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Vernacular Politics in New Participatory Media: Discursive Linkage Between Biometrics and the Holocaust in Israel

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In 2017, after vociferous public debate and strong opposition, Israel ratified a law sanctioning establishment of a mandatory biometric database. This study examines online vernacular texts that address this initiative through Holocaust imageries in four participatory platforms: Facebook, Twitter, user comments to journalistic items, and open forums (*N* = 272). Applying discourse analysis to these texts, it asks (1) how participants construct Israel's Biometric Project and how the narratives promoted thereby coalesce into a larger story about the country's surveillance; (2) how this construction shapes the public status of the Holocaust in Israel; and (3) whether and how new media affordances support and encourage these processes. The article corresponds with perspectives that are alternative to the traditional model of the public sphere. Drawing on the concepts of vernacular creativity and cultural citizenship, it conceptualizes the discursive merger of biometrics and the Holocaust as online vernacular politics that attests to civic engagement.

Keywords: biometrics, participatory media, public sphere, civic engagement, vernacular rhetoric, discourse analysis, holocaust

In 2009, the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) passed the Biometric Database Law, sanctioning the issue of biometric ID cards and passports to all Israeli citizens and the establishment of a mandatory database for storing their bodily information (fingerprints and face templates). In March 2017, after a four-year pilot study and several postponements resulting from political controversies and technical challenges, Israel's Minister of the Interior ratified the project.

The plan to establish a centralized biometric database provoked powerful opposition from activists, politicians, intellectuals, and cryptography experts, who pointed to its potential ramifications, including increased surveillance, privacy violation, social sorting, and more. Petitions addressed to the Knesset by 150 scholars and computer scientists in 2009, 2011, and 2015 warned of "the severe threat to human rights and civil liberties" (see Marciano, 2016, p. 53), whereas a 2012 appeal to Israel's High Court of Justice emphasized that "a

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biometric database of all Israeli citizens is a sensitive and powerful . . . means of surveillance and control" (see Marciano, 2018, para. 2).

Since the first days of the project, vigorous public debate has been taking place in different venues in Israel, including traditional and new media. The Holocaust and the rich cultural imaginary that developed around it over the past 50 years in Israel are central in discussions on the topic, based on shared threats of increased surveillance, social sorting, restrictions on civil liberties, and human-rights violations. The discursive linkage between biometric surveillance and the Holocaust not only is intriguing as a political manifestation per se but also, more importantly, illuminates the ways in which vernacular discourse emerges and operates in new participatory media.

The study of vernacular, as detailed below, focuses increasingly on mundane, bottom-up, and informal discursive expressions that challenge and criticize the institutional (Flores, 2009). Although many studies have examined various aspects of vernacular rhetoric (Hauser, 1999), usually in relation to marginalized communities (Ono & Sloop, 1995), online vernacular was largely overlooked (Howard, 2005, 2008 are prominent exceptions), despite the potential of new participatory media for supporting and encouraging vernacular exchanges.

This study examines the discursive interplay among biometric surveillance, Holocaust imageries, and vernacular exchanges in new participatory media. More specifically, it analyzes online vernacular texts that address Israel's Biometric Project through Holocaust motifs in four participatory platforms: Facebook, Twitter, user comments to journalistic articles, and open forums. Applying discourse analysis to these texts, it asks (1) how participants construct Israel's Biometric Project through Holocaust imageries and how the narratives promoted thereby coalesce into a larger story about Israeli surveillance, (2) how online vernacular references to the Holocaust shape its shifting public status in Israel, and (3) whether and how new media affordances support and encourage these processes.

This article consists of four sections. The theoretical framework delineates the historical shift in the Holocaust's public status in Israeli society, reconceptualizing this shift as a process of vernacularization before elaborating on the study of vernacular to explain why participatory media constitute a natural platform for the examination of this process. The methodology section covers issues of sampling, coding, categorization, and discourse analysis. The analysis points to two macro categories, demonstrating how participants discursively construct equivalence between contemporary Israel and Nazi Germany and how they employ temporal–spatial transferences that refer to Nazi Germany to discuss the project's risks. The concluding section draws on two concepts—vernacular creativity and cultural citizenship—to conceptualize the discursive merger of biometrics and the Holocaust as online vernacular politics.

Theoretical Framework

The Shift in the Public Status of the Holocaust in Israeli Society

In the first years of statehood, between 1948 and 1960, Israeli society largely denied and repressed the Holocaust (Zerubavel, 1994). Israel's founding fathers believed that a new state built under hostile geopolitical circumstances must distance itself from the weakness and victimhood associated with the Jewish

people in the Holocaust. Such denial relied on the contrast between the victims—disdained by Israeli leaders for "going like sheep to the slaughter" (Arad, 2003, p. 7)—and contemporary Sabras, who embodied a new Zionist ethos of heroism required for the new state.

Three key events have gradually resolved this contrast, thus changing the public status of the Holocaust in Israel. First, the Eichmann trial in 1961 provided more than a hundred witness survivors with the opportunity to share testimonies and voice traumatic experiences that most Israelis had never heard before (Shapira, 1998). Antipathy toward survivors was replaced thereupon with empathy and identification (Gutwein, 2009). Second, the 1967 Six-Day War exposed Israelis to Arab leaders' threats to eradicate Israel and the Jews (Novick, 2000). For the first time since the Holocaust, Israelis were able to imagine an actual threat (Shapira, 1998) that was realized by the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The war began with a joint surprise attack on Israel by a large Arab coalition, causing numerous casualties and yielding TV footage of Israeli soldiers being taken prisoner. Echoing a denied past, these images emphasized Israel's vulnerability, thus reinforcing identification with the Diaspora (Shapira, 1998; Zerubavel, 1994).

This shift from denial to acceptance to empathy, which Arad (2003) summarizes as "de-tabooization" of the Holocaust, suggests two important points for the current analysis. First, by the end of the 1970s, the Holocaust was not only acceptable or even embraced but was rather "a core element in Israeli identity" (Klar, Schori-Eyal, & Klar, 2013, p. 25), a primary "myth of Israeli society" (Liebman & Don-Yiḥya, 1983, p. 137), and even "Israel's signifier" (Arad, 2003, p. 16). Second, acknowledging Israel's vulnerability, "never again" has surfaced as Israel's new ethos of independence (Gutwein, 2009), eventually becoming a central motif in Israeli public discourse (Klar et al., 2013).

Already a consensual part of Israeli collective consciousness, the Holocaust was subject to increasing politicization and privatization during the 1980s and the 1990s (Segev, 2000). Central to these processes were the 1982 Lebanon War and the First Intifada (Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation) in 1987, during which the Holocaust had been used in discourse originating with the political right and left alike (Ofer, 2004). Whereas Israeli right-wingers were criticized for advancing "self-righteous, xenophobic, and aggressive" (Gutwein, 2009, p. 39) Holocaust memories to legitimize Israel's hawkish foreign policy, leftists adopted sensitive and controversial rhetoric such as Yeshayahu Leibowitz's catchphrase "Judeo-Nazis" (Arad, 2003) to criticize the friction between Israeli soldiers and Arab civilians during the conflicts. In other words, political use of the Holocaust relied on distancing oneself from the nationalized memory of the 1960s and adopting a privatized, more personal version (Gutwein, 2009).

In this specific sense, the Holocaust has been partly desacralized by certain political circles, for whom it ceased to be a unique event reflecting the exclusive and unprecedented suffering of the Jews and turned into a universal experience bearing a humanistic lesson (Ophir, 2005). To some extent, Israeli society has shifted from worshiping the Holocaust to understanding it (Arad, 2003) and using it as a moral platform for discussing other social inequities prevailing in Israeli society (Gutwein, 2009). Many Israelis, however, still consider the Holocaust a unique and incomparable catastrophe that "lies outside, if not beyond, history" (Elie Wiesel, as cited in Finkelstein, 2000, p. 122). Privatized, politicized, and partly desacralized, the Holocaust is now a "paradigmatic event that helps explain the Jewish past and the Israeli present" (Zerubavel, 1994, p. 87).

The next section elaborates on the study of vernacular to explain why the de-tabooization of the Holocaust—the shift from an institutional narrative to a privatized/politicized one—is in fact a process of vernacularization, pointing out the important role that new participatory media can play in the examination of this process.

New Participatory Media as Vernacular

The study of vernacular focuses on everyday mundane and informal discursive interactions through which we construct our lives (Howard, 2005). Vernacular is commonly defined vis-à-vis the institutional (Hauser, 1999), as either an "agency alternate to dominant power" (Howard, 2008, p. 491) or simply a means to critique hegemonic, top-down discourses (Calafell & Delgado, 2004). Hence, the study of vernacular emphasizes the micropolitical power of the ordinary (Flores, 2009).

Considering these characteristics, vernacular seems innate to new participatory media. With careful attention to their limitations on the one hand (Dahlberg, 2001), and to the important role that old "residual media" still play in peoples' everyday lives on the other (Acland, 2007), it is fairly easy to decide which tolerate and even foster the vernacular. In a nutshell, networked technologies allow individuals to bypass old media institutions and engage in deliberative participation based on relatively easy, informal, and uncensored exchanges (Hauser, 2007). In Howard's (2008) words, these technologies "were designed with this sort of vernacular potential" (p. 499).

Whereas mass media have been traditionally considered central among other unmediated public sphere forums, economic and political constraints entail regulation and selectivity that privilege powerful actors and limit genuine public debate (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). The Internet—and particularly the participatory nature of its latest version—has emerged as offering new promise in this context, provoking debates about its potential to shape a better public sphere according to Habermas's model (Fuchs, 2017). This potential assumes that the Internet's unique structure obviates traditional blocks usually associated with old media, such as multiple gatekeepers, thus providing access to more actors with fewer resources (e.g., individuals), allowing for alternative perspectives and interpretations and subsequently offering diverse types of (noninstitutional) information (see Dahlgren, 2005).

Denoting the contrast between unidirectional top-down communication and networked exchanges, terms such as "prosumer" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) and "produser" (Bruns, 2008) point to the merging of online content production and consumption/usage. User-generated content embedded in this merger underlies the participatory nature of the Internet, offering "new hope and new possibilities for public reinvolvement in affairs of common interest" (Langlois, 2013, p. 92).

Several scholars have linked such hope and possibilities to vernacular by pointing to its potential contribution to a lively public sphere (Hauser, 1999; Howard, 2008). For example, Hauser (2007) defines vernacular rhetoric as an everyday form of deliberation among ordinary citizens who engage in ongoing dialogue about the conditions that intersect with their lives. He suggests replacing the quantitative model—which perceives public opinion as "a rational ideal or an objective datum" and therefore misses citizens' unstructured narratives—with a deliberative model based on citizens' vernacular exchanges (Hauser, 1998,

p. 85). Such a model promises a more informative account of people's opinions and should begin with "taking discourse, including vernacular talk, seriously" (Hauser, 1998, p. 86; 2007). Hauser's perspective is supported by feminist post-Habermasian alternatives to the rational model, according to which popular culture, leisure, and everyday life are as constitutive of civic engagement as formal political venues (see Burgess, Foth, & Klaebe, 2006).

Although the present study neither tests Habermas's theory nor applies public sphere criteria, it is informed by alternative perspectives to discuss the role of vernacular discursive mergers of biometrics and the Holocaust as noninstitutional voices and counterhegemonic critique, as well as to elucidate the capacity of new participatory media in this context.

Methodology

Corpus and Sampling

This study applies discourse analysis to online vernacular texts that address Israel's Biometric Project using Holocaust imagery. The final corpus consists of 252 items published in four online participatory platforms in Israel during 2013–15: Facebook, Twitter, user comments to journalistic articles, and open forums. This corpus was created from a larger data set of 11,878 items provided to me by Vigo, an Israeli company specializing in monitoring, retrieving, and analyzing social media content. This data set covers all public content published in the above online platforms that mentions different declensions, inflections, or conjugations of "biometrics." Each item details time of publication (date and hour), type of publication, full text, and link to original content.

I sorted out relevant items that refer to the Holocaust by searching for five words: Holocaust, Nazism, Hitler, Germany, and Jew(s). Following a close reading of the retrieved texts, I expanded the search to include additional recurring words: Tattoo, arm, gas chamber, yellow badge, Goebbels, train, 1933, 1939, and 1945. These searches have generated a smaller corpus of 252 items that discuss Israel's Biometric Project with references to the Holocaust, including 113 tweets, 76 user comments, 48 Facebook statuses or posts, and 15 forum posts.

Coding and Categorization

Discourse analysis was preceded by two quantitative procedures—coding and categorization—that allowed me to map the content and identify prevalent patterns before applying interpretive analysis. Once the texts were read carefully, I used Atlas.ti to code different textual units—words, sentences, and whole phrases/posts/comments—and assign them to categories. I developed some of the codes deductively before the first reading, according to prevalent topics in the literature (e.g., "citizenship"), but most of them were developed inductively during the analysis, according to the content of the texts (Holton, 2007). Codes are thematic tags by which the researcher characterizes textual units, and categories are groups of conceptually related codes. I continued to develop codes and categories until every new textual unit fit into one, and finally merged corresponding categories to form the general patterns described in this article.

Method: Discourse Analysis of Vernacular Texts

Discourse analysis is the study of language in use, consisting of various techniques for connecting text and meanings in different contexts (Lemke, 2012). It is particularly appropriate for analyzing charged vernacular communication (i.e., Holocaust imagery) on social controversies (i.e., Israel Biometric Project) because it is more qualitative, interpretive, constructionist, and sensitive to context than related methods, such as content analysis (see Hardy, Harley, & Phillips, 2004).

In this study, I employ Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach to discourse analysis. This approach emphasizes three discursive components—variation, function, and construction—suggesting that when people communicate, they select one variation out of many alternatives to fulfill a specific purpose and construct different versions of the social world. The discourse in this approach is a functional means that people use to rationalize and construct thoughts and actions rather than a channel that leads to people's inner worlds (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Accordingly, the analysis pays close attention to the functional use of different textual units and to the selection of specific versions over others.

Unlike discourse analysis, vernacular rhetoric is not a research method, but an overall discursive context referring to a particular way of expression (language register), the location in which communication occurs (official channels vs. open public platforms), and the participants' attributes (institutional agents vs. "ordinary" citizens). Analysis informed by vernacular rhetoric focuses on the ways in which these contextual elements define the text's vernacularity and shape a given communication (see Howard, 2005).

Analysis

The analysis yielded two chief categories: (1) Discursive construction of equivalence between contemporary Israel and Nazi Germany and (2) discussion of the harm caused by biometric surveillance through two types of temporal–spatial transferences.

Constructing Equivalence Between Contemporary Israel and Nazi Germany

This category consists of texts that challenge the morals of Israel's Biometric Project through explicit comparison between contemporary Israel and Nazi Germany. At the micro level, participants undermine the ethics of biometric surveillance by juxtaposing biometric identification of Israelis with Nazi methods for marking Jews in the Holocaust. At the macro level, Israel's biometric database is constructed as a first small step, warning of a slippery slope toward foretold dictatorship.

Biometric Identification as Marking

The official purpose of the Biometric Project, as stated in the relevant law, is to allow identification of Israeli residents. Users reframe this allegedly technological feature by juxtaposing it with Nazi marking of Jews during the Holocaust: [1] "Hitler marked the Jews during the Holocaust and today we mark ourselves." [2] "The database for marking Jews continues [what] Germany [did]." [3] "This database reminds me of the monitoring to which we were subjected in the Holocaust . . . numbers and databases."

[4] "Seems like a Nazi thing, some kind of selection." [5] "A nation that was subjected to marking in the Holocaust will never cooperate with the biometric database" (see the Appendix for sources).

The discursive juxtaposition of these two practices positions the establishment of Israel's biometric database next to one of the most vicious crimes in history, setting the Holocaust as a legitimate, even warranted context for the interpretation and evaluation of the project.

Connection between Israel's biometric identification and Nazi ideological marking is built through reference to two Nazi methods. The first is the tattooing of Jewish inmates: [6] "A biometric database = a number tattoo on the arm." [7] "Nazis have invented it earlier—tattoo on the arm and identity cannot be faked." [8] "Nazis did it as well. The number is still on my arm. . . . I carry it with me for the rest of my life. You will be cursed!" Responding to a news article according to which Israel's new biometric system allows its operators to document registrants' unique identifiers, such as tattoos, a user who self-identified as "Survivor" wrote: [9] "Soon you'll be able to restore survivors' tattoos for the number, maybe even numbering us."

Similar in structure and content, other texts refer to the sewing of yellow badges to inmates' garments as a second method of marking: [10] "A biometric database = yellow badge. Same system, different era." [11] "What started as Hitler's yellow badge is ending up as [Member of Knesset] Meir Sheetrit's biometric database." [12] "It's like the yellow badge—you will be identified as Israelis and Jews everywhere." [13] "The biometric database monster . . . can now be completed with a number tattoo and a yellow badge."

These texts build connections of similarity and continuity between the Israeli database and Nazi marking. Similarity is constructed by explicit equation (=) between Israel's biometric database and Nazi methods of marking (number tattoos and yellow badges), by positioning Hitler versus Israelis ("Hitler marked . . . we mark") and particularly MK Meir Sheetrit, as well as by stating explicitly that it "seems like a Nazi thing" or "it's like the yellow badge." Continuity is constructed primarily by using tenses and other markers of time: "Hitler marked . . . and today we mark"/"Nazis invented it earlier"/"Nazis did it as well"/"Same system, different era"/"What started as . . . is ending up as. . . ." These markers imply that the preceding practice inspires the latter.

References to number tattoos and the yellow star should be understood vis-à-vis their cultural role in contemporary Israeli culture. The number tattoo, whereby "the body of the prisoners became overtly ordered and disenfranchised with a surgical efficiency" (Klik, 2017, p. 2), is the most predominant signifier of the Holocaust (Hirsch & Suleiman, 2003). In the past few years, Israeli society has been witnessing a new commemorative practice of survivors' third-generation descendants tattooing their grandparents' numbers on their own bodies (Klik, 2017), thus revitalizing number tattoos "as testament, symbol, and historical artifact" (Rosenthal, n.d., para. 1) in contemporary Israel.

Similarly, the yellow star has inspired important cultural artifacts in Israel, from the color of Maccabi Tel Aviv Football Club's uniforms (Halickman, 2016) to the color and shape of the Israel Defense Forces' Medal of Valor. Over the years, different communities have used its sensitive symbolism in different political

contexts. For example, during the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, evacuees sewed orange stars to their sleeves that were reminiscent of the yellow star (Zecharya, 2016). In 2012, ultraorthodox Jews protested in Jerusalem over incitement against their community by Israeli government and media, wearing prisoners' uniforms with yellow star badges (Flower, 2012). In both cases, use of the well-known icon aimed at associating oppression by Israeli authorities with Nazi persecution of Jews.

Discursive use of these sensitive icons in relation to the Israeli project draws attention to its oppressive "marking function." More importantly, juxtaposing Israel's biometric identification with Nazi marking of Jews blurs the dichotomy between the technological and the ideological. These seemingly distinct domains intersect in a prominent feature of biometrics—the reduction of people to codes—implied in the following quotes: [14] "Soon we will be assigned a biometric identity; each and every one of us will turn into a number, a datum in the biometric database." [15] "Soon we will be tattooed with an ordinal number." Here, grammatical use of passive voice ("be assigned," "be tattooed"), paired with objectifying wording ("ordinal number"), portray Israelis as docile bodies rather than active subjects (Foucault, 1977). Such a construction can be better understood in relation to two theoretical concepts propounded by surveillance scholars—the body as password (Aas, 2006) and informatization of the body (van Der Ploeg, 2003)—to address the emergent ontology of the human body as information in current hyperdigital environments. This ontology underlies the workings of biometrics, practically designed to bypass peoples' minds and communicate directly with their bodies as a reliable source of information. Such a reversed body–mind hierarchy produces mute individuals whose bodies speak for them.

Biometric Surveillance as a Slippery Slope Toward Dictatorship

The project's oppressive "marking function" is part of a larger narrative according to which the project is a first step along a slippery slope, foreboding a dark future. The following exemplars use Nazi Germany as a reference point: [16] "Are we going nuts? We clearly won't be able to wander without it and will be gradually deprived of our basic human rights and liberty. Does anyone remember where it happened before? Right, Hitler's Germany. . . . Feels like everything falls apart." [17] "Israeli democracy is collapsing. It happens slowly. . . . In Nazi Germany it started with small steps as well" [18] "The biometric database is a ticking time bomb. Are you aware that Nazis were just a political party? They only decided to create a 'small' database to assemble all the Jews." [19] "First, the Interior Ministry publishes a notice . . . suggesting that if your money was stolen by fraud—it's your problem and the solution is to issue a biometric ID card rather than to inform the police. . . . Then, they will document your unique identifiers such as tattoos and scars . . . and obtain blood samples. . . . This is a violation of human rights, in the simplest sense" (Name signed: "The Third Reich performed biometric identification as well").

Quotes 16–19 compare Israel to Hitler's Germany, Nazi Germany, the Nazis, and the Third Reich, employing two subarguments. First, both entities share a similar oppressive climate, because just like Nazi Germany, "Israeli democracy is collapsing," "everything is falling apart," and human rights are violated while citizens are deprived of their liberty. Second, Israel's biometric database warns of a slippery slope. By using markers such as "gradually," "happens slowly," and "first-this-then-that" pattern, it is suggested that what seems like a "small step" is in fact a "ticking time bomb" whose results are preordained. If "it happened

before" when "Nazis were just a political party," it might happen again in the form of [20] "a second Holocaust."

The texts analyzed so far (items 1–20) employ a recurrent distinction between "us" and "them"—a common discursive strategy identified by communication scholars as a central media frame (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Studies examining media representations of surveillance showed that this strategy had been particularly employed to support state surveillance in various contexts by differentiating between terrorists or other outgroups and their victims (Branum & Charteris-Black, 2015).

The above texts use the "traditional" form of this strategy by differentiating between Israelis/Jews as a nation ("us") and Hitler/Nazi Germany as an oppressor ("them"), while at the same time introducing a revised version of this strategy that illuminates the ways in which online vernacular texts function as noninstitutional and counterhegemonic discourse. The revised version draws on the same us-and-them pattern, while recharging it with different content to critique state surveillance. It dismantles the "us" to create a provoking subdivision between new "us" (good Israelis, citizens) and the oppressing "them" (Israeli authorities). In so doing, participants construct the old and the new "them" (Nazis and Israeli authorities) as parallel and interchangeable, even as competing forces motivated by similar ideologies.

The equivalence between these two entities is neatly encapsulated in the following concise quotes: [21] "A neo-Nazi database for a Nazi country." [22] "Modern Nazism under Israeli government." [23] "This is a Nazi law—the end of Israel." [24] "The Knesset is restoring the Nazi regime. We will not go like sheep to the slaughter." [25] "A despicable law that suits the Nazis." [26] "Israel—a concentration camp led by a castrated Kapo and we have nowhere to escape: Soon we will all have a biometric identity."

The discursive construction of equivalence between contemporary Israel and Nazi Germany attests to the important role of exaggeration as a rhetorical strategy. Exaggeration is a powerful tool of persuasion (Burgers, Konijn, & Steen, 2016), particularly when a speaker seeks to frame a threat as more imminent or severe than it really is (Doig & Phythian, 2005). Al-Tufaili and Al-Jobori (2016) lists five common devices of exaggeration, all of which were employed in the analyzed texts to intensify the threat of biometric Israel. Hyperbole allows speakers to accentuate a point by adding an extra note, either to praise or complain and criticize someone or something ("Feels like everything falls apart"). In irony, speakers convey a message by describing the opposite of what they mean ("They only decided to create a 'small' database to assemble all the Jews"). Simile is an explicit comparison between different elements that share a similar feature, usually by using "like" or "as" ("Seems like a Nazi thing"). Metaphor refers to an implicit comparison in which imageries from one domain are borrowed and applied to another ("Israel—a concentration camp"). Rhetorical question is a query that does not look for an answer but rather involves an assertion ("Does anyone remember where it happened before?").

The provocative line presented so far, epitomized in these quotes, grows out of the intersection of vernacular and new participatory media. Unlike institutional texts, vernacular exchanges are only committed to informal discretionary etiquette. Consequently, they are more conducive to use of discursive taboos (e.g., number tattoos) that evoke sensitive cultural imageries, thus offering more challenging, thought-provoking criticism. New participatory media embrace this type of vernacular in at least two related ways: first, they

obviate or significantly reduce traditional blocks that sort out or moderate controversial content that does not meet consensual standards of publication. Second, they provide users with deliberative venue in which nonconsensual, provocative, and counterhegemonic expressions are legitimized by and in turn nurture an overall noninstitutional climate.

By contrast, in institutional discourse, particularly in the media, "one must not compare" is a cultural presumption drawing on the "Holocaust uniqueness dogma" (see Finkelstein, 2000; Ophir, 2005). A study examining coverage of the Biometric Project in the Israeli press showed that Germany was mentioned only a few times as a judicious means of conveying the project's potential risks, explaining, for example, that "Germany is not establishing such a database because they avoid everything that echoes centralization, considering their history" (Marciano, 2018, para. 50). No comparison between contemporary Israel and Nazi Germany has been made or implied. At least in "official Jewish discourse" (Novick, 2000, p. 195), the Holocaust is considered a unique historical event that "defies both knowledge and description, cannot be explained nor visualized," and is therefore "noncommunicable" (Elie Wiesel, cited in Finkelstein, 2000, pp. 122–123). This "cult of uniqueness" (Novick, 2000, p. 198) has become axiomatic to the extent that "no speech crime loomed larger than the use of the word 'Holocaust' . . . to describe other catastrophes." Challenging the "Holocaust uniqueness" is therefore "equivalent to Holocaust denial" (Finkelstein, 2000, pp. 120–121).

Discussing the Database's Risks Through Temporal–Spatial Transferences

This category consists of texts that delineate potential ramifications of a mandatory biometric database through two types of temporal–spatial transferences. In the first type, users transpose the Israeli biometric present to the German Nazi past to ask, What if Nazi Germany had had a similar biometric database? In the second, users transpose the German Nazi past to the Israeli biometric future to warn of misuse of the biometric database by future Israeli governments, arguably inspired by Nazi aspirations. These displacements enable users to consider and discuss situations beyond the here and now or conflate these dimensions into new, imagined realities.

[27] "If Germany had a biometric database, I doubt my family would survive it." [28] "If Hitler had had a similar database, selection [of Jews] would have lasted less than a month" (Name signed: "Joseph Goebbels"). [29] "If the Nazis had had biometric identification, the Jewish people would have been exterminated. [30] "Electronic Holocaust. Let's provide our enemies with information on every Jewish citizen!!! We will never forget the last ones who used databases to locate, assemble, and kill Jews. Just imagine what would have happened to the Jewish people if they had had this electronic database back then."

These four quotes (27–30) describe two conflicting sides: Germany, Hitler, the Nazis, and "our enemies" who "used databases to locate, assemble, and kill Jews" on the one hand and the Jewish people, personalized as "we" and "my family" on the other hand. Israel's biometric database is then constructed as the principal link between them, a repressive mechanism whereby the former exerts power over the latter.

Employed to illustrate the potential risks of a biometric database, these transferences point to the same worst-case result—death—either by implicitly suggesting that it could have expedited the selection of Jews or by explicitly claiming that it would hinder their survival and advance extermination. Such construction draws on the myth of Nazi efficiency (Holland, 2017), implying that a biometric database would have naturally conformed to the systematic, well-oiled Nazi machine in its pursuit of the Final Solution.

Although temporal transferences from one historical era to another necessarily construct the risk as hypothetical and therefore imaginary, they are grammatically organized as conditional. By using the "if–then" pattern, these transferences suggest that this threat can be realized under certain circumstances. By contrast, the second type of transference focuses on "when" rather than "if," suggesting that it is only a matter of time until the German Nazi past is revived in the Israeli biometric future.

[31] "They are preparing a neat database for the next Nazis. Jews won't be able to escape once Nazism is back. With a biometric database, no one will be able to conceal his/her Judaism and rescue him/herself. The only conclusion is to escape Israel on time and the time has come." [32] "The Stasi in East Germany prior to the Fall of the Berlin Wall is nothing compared to what Israel will be with the biometric database." [33] "It is better to provide as little data as possible on us to the Zionists, who will use it against us just like in Germany almost 80 years ago." [34] "Luckily, there is no chance we will have to face a future regime that will need such a database to exterminate Jews, or is there?" Responding to a news article entitled "Biometric ID cards are now available nationwide," one reader commented: [35] "The next Hitler is surely going to have an easier life."

These temporal–spatial transferences sketch a gloomier picture than the one drawn by the previous type in two different senses. First, they are more pessimistic, corresponding with the narrative of dictatorship presented earlier. Rather than introducing conditioned scenarios ("if Germany," "if Hitler," "if the Nazis"), they refer to "the next Nazis" and "the next Hitler" as a given, contemplating what Israel will be and how the Zionists will exploit the situation "once Nazism is back." Here, a second extermination of Jews is a possible scenario. This prophecy should be understood as undermining the lesson of "never again," which "became the cornerstone of the Israeli ethos of independence" (Gutwein, 2009, p. 37), supporting a historical Israel-Jewish guarantee to eliminate the threat of a second Holocaust. Second, while equivalence between contemporary Israel and Nazi Germany has been thus far constructed by referring to similar oppressive practices (i.e., marking) or at the most by portraying them as competing forces inspired by similar ideologies, the narrative suggested here portrays Israeli authorities as collaborators, if not new Nazis themselves, even worse than the Stasi.

Temporal and spatial transferences are not unique to vernacular texts. Different institutional texts—from presidential speeches (Dunmire, 2005) to news media reports (Dunmire, 1997)—employ such transferences as a discursive strategy, mostly through references to the future. For example, a study on "the discourse of the future" in the Israeli press has found that between 1985 and 2003, approximately 70% of major headlines referred to future events (Neiger, 2007). The present analysis, however, suggests that institutional and vernacular transferences differ in style and function. Vernacular transferences

encourage readers to imagine alternative realities. Transposing contexts of time and space allows for the envisioning of hypothetical situations that seem impossible or irrelevant—or constructed as such—unless displaced and recontextualized. In Hebdige's (1993) words, vernacular texts offer nontrivial, "even antithetical futures" (p. 275). The futures portrayed by the above transferences undermine the Israeli-Jewish ethos of "never again" and "no second Holocaust," drawing an apocalyptic picture according to which Jews will not be able to hide their identities, escape, or rescue themselves in biometric Israel.

By contrast, official and institutional texts point to a specific future as a natural continuation of the past and present, constructing it as impending, even inescapable, thus limiting readers' visions. As Dunmire (2005) puts it, dominant political actors and institutions "supplant the notion of the future as the site of the possible with a conception of the future as inevitable and, thereby, undermine the future as a site through which political change can be imagined and, ultimately, realized" (p. 482). In so doing, they limit readers' ability and desire to imagine "futures that challenge those prescribed by dominant discourses" (p. 483). For example, Alessandrini (2003) showed how official discourse produced in response to the events of September 11 had predicted and therefore advanced global war on terrorism, and Dunmire (1997) demonstrated how hypothetical future events had been constructed discursively to justify U.S. military action against Iraq. In other words, institutional texts employ "anticipatory discourse" (de Saint-Georges, 2013) that serves hegemonic goals by limiting rather than supporting readers' ability to use their imaginations.

A comparison between the present analysis and Neiger's (2007) study on "the discourse of the future" in the Israeli press further elucidates the differences between institutional and vernacular transferences, pointing out the unique style of the latter. Two of the four types of "future discourse" identified by Neiger—speculative assessment (e.g., "five government ministries will be eliminated after the elections") and conjectured future (e.g., "Iranian Shehab missiles can hit the heart of Israel")—resemble the vernacular transferences discussed above because they refer to a long-term or undetermined future and rely on self-assessment and interpretation. Moreover, like vernacular texts, they refer to worst-case scenarios and use the "what would have happened if" pattern to ask questions about dangers and threats.

However, while references to the future in the press are "phrased in a restrictive language" to meet the medium's norms and reinforce "the power of the branches of government and the armed forces" (Neiger, 2007, pp. 315–316), online vernacular transferences, as demonstrated above, are unfettered, provocative, subversive, and counterhegemonic. Of even greater significance is the ability of vernacular transferences to transcend dimensions of time and validity: They concern apocalyptic visions that aim to challenge rather than temporal predictions that seek to foretell.

As I explained earlier, temporal–spatial transferences are used to delineate the potential ramifications of a mandatory biometric database through the portrayal of hypothetical situations. A subcategory consists of texts that exploit such portrayals to call for active resistance: [36] "Nowadays we are allowed and committed to imagine what would happen if Nazis had a biometric database—how many survivors would have died? #citizens_resist_biometrics!" [37] "Only a violent protest will help us protect our privacy. Just imagine: Had the Nazis had a biometric database, no Jews could have escaped

and survived. . . . The state seeks to gain absolute control over its citizens and we're going to resist!!!" [38] "It's been 80 years since my family arrived in Israel after my grandfather, with his wife and kids, had to escape from the Nazi regime. If it had had a biometric database, it is possible that the history of my family would have been different. No one guarantees that Israel will not have a similar regime that will use a biometric database to do things that Hitler never dreamed about. It is sufficient to resist the biometric database. . . . We can still prevent the biometric initiative by refusing enrollment and calling others to refuse. #citizens_resist_biometrics!"

Quotes 36–37 transpose the Israeli biometric present to the German Nazi past, whereas Quote 38 combines the two types of transference with a reference to a personal story; it first transposes the Israeli biometric present to the German Nazi past and goes on to transpose the Nazi German past to the Israeli biometric future. All three quotes use transferences to justify active resistance, either by using the hashtag #citizens_resist_biometrics—that has become a prominent symbol of online resistance to the database—or by explicitly calling for "violent protest." Such provocative calls for active resistance, let alone violence, derive their legitimacy from the intersection of vernacular and new participatory media, and particularly from the unfettered climate that characterizes online vernacular venues.

Concluding Discussion

Acknowledging the potential capacity of new media as a deliberative public venue, this study asked how online vernacular use of the Holocaust's symbolism corresponds with the shifting status of the Holocaust in Israeli discourse and how participants exploit this symbolism in constructing Israel's Biometric Project.

The unfettered, provocative, and impassioned nature of the online vernacular discourse presented throughout the article appears antithetical to the engagement and participation central to Habermas's model. To challenge this discrepancy, I suggest reframing this discourse as online vernacular politics by drawing on the notions of "vernacular creativity" (Burgess, 2006) and "cultural citizenship" (Burgess et al., 2006). I define online vernacular politics as a cultural practice whereby communicative norms (i.e., textual structures) and social imagery (i.e., symbolic motifs) are modified and manipulated by ordinary voices that seek to criticize. A key element of this concept is "vernacular creativity," which Burgess (2006) defines as "creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts" and by which "cultural resources . . . are recombined in novel ways, so that they . . . create affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination" (p. 206).

Conceptualizing online vernacular politics in terms of vernacular creativity points out the importance of the unconventional, nonconsensual, and provocative ways in which participants combine distinct sociocultural domains (e.g., biometrics and the Holocaust). Moreover, it supplants the traditional model of the public sphere—that rejects discursive provocation as irrational, rendering it an illegitimate form of engagement and participation—with the notion of "cultural citizenship," according to which "bona fide citizenship is practiced . . . through everyday life, leisure, critical consumption and popular entertainment" (Burgess et al., 2006, p. 1). Nevertheless, cultural citizenship is fully political "as a means of expanding rights or creating new meanings" (Uricchio, 2004, p. 148). Online vernacular politics—and

its relation to vernacular creativity and cultural citizenship—are implicated in and allow for the core processes examined in this article: The vernacularization of the Holocaust and the construction of Israel's Biometric Project.

The Vernacularization of the Holocaust

Online vernacular exchanges about the Holocaust mark a new phase in the shift of the Holocaust's public status in Israel. I began the article with a description of the de-tabooization of the Holocaust, showing that the last phase of this process—desacralization—was limited and controversial. This analysis suggests that online vernacular discourse continues and extends de-tabooization, as it makes extensive use of sensitive and provocative rhetoric that was previously rare and controversial. As the quotes presented throughout the analysis demonstrate, the vernacular discourse violates and desecrates some of the most sanctified motifs in the official Holocaust discourse in Israel. Previous studies have shown that humor and satire are the only genres in which Holocaust motifs have been desacralized. However avant-garde it may have appeared, such desacralization was actually part of mainstream remembrance, functioning as "a new voice in Israeli Holocaust commemoration" (Zandberg, 2006, p. 561) and "an alternative and subversive path that seeks to remember" (Steir-Livny, 2016, p. 105). Other studies have shown that online vernacular texts about the Holocaust did not advance alternative, noninstitutional, or critical political discourse, but rather constituted "noncommemorative sites for Holocaust remembrance" (Yadlin-Segal, 2017, p. 39).

By contrast, the online vernacular discourse examined in this article transcends commemoration. It recontextualizes the above motifs to criticize current politics, supplanting the pervasive dogma of uniqueness with a universal approach. While online vernacular expressions confirm that the Holocaust still functions as an interpretive framework for understanding contemporary Israel (Zerubavel, 1994), they attest to a new type of political and desacralizing interpretation that reflects civic participation and engagement.

Israel's Biometric Project: Technology, Politics, and Resistance

The primary and most important element in the discursive construction of Israel's Biometric Project is the understanding that the Holocaust can and should be a legitimate context for the interpretation of the project. Within this context, two main narratives emerge. The first addresses the politics of biometrics, problematizing the technical nature of biometric identification and reframing it as ideological, suggesting that it should be evaluated not in terms of efficiency and performance but as a biopolitical enactment. This position perceives biometric identification as reflecting the informatization of the body, a process whereby selves turn into codes. The second narrative addresses Israel's surveillance politics more broadly, constructing the project as reflecting Israel's oppressive policy while announcing a darker future of dictatorship. The inverted strategy of us-and-them is central to this narrative, as it attests to citizens' distrust of the state and to distancing from the ideal form of citizenship.

Constructing the project in terms of biopolitics, oppression, and citizenship, these narratives echo Giorgio Agamben's theory. Agamben (2005) analyzed the conditions that allow democratic regimes to strip citizens of their citizenship, claiming that under states of exception, lives in democracies may be abandoned

by law, becoming what he calls bare life. These conditions originate in declared states of emergency. Agamben used Nazi concentration camps as a classic example in which bare lives were subject to states of exception that became the norm (Agamben, 1999). Interestingly, in his 2008 article “No to Biopolitical Tattooing”—published after he was denied entry to the United States after refusing to submit biometric data to federal authorities—he pointed to biometric surveillance as an important intersection point between bare life and Nazi ideology, arguing that use of biometrics normalizes the exception and universalizes bare life, concluding that “we must oppose it” (Agamben, 2008, p. 202).

The vernacular narratives mentioned above question the morals of Israel’s biometric surveillance using the Agambenian triad of biopolitics, oppression, and citizenship. Both Agamben’s article and these narratives link this triad with the Holocaust, leading to recognition of one’s obligation to resist. Israel’s permanent state of emergency since its establishment in 1948 (see Marciano, 2016) further emphasizes the relevance of Agamben’s theory to the Israeli case. The two processes involved—desacralization of the Holocaust and construction of the Biometric Project as an oppressive biopolitical enterprise—demonstrate how participants employ online vernacular politics attesting to civic participation and engagement by violating discursive norms, recharging sensitive imageries, and challenging cultural taboos.

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Appendix

Table A1. Detailed List of Quotes.

#	Type	Site	Date
1	User comment 74	Ynet	August 8, 2013
2	User comment 3	Calcalist	January 27, 2014
3	Tweet	Tweeter	September 14, 2014
4	User comment 190	Ynet	December 8, 2009
5	User comment 137	Ynet	November 28, 2012
6	Facebook post	Facebook	December 26, 2013
7	User comment 160	Ynet	November 6, 2009
8	User comment 67	Ynet	June 4, 2008
9	User comment 34	Ynet	November 12, 2013
10	Facebook post	Facebook	July 4, 2013
11	User comment 44	Ynet	July 23, 2012
12	User comment 47	Ynet	July 8, 2013
13	User comment 15	Ynet	November 12, 2013
14	User comment –	NRG	July 30, 2013
15	Open forum post	LBS forum	November 13, 2013
16	User comment 272	Ynet	October 29, 2008
17	User comment 16	Ynet	August 8, 2013
18	User comment 15	Ynet	August 8, 2013
19	User comment 4	Ynet	November 12, 2013
20	User comment 262	Ynet	October 30, 2008
21	User comment 2	Ynet	July 8, 2013
22	User comment 150	Ynet	October 5, 2008
23	User comment 45	Ynet	October 15, 2009
24	User comment 145	Ynet	July 23, 2009
25	User comment 81	Ynet	July 23, 2009
26	User comment –	NRG	July 30, 2013
27	Facebook post	Facebook	July 1, 2013
28	User comment 115	Ynet	June 24, 2013
29	User comment 136	Ynet	July 20, 2009
30	User comment 3	Ynet	August 5, 2008
31	User comment 1	Ynet	November 12, 2013
32	Open forum post	Ynet forum	July 9, 2013
33	Open forum post	Bhol forum	April 1, 2014
34	User comment 1	Ynet	December 8, 2009
35	User comment 60	Ynet	September 10, 2013
36	Tweet	Twitter	April 15, 2015
37	User comment 27	Haaretz	December 20, 2013
38	Facebook post	Facebook	June 24, 2013