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## Talking back in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Rational dialogue or emotional shouting match?<sup>1</sup>

*Kurzfassung:* Das Internet erleichtert eine breite globale Konversation unter Bürgern und ermöglicht einen interkulturellen Dialog über eine Vielzahl von gesellschaftlich relevanten Fragen. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht die Beschaffenheit von „Talkback“-Diskursen auf Nachrichten-Web-Seiten im Rahmen des palästinensisch-israelischen Konflikts. Die Ergebnisse der Studie zeigen, dass viele der Antwortschreiber sich einer kritisch-rationalen Diskussion über grundlegende Fragen des Konflikts verpflichten, jedoch oft auch rationale Argumente vorbringen, um entgegenstehende Meinungen zu delegitimieren. Der „Talkback“-Dialog ist durch eine engagierte Diskussion gekennzeichnet, wobei jedoch die Mehrheit der Antwortschreiber eher in Dialog mit dem jeweiligen Artikel treten als einen Dialog mit den anderen Antwortschreibern zu führen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der „Talkback“-Diskurs eine lebhaft, vielseitige und umfassende Form eines öffentlichen Raumes konstituiert, der den Austausch heterogener Meinungen ermöglicht, jedoch die Selbstdarstellung gegenüber der Auseinandersetzung mit den anderen bevorzugt.

*Abstract:* The Internet has facilitated a broad global conversation among citizens, enabling cross-cultural dialogue on a range of issues, in particular through Web 2.0 tools. This study analyzes the nature of the talkback discourse on news web sites within the framework of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The study's findings demonstrated that several talkback writers engage in rational-critical discussion of issues essential to the conflict, although they often use rational arguments to de-legitimize conflicting opinions. Talkback dialogue is characterized by engaged discussion, though the majority of respondents engage in dialogue with the article, rather than with other talkback writers. The findings showed that talkback discourse enables a lively, eclectic, and inclusive version of a public sphere, which facilitates the exchange of heterogeneous opinions, though favoring exhibitionism over engagement.

### 1. Introduction

The Internet, in particular the collaborative, participatory frameworks enabled by Web 2.0 tools, has decentralized content creation, and allowed anybody with access to the required technology to present his or her message to over a billion Internet users. Within the context of ethnic conflicts, the Internet, as a 'public sphere' for the democratic, critical-rational discussion, has potential for breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding that exist between conflicting nations. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict provides an excellent case study of this phenomenon. In a conflict that is so complex, and seemingly intractable, the question of how the Internet could enable a public sphere of critical-rational dialogue is all the more intriguing.

While dialogue among citizens exists within several Internet frameworks, I will examine reader responses or 'talkbacks' on Internet news sites, as this type of content creates a meeting ground for individuals of disparate opinions within a specific framework. The talkback framework enables a potentially heterogeneous group of users to engage in debate on issues that are of concern to an audience that reads mainstream news websites.

### Contribution of research to the field

While a number of studies have been devoted to the Internet's role in enabling a public sphere, almost no literature exists on the role of talkbacks regarding this issue. The talkback framework represents a distinctive way in which various national groups within the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which are likely prevented from discussing the conflict due to geographical and security restrictions, can engage in a discussion.

### 2. Literature review

The literature review will first study the role of rational dialogue in modern society, focusing on Habermas' 'public sphere', and its disintegration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will then discuss theoretical approaches towards the Internet as a possible medium for the revitalization of the public sphere. Last, I will review the limited amount of literature that has been written about the phenomenon of talkbacks on news web sites.

#### 2.1 The public sphere, its denigration, and possible reinvigoration through the Internet

Habermas placed reason within interpersonal communication, within a 'public sphere' in which bourgeois Enlightenment

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1. This study is based, in part, on research conducted for the author's M.A. thesis, which was supervised by Dr. Yehudit Auerbach and Dr. Atara Frenkel-Faran. The author is indebted to his supervisors for their input during the study.

society engaged in rational debate on matters of political importance in coffeehouses and literary salons. He views the public sphere as a key component in the functioning of a democracy, arguing that 'the public sphere as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding to its needs' (Habermas, 1989: 74). Habermas defined the public sphere as a domain of un-coerced conversation oriented towards pragmatic accord and consensus. While within the print-culture dominated enlightenment, newspapers played a central role in informing the public debate, the growth of a commercial mass media resulted in a situation in which media became a commodity, rather than a tool for public discourse, bringing about a deterioration of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Curran continues Habermas' argument, claiming that the public sphere allows for public interests to interact with one another to establish an agreement about the direction of society. He explains that the media must generate a pluralistic and informed public dialogue. Curran advances Habermas' claim regarding the disintegration of the mass media's role, arguing that the media has established power relations with organized interests, thus, increasingly excluding the public from media discourse. He claims that the media have ceased acting as an agent of empowerment, thus 'sidelining' the public (Curran, 1991).

### 2.1.1 The Internet as a re-invigoration of the public sphere

Theorists have posited that the decline of the public sphere has been reversed by recent developments in Internet communications. These techno-utopists view the Internet as a type of 21<sup>st</sup> century coffee house, that enables rational debate on matters of importance.

In one of most revolutionary publications about the Internet – *The Cluetrain Manifesto* – Levine, Locke, Searls, and Weinberger argue that the Internet represents 'a powerful global conversation' (Levine, Locke, Searls, and Weinberger, 2001: 9). They claim that Internet markets are essentially discourse among individuals. Indeed, their concept of the basic notion of the Internet as *conversation* is an essential concept connected to the notion of the Internet as a public sphere (Levine, Locke, Searls, and Weinberger, 2001).

Dahlberg argues that the Internet enables a 'deliberative democracy', in which free, open, and rational debate among Internet users builds strong citizens by enabling them to act publicly. This 'deliberation' enables a movement towards understanding between disparate groups, resulting in consensus. Dahlberg believes that the participatory and deliberative nature of the Internet activates the type of public sphere that Habermas envisioned in Enlightenment era coffee houses and intellectual and literary salons (Dahlberg, 2001).

When reviewing this stream of literature, it is essential to understand the meaning of the most recent trends in Internet development – Web 2.0 tools. In essence, Web 2.0, while not defined by a specific technology revolution, is comprised of the development and evolution of web culture communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, tagging and social bookmarking sites, multimedia sharing sites, wikis, aggregation services such as RSS feeds, and blogs, enabling a more socially connected Web in which individuals can co-create and publish any type of content quickly and efficiently within recognized environments (Anderson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). Trends of Web 2.0 are reflected by the choice of Time Magazine to grant its person of the year award in 2006 to 'you' – for 'seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game' (Grossman, 2006). Time magazine celebrates the collaborative projects of Web 2.0, as follows:

„It's a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before....It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes....This is an opportunity to build a new kind of international understanding, not politician to politician, great man to great man, but citizen to citizen, person to person. It's a chance for people to look at a computer screen and really, genuinely wonder who's out there looking back at them" (Grossman, 2006).

As described by Time magazine, platforms enabled by Web 2.0 placed the focus of power on the individual, rather than on traditional hegemonic conglomerates.

Furthermore, Anderson argues that Web 2.0 enables 'the crowd' with a new level of power, facilitating the rise of the amateur and challenging conventional thinking about status and hierarchy (Anderson, 2007). However, this praise of the role of the amateur in the creation of content within these environments (Anderson, 2007) serves as the very crux of certain theorists scathing criticism of Web 2.0 (see below).

At the level of individual political involvement, Best and Wade argue that the Internet can allow people to better determine their position on issues because of its extraordinary capacity to gather information. Furthermore, they argue that the Internet can teach people how to organize to collectively effect change around the world, while contributing to the rise of more multi-centric world structure in which nation-states have lost power to nongovernment actors, allowing people to define their identities more freely, choosing among collectives and social groups, in addition to their nation-state (Best and

Wade, 2009). On a similar note, Rohlinger and Brown conclude, from their study of MoveOn.org, that the Internet provides citizens an opportunity to lodge democratic challenges against the state during hostile political climates (Rohlinger and Brown, 2009).

The above literature presents an extensively hopeful vision of the potential prospects of the Internet in the fields of democratic participation, deliberation and dialogue, participatory culture, and increased understanding between various peoples and cultures. Perhaps their most significant claim is the thesis that Internet users are viewed as citizens of a participatory global culture. However, according to the analysis of several theorists discussed above, it would appear that Internet users are primarily interesting in engaging in rational discussion, confronting social and political problems, learning about diverse points of view, and engaging in joint development projects – a claim that is challenged by a number of critical theorists in the following section.

### 2.1.2 Criticism of Internet as a public sphere

The above literature presents a hopeful vision of the potential of the Internet in the fields of democratic participation, and increased understanding between various peoples. However, there can be no question that, as Habermas' public sphere is conceptualized as an ideal type, the Internet cannot be expected to recapture a lost golden age, which never actually existed. As Calhoun argues, the public sphere was not only a framework for making rational argumentation, but also based on a set of power relations that determined who was included or excluded in this discussion, and whose opinion would carry more weight. In addition, Calhoun extracts from Habermas the notion that a more inclusive public sphere ultimately results in a degeneration of its quality, a concepts echoed by Internet theorists, below (Calhoun, 1992).

Furthermore, the vision presented by the techno-utopists presented above is contested by theorists who question whether Internet discussions with little moderation can result in a rational, inclusive dialogue. Streck claims that unmonitored message-sending results in chaos that 'is about as interactive as a shouting match' (Streck, 1998: 45). He argues that the major problem of cyberspace is that 'the right to speak is elevated above all others, while the responsibility of listening is ignored' (Streck, 1998: 45).

Keen engages in a scathing criticism of the results of Web 2.0 revolution. He claims, 'It is ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rule...on steroids' (Keen, 2007: 1). Keen argues that Web 2.0 is the 'cult of the amateur' in which 'the monkeys are running the show' (Keen, 2007: 9). He claims that the 'democratization' of the Internet undermines truth, sours civic discourse, and belittles expertise, experience and talent. Thus, in contrast with other theorists, Keen believes that the Internet is 'outright corrupting our national civic conversation' (Keen, 2007: 27).

Bauerlein's watershed publication, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, takes Keen's criticism a step further, claiming, as his unambiguous title would suggest, that digital culture are not broadening the horizon of the younger generation, but are narrowing it to a self-absorbed social universe that hampers intellectual development and rightful citizenship. He engages in numerous studies that examine the knowledge, skills and intellectual habits of teenagers, which illustrate that youths use technology for self-obsessive purposes of exchanging personal, pictures, video, and songs, while they have closed themselves off from political or cultural knowledge that extends beyond their immediate social circle and interests (Bauerlein, 2008).

Gerhards and Schafer continue this critical perspective, as they examine the notion that the Internet has re-invigorated the public sphere. In their study, they found a lack of popular inclusion and heterogeneity of opinions, as search engines provide established, institutionalized actors with an obvious advantage (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010).

## 2.2 The nature of talkback discourse

The final sphere of the literature review includes literature dealing specifically with talkbacks, a highly underdeveloped topic. Kohn and Neiger conducted a ground-breaking study of the Israeli talkback discourse, using as a case study an article written by Haaretz journalist Ari Shavit during Gaza "disengagement". They found that talkbacks illustrated the journalistic preference of the dramas of confrontation over the mechanical nature of peace-making and reconciliation reflecting "a particularly violent and aggressive discourse" (Kohn and Neiger, 2006: 2).

Furthermore, Kohn and Neiger found that talkback writers engage with both the journalist and other respondents, primarily by attempting to undermine their rhetoric by constructing counter-rhetoric to their rhetoric. According to Kohn and Neiger, while the journalists use Aristotelian rhetoric of logos, pathos, and ethos, talkback writers try to "undermine the rhetoric of the journalists and build a counter-rhetoric (termed anti-logos, anti-pathos, and anti-ethos) in order to confront the claims suggested by a journalist or by a respondent" (Kohn and Neiger, 2006: 2).

Abdul-Mageed conducted a quantitative study of talkbacks on the Arabic Al-Jazeera web site, attempting to determine the extent to which the web site was interactive. Abdul-Mageed found that there was a regular use of talkbacks in response to

stories, but that they were distributed unevenly across articles. He found that articles focusing on violent conflict, foreign relations, and events related to the Arab world enjoyed a higher level of talkback response than other articles. This result contributes to the claim that talkback writers prefer to engage in emotional, violent content. In addition, Abdul-Mageed found that the position of the story on the web page contributed to the number of talkbacks received (Abdul-Mageed, 2008).

Gillmor argues that talkbacks may offer valuable insights, but that it is doubtful whether many of the posts are actually read by authors of the article. Thus, talkback discourse consists inevitably of posters talking among themselves, meaning that there is no actual interaction between the journalist and the posters. The article written by the journalist serves only as a catalyst for conversation among posters (Gillmor, 2009). However, it should be noted that the conversation initiated by talkbacks is not exclusively limited to other posters – even if the journalists themselves rarely read talkbacks, they are read by a broad audience and are considered to reflect, to a certain extent, public opinion. Thus, talkbacks can serve as raw material for the public relations needs of various interest parties in their attempts at agenda setting for the public discourse.

In general, the limited literature that exists on talkbacks illustrates trends of heated dialogue between various respondents and with the article itself, as well as a tendency for respondents to prefer reacting to content that involves conflict, and expressing themselves aggressively.

### 3. Methodology

This section presents the methodology used during the study, describing the study's research question and method.

#### 3.1 Research question

The research question and sub-questions are as follows:

Within the realm of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, to what extent do talkbacks constitute a public sphere?

- To what extent do talkback writers use rationally-based arguments?
- To what extent do talkback writers engage in a dialogue with one another's talkbacks and with the article itself?

#### 3.2 Research method

The primary research method used in this study is a combined quantitative/qualitative content analysis of talkback discourse from two web sites, described below. Content analysis is the preferred research method for two reasons. First, content analysis constitutes a study of data as it appears in its context, enabling an analysis of text as it is presented (Krippendorff, 1980). User-generated content comprises a defined context within which a discussion can be evaluated, meaning there is no need to know who the participants are to evaluate the discussion (Wilhelm, 2000). Thus, the "text" of the study is the content itself, eliminating the problem of not knowing the identity of generators of content in Internet studies. Second, in contrast to other research methods, in which the subject is apt to feel pressure to present acceptable responses, the creators of the messages are unaware that they are being analyzed, and thus the examined text is more authentic (Weber, 1990). By analyzing the content of talkbacks, the study has direct access to the content itself, without the need to make reference to a mediator who describes talkback content through a survey or questionnaire.

An emphasis on qualitative content analysis has been chosen, as it has the capability to provide a discourse comprised of "authentic voices" (Lincoln and Guba, 2003), producing "a *bricolage* – that is, a pieced together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Thus, I have opted to attempt a discourse analysis that will attempt to arrive at "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of the content. The qualitative aspect of the content analysis will utilize a Critical Discourse Analysis inspired approach, by attempting to uncover, or disclose that which is implicit or not immediately obvious in texts used to enact the dominance of a particular ideology (Van Dijk, 1995). Within this context, the discourse analysis will focus on social problems and political issues, analyzing the link between discourse and the power relations of society (Van Dijk, 2001), as well as focusing on the discursive construction of national identity (Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak, 1999).

The two web sites chosen are in English to enable the study of discussion across international borders. However, the decision of focusing exclusively on English language web sites creates a built-in limitation to the study: several Middle Eastern talkback writers who write on Arabic or Hebrew web sites are excluded from the study. Thus, in attempting to focus on international dialogue, it must be accepted that the Arabic or Hebrew speaking talkback writers studied will represent an educated, international, non-representational sample population.

I opted to choose specific web sites rather than to randomly sample the Internet, as generalizations about user-generated content on the Internet on the basis of random sampling are impossible, since there is no clear finite universe of materials that can be sampled (Keren, 2006).

I chose one Israeli news web site, the English edition of Haaretz, and one Arab news web site, the English edition of Al-Jazeera.<sup>1</sup> I limited my study to two news web site, as including a larger range of web sites would add additional variables to the study.

### Sampling of articles and talkbacks

The analysis of talkback discourse focused on the following types of news items:

- A major peace event, such as a breakthrough in negotiations on the Palestinian-Israeli track.
- A setback in the negotiating process.
- An act of Palestinian use of force against Israelis.
- An act of Israeli use of force against Palestinians.

The articles chosen were not selected randomly, but were chosen specifically to reflect the topics mentioned above. Within the articles chosen, specific talkbacks were selected using an interval sampling method, in which every fifth talkback was chosen for analysis. Using this method, 300 talkbacks were chosen from the Haaretz English language web site and 300 talkbacks were chosen from the Al-Jazeera English language web site.

Only talkbacks that were actually published – that is, talkbacks that entered the public sphere – were analyzed. Numerous submitted talkbacks are not published, as they do not conform to the censorship policy of the web sites (see Appendix II). The methodology assumes that the results obtained only reflect trends of talkbacks that enter the public sphere – results cannot be assumed to reflect the general character of talkbacks submitted.

### 3.3 Content categories and discourse analysis

In attempting to ascertain the extent to which talkback discourse constitutes a public sphere, two aspects were studied:

- The rationality of talkbacks, determined by the uses of established rhetorical tools including deductive logic and inductive logic, making use of statistics, historical texts, concrete examples, and observable materials (Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik, 1979; Ross, 1994). Each talkback studied was allocated to one of the following nominal classifications within the categories of rationality of content and dialogue, for the purpose of quantitative analysis:

Rational/non-rational aspect of content
1. Message presented as an argument, using previously discussed rhetorical tools. <sup>a</sup>
2. Message is primarily a non-rational claim, with no validating reasons for claim provided.

a. It should be noted that arguments that used rational arguments to support non-rational claims were coded in this category.

Table 1: Quantitative Analysis - Rationality

- The extent to which talkback discourse is characterized by dialogue – between the various talkback writers, and between talkback writers and the article to which the writers are reacting. The types of dialogue were categorized into various trends and analyzed. Within the context of this study, the term dialogue must be understood in the most basic sense of the word, and can be considered to be synonym for engagement. Dialogue does not delineate any specific type of discussion with a talkback writer or journalist, but indicates that the talkback writer has engaged with the content of the article or of another post. Each talkback studied was allocated to one of the following nominal classifications within the categories of rationality of content and dialogue, for the purpose of quantitative analysis:

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1. For purposes of parallelism between the web sites, it would have been preferable to choose a Palestinian news web site rather than a Pan-Arab news web site. However, none of the Palestinian news web sites have a well-developed talkback feature.

<b>Dialogue with original article and other respondents</b>
1. Dialogue with both original article and other respondents.
2. Dialogue with other respondents.
3. Dialogue with original article.
4. Absence of dialogue.

Table 2: Quantitative Analysis - Dialogue

The intercoder reliability test was used to verify the reliability of my coding of variables in my quantitative content analysis. According to Tinsley and Weiss, intercoder agreement is needed in content analysis because it measures the extent to which the different judges tend to assign the same rating to each object (Tinsley and Weiss, 2000). See Appendix IV for an explanation of how the intercoder reliability test was conducted.

### **3.4 In-depth interviews of web site editors**

In addition to content analysis, my study engaged in in-depth interviews with the editor of the Haaretz English language web site. This interview provided insight into the editor's opinion regarding the possibility of the talkback framework enabling a public sphere within the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (see Appendix I for the questionnaire). In addition, this interview facilitated a greater understanding of the principles used for moderating talkback content and the way in which censorship affects talkback discourse. While my intention was to interview the editors of both web sites studied, unfortunately, my request to interview the editor of the Al-Jazeera web site was rejected.

### **3.5 Time frame of the study**

Talkbacks for this study were studied from the beginning of November, 2007, until the end of January, 2009. This period was chosen to begin with the onset of the 'Annapolis Process', as the Annapolis Conference took place on November 27, 2009, and end at the conclusion of Operation 'Cast Lead', the Israel-Gaza conflict, which ended on January 21, 2009, with the complete withdrawal of Israel's ground troops from Gaza.

## **4. Findings**

This section presents the results of my study, which include a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of 600 talkbacks: 300 talkbacks taken from the Haaretz English language web site and 300 talkbacks taken from the Al-Jazeera English language web site.

### **4.1 Rationality of arguments**

In determining the extent to which talkback discourse constitutes a public sphere, the question of the rationality of the arguments presented is essential. While the question of defining the essence of a rational argument is complex, for the purposes of this discussion, rational arguments are defined as those which support the validity of their positions by using rhetorical tools such as deductive logic and inductive argumentation, making use of statistics, historical texts, concrete and hypothetical examples, and observable materials. In this section, I first provide a quantitative analysis of the rationality of talkbacks and then a qualitative talkback analysis, which examines various uses of rational argumentation among talkback writers.

#### **4.1.1 Rationality of arguments – Quantitative analysis**

As was discussed in the methodology, a quantitative analysis of rationality of talkbacks was conducted, according to the following two nominal categories:

- Rational talkbacks (R): talkbacks that present reasons to support the validity of their positions.
- Non-Rational talkbacks (NR): talkbacks that do not present reasons to support the validity of their positions.

For 300 talkbacks from the Haaretz English language web site, the following results were found:

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
R	163	54.3
NR	137	45.7
Total	300	100

Table 3: Rationality on Haaretz

For 300 talkbacks from the Al-Jazeera English language web site, the following results were found:

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
R	154	51.3
NR	146	48.7
Total	300	100

Table 4: Rationality on Al-Jazeera

The combined results of the two web sites are as follows:

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
R	317	52.8
NR	283	47.2
Total	600	100

Table 5: Combined Rationality Results

These results illustrate that for each web site, a small majority of talkbacks analyzed were categorized as rational. The non-significant difference between the two sites of 3% illustrates that both web sites analyzed show similar trends. The combined result of the two web sites, in which 52.8% of analyzed talkbacks were categorized as rational, attests to the potential for the talkback platform to constitute a public sphere.

#### 4.1.2 Rationality of arguments – Qualitative analysis

From the 600 talkbacks analyzed, certain trends regarding the use of rationality became apparent. The following section will trace some of the major trends in talkback discourse with respect to the use of rational arguments, through the use of specific examples.

##### 4.1.2.1 The use of syllogistic logic

Several talkback writers make use of simple syllogisms to impart a certain argument regarding Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, in response to the article, 'PA rejects Olmert's offer to withdraw from 93% of West Bank', 'Elias Khoury', who claims to reside in 'Jerusalem, Palestine', makes the following argument in support of why the Palestinian leadership has rejected Israel's offer on borders:

„Most Palestinians, if Israel offered a free, sovereign, and contiguous Palestinian state in Gaza, WB, and E. Jerusalem would have accepted with an agreed upon solution (compensation) for the refugee issue. The reality is that Israel continues to create 'facts' on the ground furnishing its true intentions of making a Palestinian state non-existent. This is why the movement grows for a 1 state solution" (Elias Khoury, 2008).

Elias Khoury's argument can be summed up as follows:

- Most Palestinians would agree to a sovereign, contiguous state in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, with compensation provided for the Palestinian refugees.
- Israel is not making such an offer, but is instead destroying this possibility by expanding settlements.
- Therefore, many Palestinians have abandoned the two-state solution, and the movement for a one-state solution is growing.

In this example, the writer provides a logical syllogism in support of his claim, exploiting accepted and clearly understood rhetorical techniques in order to illustrate why the Palestinians do not take Israeli peace overtures seriously.

#### 4.1.2.2 Arguments that use historical documents

There are certain rational arguments used in talkbacks that attempt to make use of historical documents to justify positions. For instance, in response to the article, 'PA rejects Olmert's offer to withdraw from 93% of West Bank', 'R'Fael Moshe' makes an attempted rational argument against Israel being required to return all the land conquered in 1967, basing his argument on United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. He quotes an author of the resolution, as follows:

„From the actual author of the text, Prof. Eugene Rostow, former US Undersecretary of State, a key author of UN Resolution 242, international law authority, Yale University:

'UN SC 242 calls on Israel to withdraw only from territories occupied in the course of the Six Day War - that is, not from 'all' the territories or even from 'the' territories. Repeated attempts to amend this sentence by inserting the word 'the' failed in the Security Council...

Ingeniously drafted resolutions calling for withdrawal from 'all' the territory were defeated in the Security Council and the General Assembly one after another. Speaker after speaker made it explicit that Israel was not to be forced back to the 'fragile and vulnerable' [1949/1967] Armistice Demarcation Lines ..." ('R'Fael Moshe', 2008).

In this example, the writer makes use of the rhetorical device of quoting a historical document, exploiting the well-known use of the word 'territories' rather than 'the territories' or 'all the territories' used in UN Security Council Resolution 242. The writer uses this quotation to argue that the international community never expected Israel to return to the 1967 lines in exchange for peace agreements, but merely to return 'territories'.

#### 4.1.2.3 Claims with no rational validation

While talkback writers utilize a spectrum of uses of rationality, there are certain types of emotional talkbacks that make no attempts to use reason, and constitute a type of shouting match. These posts often have a violent character, which are offensive to certain groups. For example, in a post written by 'Efox', entitled 'Blaming God when it is Arabs Who Will Chop Up Your Son', he makes the cryptic forecast, 'There will be no peace, not because of God, but because of Allah....No Peace, ever, for anyone. Fight or Die at their hands' ('Efox', 2007). In another example, 'Rozz' asks how Israel's leaders can 'LITERALLY SELL OUT THE COUNTRY TO FILTHY MURDERING ARABS' ('Rozz', 2008).

There are similar types of posts on the other side of the conflict axis. A common discourse is the comparison of Israel to Nazis, as writers often ask rhetorical question of how Jews could act like Nazis, after having undergone the Holocaust. In response to the article 'Gazans: 'We are living a nightmare'', 'Will' writes:

„Does Israel represent the new Nazis? The Germans were good instructors and the Israelis seem to have learned well. It is strange that the Israeli government doesn't see the reality of their inhumanity. Did they learn nothing from the holocaust?" ('Will', 2009).

Other trends of emotional types of posts include the personal insult of other talkback writers. Talkback writers often refer to one another as 'idiots', 'morons', and 'Fascists'. These types of emotionally-driven comments, while perhaps giving the writer a platform to release anger and frustration, do not contribute to a public sphere.

#### 4.1.2.4 Summary of the use of rationality

In general, over 50% of the talkbacks analyzed from the two web sites make rationally-based claims, offering reasons to validate their claims. However, rational tools are often used for the sake of de-legitimizing opposing claims, rather than for the sake of proposing practical solutions. Furthermore, some talkback writers make emotional claims that bring down the discussion to a type of shouting match.

The editor of the Haaretz English web site, Sara Miller, confirmed my results, estimating that approximately 50% of the published talkbacks could be considered rational, and that the last year showed an increase in 'civilized debate and discussion.' However, she estimated that approximately 50% of talkbacks submitted were not published, as they did not conform to the web site's censorship standards. Since almost none of the censored talkbacks could be considered rational, of the total talkbacks submitted, approximately 25% could be considered to be rational (Miller, 2009). Thus, there is a significant difference between the rationality of talkbacks accepted into the public sphere, and the rationality of talkbacks submitted.

#### 4.1.3 Dialogue in talkback discourse

In determining the extent to which talkback discourse constitutes a public sphere, the nature of the dialogue that occurs is essential. In this section, I first provide a quantitative analysis of the four general categories of dialogue, and then a qualitative talkback analysis, which examines certain dialogue trends within talkback discourse.



#### 4.1.3.1 Nature of dialogue – Quantitative results

As explained in the Methodology, a quantitative analysis of the talkbacks was conducted in order to measure the dialogue component of talkback discourse. The four nominal categories are as follows:

- Dialogue with both original article and other respondents (symbol = DAR).
- Dialogue with other respondents (symbol = DR).
- Dialogue with original article (symbol = DA).
- Absence of dialogue (symbol = ND).

For the Haaretz English language site, the results obtained for these four categories for 300 talkbacks studied were as follows:

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
DAR	37	12.3
DR	26	8.7
DA	223	74.3
ND	14	4.7
Total	300	100

Table 6: Dialogue on Haaretz

For the Al-Jazeera English language site, the results obtained for these four categories for 300 talkbacks studied were as follows:

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
DAR	21	7.0
DR	10	3.3
DA	245	81.7
ND	24	8.0
Total	300	100

Table 7: Dialogue on Al-Jazeera

The combined results for these four categories are as follows:

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
DAR	58	9.7
DR	36	6
DA	468	78
ND	38	6.3
Total	600	100

Table 8: Dialogue Combined Results

The quantitative analysis of both web sites illustrates that the majority of talkback writers engage in a dialogue with the main article itself. A smaller percentage of talkback writers engaged in dialogue with other respondents exclusively, or with other respondents and with the article itself. Among the talkbacks for the Haaretz English language web site, a larger percentage of writers engage in dialogue with other respondents and with other respondents and the main article, than do talkbacks on the Al-Jazeera English language web site. While there could be several factors that contribute to this phenomenon, this difference likely attests to a more developed and integrated talkback community at Haaretz's web site than Al-Jazeera, as the Haaretz talkback feature has existed for a much longer time than Al-Jazeera's and is used with greater frequency. Thus, talkback writers know one another to a greater extent, and respond more actively to one another's posts.

In addition, a small percentage of writers did not engage in dialogue with the article or other respondents. These posts are both unrelated to the topic of the main article or to the ensuing talkback dialogue; they reflect talkback writers' desire to express a certain position, even if it is totally irrelevant.

#### 4.1.3.2 Types of dialogue – Qualitative analysis

Of the 600 talkbacks analyzed, various types of dialogue, both with the main article, and among talkback users were apparent. The following section will trace some of these trends, through the use of specific examples.

##### 4.1.3.3 Dialogue with the article

The type of engagement that talkback writers have with the main article can be divided into three general categories, described in the following sections:

- Response to the content of the article.
- Response to the coverage of the event, journalist, or media organization.
- Disregard of the article in the content of the post.

##### 4.1.3.3.1 Response to the content of the article

Talkback writers generally respond directly to the item presented in the main article, particularly in news pieces. They frequently take a specific opinion of the events and portray the events as being typical of a certain trend or regular behavior of one side or the other. For example, in response to the article 'Israel PM casts doubt on 2008 deal', 'Sam' who claims to reside in the United States reacts directly to the article's content, complaining the American presidents seem to only seriously attempt to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict just before they leave office ('Sam', 2008).

##### 4.1.3.3.2 Response to the coverage of the event, journalist, or media organization

There are examples in which talkbacks extend beyond the mere events presented in the article, but respond to the coverage of the events, the journalist him or herself, or the media organization. Op-ed pieces and editorials often elicit a personal response to the writer. For example, in the article 'The IAF, bullies of the clear blue skies', Gideon Levy paints a particularly gruesome picture of the destruction caused by Israel Air Forces bombing during the operation in Gaza, portraying the pilots as little more than glorified murderers. Personal responses to the author include the following talkbacks:

„You are not a peacemaker, Gideon. You are a propagandist. If you don't like killing, use your column to call on both sides for a cease fire and stop your vicious propaganda“ („Tzfonit', 2008).

„I feel ashamed of a guy like you to be Jewish, but more of a paper called Ha'aretz which publishes your trash....Because of people like you research has shown anti Semitism finds an excuse to be considered 'salon fahig'. You did not bother even once to go to Jewish victims, probably because you are too scared to be lynched by your own people as they will show what they think of you“ („Zebra', 2008).

These types of accusations, in essence, accuse the journalist both as serving as a traitor to his own people and as failing to advance the interests of peace.

Other talkback writers express personal appreciation to the journalists. For example, in response to the op-ed piece entitled, 'Lucky my parents aren't alive to see this', in which Amira Hass expresses thanks that her parents are not alive to see the ruin that Israel has caused in Gaza during the Gaza operation, 'D.S.', who claims to reside in East Jerusalem, writes:

„You - and Israelis like you - are a source of comfort that not all is lost and that peace might one day be possible. It's hard to hold on to that hope these days, especially when it seems abundantly clear that our lives are officially not worth anything in Israel“ („D.S.', 2009).

This talkback illustrates that Amira Hass' approach provides hope for this talkback writer, serving as a type of exception to general Israeli discourse.

A similar type of response involves the talkback writer commenting on the media organization's perceived ideological approach. In a talkback written for the same article, 'Michael N. Landis' thanks Al-Jazeera, writing, 'Thank you, Al-Jazeera, for bringing us the story of what is happening in Gaza. As usual, the media here are not telling us about Israeli holocaust against the Palestinians of Gaza' ('Michael N. Landis', 2009).

##### 4.1.3.4 Dialogue between talkback writers

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the talkback phenomenon is not the content of each individual talkback, but the dialogue between talkback writers themselves. While many talkbacks studied reacted only to the article itself, there are several forms of dialogue and debate that take place among talkback writers.

#### 4.1.3.4.1 The dialogue of developed personal relations

Several talkback writers engage in a dialogue of acquaintances, which clearly depicts a relationship which has developed over time. Writers attribute characteristics to one another, attesting to previous acquaintance via talkback discussions. For example, in reaction to the article entitled 'People who hate the very idea of peace', 'Margie in Tel Aviv' writes that there are several examples of such individuals (people who hate the very idea of peace) among talkback writers. She claims that 'Clickfool', 'Ballistic', and 'Durson' would hate to see any diplomatic progress, as this would disprove their thesis that Jews do not want peace ('Margie in Tel Aviv', 2007). 'Yonathan', who claims to reside in Kfar Saba, Israel, adds to this discourse the notion that there exists a symmetry of extremism on both sides of the conflict both in the realm of politics and equally in the realm of talkbacks. He writes:

„As for symmetry, yes it exists. BB has given several examples in his column. Zvi Hendel = Fawzi Barhoum, Mahmoud Zahar = Shaul Goldstein. The parallels are legion.

And for every Clickfool, there is a Yishai Cohen. For every Natalie Durson, there is an Absolute Sweden. For every Indrajaya, there is a VOICE OF MOSHIACH ('Yonathan', 2007).

These talkbacks exemplify a type of meta-discourse, in which writers describe the discussion enabled by other talkback writers, indicating long-standing acquaintance with these writers' views.

#### 4.1.3.4.2 A debate of de-legitimization

In response to the article, 'People who hate the very idea of peace', a dialogue develops in which two participants, 'Omar' and 'Peter', engage in a point-counter-point argument. 'Omar', who states that he is from Ramallah, opens this thread with the following argument, in a post entitled 'The problem with peace':

„As I've argued in the past, this talk of 'peace', while important, has overshadowed the true requirement to end the conflict: freedom. We Palestinians desire freedom just like any other nation on earth (here come the 'you're not a nation' comments). Okay, just like any other human beings on earth. You cannot have peace between occupier and occupied, peace must be between two free peoples. Freedom is a basic human right, and is not something that is 'earned'. If one thinks that freedom is something a human being needs to 'earn', that someone is a racist.

As for peace, the equation is very very simple: Do not demand of us that which you would not accept for yourselves. This goes both ways. In 2000, Shlomo Ben-Ami said that if he were Palestinian, he wouldn't have accepted Barak's offer (which he helped draw up) either" ('Omar', 2007a).

'Omar' makes two central arguments:

- While peace between Israelis and Palestinians is important, the true requirement to end the conflict is Palestinian freedom. Peace cannot exist between occupier and occupied, but only between two free peoples.
- The end-of-conflict agreement proposed at Camp David in 2000 was unacceptable to the Palestinians, as illustrated by Shlomo Ben-Ami's comment.

'Omar's' rhetoric involves an anticipation of counter-claims. He anticipates claims that deny Palestinian nationhood ('here come the 'you're not a nation' comments' – an argument which is, in fact purported by 'Peter' – see below), as well as the common claim that Palestinians have not 'earned' their freedom. Thus, 'Omar' illustrates an acute awareness of the types of the arguments made in talkback discourse, and even has the ability to accurately predict a counter-argument.

In the counter-post, entitled 'Omar on imaginary nationalism', 'Peter', who claims to reside in Montreal, Canada, makes a number of claims discounting the claims of Palestinian nationhood. He asks several rhetorical questions which ask for proof that Palestine is a nation-state, equating symbols of sovereignty (borders, money, a flag, etc.) with nationhood, as follows:

„Last I heard coming from a city isn't a nationality, so while you lay claim to being from Ramallah...so what? This means holding some imaginary nationality of Palestinian???? When did this nationality exist?

Stating you aren't free in your own country is a neat party trick, but which country are you referring to? Surely you aren't talking about the imaginary country of Palestine. If you are then tell us where the borders are? Where is the capital? Some stamps, money, passports, a flag, a national anthem would be nice to see" ('Peter', 2007a).

In this post, 'Peter' does not actually confront the claims for the need for freedom made by Omar, but instead negates 'Omar's' right to request freedom by denying his right to nationhood.

'Omar' replies to 'Peter's' post, claiming that 'Peter's' argument can be applied to any nation that has not yet achieved independence. He informs 'Peter' that as a Canadian foreigner, he 'has no right to inform me about my own identity'. 'Omar' then kindly requests that 'Peter' 'go hunt seals in the arctic or something and leave issues in the Middle East to those who know something about it' ('Omar', 2007b). This post illustrates a complete lack of respect for the argument made by Peter. In addition, this post shows how stated geographic location can influence the discourse. 'Omar' claims that as a Canadian, 'Peter' has no right to comment on Palestinian nationalism, and that as an ill-informed outsider, he best not get involved

in issues related to the Middle East conflict. 'Peter' closes his post by claiming, 'Typical response from you Omar....ignoring the fact that you're unable to live up to your own revisionism' ('Peter', 2007b). This conclusion attests to the fact that 'Omar' and 'Peter' have a previous online relationship, which is likely characterized by the same style of back-and-forth point and counter-point argument of de-legitimization. The argument between 'Omar' and 'Peter' consist of each writer, not only reacting to one another's posts, but attempting to use one another's arguments as rhetorical tool against his combatant.

#### **4.1.3.4.3 No dialogue with article or other talkback writers**

Though it is rare, there are certain talkback writers whose posts do not directly relate to the topic presented in the article, nor do they relate to the posts of other talkback writers. These talkbacks seek to make a statement, often with little connection to the main article or to the ensuing talkback discourse. For example, in response to the article, 'Rice: Annapolis Mideast peace push was no failure', in which Secretary of State Rice suggests that the Annapolis Process must develop in 2009, a talkback writer who identifies himself as 'The Midwestern', and claims to reside in Ann Arbor Michigan, writes a list of features that a single state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river must encompass: a democratic state for all of its citizens, one person – one vote, the return of refugees, and no religious or ethnic definition of the state ('The Midwestern', 2008). These types of talkbacks attest to an infrequent phenomenon of talkback writers using the talkback platform to stage their ideas, without any sense of the context or relevance of their comments to the general discussion.

#### **4.1.3.5 Summary of types of dialogue**

This section has provided an overview of the types of dialogue used by talkback writers, including both dialogue between talkback writers and the main articles, and among talkback writers themselves. The editor of the Haaretz English web site, Sara Miller, confirmed in an interview that talkback writers respond primarily to the content of the article, but also to the journalists themselves, as well as to Haaretz as an organization with a specific ideological perspective. She argued that certain op-ed writers elicit talkbacks aimed specifically towards the writers themselves, often addressing the journalist as if they have developed a long-standing relationship (Miller, 2009). Miller confirmed that talkback writers frequently respond to one another's posts, though often in the form of an attack. She argued that the dialogue between talkback writers could be considered to be a debate in which neither side shows flexibility or attempts to understand or accept the opposing point of view (Miller, 2009).

#### **4.1.3.6 Summary of results**

The range of uses of rationality as well as dialogue which tends to be characterized, at times, by de-legitimization of the other side and insults, attests to the fact that talkback discourse facilitates a complex and colorful discourse in which a highly egalitarian platform may compromise the quality of the deliberation. As the editor of the Haaretz English web site argued, the talkback platform has great potential to enable broader participation in public debate; however, this potential was often not properly utilized, as talkback discourse often took the form of a shouting match (Miller, 2009). With this in mind, a more realistic version of a lively, colorful, often personal public sphere does exist in talkback discourse within the framework of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as individuals representing a range of viewpoints and opinions engage in a fruitful exchange of views.

## **5. Discussion**

This section will discuss the implications of the findings of this study by making reference to the various spheres of the literature review, as well as broader ramifications of this study.

### **5.1 The nature of talkback discourse**

The results of my study offered a varied and mixed picture regarding talkback discourse within the framework of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. While talkback writers frequently used rationally based arguments, rationality was often used as a tool of delegitimizing counter-claims. Furthermore, talkback writers often engaged in dialogue with the article, though they less frequently related to posts made by other talkback writers. In a sense, Kohn and Neiger's claim that talkbacks reflected 'a particularly violent and aggressive discourse' (Kohn and Neiger, 2006: 2), was proven to be correct, as even rational claims attempted to attack opposing points of view. This claim was supported by the editor of the Haaretz English edition web site, who noted that talkback discourse on the web site is 'uncompromising, rigid, and hostile.' She argued that the majority of talkbacks could be categorized as either staunchly pro-Israel or staunchly anti-Israel, with few talkbacks occupying a 'gray area' (Miller, 2009). In addition, as Kohn and Neiger claimed, talkback writers engaged with both journalist and other respondents, primarily by attempting to undermine their rhetoric by constructing counter-rhetoric to their rhetoric (Kohn and Neiger, 2006).

## 5.2 Talkbacks as a potential public sphere

These results of this study lead to the essential question – do talkbacks constitute a public sphere? This study indicates that the answer to this question cannot be unequivocal, but instead requires a layered and multi-faceted response, as described below.

### 5.2.1 Talkbacks as a decentralized and egalitarian framework

There can be no doubt that the development of talkbacks as an accepted means of expression on news web sites constitutes an important democratization of mainstream medium. The talkback feature enables traditional news web sites to compete with blogs, claiming that they too enable a democratic forum for user participation.

In essence, decentralization on the Internet results in very specific groupings according to topics, attitudes, or political ideologies, preventing users from facing diversity and opposing opinions. The talkback framework on news web sites facilitates a meeting point of heterogeneous opinions, thus avoiding this problem posed by more decentralized Internet frameworks. Heterogeneity is perhaps maintained to the greatest extent within frameworks that do not ardently subscribe a specific ideology or stance, but, to a certain extent, serve as a platform for the expression of a range of opinions.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while the range of opinions expressed in talkback discourse dictates that the discussion will often be confrontational and oppositional, at the very least, a heterogeneous range of opinions become acquainted with each other through this framework. In addition, as Calhoun argues, a more inclusive framework, such as talkbacks, may ultimately result in a lower quality of deliberation (Calhoun, 1992).

### 5.2.2 Talkbacks as a framework for critical-rational dialogue

Within the framework of talkback discourse, there is little evidence that rational debate advances to the stage of constructive discussion, in which writers are truly interested in finding pragmatic solutions that are acceptable to a consensus. Often the back-and-forth rational talkback debate results simply in each side further 'digging into' their stance. Thus, according to the results of my study, Dahlberg's claim of the Internet enabling concrete consensual solutions to social and political problems through deliberative debate (Dahlberg, 2000) is overly optimistic. While deliberation within the talkback framework allows for exposure to opposing opinions, there is little evidence that this deliberation enables a practical movement towards consensus-building.

### 5.2.3 Censorship of talkbacks and the public sphere

Most, if not all, news web sites employ a form of censorship to filter the submitted talkbacks before posting. The censorship policy is often published by the web site (see Appendix II). There can be no question that censorship alters the nature of the talkback discourse as a public sphere, as it defines the limits of acceptable discourse. For example, as stated above, while approximately 50% of the talkbacks studied were categorized as rational, this does not take into account the talkbacks that were censored. In general, the nature of the public sphere is significantly affected by the web site's censorship policy. However, when studying the platform as a public sphere, only the material published can be dealt with, as only this is accepted into the 'town square' and becomes a part of the public discourse.

## 5.3 Summary

In this study, I found that the use of rationality and engaged dialogue attests to the concept of the talkback framework serving as a version of a public sphere. However, the talkback framework obviously differs from the ideal type public sphere concept in several ways, as talkback discourse includes several non-rational elements that promote hatred, negation of the other, and monologue rather than dialogue. Furthermore, the accepted speech act within the realm of talkbacks, and within a range of participatory Internet frameworks, is significantly different from that perceived in Habermas' concept of the public sphere. The combination of an open platform for expression, coupled with the lack of actual face-to-face contact and user's abilities to create cyber-identities, creates a situation in which Internet users feel free to express their uncensored selves in a way that they would not feel comfortable doing in face-to-face meeting in a Habermasian coffee house or literary salon.

Indeed, the Internet has not resulted in resurgence of rationality within the public sphere. I would agree, to a certain extent with Keen (2007) and Bauerlein's (2008) assessment of the low quality of content posted on the Web, as the Internet, and particularly Web 2.0 tools, by serving as an open, highly democratic platform for expression and communication, cannot be considered a platform that encourages rational discourse. In a sense, the Internet has traded rationality for inclusive

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1. While every mainstream news provider has its own ideological viewpoint, they, to a certain extent, attempt to engage in balanced reporting. This is not the case for more specialized Internet frameworks.

democracy. Furthermore, the use of Internet-based social networks for organizing social activity against corrupt governments (Best and Wade, 2009; Rohlinger and Brown, 2009), does not extend to the talkback framework, as talkbacks are essentially used as a platform for reactions and debate, rather than for organizing social action.

The notion of a rational-critical public sphere perhaps needs to be updated to the notion of an inclusive-eclectic public sphere. The concept of participants attempting to advance concrete solutions to issues often takes a 'back seat' to exhibitionism and rhetorical muscle-flexing, even if often couched in rational arguments and dialogue. Indeed, Internet discourse, and in particular frameworks enabled by Web 2.0, facilitates different, perhaps more honest types of personal relations among participants, fueled by anonymity and control of level of engagement with other participants.

Despite limitations of the talkback framework, which may be more related to the limitations of human nature when dealing with deeply-rooted identity conflict than a problem with the Internet platform itself, many of the stigmas related to the talkback framework were found to be inaccurate in this study. While the talkback forum is often thought of as one of the lowest forms of communication of the Internet, often characterized by insults, immature and uneducated positions, and emotional shouting matches, this study illustrated several examples of informed dialogue that utilizes a range of rhetorical tools. Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor in describing talkback discourse is that of a 'tossed salad' – a colorful, eclectic discussion that takes several forms, including critical-rational debate, extremist demagoguery, friendly teasing, exhibitionism, and emotional pleas.

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### Appendix I: In-depth interview questions with web site editor

1. Why was the talkback feature added to the web site?
2. How would you characterize the nature of the discourse in talkbacks?
3. To what extent would you consider the arguments made in talkbacks to be rational?
4. To what extent do authors actually respond to one another's posts?
5. How do the authors relate to the main article?
6. Could the discussion among authors be called a debate?
7. How would you describe the heterogeneity of the opinions expressed?
8. To what extent do talkbacks on your web site contribute to a broader participation in the public debate regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?
9. To what extent are talkbacks moderated? What is your censorship policy?
10. What is the purpose of the guidelines and term to posting talkbacks?
11. How does your censorship policy affect the heterogeneity of opinions expressed?

### Appendix II: Guidelines for talkback publication

Only a certain percentage of talkbacks submitted are actually published on news web sites. Each news web site has a specific method for determining which talkbacks are to be published. The Haaretz English web site posts guidelines for publication in its talkback form. These guidelines are as follows:

The Talkback feature is intended to enable our readers to respond to articles, voice their opinions, and discuss them with other readers.

Political orientation will have absolutely no bearing on whether a comment is posted or rejected.

Comments containing the following will be automatically disqualified:

1. Personal attacks, vulgarities and profanities directed at other respondents.
2. Statements terming Israelis or Palestinians and their leaders Nazis, or accusing them of genocide or ethnic cleansing.
3. Statements which may be construed as urging attacks on Israeli or Palestinian leaders, officials, security forces or civilians.
4. Comments of an anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-Arab or other racist nature.

There are no such guidelines published on Al-Jazeera's English web site. Instead, the phrase, 'Your feedback may be published online' appears on the talkback window. This indicates to the talkback writer that a decision will be made as to whether or not the talkback will be published; however, it offers no information as to the criteria for such a decision.

### Appendix IV: Intercoder reliability test of quantitative results

The intercoder reliability test was used to verify the reliability of my coding of variables in my quantitative content analysis. To conduct the intercoder reliability test, ten percent of the talkbacks studied, selected randomly, were given to a graduate student, who was instructed to code the talkbacks according to the nominal categories in the quantitative content analysis. Following the coding, chi-square tests were run for each of the variables in each of the nominal categories. Each chi-square test illustrated non-significant differences between the coding that I performed and that performed by the external judge. Thus, the quantitative content analysis was shown to be reliable.

The following sections present my coding ('study') followed by the coding conducted by the external judge ('test') for each of the variables.

#### 1. Rationality of talkbacks

Rational talkbacks (symbol =R).

Non-Rational talkbacks (symbol =NR).

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
R	163	54.3
NR	137	45.7
Total	300	100

Table 9: Rationality - Haaretz Study



Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
R	18	60.0
NR	12	40.0
Total	30	100

Table 10: Rationality - Haaretz Test

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
R	154	51.3
NR	146	48.7
Total	300	100

Table 11: Rationality - Al-Jazeera Study

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
R	16	53.3
NR	14	46.7
Total	30	100

Table 12: Rationality - Al-Jazeera Test

## 2. The nature of dialogue

Dialogue with both original article and other respondents (symbol = DAR).

Dialogue with other respondents (symbol = DR).

Dialogue with original article (symbol = DA).

Absence of dialogue (symbol = ND).

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
DAR	37	12.3
DR	26	8.7
DA	223	74.3
ND	14	4.7
Total	300	100

Table 13: Dialogue - Haaretz Study

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
DAR	4	13.3
DR	3	10.0
DA	23	76.7
ND	0	0
Total	30	100

Table 14: Dialogue - Haaretz Test

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
DAR	21	7.0
DR	10	3.3
DA	245	81.7
ND	24	8.0
Total	300	100

Table 15: Dialogue - Al-Jazeera Study

Category	Number of Talkbacks	Expressed as a Percentage
DAR	3	10.0
DR	1	3.3
DA	25	83.3
ND	1	3.3
Total	30	100

Table 16: Dialogue - Al-Jazeera Test

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