networked communication. This raises the question of which social media comprise personal public spheres, and further research is needed in this direction. For instance, how does Twitter compare with Facebook in this regard? Do Twitter users feel accountable for the content on their timelines? Does the nonmutuality of Twitter ties change justifications for muting or unfollowing? We would also suggest asking whether the concept of the personal public sphere applies to discussions on social media that are not about politics, however broadly understood.

Conceiving of Facebook users as operating within a personal public sphere—and conceiving of them as conceiving of themselves as thus operating—helps us understand their varied accounts of unfriending and the very fact that they are so varied. Indeed, some accounts—specifically those that refer to significant weak ties—are thoroughly idiosyncratic. People's accounts of unfriending sometimes sound universal, but they are not universally applied. At the most general level, the concept of the personal public sphere allows us to see politically motivated unfriending as a new form of boundary management for the self in an age of networked sociality. Moreover, it sheds light on people's deeply rooted perceptions of the "networkedness" of society as a fundamental organizing principle of the self and the collective.

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