Abstract

Our international research team was in the midst of a comparative study about the daytoday experience of Twitter users in Berlin and Jerusalem through a series of daily short surveys, when our Jerusalem data were becoming increasingly compromised by the growing public concern, and tightening government measures, around the spread of the Coronavirus in Israel. During the two waves of our 10day survey of salient Twitter users in Jerusalem (March 9March 19, N = 34; March 23April 2, N = 25), Israel shifted from 50 confirmed Coronavirus cases to over 6,800 and from relative routine to almost full stayathome orders. This essay presents two intersecting narratives. First, we consider the methodological challenges of adapting ongoing academic survey studies to changing conditions. We then offer a mixedmethods analysis of the experiences of our Twitter users and how they saw the Coronavirus crisis shaping their use of Twitter. The essay thus offers a unique methodological and empirical vantage point on how social media useand academic researchevolve during times of global uncertainty.

Keywords

crisis communication, COVID19, Israel, survey research, Twitter

The catchphrase never let a crisis go to waste, attributed to Obamaadvisor Rahm Emanuel in the context of the 2008 financial crisis, has been made newly relevant in the context of COVID19. Yet making the most of a crisis often means needing to act fast, and under conditions of uncertainty. Unlike political leaders, researchers may be less accustomed to fastpaced shifts of research agendas, but both may sometimes gain from a crisis. This essay presents two intersecting narratives: Our response to the evolving situation as a research team; and a glimpse of the resulting data we gained, reflecting shifting social media use during the initial escalation of the Coronavirus crisis in Israel.

Doing Research under Changing ConditionsThe Researchers Point of View

We are an international research team engaged in an ongoing study on the role of space and locality in Twitter communication, comparing two cities: Berlin and Jerusalem.1 In early

2020, we were in the midst of one of the peaks of the studya threelanguage survey with salient Twitter users,2 using a Mobile Experience Sampling Method: a series of two short daily surveys asking about the last instance of Twitter usage, sent over 10 days via SMS. Our Berlin survey, completed in JanuaryFebruary 2020, was supposed to be compared with the Jerusalem survey, planned to occur in two waves during MarchApril 2020.

The Coronavirus seemed a distant event unrelated to our study. A first sign that it might interfere with our research came in early Marchthe second author, a German team member, had to cancel her planned research stay in Israel due to border closures. Despite this hiccup, we continued with

1The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

2WWU Munster, Germany

3Free University of Berlin, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Neta KliglerVilenchik, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 9190501, Israel.

Email: netakligler@gmail.com

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2 Social Media + Society

Figure 1. Confirmed Coronavirus cases and public measures per date and survey wave.

the survey as planned. When the first wave began on March 9, Israel had 50 confirmed Coronavirus cases, and the public moodwhile tensewas still one of relative routine. The 10 days of our first survey wave, however, proved to be dramatic in Israel. As Figure 1 illustrates, these days showed a fast pace of contagion, accompanied by increasingly tightening public measures, from school closures to stayathome orders.

Throughout this, our first wave respondents were filling out the survey twice daily. We quickly understood our data would be affected, making comparisons with the Berlin case moot.3 The key to not letting the crisis go to waste was acknowledging that our original, comparative research plan was no longer valid, and to consider what the new opportunities may be. Surprisingly, this direction emerged directly from the field. At the midpoint of our survey, a respondent informally shared that her tweeting habits were atypical: I was just thinking that the Corona situation may taint your dataI keep answering that Im tweeting from home at times when I would not normally be home. Just something to consider .

The respondents message provided the tipping point for us to see the Coronavirus as a research opportunity. On March 16, 3 days to the surveys end, we decided to add a postsurvey questionnaire examining how the situation affected respondents Twitter use. Over two hectic days, team members composed the postsurvey questionnaire, translated it into three languages, implemented it into the

survey system, and pilottested it. Since we were dealing with an unfolding crisis of an unknown nature, we were unsure standardized batteries of use motivations and intensity would capture relevant changes in our respondents social media use. We thus opted for a bottomup approach and added the following item: Please share with us in an openended manner how you feel the Coronavirus situation shaped your Tweeting habits over the past 10 days. On March 19, our postsurvey questionnaire was launched. The high response rate (89% of Wave 1 respondents) confirmed that our participants had much to share.

After the highpaced effort of preparing the Coronavirus survey, implementing it in the second wave of our survey (March 23April 2) was smoother. As seen in Figure 1, during Wave 2 of our research, Israel remained in lockdown, and cases continued to increase rapidlyyet, as the Israeli part of the research team testified, this period felt less dramatic. While cases were increasing, these were not the apocalyptic rates predicted by public health authorities. Israela nation accustomed to public crises (Cohen, 2002; Peri, 2007)seemed to quickly become habituated to the Coronavirus as part of daily life.

Twitter Use in Times of Global CrisisEvidence from the Field

Before moving to the experiences of our respondentssalient Twitter users in Jerusalemsome context is needed

KliglerVilenchik et al. 3

on crisis communication in Israel. In its 72 years, Israel has known a range of public crises, mostly in the form of armed conflict. Cohen (2002) describes Israel as a crisisridden democracy, whose media structure is accustomed to covering national crises, often through a live, nonstop, openended broadcasting mode of regurgitating disaster (Liebes, 1998).

National crises are also reflected in Israelis use of social mediaas studied extensively in the context of the IsraelGaza conflict of 2014. In the context of this crisis, Malka et al. (2015) found that Israelis used WhatsApp to consume information and interact socially. John and Gal (2018) found that during this conflict, Facebook users pruned political content and contacts from their feed in an attempt to exert control over their personal public sphere. While Facebook and WhatsApp are the dominant mainstream social media, Twitter is considered a niche platform in Israel, used particularly by elite users such as journalists, politicians, and public influencers. As such, it plays an important role during national crises (Tenenboim, 2017).

Our Jerusalemite Twitter usersmany of whom belong to this information eliteare thus no strangers to public crises. How did they respond to the emerging pandemic? We answer this via a mixedmethods analysis of our two survey waves. Given the literature on social media use during crises in the Israeli context, we would expect a heightened use of social media for news consumption and social coping in Wave 1, with some evidence of normalization in Wave 2possibly reflecting Israelis quick habituation to crisis.

We begin with a quantitative analysis. Before each survey wave, respondents filled out measures about intensity of, and motivations for, general Twitter usage (adapted from Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Our added postsurvey Coronavirus questionnaire included these measures again, but asked respondents to think specifically about their Twitter use during the previous 10 days (Wave 1, N = 34; Wave 2, N = 25;

Gender: 16 women, 42 men; Age: M = 38.17 years, SD = 12.31 years).

As Table 1 shows, the two survey waves were very similar in terms of intensity and motivations of Twitter usage. In line with our sample of frequent users of Twitter, intensity of Twitter usage was already high presurvey, for both waves. For Wave 1 users, one item for intensity of usage increased significantly postsurvey: I would be disappointed if Twitter shut down. In terms of motivations for Twitter usage, one item increased significantly, for both waves: I use Twitter because it helps me pass the time. Borderline significance was found for the item I use Twitter to receive information for Wave 2 only, with agreement decreasing. This may confirm a sense of Coronavirus habituation (or perhaps, Coronavirus informationoverload) for Wave 2 respondents. While most aggregate measures were very similar preand postsurvey, some evidence suggests the existence of underlying changes. Mapping movements between categories from the presurvey to the postsurvey shows for many

of the items movements from roughly equal numbers, in opposite directions. The most illustrative example was the item I feel out of touch when I havent logged onto Twitter. Although this item did not change significantly from presurvey to postsurvey, only ten participants agreed exactly the same with this statement in both questionnaires; 25 agreed less and 24 agreed more in the postsurvey questionnaire. Beyond this item, most movements are smallor mediumsized (changes of 12 points on a 7point Likerttype scale), suggesting that most people adjusted their behavior, but did not completely overhaul it during the crisis. However, there are some people whose answers shifted much more dramatically.

These data imply that the Coronavirus shaped different respondents Twitter use in very differential, even opposing ways. To further investigate this variance, we employed a qualitative thematic analysis of responses to the question how do you feel the Coronavirus situation shaped your Tweeting habits over the past 10 days?.

Our analysis points at three emerging themes: Information goals, social connections, and use habits.

Information goals was the most salient theme, reflecting use of Twitter to stay uptodate on the unfolding Coronavirus situation. One of the unique sociotechnical affordances of Twitter was the ability to find indepth analysis in a quickly changing reality:

Twitter was useful in searching and interpreting nearlylive data about the origin and spread of the disease. [. . . ] This was easier done on Twitter than on traditional news media. (Male, 33, Wave 1)

It enabled me to follow the literature, the science, the scientific breakthroughs and those that are controversial, and to publish a daily graph with the number of cases in Israel vis vis the expected exponential growth. (Male, 49, Wave 2)

While users in both waves described using Twitter for Coronavirusrelated information, an aspect that was unique to Wave 1 was Coronavirusrelated content replacing other topics:

Tweeted less about tech/work, more about Corona. (Male, 34, Wave 1)

It has meant a focus on only 1 topic. . . (Female, 48, Wave 1)

A second pertinent theme was using Twitter for maintaining social connections. This function was particularly pronounced vis vis stayathome orders:

Because youre stuck at home all day its the easiest way to check up whats going on with everyone. (Male, 23, Wave 2)

A small number of respondents specifically mentioned dealing with psychological difficulties, such as anxiety,