



A New Role for the Public in Climate Politics: The Social Media Potential

Gilead Sher and Adelaide Duckett

In light of Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential elections, the public discourse regarding the influence of social media in politics has seen a resurgence. In this environment, teen climate activist Greta Thunberg has attracted global attention following the rapid spread of her school strikes for climate movement through social media. With nine million followers on Instagram alone, Thunberg has leveraged social media platforms to magnify her call to action on climate change, highlighting the ability of social media to amplify voices that might not otherwise be heard, such as that of a youth activist. This article reviews the scholarly research around the role of social media in politics, and in particular the global political discussion surrounding climate change. It assesses the state of environmental politics in Israel, seeking to apply lessons from the role of social media in the global climate debate to the Israeli case. The authors conclude that social media has the potential to disrupt current political norms and elevate climate discussion in Israel, if leveraged by environmental activists and environmentally oriented politicians.

Keywords: climate, social media, environment, negotiations, internet, security

Introduction

Environmental activism is a valuable case study on the political potential of social media, due to the urgent need for global public support and mobilization behind climate cooperation. Energy security issues have come to dominate the global agenda in recent years, with geopolitical competition for resources being a major driver of conflict. In contrast to a system defined by fossil fuels, the diversity of emerging green energy technologies allows the possibility of a future global system less defined by energy competition. Nearly all countries possess potential for solar, wind, hydro, or other energy production, and thus an increased emphasis on advancing access to these technologies could revolutionize international geopolitics. However, studies routinely display the tendency for the public to place more weight on issues they see as directly affecting their daily lives, such as economic issues, and ignore issues like climate change that are considered more esoteric (Leiserowitz, 2018). The internet has proven to be a valuable tool for spreading global awareness of problems typically not discussed by traditional media.

Given the crucial nature of generating political momentum behind the issue of climate change, the lack of focus on environmental issues in Israeli politics is a major concern. Insofar as social media has been employed effectively around the globe to mobilize the public behind climate change, this article examines the potential for social media to disrupt environmental narratives in Israel and push climate control higher on the political agenda. How might social media be leveraged to improve the potential for greater action on climate issues by the Israeli government?

Research Overview

Writing in 2011, Brian D. Loader and Dan Mercea of the University of London described the disruptive stance that social media assumed in scholarly thinking on the role of the internet in promoting participatory democracy. While

the internet provided a platform to increase dissemination of knowledge, traditionally powerful voices, such as those of politicians and news organizations, remained the most amplified. With the advent of social media, however, what the authors call the “second generation of internet democracy,” the old “public sphere model” of the internet was displaced by “a networked citizen-centered perspective providing opportunities to connect the private sphere of autonomous political identity to a multitude of chosen political spaces” (Loader and Mercea, 2011). Enthusiasm surrounding the possibilities of social media to alter political outcomes perhaps reached its height in 2011-12 with the so-called Arab Spring, where the use of Facebook by protestors led many to believe in the revolutionary implications of the new internet sphere. While warning against an excess of enthusiasm about the political possibilities of social media, the authors are cautiously optimistic about its potential to bring about political change. They note that instead of acting as a “passive consumer” of internet information, social media allows the citizen “to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions” (Loader and Mercea, 2011).

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One common criticism of the role of social media in political conversations is the “slacktivism” critique. This is the hypothesis that the ability to participate in political movements passively, by liking posts, signing petitions, and engaging in other online actions will actually make citizens less likely to engage in political causes in more concrete ways (e.g., volunteering, working for a cause, attending physical protests). Feeling a sense of fulfillment through online action with little effect, citizens will not feel motivated to engage further. Therefore,

proponents of the slacktivism theory argue that social media has weakened, rather than strengthened, participatory democracy. Philip N. Howard et. al., in their 2016 contribution to the *Journal of International Affairs*, refute the slacktivism hypothesis in their analysis of the successful gubernatorial campaign of Mexican politician El Bronco, an independent candidate who delivered an upset victory after successful widespread use of voter engagement through social media. The authors argue that “the data reveal that candidate engagement with citizens on the Facebook fan page had a positive effect, resulting in continued platform use.” They conclude that El Bronco’s campaign indicates that “social media can be used to sustain a large quantity of civic exchanges about public life well beyond a particular political event” (Howard et al., 2016).

The slacktivism hypothesis remains unconvincing in light of a multitude of successful social media campaigns in the sphere of environmental politics. An examination of the progress of the COP21 climate negotiations leading up to the Paris Agreement of 2015 reveals the influence of social media activism at the highest levels of environmental advocacy. According to researcher Jill Hopke, in advance of the negotiations, “activists held more than 2,300 events in more than 175 countries in a Global Climate March,” displaying global support for a goal of transitioning entirely to renewables by 2050 (Hopke, 2019). In its 2019 annual report, the World Economic Forum reflected that the political climate surrounding

helped to create “political confidence” in the negotiations. This high level of mobilization from the public served to create a “can-do feeling” that “captured the imaginations of heads of states, as well as leading climate negotiators and environment ministers,” successfully leading to an agreement—unlike the failed COP15 negotiations in Copenhagen (Lambertini et al., 2019).

Contributing to this success, the format of the Paris negotiations differed in crucial ways from that of previous negotiations. Instead of a strictly top-down approach, COP21 “also added a ‘bottom-up’ dimension,” allowing governments the freedom to decide how they would implement collective goals and to set their own individualized agendas. According to WEF experts, this greater flexibility promoted increased willingness to cooperate. It also placed “climate change at the core of domestic politics, so that citizens could hold governments to account for their pledges” (Patrick, 2019). Not only did this decentralized negotiation model lead to more effective outcomes for cooperation, but it also created a greater opportunity for public influence, making domestic politics and public opinion bear more weight in international negotiations. In this new space, social media serves a key role in providing a vehicle for public mobilization and the communication of public sentiment.

The Role of Social Media

The energized public sentiment surrounding COP21 was aided significantly by social media messaging. Indeed, Hopke and Hesteres posit a connection between the prominent activist message calling for a 1.5 goal and the resulting goal that was signed, suggesting the influence of such messaging. After authorities placed restrictions on physical demonstrations in Paris during the negotiation process, activists largely relied on social media to direct their messages to leaders and to receive updates on the negotiation process. In her analysis of the social media conversation surrounding the COP21

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the Paris negotiations, created in part through greater mobilization from non-state actors,

talks, one researcher found that the “more than 2.4 million posts” discussing the negotiations “had a reach of 26 billion potential impressions” (Hopke, 2019). This huge reach alone, shown by the sheer volume of the discussion, marked an accomplishment in climate awareness. Alongside this strong reach of top-down social media messaging, activists also found space to send their messages upwards through various platforms, very possibly to crucial effect.

In their analysis of the use of images in social media messaging throughout the COP21 negotiations, researchers noted the connection between prominent advocacy messages on Twitter and decisions made by negotiators in the drafting of the agreement. They cite a prominent trend of images circulated on social media demanding a goal of limiting planetary warming to 1.5 degrees, as opposed to the prevalent norm of 2 degrees. Significantly, this goal “gained traction during the Paris climate talks,” leading several large economies, traditionally more in favor of a 2-degree goal, to surprise the world in making declarations of support for 1.5 degrees (Hopke and Hesteres, 2018).

There is no definitive proof that social media messaging can be credited fully with the 1.5-degree aspirational goal in the final agreement. However, most stakeholders entered the negotiations with an expectation of a 2-degree limit, and thus it is significant that countries like the US, China, and Canada, some of the largest polluters, decided to support a goal of 1.5 degrees over the course of the negotiations. Officials explained that the new goal was based on arguments by low-lying developing countries that fear that an additional half a degree of warming would have dire effects on their territories. However, this shift in goals took place during the negotiation process, in the absence of new scientific revelations regarding 1.5 versus 2 degrees. As the science remained the same during that time, heightened public demands being the only new element, it seems likely that demands from activists, spread effectively through the vast network

of social media COP21 discussion, played a role in this shift.

The possible influence of social media messaging during COP21 negotiations also seems plausible given the influence of other environmental demands popularized on social media. Social media has already demonstrated its ability to mobilize the public behind environmental action, resulting in new regulations and pledges from businesses. One example of a successful social media strategy is the trend of campaigns targeted at single-use plastic. Discussion of waste and pollution on social media has picked up markedly over the past several years. In the first quarter of 2018, conversation about plastic waste on Twitter was more than double what it had been during the same period in 2017 (Joyce, 2018). This trend has been translated to concrete action in various examples. After a petition circulated online by Greenpeace generated nearly 100,000 signatures, the popular American supermarket chain Trader Joe’s announced that it would phase out single-use plastic from its stores. This case exemplifies the power of social media to translate increased awareness of environmental issues to concrete action.

With the possibility of online petitions serving as a signal of real-time public opinion measures, social media can serve as a vehicle to translate shifts in public opinion into changes in government and business policy. Given these implications, further research into the makings of successful social media messaging is warranted. Hopke and Hesteres emphasize the need for social media campaigns to include more images that depict the effects of climate change on people around the world. They also cite the value of combining such messages with information about actions individuals can make in their daily lives to lessen their own environmental footprints. In doing so, climate activists can employ social media to make the connection in peoples’ minds between their personal actions and the effects they have around the world.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, social media has key limitations as a tool to advance climate action. In their analysis of visual framings of the Paris negotiations on social media, Hopke and Hestres note that while discussion among activists and politicians was strong, participation from fossil fuel industry stakeholders was minimal. Despite being key stakeholders in any plan to reduce carbon emissions, “fossil fuel industry and trade group accounts largely bypassed discussion of COP21.” With clear motives to avoid action on climate change, the fossil fuel industry, given the tremendous influence it exerts on governments around the world, is a key player in any climate agreement. Failure to engage such a key stakeholder indicates clear limitations of social media’s ability to influence political actions. While social media has allowed for more direct channels of communication between citizens and government officials, backchannel lobbying efforts by fossil fuel companies do not take place in this new public sphere.

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In addition, while activism and public opinion make up key elements of domestic politics in democracies, freedom of speech online is a key element within this puzzle. In countries like China, where the government closely monitors and regulates the online activity of citizens, online criticism of government climate policy would not prove a viable strategy for improving Chinese climate commitments. This is a key weakness of social media strategies, as China is the world’s largest polluter and a powerful actor in negotiations. Other concerns include the potential for fake news on social media regarding climate change to have a detrimental effect on momentum for climate action. Due

to these limitations, obstacles still remain on the road toward greater citizen influence on the global political climate surrounding climate change.

Given that social media has proven effective in increasing participatory democracy domestically, as in the El Bronco campaign, in addition to amplifying public environmental opinion to bring about behavior changes in businesses and in international climate negotiations, there are promising prospects for the application of social media strategizing for improving the climate conversation in Israel.

The Israeli Case

Israel faces a unique situation in the arena of climate change action due to the higher priority of other threats in the public mindset. In the face of threats of war, people tend to view climate change as a distant and therefore less important concern (Carmi and Bartal, 2014). One study even found a decrease between 2003 and 2015 in the percentage of Israelis considering global warming a severe threat. Although there is recognition of the dangers of climate change to national security throughout Israeli leadership, climate concerns have not been sufficiently prioritized to parallel the severity of the climate crisis. In a 2013 article in *The Geographic Journal*, Michael Mason argues that “climate risks are crowded out by proximate existential threats” in Israeli government decision making (Mason, 2013). However, given the escalation of the water crisis in the Palestinian territories in recent years, experts have called for stronger action on environmental issues and more focus on the environment in public discourse as an issue of immediate national security concern. Lessons learned from the use of social media in climate activism are therefore relevant to Israel in several ways.

Most importantly, social media should be employed by climate activists and other stakeholders to promote the view of climate change as a national security issue. In a discussion paper published jointly by INSS and

the organization EcoPeace Middle East, the authors evaluate the altered reality surrounding water negotiations. They write that “given technological advances in the manufacture of new water, water issues are no longer a zero-sum game as they were in 1995,” during the negotiation of the Oslo II agreements. Today, desalination technology and other innovations enable a wider range of water security solutions for Israel and the Palestinian territories. This new context for negotiation might allow for more productive dialogue. This potential should be capitalized on through generating public demand, as solutions are sorely needed to prevent an intensified water crisis, which would likely create instability and security risks for all involved.

Water negotiations between Israel and Jordan have proven productive, even leading to subsequent cooperation on other matters, due to the fact that Jordan has viewed “cooperation on water issues with Israel as a matter of national security, and therefore a matter necessary to deal with, despite political disagreements on other issues.” In contrast, the PLO has maintained a refusal to negotiate with Israel on water issues outside of a framework for final status agreement negotiations. Now, however, with increased recognition of climate change-related water scarcity issues, many in the Palestinian public have altered these mindsets. Many now favor “cooperation on water with Israel as a Palestinian water security and national security issue” (Eran et al., 2018).

The influence of a public mindset viewing environmental issues as issues of national security is of key importance here. If effective social media content can spread knowledge of the importance of water for the security of both parties, public opinion might be altered so as to provide a more fruitful negotiation environment. As occurred in the Jordanian case, cooperation on water issues might then open doors for further cooperation. Social media messaging in this case would likely be most effective in combining visuals and

information regarding the water crisis with information on steps individuals can take (both political and lifestyle-related), as per the recommendations of Hopke and Hesteres. In addition, one study from the Yale Program on Climate Communication found that perception of personal risk from climate change was the strongest predictor of environmental activism in study participants (Ballew et al., 2019). This result highlights the need to make climate messaging direct, personal, and alarmist. However, alarmist rhetoric must also be carefully balanced with positive messaging to maintain audience engagement. Campaigns should also highlight the positive effects that could result from resolving Israel’s water crisis, such as progress in peace negotiations and environmental restoration.

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As Mason argues, the fact of climate change being a “threat multiplier for Israeli-Palestinian relations, especially with regards to forecasted stresses on water availability, food production and public health,” is nothing new. He notes that given that this reality is evident to so many policymakers, the fact that such knowledge has “had minimal impact on Israeli and Palestinian governing authorities indicates the discursive hold of more immediate existential threats – for the State of Israel, ongoing security dangers from political violence and, for the Palestinian Authority, the threats to Palestinian national survival posed by a deepening occupation” (Mason, 2013). This “discursive hold” of immediate existential threats does not leave room for the equally dire but less timely existential threat of climate change. Under

these circumstances, social media could help to provide the boost needed for discussion of climate change mitigation to gain political traction in Israel. Additionally, social media should be employed as a tool to heighten Israeli public awareness of environmental issues leading up to upcoming environmental summits. Ahead of the 2020 Convention on Biological Diversity COP meeting, scientists, activists, and other stakeholders should seek to educate the public about the importance of biodiversity in order to maximize public involvement in the meeting and recreate the environment that surrounded COP21. However, while Israelis can still contribute valuably to this political climate, Israel's power as a small country is inherently limited in the arena of COP negotiations. Consequently, Israel does not have a large potential for influencing the course of climate change mitigation (though its commitment to these goals remains important).

Despite this limitation, Israel has an advantage in its strong technology sector, leading the globe in water and agricultural technology, and coming in first place in the 2014 Global Cleantech Innovation Index. This will prove increasingly beneficial as more states seek critical assistance with climate change adaptation. This dynamic might place Israel in a strategically beneficial position, enabling it to strengthen diplomatic ties with countries in need of its technological assistance, and positioning it as a global leader in climate adaptation (Alterman, 2015). Israel's technological advantages also extend to the crucial energy sector, Israel being home to some of the world's leading researchers in biofuels and other energy alternatives, further increasing its value to other parties in climate agreements. These advantageous aspects of focusing national attention on climate action should also be emphasized through political social media campaigns, enabling the public to both acknowledge the security risks of failing to act on climate, as well as the significant economic and geopolitical benefits of doing so.

In Israel in particular, where national security concerns dominate public discourse, the issue of climate change is in need of a boost in national consciousness. In light of this gap in public awareness, social media has the potential to mold public perceptions toward greater enthusiasm for climate change action, and greater acknowledgment of environmental threats as issues of national security. Emphasis on promoting national identity as a leader in green technology may have potential as a positive catalyst for wider discussion of environmental issues more broadly, prompting greater lifestyle alterations and progress on water and pollution issues.

Conclusion and Future Implications

As a global network of information sharing, social media contains enormous potential to build a global consensus on the need for climate action. Indeed, social media has already proven an invaluable tool for advancing the conditions for fruitful climate negotiations through mobilizing the public from the bottom-up to encourage stronger government actions. Research indicates that carefully crafted social media posts and discourse connecting personal action to global damage can act effectively to spread such awareness and support. The power of this phenomenon can be observed directly through public demand for plastic regulation that began through social media movements and continues to result in increased regulation and pledges from the business sector.

Social media also allows for a direct channel of communication between members of the public and their political representatives from the bottom-up. In this way, social media may work to create a larger level of influence from public opinion through its ability to reflect real time public reactions to political decisions, as well as its ability to illuminate and emphasize public demands. Social media should be used in different ways by different stakeholders in the climate debate. As in the El Bronco case study, social media has demonstrated potential

to build momentum around non-traditional political candidates. If any Knesset candidates chose to make climate change a key pillar of their campaign, they would be wise to build up social media presence to begin connecting with youth around these issues well in advance of their campaign. Given Israel's environmental technology advantages, building a positive vision of Israel as a climate leader, in place of alarmist rhetoric, may prove a helpful strategy. Climate activists, including organizers, those working for environmental nonprofits, and climate scientists, should leverage social media campaigns as a central pillar of their efforts in order to bring environmental topics to the forefront of public consciousness. This might include ads calling for petition signing in response to specific threats, educational content connecting personal action to climate effects (as promoted by Hopke and Hestres), and other content. Despite the irregularity of viral content, paid advertisements are an option for groups willing to prioritize investment in social media messaging as a promising tool for change.

Further research is required in this field to help answer several key questions. First, the results of Hopke and Hestres' study, reflecting the importance of crafting messages to connect personal behaviors and actions to global climate change, must be expanded upon. With increased knowledge on the effectiveness of different forms of posts, activists can more effectively alter the political climate surrounding climate action. In building such a consensus, the positive effects of communicating public demands on negotiations processes can be expanded. The Yale Program on Climate Communication has been a leader in research in this new frontier, noting the greater persuasive power of video over text to convey climate information, in addition to other internationally applicable studies. Much of their research, however, focuses on the American electorate and may not be directly transferable to Israel.

Second, the role of public opinion in climate negotiations demands further study in order to

better reveal how to translate the consensus-building power of social media into direct political influence. In order to face the global challenge of climate change, activists must find ways to create a better-informed global public, which in turn can produce more effective climate negotiations. Following the effects observed in Paris and public perceptions of plastic, social media clearly amounts to a key element of this puzzle. However, other strategies

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are needed to exert influence over the fossil fuel sector, as well as to increase awareness and motivate action by states lacking internet freedom. In addition, much remains unknown about the mechanisms by which some posts or movements go viral while others remain unnoticed. A sustained effort to leverage social media to amplify climate discussion would surely be met with more failures than success in this regard. However, sustained saturation of social media with climate change content has the potential to significantly alter public climate perceptions. With further study, social media could prove a powerful tool to motivate global climate action by creating the political conditions for more effective international cooperation.

Gilead Sher, a former Israeli senior peace negotiator who was Chief of Staff and Policy Coordinator to Prime Minister Ehud Barak, heads the Center for Applied Negotiations at INSS. In 2019, Adv. Sher was a visiting professor at Georgetown University.

Adelaide Duckett is a fourth-year student at the University of Chicago studying political science and human rights. She was a research intern at INSS during the summer of 2019, working with Gilead Sher at the Center for Applied Negotiations.

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