

Techniques of Denial towards Excessive Use of Force by the Police among Israeli Talkbacks

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Abstract

The Internet community has become one of the main public arena, for sharing and solidarity declarations, or alternatively, of denunciation, exclusion and expulsion. This paper wishes to examine utilization of Denial techniques within online comment posters towards excessive use of police force, in which the negative components are almost irrefutable. In order to examine the legitimization level provided over the Internet, towards expressions of excessive use of police force, a qualitative analysis was made on online talkback posters regarding two different incidents of excessive use of force towards civilians, which were widely resonated through the Israeli electronic media ("the Avenging Police Officers" and the "Kicking Policeman"). Our finding suggested that in both cases, the most frequent online comments were based on responsibility denial and on denial of the victim. The neutralization of the deviant meaning of incidents involving excessive use of force was mainly based on a triple combination of rationalization techniques: undermining the credibility of the story, and especially that of the narrator; presenting an alternative order of events that turns a story of police brutality into a justified incident of self-defense; and switching the roles of criminal and victim by presenting the assaulted individual as an offensive and dangerous person. This triple combination allows the comment posters to retell stories of excessive force as logical and accepted narratives.

Keyword: excessive force, techniques of denial, talkbacks, Israel

1. Introduction

Today's media has made redundant the need for large human gatherings that can testify or comment about a certain punishment. Instead, the public can now remain closed in their homes while still being morally involved in the occurring events in the public and private spheres. The broadcasting of criminal and violent events through the media satisfies, in terms of the functionalist approach, the urge to produce and confirm the public support of the current social order and the acknowledgement of the moral boundaries of the society. Usually, the broadcast of violent events reaches its peak in the denunciation ritual of the moral degradation that is behind such events (Cavaglioni & Shoham, 2012).

According to the functionalists, many enforcement actions whose purpose is to reduce the level of social deviance are in fact ritualistic expressions of the existential needs of a given community. Expressing such needs through actions of supervision and punishment is meant to strengthen and encourage the social solidarity and the preservation of the community's basic values. This approach sees the deviance as a marker of the community's external borders, and as a result it also sees it as the framework within which the "Bystander" community members can develop an organized sense of their cultural identity (Box 1971; Erikson 1966; Farrell & Swigert 1982).

The issue of the Bystanders has become a significant component in the criminology discussion and research, no less than the issues of the Criminal, the Victim and the Law-Enforcement System. Over the years, researchers have reviewed a variety of opinions, perceptions, viewpoints, and behaviors of the Bystanders as expressed prior to criminal events, during their occurrence or following them. In his article "*Reactive Perspective of Deviance*", Good (1994) emphasizes that Bystanders are the ones who will determine whether a certain action or person is viewed as deviant or not: without Bystanders there is no labeling, and without labeling there is no deviation.

Today, the media is the most prominent player taking the role of the Bystander. In this modern age, the Internet, newspapers, radio and television have become the main communication media that provide, among others, the

same type of entertainment delivered in the past: the public hanging or Saturday visits to the local prison (Erikson, 1966). The Internet sphere is used as an active arena of solidarity declarations and sharing – or, alternatively, of denunciation, exclusion and expulsion.

The Internet can be used as a broad lane for expressions of fear, sorrow, excitement or calls of revenge by anyone either criticizing a given deviant behavior or praising it. Interest groups or formal agencies can manipulate this sphere by hiring “professional talkback posters” (a new term in local slang) and using them as provocative agents to express contrary opinions in such declarations that wish to challenge the public opinion. In Israel, for example, a Knesset member of the opposition had recently (September 12th, 2011) turned to the State Comptroller and asked him to investigate claims that the government has been supposedly hiring online talkback posters (“talkbackers”) to slander the public rally demonstrations held at the time to promote “social justice” by doubting and undermining the public's trust in the leaders of said demonstrations.

Despite the negative consequences of the intentional manipulations on the spontaneous voices heard and spoken in the public sphere, the Talkbackers’ stage – used in this post-modern age as a central arena for the Bystanders – represents a new form of social interaction, in which the participants can express their opinions and emotions without mediation (Baym, 1995; Valier, 2004) and weave giant webs of interconnections. Virtual expressions of rage and suffering may touch even a complete stranger, and leave their footprint of strangers’ minds without the author being physically affected by it – in the spirit of closeness and distant proximity (Greer, 2004).

In this article we wish to analyze the comments posted by online talkback posters (Talkbackers) to events of excessive force use by the police towards individuals or groups which Israeli society tends to exclude from the social and cultural consensus.

1.1 Techniques of Denial

One of the interesting aspects of studying the criminal behavior concerns the structuring of the criminal or victim-like identity and the rhetoric that accompanies such personal identity structuring processes. Sykes and Matza, in their pioneering research (1957), claimed that a significant part of the criminal activity is accompanied by justifications of the deviation done by the Criminal. These justifications were meant to replace or diminish the power held by the Criminal label, used to tag individuals by the law enforcement system or by society. Sykes and Matza defined these justifications using psychoanalytic terms that have seeped thoroughly, at the time, into the main criminology explanations – rationalization and denial – two “defense mechanisms” operating within the subconscious field. The combination between these two mechanisms was meant to allow one to believe that even though he has committed a crime or a forbidden act, he is not a bad person but in fact he is a good person who can provide himself and others with a valid, convincing explanation for his unaccepted behavior (Adadd & Leslau, 2002). Sykes and Matza (*ibid.*) explain that the combination between denial and rationalization, referred to as “Guilt-Neutralization Techniques”, appears in five main contexts: Responsibility Denial (the Criminal’s actions are the result of forces beyond man’s control); Denial of the Damage (diminishing the damage caused to property and other people); Denial of the Victim (who turns into someone who “deserves” being hurt or, alternatively, one who is not worthy of protection); Denunciation of the Criticizers (*e.g.* the police, teachers, legislators etc.); and finally, Response to Rules of Higher and Supreme Loyalties (such as religious decrees, rules of the gang, defending the security of the State, organization, family or friends).

Continuing Sykes and Matza’s explanation of the “Neutralization Techniques”, Scott and Lyman (1968) add the term of “Accounts”. Accounts (composed of excuses and justifications) are verbal devices employed by one to present a personal or social-cultural interpretation, which is different than that defining his own actions or personality as deviant (Orbuch, 1997). Scott and Lyman differentiate between excuses and justifications. When one makes an excuse, he admits that his behavior was wrong but does not take responsibility for the outcome. When one justifies, he takes full responsibility but rejects the negative interpretation related to his actions. Scully and Marolla (1984), for example, have investigated the use of neutralization tactics in the context of rapists’ struggle against their negative, deviant stigmatization. In their research, they demonstrated the rich vocabulary and pool of expressions used for the justification of the rapist’s behavior by structuring the image of a “good guy”, which allows him to admit his mistake while at the same time maintain the claim that, in general, he is no different than normative people. Buzzel (2005) also mentions additional techniques to deny the damage of the forbidden action, such as the “Audit Technique”: “I may have done something wrong, but all in all I am a law abiding person”, or denial rhetoric based on a claim for the behavior’s normality. This technique allows one to deny negative components of a behavior based on an innuendo – “everybody’s doing it”; or to deny the negative intention behind the act and present it as a gesture that did not intend to cause any harm; or by presenting a scale of forbidden actions that have caused far more damage.

Stanley Cohen (1972), who has written in length in the past about the issue of “Moral Panic” and the role of the media in increasing the danger and threat attributed to a person, action or group, tried to address the question: why do decent people, who are aware to others’ suffering, usually choose to respond with denial, apathy or rationalization? The deviance triangle that stands at the base of criminology preoccupation is formed by three players: the Victim, the Aggressor and the Viewer. Cohen (2001) is more interested in the latter: the Close Viewer (such as a bystander witness) and the Far Viewer (mass media, Internet). He is not interested in the Viewers that support the Aggressor’s stand, but in those of object the Aggressor – morally and ideologically – but is still in denial. Cohen claims that not only the individual Viewer, but also the law system or the general society, have been adopting these neutralization tactics.

Cohen explains that denial of the violent events (Cavaglion & Shoham, 2012) in the mass media is based on what he refers to as “Spiral of Denial”. The initial response is denying the event by presenting it as strange, illogical or impossible. Once the facts of the occurrence are revealed and its existence can no longer be denied, we reach the next stage by denying certain parts of it or by reorganization of the order of events, in a way that presents the violent response as a logical one, or even an inevitable one. When this technique also fails, we move on to the next stage of denial – admitting the description of the facts and their chronological order, but denying the guilt and responsibility through the denial of victims or damage. “There was indeed use of force and violent actions, but they were addressed to a dangerous individual who wished to harm us”.

This new interpretation of the assault act allows attributing negative properties to the victims and labeling them as criminals or immoral individuals, thus positively defining the actual criminals as normal, good citizens.

1.2 Attitudes towards Use of Excessive Force by Police Officers

The comprehensive use of enforcement force (including physical force, denial of freedom and violation of civil rights) used to obtain a wide variety of purposes is the unique characteristic of police work (Gimshi, 2007; Skolnick & Fayfe, 1993). The use of enforcement force is not just another means used by the police, but a main component of the police work, which distinguishes it from other institutions in both public and private sectors. Authorization of the use of force is based, according to Gimshi (2007), on the fundamental confidence that the use of it will be reasonable and that it will be implemented only in legal and justified incidents.

In the past three decades, the issue of use of force by Israeli police officers was addressed by a number of public committees. Their findings claim, among other things, that the police activity is a dual one and is based on the gaps between declarations that emphasize the need to limit and supervise the use of force, and eye-shutting and allowing the excessive use of force (State Comptroller, 2005). Skolnick and Fayfe (1993) claim that the police officers see themselves as part of a special clan that has a different set of rules, customs and stands, which lead to the fact that various events occurring in their surroundings are judged in a characteristic manner to this system. Goldsmith (2006), claims that the unmediated friction with the human evil brings the field officers to a general stand of suspiciousness, sarcasm and distrust. The organizational culture developed in the police force brings, along with the creation of a supporting organizational solidarity, a phenomenon referred to as the “Silence of the Blue Wall”, which creates a defensive barrier that stands before anyone who is not a member of the police force (Frost, 2005).

The Israeli society has been living in the shadow of a high level of security threat for over six decades; combined with the Israeli police involvement in the array of forces fighting against terror organizations, this might explain the high level of support within Israeli society towards the excessive use of force in civil policing activities (Jonathan, 2010; Herzog, 2001; Weisburd, Jonathan & Perry, 2009). Shoham and Stern-Yehusha (2012) for example, found that the supervision of use of excessive force is perceived, by half of the Israeli citizens that participated in their research, as damaging the police officer’s ability to perform his duty efficiently. About three quarters of all participants in their research – police officers and citizens alike (ibid.) – agree with the statement that abiding to rules that limit the use of force makes treatment of various criminal events more difficult. Half of the participants have also expressed high support rates of excessive use of force in civil policing activities. The three values examined in the research – legitimacy of the use of force in police work activity; objection to external supervision of use of force; and providing full professional autonomy to a police officer in duty – reflect altogether a professional culture that considers the war against crime as a top priority value, and the use of force and violence as legitimate and efficient means that should be left to the officer’s judgment in the field. The demand for supervision of the excessive use of force by the police is mainly perceived as an expression of the detachment of the decision makers from the poor reality of the streets (Ibid).

1.3 Online Talkback Posters

The absence of breaks and mediations that characterize the Internet discourse strengthens the spontaneous and anonymous dimensions and allows the online talkback posters to exploit the interactivity dimension while making

free usage of language and style. The talkback characteristics, its openness, spontaneity and freedom of speech explain a significant portion of the talkback's charm, which is translated into an increasing popularity. The talkback has greatly accelerated in its role as a social, cultural and political activity, which is the focus of various imageries of the democratic culture that expresses the freedom of speech, but also as the center of slanders and unrestrained comments that are more suitable for spontaneous street gatherings (Cavaglioni & Shoham, 2012).

The talkback serves as a convenient stage for response analysis, without editing and other mediating elements that may affect its nature. However, the talkback writers do not represent the public's general opinion. It is important to clarify that one must be careful not to jump to conclusions regarding the "public temper" as expressed in virtual forums, since the participants should not be considered a sample that represents the general population. The virtual sphere is only open to those with computer access, people who are required to have certain technical capabilities and financial resources. Other groups that do not follow this criterion may be excluded from these communities (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Another methodic limitation is that in such a research one cannot check the identity of the participants and, for example, one person can use different names to sign on different posts, and it is common for writers to use fabricated names and pseudonyms in their signature (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 2001).

Nevertheless, investigating the readers' comments in the virtual community, when straightforwardness, immediacy and spontaneity are common, can lead the way to valuable analysis (Garland, 2005). Since this medium protects the writers' privacy, it is no surprise that the comments' style is characterized by writing in short or crude (sometimes even meaningless) sentences and spelling and grammar mistakes. The style is straightforward and the writing is laconic, callous and filled with personal comments, humor, cynicism, expression of loathing and aggression.

In order to examine the legitimization level provided over the Internet towards expressions of violence – sometimes extreme violence – utilized in police work activities, we have chosen to analyze qualitatively the stands of talkback posters towards two different incidents of excessive use of force towards civilians which were widely resonated through the Israeli electronic media. Despite the great differences in the circumstances and characteristics of the two violence incidents, in both occasions the victim of the violent act was not perceived as a genuine victim or a genuine part of "us", *i.e.* people of normal and regular society, but as part of "them" – criminals or Palestinians, residents of the West-Bank Territories, adults or minors.

2. "The Avenging Police Officers" – First Incident

The case of the "Avenging Police Officers" was a criminal case that occurred in Israel in 2006. In this case, a few police officers from the northern district of the Israeli police force were involved. According to their conviction, the officers laid explosives in the house and vehicle of Michael Mor, the head of a crime organization based in the city of Nahariya. The act was committed in response to several incidents in which live grenades were thrown into the police officers' houses and several threats that were sent to their family members. These events were attributed, according to the Avenging Officers, to Mor's organization, although no indictments were filed in this matter. On July, 2009, five of the accused officers were found guilty of this incident and were given a verdict – one year of active prison term and additional year on probation. The judges rejected the defense's claims that the officers acted out of self-defense, and determined that the accused officers' motivation was to take vengeance in Mor and his nephew for repeatedly escaping the arms of law. The judges also said that the explosive devices contained metal balls that could have been lethal. At the same time, the judges pointed an accusing finger at the head of police command regarding their way of dealing with crime families and threats towards police officers and their families.

The background of this story begins with the story of the criminal Michael Mor, Nahariya born and raised, who established and leads a large crime organization in the city. His businesses include, among other things, charging of protection money and operation of gambling houses. Mor's people were questioned several times on suspicion regarding assaults against Nahariya Police facilities and throwing grenades at houses of police officers and public officials. On May, 2000, a grenade was thrown into the house of the Head of Detective Division of Nahariya Police department. A week later, two grenades were thrown at the police station located at the entrance to the city. After yet another month, a missile was shot at the station, causing the minor injury of one officer. The investigations conducted due to these events pointed Mor's organization as the initiator of the assaults, although no arrests were made. After the investigations failed, the detective crew was disassembled and the officers serving in that unit were scattered to various stations. In 2004, the detective unit was reassembled and led by a different officer, who strived to achieve contact and constant interaction with the crime organization. After an extensive work performed by the detective unit, Michael Mor was captured and sentenced to 7 months in prison for threatening a police officer. The detective unit was renowned as the "District Excelling Unit". The end to this quiet period was marked with a

grenade thrown at the house of another detective squad leader. Another grenade was thrown that same day near the house of a patrolman in the city. During 2005, grenades were thrown at the flats of two detectives, and an attempt to lay explosives in the house of the Mayor of Nahariya at the time. The investigations kept leading to Mor's organization, but time after time did not lead to indictments. On October, 2006, grenades were once again thrown at the house of the mayor at the time. According to the police officers, two of Mor's men were seen at the time watching the house of the detective squad leader's father, presumably in preparation to another assault. According to the five convicted officers, the purpose of laying the explosives was to undermine the self-confidence of the crime organization's leader and to get him to make a mistake that will eventually lead to his capture and imprisonment. According to the indictment submitted against them, the officers considered throwing grenades as retaliation. Later on they agreed to use explosive devices. The officers contacted a civilian who was knowledgeable with operating fireworks and pyrotechnics, known as "the Engineer". This civilian guided them in assembling and laying a pipe bomb. The indictment describes how the officers assembled the bombs and even conducted several experiments to ensure their operation. On the night of October 22nd, 2006, at around 3:00am, the police officers met in the forest, where they replaced their vehicle license plates and divided into two groups in order to lay the explosive devices. One group, composed of two officers, laid a pipe bomb under a vehicle that belonged to Michael Mor. The second group, composed of three officers, laid the explosive device on the window ledge of a house registered under Mor's ownership, located on the other side of the city. Mor's nephew was residing in that house at the time. At around 7:30am, the explosive device in the flat exploded and caused minor damages. Due to the explosion, Mor thoroughly examined his vehicle and discovered the second explosive device. Medical teams, Firefighters and police bomb disposal squads were called to the site and worked on deactivating the device. At first, the police assumed that the explosives were laid by Mor's criminal rivals. The breakthrough in the investigation was reached during the investigation of an informers coordinator from a nearby police station, He was investigated on suspect of several criminal felonies, among which were an attempt to damage property of a man who filed a complain against him; conspiracy for breaking and entering a private home; weapon holding and trade; and assaulting a police officer. During his questioning, the informer's coordinator gave information regarding the people who laid the explosive devices set against Mor. Following this information, the investigators arrested one of the suspected offices who laid the explosives, and who agreed to frame his comrades in a State Evidence arrangement. His testimony led to the arrest of all officers involved, and they were put in custody (Ammar, 2011).

At the beginning the formal police response was shock, and comprehensive condemnation of the Avenging Officers' actions. The police commissioner at the time said, during a press conference held after the indictment was submitted, *"I consider such events very severely. The officers acted in complete contradiction to their role, to the behavioral norms and to every value police officers were educated to keep. This is a self-organization of police officers and nothing more, and I am convinced they will be delivered a severe sentence and will no longer serve in the police force. I have never come across such callousness in police officers, that they would take the law to their own hands. It is unthinkable that a police officer in the State of Israel will fear sending his or her child off to kindergarten. As the police commissioner, I must stop and think how we should increase our citizens' and officers' self-confidence and security. We should view this event through inclusive organizational vision. It is my duty to bring the issue of the police's national deterring force. We intend to comprehensively treat the police's deterring force"*. The commissioner also stated that the police will not legally assist the five suspected officers, but said that they did receive protection assistance around them and their homes. The Police Internal Investigation Department deputy was quoted saying that *"police officers have adopted the means of crime organizations. A group of police officers joined together as an underground unit, this is the most severe phenomenon the PIID had ever encountered"* (Walla News, July 13th, 2009). The police officers' friends in the Galilee district also criticized their actions, but at the same time pointed to the police high command's lack of support shown to the officers even prior to their action.

"The investigation around Michael Mor was not held in the Nahariya station only, but also in Regional and District levels as well. Why doesn't anyone mention that? The officers of Nahariya station are not alone in this mess. Unfortunately, senior police officials were caught sleeping on their watch and those officers, who suffered extensive commanding pressure, simply crashed and crossed those red lines" (Ma'ariv, July 2nd, 2011).

On September, 2010, the Supreme Court rejected the accused officers' appeal, and in its decision wrote that *"an action taken by Israeli police officers that is illegal and in no way unbecoming human respect and rights, might severely damage the police force activity and the public's trust in it"*. The Avenging Police Officers were fired from the police force a day before their active prison term, while at the same time; several applications from

various entities were submitted to the Israeli President, pleading pardon for the officers. The officers were released on April 2011, after a reduction of third of their sentenced term, and the President agreed to pardon them.

2.1 Sample of Online Talkback Posts

The sample included 235 comments to 15 articles regarding the “Avenging Police Officers” case that were published in electronic newspapers between the years 2008-2011. The titles of these newspapers were divided to those who criticized the Avenging Officers’ actions, such as “Criminals in Blue” (Walla News, July 13th, 2009) or “We Turned into Sicily” (Ma’ariv Paper, August 23rd, 2008), and those that sided with the officers, such as “Black Day to Law Enforcement” (Ma’ariv Paper, September 21st, 2009) or “The Criminals Won” (Mynet, July 2nd, 2011).

Of the total comments posted to these articles we analyzed only the ones that were directly related to the story in question. Out of the 255 analyzed comments, arise three main types of reference to the officers’ violent actions. However, certain comments were included in more than one category due to their double meaning or because their writer intended them to have double-meaning.

3. Findings

3.1 Denial of Responsibility

The first type of comments denies the offices’ responsibility for these actions – “...the police officers did what they did in an attempt to do their job, enforcing the law... *Instead of backing them up, the police turned its back on them...*” and “*they had no choice, they had to do something that will solve this problem*”. This group included 99 comments, (38%). The online talkbacks maintain the main reason for the officers’ violent behavior in the dysfunction of the law-enforcement system. The officers are presented as good, normative people who “...*devoted themselves to war against crime and did not receive the assistance and protection they were entitled to*”. Talkback posters in this group justify the officers’ actions, despite the fact that these actions are radical and illegal, by saying that “...*these were last-resort actions...*” These talkback posters differentiate between the police officer’s positive and normative characteristics and the negative act he – according to them – was pushed into doing. The comments in this category divide between those who considered the police officers’ action an act of self-defense and those who saw these actions as a symptom to the general weakness of the police organization: “*no law, no deterrence, no enforcement*”... “*this is a failure of the police system... What do they want from them, the problem is with the police not with them...*”, “*Self defense*”, “*and were pushed to do this involuntarily*”, “*They were protecting their families*”.

3.2 Denial of the Victim

The second group of comments was similar to the first, and was based on guilt-neutralizing techniques that turn the criminal into the victim. This group includes all the comments which explain that the police officers’ actions stemmed from feelings of frustration, great fear for their families’ safety and the inability of the police to protect the officers, or the police organization powerlessness in dealing with this criminal. This group includes 55 (21.5%) comments that view the police officers as men who acted out of need to fight criminals that put them and their families in danger, “*they had no choice, someone had to take care of them... the police did not defend them against these criminals... the officers reached a point where they couldn’t function since they were so worried about their families... police officers’ negligence is a common matter*”.

Findings show that sixty percent (60%) of all comment posters supported the “Avenging Police Officers” and exhibited understanding of the circumstances that led the officers to commit criminal actions. The posters claim that the responsibility to the officers’ criminal offenses lies with the police’s powerlessness and the officers’ sense of helplessness.

3.3 Condemnation of the Avenging Police Officers

Along the use of guilt-neutralization techniques that denied the responsibility or the victim’s identity in the police officers actions, there was also considerable criticism expressed against the Avenging Officers’ actions.

40 percent of comment posters have condemned the criminal activity of the “Avenging Officers”. This group includes comments that express firm condemnation of the Avenging Officers’ actions. These talkback posters refer to the officers as “...*criminals, murderers and delinquents...*” and exhibit decisive rejection of their actions and ordeals. This group consisted of 101 talkback posts claiming that the officers were “*criminals in blue*” and that “*they are murderers and criminals and they deserve to go to prison*”. This group of backtalk posters believes that the officers, who see crime on a daily basis within their job’s duty, learn the criminals’ methods and sometimes even befriend the criminals as part of their duty. They have learned the criminals’ methods and ways of action and

have adopted them. The talkback posters of this group express their opinion firmly and object the police officers' actions. Their opinion does not put the blame on the police organization or law enforcement system, although some of them do believe that the police did not provide adequate protection to its officers, but they are still unwilling to deny the officers' responsibility to their actions or the dangerous criminal interpretation of laying explosive devices in civilians' vehicles. The officers' criminal behavior is presented as an expression to their learning of criminal norms and techniques during their service, and to the sense of lack of boundaries and an "all-powerful" self that some officers have, especially in detective units, where the lines between allowed and forbid, or between good and bad are often blurred.

4. "The Kicking Officer" – Second Incident

On July 2nd, 2012, the electronic newspaper "Ha'aretz" published an article regarding a video uploaded by a "citizen rights organization", in which a Palestinian boy was seen crossing an alley in an Arabic city at the West bank-Hebron. The city of Hebron is mentioned since Canaanite and Israelite days, and it almost regularly hosted an Israelite or Jewish settlement ever since the biblical times to nowadays. During the 7th century AD, the Islamic Caliphate conquered the city of Hebron from the Byzantines and turned it into an Arabic city. During the 19th century many Jews returned to the city, where they established a large Jewish settlement.

In the 20th century 20's and 30's, during the Arab Revolt in Palestine, dozens of the Jewish citizens of Hebron were murdered by their neighbors, and the rest of the Jewish settlement fled. In 1967, during the Six-Day war, Israel once more conquered the West Bank, the region in which Hebron resides.. Today, a large Israeli-Jewish settlement, of approximately 900 citizens, exists within the Arabic city of Hebron (around Jewish legacy sites). According to international agreements, control of 80 percent of the city's territory is under the authority of the Palestinian National Authority, and 20 percent are governed by the Israeli army and the Border Guard police, who guard the Jewish settlement in the city (w.hebron.com/english/article.php?id=178).

There is great tension between the Israeli settlers and their Arab neighbors, tension that is characterized in many and various cases, in verbal and physical violent eruptions by both parties.

The two-minute long video that was uploaded to the Internet showed the child running in front of a Border Guard post, when a Border Guard policeman grabs him and yells at him that he is making a mess. The child starts crying, calling out to his mother, while another BG officer steps out of the post cabin, kicks the boy, and goes back to his post. The child explains to the cameraman that he simply wished to take a shortcut on his way home... The video, uploaded to YouTube.com, was also broadcasted at the 20:00 Central News Program and, as written above, was also mentioned in an article published in the common daily newspaper "Ha'aretz", which is identified with the left, intellectual wing of the Israeli political map.

During the day when the article was published on "Ha'aretz" newspaper's website, 121 "talk backer" comments were registered for the article. The analysis excluded 12 comments that referred to characteristics of the comment poster or that were irrelevant. A total of 109 comments were analyzed for the article published in the newspaper's website.

Next to each comment, the newspaper allows the viewers to note whether they are for or against this comment. There was a total of 1840 "for/against" votes marked by readers next to verbal comments.

Analysis of the comments showed 9 main categories in which all comments may be divided to.

The categories are arranged herein from common to rare, according to the number of comments in each category and not according to number of note references (for/against) by the total amount readers of each category.

4.1 Distrust in the Video Authenticity or its Order of Events (28 Comments out of 109 Total Comments)

Many comment posters doubted the very existence of this act, and especially doubted the order of events as presented in the article that, allegedly, shows an exhibition of violent by the officer towards a small child with no prior teasing on the child's behalf.

"They didn't film what the child did before that", "I'm sure the kid was throwing rocks earlier, they directed it so that the camera would only catch the soldiers' response", "these kids are no innocent lambs".

429 readers referred to this category, which exhibits distrust of the authenticity of the kicking story as presented in the video. 298 (69%) readers supported the exhibition of distrust towards the violence incident story, while 131(31%) objected to it.

4.2 Minimization of the Child's Kicking Incident (25 Comments out of 109)

Another common type of comments did not deny the order of events but did not ascribe significant damage to the kicking act, or considered the kicked child as a true victim of a violent act.

"Nothing happened, it was just a kick", "I'm sure the kid gets a lot worse back home than he did here", "that shows him he shouldn't be throwing rocks", "big deal, like something horrible just happened", "in Syria they slaughter children and here you make such a fuss about a kick... ", "You'd think they killed someone..." "These Arabs, they beat up their children anyway..." 242 readers referred to this category; 129 (60.5%) viewers agreed with the minimization of the damage attributed to the kick or to the kicked child, and 113 (39.5) objected to it.

4.3 It's a Daily Routine (17 Comments out of the 109)

Some of the comment posters believed that this was not an unusual act of violence but rather a daily occurrence which only exception, in this case, was that being captured by a video camera.

"The only exception now is that it was filmed", "this happens every day", "it happens all the time, every day, the only thing that's changed now is that they had a camera", "this isn't news, it's always like this..." 238 readers referred to this category; 176 (74%) readers agreed that this was a common incident, happening on a daily basis, while 62 (26%) readers did not believe it was a common and daily routine.

4.4. Blaming the Reporter (13 Comments out of the 109)

Another group of talkback writers criticized the very choice of publishing the kicking story and the images that accompanied it. These talkback posters did not think that the main problem here was the kicking officer's action, but rather the newspaper, which chose to join forces with enemies of the State and search for stories that intend to damage the country, its image or its security.

"The problem is with 'Ha'aretz' that is used as the voice of our enemies..." "It's time to shut this paper down" "why make it easier on the haters of Israel", "'Ha'aretz' newspaper and The Palestinian Organization is practically the same thing", "they're all cheaters, haters of Israel..." 155 readers referred to this category

67 (43%) readers supported these comments while 88 (56%) objected them.

4.5 "A kick's a Kick" (10 Comments out of the 109)

Another category considered the factual components of the event and their severity. These comments refer to the fact that regardless of the circumstances or the identity of the participants involved – violence is violence.

"A nine-year old kid is just a kid", "it doesn't matter what happened earlier, what if they did it to your own child?" "a kick's a kick". 186 readers referred to this category;

109 (58.6%) readers voted to support such comments while 77 (41.4) voted against them.

4.6 "The Problem is all the Lefties" (6 Comments out of the 109)

Comments in this category also completely changed the focus of the story and attempted to redefine the problem. The problem is not with the original components of the story, but with the way those referred to as "lefties" such as this newspaper; make use of such dubious tales – *"The problem is all those lefties..." "It's just like those lefties to blow everything out of proportion..."*

55 (36.6%) readers voted that these comments represent their own opinion, while 95 (63.4%) objected to these comments.

4.7 "True Story of Living Danger" (4 Comments)

There were a few comments that tried to put the story in the much broader context of the threat that stands behind the act of throwing rocks at soldiers or vehicles in the Judea and Samaria Territories (West Bank), especially by the Palestinian population. Although the video shows no expression to rocks-throwing, comment posters assumed that, whether before or after this incident, stones will be or have been thrown at the soldiers.

"A stone thrown by a kid can still kill", "did someone throw a rock at YOU?" "just because it's a child doesn't mean it's not dangerous". 59 readers referred to this category;

27 readers marked that they agree with this claim while 32 readers objected to it.

4.8 The Problem is the Nature of the Border Guard Police Force (3 Comments)

A small number of comment posters assumed that the problem lies with the violent character of the Border Guard police officers, which differs them from other police officers or soldiers. 193 readers referred to this category, 131(67.8%) readers voted for this statement while 62 (32.2%) voted against it.

4.9 *The Problem is with the Occupation or the Settlers (3 Comments out of the 109)*

These comment posters considered the problem to stem from the Israeli ongoing occupation of the Occupied Territories, or from the presence of settlers in those Territories.

78 readers referred to this category; 53 (68%) readers voted for this statement while 25 (32%) voted against it.

5. Discussion

The Internet sphere in general, and the talkback arena specifically, has turned in this post-modern age to the central arena of the “Bystander”. This arena allows its participants to express their opinions on various social issues without the mediation of formal social agencies and with no regulation or supervision (Valier, 2004).

The issue of violence in general and police violence in particular is one of the most investigated issues in the fields of criminology and law enforcement. During the last few decades, the focus of this research diverted significantly from asking etiological, causative questions to investigating the stands taken by the public, who was not directly involved in the act of violence or the fight against it.

This article wished to examine the stand taken by Israeli online talkback posters towards excessive use of force by the Israeli police during civil policing. Out of a long line of events that were published on the Internet and expressed excessive use of force, we selected two events in which the act of violence was obvious and supposedly irrefutable: laying explosive devices by police officers against civil population suspected of criminal acts, and beating up a Palestinian child who crossed an alley in an Arab city under Israeli occupation.

The level of ongoing security threat the Israeli society is in (Weisburd *et al.*, 2009), along with the Israeli society’s need to use techniques of denial towards daily acts of violence directed at different parts of the population (Cohen, 2001), have brought us to assume that the online comments to the incidents of police excessive force, would be versatile in character, and not just comments of disdain or condemnation of this excessive use of force.

Indeed, as seen in the incident of the “Avenging Police Officers”, over half the comments posted in various articles, used different techniques of denial, where the most prominent ones were Responsibility Denial and Denial of the Victim. These techniques are a type of rationalization that allows a specific individual or group to see an act where there is no doubt about its criminal components, and still not to condemn it. Unlike the 40 percent of the viewers, who criticized the police officers’ actions and considered them to be potential criminals or murderers who should be punished to the full extent of the law, the rest of the talkback posters believe that installing explosive devices in the cars of criminals is the result of the external circumstances in which the avenging officers found themselves to be. The violent officers were portrayed as “pawn” in the war between cops and criminals. The officers’ criminal behavior receives a different interpretation with many comment posters, who see it as the officers’ desperate attempt to protect their lives and lives of their families as heroic act. Their actions were re defined as an act of bravery aimed for saving their honor and perhaps the safety of every other citizen in their surroundings. The lack of resources which the Israeli Police is facing, and the assault to innocent citizens during gang wars, turn the “Responsibility Denial” technique, to a logical explanation that sounds reasonable and accepted by many comment posters. In many cases, this technique does not stand alone. For the Responsibility Denial technique to succeed, it tends to be most commonly combined with another technique – Denial of the Damage or the Victim (Anand, Ashforth & Joshi, 2004). The victims in the Avenging Officers’ case were criminals who were terrorizing the citizens of the north for a long time, with the police still unable to press significant charges against them. Although laying explosive devices in the criminals’ car could have killed them, the comment posters, for the most part, considered this an appropriate and legitimate action which was not aimed to harm the innocents, but rather to fight crime with every means necessary. Denial of the Victim and turning the officers into “victims of a threatening reality and lack of support” not only allows the talkback posters not to condemn the police officers’ actions, but even to support them or identify with them.

The use of excuses or justifications to the violent acts (Scully and Marolla, 1996) allows the person who chose to explain these acts to maintain his or her stature in the social system as a normative, equitable individual while laying fundamental question marks regarding the types of “guilt” or “assault” that may accompany this violent act. Shoham (2009) explains that providing convincing explanations to acts of violence is established, among other things, on the ability of the person who reacts to act, to negotiate the interpretation of the “Criminal” and “Victim” labels. This negotiation, which was most prominent in the response to the second case mentioned above, is based on reconstruction of the tale, in a way that involves the denial of various elements, and reinterpretation and reorganization of the events and their chronological order.

The “Denial of the victim” technique is usually accompanied with a process of depersonalization or dehumanization of the victim (Bandura, 1999) and thus takes away whichever elements that would have allowed

us to identify with the victim, to feel sorry for him or to try and protect him. The farther the personal or social characteristics of the victims are from the “true victim” prototype image (Carter & Weaver, 2003), the easier it is for viewers to use the Denial of the Victim technique even with obviously violent incidents. Individuals or groups perceived as foreigners, others, or dangerous, allow the viewer to use the Denial of the Victim technique without risking the loss of a positive or moral self-perception.

Children are usually perceived as the ultimate victims in an act of crime. According to Jenks (1996), the dominant modern discourse regarding childhood preserves the perception of childhood as closest to nature, inherently pure, innocent, dependant of grownups, and vulnerable. Therefore, acts of violence towards small children represent that which is evil, corrupt and wrong in our society. Nevertheless, as we can see in the second incident described above, about half of comment posters supported the act of kicking the boy by the Border Guard police officer, as presented in the video uploaded by the human right organization. This support was based, first and foremost, on a denial that the story of the kicked boy, was a case of abuse or violence. The reinterpretation of the kicking incident presents it as a normative, appropriate response to a “dangerous and endangering” population, even if some of its members are children. In order for this type of response to be accepted by public opinion, and the person who posted this explanation in the first place, they must restructure the chronological order of the event, and deny the damage caused by this act or the fact that the victim is an innocent child. The denial techniques we found here did use denial of the inflicted damage (“It’s just a kick...”) or used exclusion practices by excluding the child from the normal environment where parents actually care about their children (“they kick him a lot worse back home...”), while simultaneously using Denial of the Victim technique (“This isn’t about the child, this is about the rock that risks the safety of the soldiers...”) and attack of the attackers. Denying this act of violence does not only involve the redefinition of the incident’s circumstances or turning the victim into an assaulter, but also concerns itself with questions regarding the character of the violent tale’s narrator.

The social-cultural stature of the narrator and the interests he or she represents (Good, 2001) play a significant role when choosing the most persuading technique for denying the story’s violent elements. The comments posters kept discussing questions such as who filmed this video, who brought the story and light and why did this entity bothered with spreading it in the first place. Undermining the narrator’s credibility, attributing some secret agenda standing behind the publication and spreading of the story or relating it with a wish to hurt and damage the Jewish society as a rule, all assist in denying the kicking story as a violent incident and turn it into an excuse used by the “despised” ones who wish to taunt “us” anyway.

Following his term “Amplification Spiral”, which demonstrates how the media’s concern artificially increases the level of threat and danger attributed to certain behaviors or people, Cohen (2001) coined the opposite term – “Spiral of Denial” – which purpose is to diminish, “launder”, deny or disregard the deviant aspects attributed to the behavior, individual or group of people.

This spiral describes how a person who believes himself/ herself to be a good and decent person, who stands before social injustice, can explain this act using techniques that will initially deny the incident’s facts – “those things, as they were told, never happened”. When the viewer is confronted with the facts of the story, he or she will go to a technique of diminishing parts of the act – “this may have happened, but not as you say it did”. Eventually, when this technique also fails in the face of reality, the viewer will go to the “winning” techniques – *i.e.* “the incident may have happened as it was described, however, the victim is not some innocent lamb but rather belongs to a group of dangerous people, and assault against these people is completely justified anyway”.

6. Conclusions

In the post modern world, we see bi-directional processes and mutual fertilization occurring between the media and its public viewers. Media tools such as social networks are powerful ones, used for political and social recruitment. Social networks such as Facebook, talkback websites and global television networks such as Al Jazeera can take down stable governments and operate extensive and comprehensive uprisings. Alongside the mass media, which among other things serves as a designer of public opinions, the Internet is used as a route to set new definitions of social deviance. The bustling activity across the network in the form of blogs, tweets, Skype, Facebook posts, public opinion surveys, letters and petitions turns the “Bystanders” audience into active partners in the process of creating social problems, especially when redefining the borders of social deviance in general and violent action in particular.

This paper wished to examine the attitude of comment posters towards excessive use of police force in which the positive-negative components are almost irrefutable. Although methodologically it is difficult to know who were those comment posters and at what accuracy their opinions reflect those of the common Israeli “Bystander”, analyzing their responses help us deepen the understanding of the term “Guilt-Neutralization Techniques” in the

political and social contexts. This research shows that neutralization of the negative meaning of incidents involving excessive use of force by the Israeli police is mainly based on three main rationalization techniques: undermining the credibility of the story, and especially that of the narrator; presenting an alternative order of events that turns a story of police brutality into a justified incident of self-defense; and switching the roles of criminal and victim by presenting the assaulted individual as an offensive and dangerous person who represents an alternative social universe that does not deserve protection or containment. This triple combination allows the comment posters to retell stories of extreme violence (the Avenging Officers) or violence directed towards small child (the Kicking Soldier) as logical and accepted narratives.

Techniques of denial, exclusion and alienation, and the social and cultural justifications that accompany them, are gnawing at the socialization processes that are meant to condemn violent acts of excessive use of force. The unmediated and anonymous nature of the Internet sphere is fulfilling a double role. On one hand it allows the Bystanders (Talkbackers) to freely express support or sympathy with violent acts without undermining their positive self image, and on the other hand, it creates a social atmosphere within incidents of excessive force or police brutality are perceived as acceptable and even necessary. Despite the fact that the Israeli society is a multiracial society, engaged in situation of animosity with its Arab neighbors from its early days, and the fact that this research was performed among online talkback posters, and therefore its inclusion validity may be low, it seems that the denial techniques that characterize the comment posters' explanations greatly reflect the culture of denial gradually grows at the face of the increasing violence, and addresses, even if only partially, Stanley Cohen's (2001) wonder: How can good people see bad deeds, and choose to justify them, while still feeling like good people?

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