

## How a Politician Can Successfully Use Self-Humor and Apply Public Relations Principles Online: An Israeli Case Study

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Ruth Avidar\*

### Abstract

*In the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the co-creational perspective became a dominant perspective in public relations research (Botan & Taylor, 2004). The co-creational perspective emphasizes the importance of dialogue and two-way communication to organization–public relationship building (OPR). One way to engage with the public and foster a productive dialogue with it is that of humor. Indeed, humor contributes to the conversationalisation of public discourse and it is positively evaluated by the public (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). The emergence of the Internet and particularly Web 2.0 and elements of social media (such as blogs, social networks and micromedia) opened up new opportunities for a dialogue and relationship-building between organizations and their publics. Organizations, as well as politicians and other entities, use Facebook, Twitter and other social media elements in order to spread information to their publics, promote their products, services and events, comment on various topics, advance a dialogue, and engage with their publics. Individual members became distributors as well as consumers and producers of content (a phenomenon known as “prosumers”) and played an important part in sharing content and having it turn viral. One form of such content is the humorous meme. The current study embraces the co-creational perspective from public relations theory, while trying to analyze an Israeli case study. The case study demonstrates how a politician can successfully use social media and a humorous meme in order to take the edge off the given criticism and promote OPR.*

**Key words:** Online public relations, Humor, Social Media, Meme, Prosumers, Netizens

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\*Dr. Ruth Avidar, Department of Communication, Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, Israel

## OVERVIEW

The Internet and particularly the social media brought about the creation of an information society. Individual members of the public became consumers, creators and distributors of information while publics, organizations, politicians and other entities were able, for the first time, to engage in a direct online dialogue. The current study tries to demonstrate how a politician can successfully use social media and humor in order to engage with various publics, achieve positive public relations and advance an organization–public relationship (OPR). The methodology used here is a qualitative content analysis of an Israeli case study. The study is comprised of three parts. The first part is a literature review that presents the co-creational approach, based on public relations research, and the contribution of social media to the implementation of the co-creational principles. A short review of current research from the fields of political humor and online memes is presented as well. The second part of the study presents an Israeli case study, and finally the discussion and conclusions are presented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Co-Creational Approach

The co-creational perspective in public relations literature emphasizes the important role of communication in enabling publics to become co-creators of meanings. According to the co-creational approach, the public is not a secondary actor that has to meet an organization's policy and marketing needs, but rather an equal actor in a dialogical, two-way communication (Botan, 1997). Two of the leading co-creational theories are the *relational approach* and the *dialogic communication approach*. The *relational approach* sees in the building, management, and maintenance of OPRs the main activities of public relations (Botan, 1992; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Huang, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & Mcallister-Spooner, 2002; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Indeed, public relations itself was defined in relational terms as "the management of relationships between organizations and publics" (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000, p. 85).

The *dialogic communication approach* adds to OPR building the notion of dialogue and "dialogic communication" as the theoretical framework which guides the relationship building between organizations and publics (Taylor et al., 2001). The dialogic communication approach suggests that in order to create effective organization–

communication channels, organizations must be willing to communicate with publics in honest and ethical ways (Taylor et al., 2001). The dialogic communication approach does not focus on conflict-solving; it rather encourages participants to speak their minds, air different opinions, and exchange ideas.

### **The Internet and the Social Media**

The emergence of the Internet and the social media brought various changes in the relations between society and information. Indeed, the society became an information society. The Internet changed the relations between information possession, information dissemination and information consumption, and brought about the democratization and decentralization of information. The emergence of various Web 2.0 elements, such as blogs, social networks, wikis and RSS feeds added to the "read only" Web a "read/write" Web, which enables individuals to become co-creators of content and to participate in social media by employing its inherent collaborative capabilities. The Internet and computer-mediated-communication (CMC) blur the classical distinction between information providers (journalists, editors and reporters) and information consumers (the general public), with the effect that every person with Internet access and a broadband becomes a potential civic journalist. Indeed, according to Jenkins (2006) we live in a convergence culture, in which content flows across multiple media platforms, multiple media industries cooperate with each other, and audiences actively participate in the culture and interact with each other.

In recent years, Web 2.0 and social media elements have gained popularity among individuals that have access to broadband technology. This popularity is demonstrated by the more than 900 million active users of Facebook as of July 2012, the 60 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute, and by the fact that over 6.7 billion photographs are hosted by Flickr. New Internet technologies and Web 2.0 applications enable individuals to share information and collaborate with other individuals, groups or organizations through the social Web. They are exposed to almost endless sources of information in almost all possible languages, whereas the restrictions of location are well-nigh removed altogether with the growing use of mobile devices or wifi connections. The information itself is not linear anymore but hypertextual; it comprises private as well as public issues, and it uses text, video, voice, or a mixture of other elements (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996).

The Internet promotes transparency, interactivity and immediacy. It enables organizations, politicians and other entities to share information with their publics, to engage

with individuals, to address the needs and problems of publics, and to monitor and respond to online criticism (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000; Scoble & Israel, 2006). In other words, organizations, politicians, and other entities can communicate with their publics via asynchronous elements (forums, blogs) and synchronous elements (chats, instant messaging, and mobile telephony-based texting) (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998; Paulussen, 2004; Witmer, 2000) and to promote OPR building (Jo & Kim, 2003).

In the field of public relations, social media elements (such as blogs and social networks) became all-important and vital means for building and maintaining OPR. In the mid- to late-1990s, the term *PR 2.0* was introduced. *PR 2.0* is a model that advocates a new approach to public relations, emphasizing the usage of social media tools in order to reach publics, call for direct online conversations with publics, and force public relations professionals to focus their efforts on mainstream publics as well as on niche groups (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). In this context, a study from 2009 pointed out the willingness of Israeli public relations professionals to use and experiment with social media elements, although the usage of such media was still in its initial stage (Avidar, 2009).

### **The Israeli Political Sphere and the Internet**

The usage of the Internet in the Israeli political sphere is increasing. The first appearance of party Web sites took place in 1996, followed by several campaign sites of municipal candidates in 1998 and a flourishing of candidates' and parties' Web sites in the 1999 election campaign (Lehman-Wilzig, 2004). In the elections of 2003, "the internet became a 'presence'" (Lehman-Wilzig, 2004, p. 257), and in 2007, several Israeli parliament (Knesset) members opened their own pages on Facebook (Marenda, 2007). In 2009, Shimon Peres, the president of Israel, launched his own YouTube channel and in 2012 his Facebook page, with the declared aim of fostering a dialogue with citizens around the globe. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, also opened accounts on Twitter and on Facebook. The Israeli government is also involved in at least two online projects; the first is aimed to increase the presence and visibility of nonprofit associations on the Internet ("Guidestar Israel"), and the second is aimed to enable Israeli citizens to engage in online interactions with the government regarding governmental decisions ("Gov 2.0").

Nevertheless, studies suggest that the dialogic potential of the Internet is not utilized to the full by Israeli politicians and parties, as they use their online presence mainly in order

to disseminate information in a one-way flow (Atmor, 2008; Lehman-Wilzig, 2004). A field experiment conducted by a popular Israeli newspaper and Web site explored the rates of responsiveness of 37 Israeli parliament members to a query that was sent to their Facebook accounts. The findings revealed that most members (54%) did not respond to the query and the others did not provide satisfying or helpful responses. When they were asked about this, a few parliament members explained that they do not perceive Facebook as an adequate platform for keeping in touch with their voters (Avital & Cabir, 2010). To sum up, Internet usage becomes more and more prevalent and popular in the Israeli political sphere; however, it still appears that politicians and parties fail to fully utilize the interactive potential of the Internet in order to engage in an ongoing dialogue with their publics.

### **Humor and Political Humor**

*Humor* has been examined from different perspectives and researchers do not always agree on its main features or emphasize its different aspects. Some consider humor to be a positive phenomenon, accompanied by laughter that entails, in turn, a sense of pleasure (Raskin, 1985), while others emphasize the fear of being laughed at (Ruch & Proyer, 2008). Nevertheless, most researchers agree that incongruity is the basis for humor. The term 'humor' is used differently in various languages and it is often confused with other terms, such as irony, laughter or parody. Morreall (1983, 2009) suggest that humor can be described as the 'enjoyment of incongruity' or in other words, the appearance of a pleasant, yet unexpected element, in a given situation. Sover (2009) argues that humor plays an important part in the life of any society, providing that it serves as a non-formal tool with which the society defines its norms and boundaries. Indeed, according to Tsakona and Popa (2011), the social function of humor is to highlight, correct and even prevent any disruption or deviation from what is generally accepted and approved by the social dimension. According to Raskin (1985), the ability to enjoy humor is universal, while it is the fact of sharing social values and norms that makes humor such an effective phenomenon. Meyer (2000) emphasizes the unifying and dividing nature of humor. Humor unifies people that share positions and values, and enhances the gap with others that do not see things in the same way. Davies (2008) suggests that various ethnic groups may perceive humor differently and that it is therefore important to explore the social, cultural and psychological qualities of the targets of humor as well as of those who produce it.

Political humor is a type of humor that can be produced by almost anyone: politicians, journalists, artists, and common people. Political humor can be defined as "a communicative

resource spotting, highlighting and attacking incongruities originating in political discourse and action” (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p.6). In other words, political humor highlights and brings to the surface certain inadequacies of political decisions and actions. According to Nilsen (1990), political humor has many social functions. It serves politicians in defining political concepts, to disarm critics and to relieve tension, on the one hand, and serves political critics in expressing their criticism, on the other. So much so that the growing recognition of the importance of humor has led some researches, such as Holmes and Marra (2006), to claim that the ability to use humor effectively is an important aspect of “good” leadership.

### **Social Media, Memes, and Humor**

The evolution of social media has generated the widespread phenomenon of user-generated content. Traditional consumers of information became producers and distributors of various content types (such as blog-posts, comments, ‘likes’ and Tweets) in the form of text, audio, video and photography (Baym & Burnett, 2009; Lessig, 2008). One type of easily spread content is the meme. The biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) coined the term ‘meme’ and defined it as a small cultural unit that spreads, as genes do, by copying or imitation. A meme may contain symbols, ideas and practices that are either unique to a specific culture or more global or universal in their distribution or application. According to Shifman (2011) and Knobel and Lankshear (2007), humor is a key feature and a central component of online memes. Shifman (2011) found that three important concepts in defining humor were also found in the majority of humorous memes. These concepts include playfulness (‘inviting’ viewers to participate in a game) (Morreall, 2005, 2009; Raskin, 1985), incongruity (an unexpected cognitive encounter between two incongruent elements) (Koestler, 1965), and superiority (the viewer perceives himself as superior to the other) (Billig, 2005). Shifman (2011), who analyzed memetic videos from YouTube, argued that the practice of creating easily replicable videos is prominent nowadays since the Internet enables a simple, cheap and fast creation and distribution of memes. In addition, the mimetic activity has a chance to be noticeable to the online community in an attention-driven era, and it can serve as a way to express individualism and originality, but at the same time to be part of an online community.



## A CASE STUDY

This is an exploratory study that tries to reveal how a politician can use self-humor and co-creational principles in his online communication with the public in order to face criticism. The study is based on a content analysis of a single Israeli case study.

On October 18, 2011, the Israeli soldier and war prisoner Gilad Shalit was released in a prisoners' exchange after being held in captivity by Hamas for over five years. As the Israeli nation celebrated the event, a certain photograph released by the Israeli Prime Minister's office began to circulate on the Israeli Web. The photograph presents the touching moment of reunion between Gilad Shalit and his father, while the Prime Minister Netanyahu smiles in the background (Image 1).



**Image 1: The photograph of the family reunion (Source: Government Press Office)**

A few Israeli netizens (online citizens) on Facebook have criticized Netanyahu's act, arguing that he should not have "pushed himself" into the photograph in such an intimate moment of family reunion. They cut Netanyahu's smiling image from the photograph and pasted it into various historically significant moments, somewhat like in the American film *Forrest Gump*.

The [Bibigump](#) phenomenon became a meme, a wide-spread cultural idea. Numerous Israelis used their editing software to create their own versions of the photo. The versions included hilarious images, such as Bibi and the creation of mankind, Bibi and the first American astronaut on the moon, Bibi in bed with Yoko Ono and John Lennon, and many others. The photographs were uploaded to Facebook and Tumblr and created an online buzz.

According to an Israeli Web site, [HolesInTheNet](#), 18,000 visitors viewed the photos on the Web site, and over 15,000 shared it. They even argued that Bibigump was the first original Israeli meme.

The spontaneous creation of the Bibigump meme was actually a sigh of relief of the Israeli public following Shalit's dramatic exchanges all day on TV, radio, and the Internet. The Israeli netizens used humor to express their happiness at the successful return of the Israeli soldier without, however, overlooking Netanyahu's "attempt" at "self-promotion", nor missing the opportunity to express a cynical attitude towards the alleged act of the Prime Minister.

The Israeli netizens did not expect to receive a response from the Prime Minister's office. It was quite obvious that Netanyahu would ignore the meme and remain "official." However, a week after the meme began to spread, Netanyahu and his staff uploaded their own version of the meme to Netanyahu's official Facebook page. The photo showed the smiling image of Netanyahu watching Netanyahu speaking in the United Nations Assembly, saying, "Bottom line, you made me laugh" (Image 2). Netanyahu's response came as a nice surprise to the media and the public, and received a great deal of positive coverage in the online, print, and electronic media. Two hours after uploading the photo on Facebook, it received 700 "likes" and 186 shares. Five days after uploading the photo, it had received 2,238 "likes," 541 shares, and 288 comments that were mostly positive.



**Image 2: Netanyahu's version of the meme (Source: Benjamin Netanyahu's Facebook page)**



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Bibigump phenomenon demonstrates the advantages of the Internet and social media for politicians and other public figures. Politicians can monitor social media sites and become aware of the public's attitude towards their acts and policies. Hence, they can solve problems and potential issues before they grow into critical crises (Botan & Taylor, 2004). In addition, politicians can use social media to engage with publics and promote dialogue and the building of relationships. Social media enabled Netanyahu to become aware of the criticism of his acts very early and to respond with the same tone and on the same platform in which the criticism began. From a discourse analysis perspective, one can argue that Netanyahu's response ("Bottom line, you made me laugh.") did not refer to the criticism aimed at him through the original meme blaming him for self-promotion. One could argue that Netanyahu's response was not truly interactive or dialogical since he did not invite the public to further communication about the photo; yet it will be argued here that it was a *dialogical gesture* in essence. Netanyahu engaged with the online community that created and spread the meme, used the same tone and platform, thus opening an additional channel of communication with this community. From a public relations standpoint, Netanyahu could have ignored the Bibigump phenomenon and remained official and distant. Yet, Netanyahu's decision to create his own version of the meme was a purposive strategic decision. Netanyahu actually signaled to the online community that he was aware of their criticism, that he understood their style of humor, and that he had the technological knowledge and resources to respond in the same manner. By creating his own version of the meme, Netanyahu had actually applied a few co-creational principles:

**Communicating in a human voice:** As suggested by Kelleher and Miller (2006), Netanyahu used a "conversational human voice" and a conversational style to respond to online criticism. While using humor in his response, Netanyahu conceptualized politics in everyday terms and created the illusion that he "speaks the language of common people" and is "one of them" (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, p.7). As suggested by Davies (2008) the so-called victims of humor can either choose to avoid humor that might offend them or to seek it. In this case Netanyahu decided to participate in the Bibigump phenomenon. Indeed, when interviewed about Netanyahu's version of the meme, Netanyahu's staff members told the printed media that the Prime Minister saw the meme, that it made him laugh, and he decided to "flow with it." Netanyahu did not patronize the creators of the Bibigump meme, but used the same type of content (humorous meme), the same language (Hebrew slang) and placed the meme in the

same social network (Facebook). Hence, he signaled to the online community that he was part of their ongoing conversation.

**Being responsive:** Politicians are often blamed for not being responsive to the needs and desires of their public. In this case, the creators of the meme did not expect a response from Netanyahu. Therefore, when Netanyahu responded, by creating his own version of the meme, it took the public and his critics by surprise and resulted in positive media coverage.

**Viral communication:** Netanyahu utilized the viral nature of social media. He could have chosen electronic or printed media to present his version of the photograph. But he anticipated that using Facebook would result in many "likes," "shares," and "comments," and that the photograph would go viral. He was right: shortly after uploading his photograph, it received coverage in the online, print, and electronic media. The public and the media showed appreciation of Netanyahu's gesture.

The co-creational approach in public relations perceives the public as co-creators of meanings and relationships. By creating his own version of the meme, Netanyahu became a co-creator of the meaning behind the photograph and signaled to the Israeli public that they were in dialogic relations, and that he counts them as equal to him in terms of communication (Botan, 1997). According to the dialogic communication approach in public relations, dialogic communication plays a crucial role in the building of relationships. Netanyahu's dialogical gesture was actually an implementation of a principle from the field of marketing: Come down from your ivory tower and talk with the people with whom you hope to create relationships (Levine et al., 2000).

Although a single case study, the Bibigump phenomenon demonstrates two important points. First, it shows how humor can successfully be used as both a strategic tool and a means of communication. According to Tsakona and Popa (2011), politicians are expected to employ serious (logical and legal) argumentation in order to convince their audience and attack the decisions of their opponents. Nevertheless, in various cultures and political systems, it is not uncommon to find politicians who use humor to respond to their opponents, thus expressing their criticism without being rude. Since humor is positively evaluated by publics, a politician who uses humor is presented in a positive manner as having "good" leadership skills (Holmes & Marra, 2006). Therefore, politicians attempt to enhance their popularity by adding a humorous tone or remark to their discourse whenever they are being observed by the wider audience. Similarly, the humorous online conversation between

Netanyahu and the Israeli netizens enabled both sides to communicate in a positive and friendly way without being aggressive or rude to each other. As suggested by Sover (2009), humor was employed here by both sides as a non-formal tool to define norms and boundaries and to argue which conduct is "right" and which is "wrong." The positive coverage that Netanyahu's response received in the printed, electronic, and online media demonstrates that from a public relations perspective, Netanyahu's humorous response was a successful strategic tool to ward off criticism. Indeed, journalists found Netanyahu's humorous response attractive and memorable and therefore gave it media coverage (cf. Tsakona and Popa, 2011).

Second, the Bibigump phenomenon emphasizes the power of individuals in the era of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) and social media. The technological developments enable a fast and cheap creation and distribution of information. Social media enable citizens to create and share information, to communicate with each other, and to quickly spread rumors and criticism about a politician or an organization (Pavlik, 2007). In other words, the Internet enabled a large-scale and fast meme distribution (Heylighen, 1996). Individuals used collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006) and expressed their individuality by creating their own version of the Bibigump meme and by spreading it across social networks. At the same time they felt part of a larger online community of meme consumers and producers (Shifman, 2011). Israeli netizens used image editing software and placed Netanyahu's image in various well-known local and global events. As suggested by Shifman (2011) and Knobel and Lankshear (2007), humor was a key feature in the various hilarious memes that were created by the netizens. The Bibigump memes contained playfulness, once they actually 'invited' viewers to create their own versions of the meme; the memes also contained incongruity, as they have presented an unexpected cognitive encounter between a well-known historical, event and Netanyahu's smiling image; finally, the memes expressed the superiority of the creators and consumers of the memes over the Israeli Prime Minister who was presented in a rather ridiculous tone. In Sover's terms (2009), the Israeli netizens used a non-formal tool in order to express their criticism against Netanyahu's act. The humorous memes enabled them to express their criticism in a friendly way, which in its turn contributed to Netanyahu's decision to respond in the same humorous way.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study explores the Bibigump phenomenon and demonstrates that in the online era humor can be successfully implemented as a strategic tool by politicians and other entities in order to foster dialogue, engage with publics, and promote OPR. However, this paper is based on a single case study, since no other similar cases in which a politician responded to criticism were available. Nevertheless, in future research a comparative approach might be used. This would enable us to search for more instances of online humorous dialogue between leaders or organizations and the public, whether in different countries or in different settings (e.g., contrasting politics and the commercial sphere). Such analysis could provide a descriptive mapping of the different humorous strategies used in order to restore public images, save face in different contexts, and account for the reasons why some strategies might prove successful whereas others might fail.

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