

The discursive and cultural meanings of Israeli tokbek (talk-back – online commenting) and their relevance to the online democratic public sphere.

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THE *TOKBEK* FEATURE

The image shows a screenshot of a web interface for submitting and viewing comments. The top section is titled "הוספת תגובה" (Add Comment). It contains a form with three input fields: a name slot, a title line, and a large commenting box. A "שלח" (Send) button is located below the form. Below the form, there is a navigation bar with buttons for "מהראשונה לאתרונו", "מהאחרונה לראשונה", "הצג לפי דירוג", and "הצג לפי פופולריות". A dropdown menu is set to "הצג את כל התגובות פתוחות".

The bottom section shows a list of comments. The first comment is numbered "01" and has the following text: "צדקנות מזויפת!!! גדעון תראה דוגמא, קח כמה מסתננים לביתך ואז אולי אוכל להאמין לך!!! (לת)". Below the text is the date and time "31.05.12 | 05:59" and the name "אורן".

Callouts identify the following elements:

- NAME SLOT
- TITLE LINE
- COMMENTING BOX
- TITLE LINE (CLICKABLE)
- COMMENT'S #
- NAME
- DATE AND TIME OF PUBLICATION

TOKBEK - CULTURAL TERM FOR POLITICAL COMMENTING

“The *tokbek* gives every citizen a communication arena... So what can go wrong? Well, one can learn something about the Israeli zeitgeist from surfing the *tokbek*: there is no one to talk to. The average Israeli of the *tokbek* does not come to debate... he is violent, boisterous, decisive, threatening, simplistic, and has copyrights over the truth and reality. The *tokbek* is only allegedly a tool for promoting public debate on current events. In truth, most commentators are busy in silencing each other and denying the other’s legitimacy.” (Alper, 2003)

OUR GOAL

Israeli *tokbek* demarcates democratic failure – it has democratic potential yet it does not fulfill it.

We provide a cultural interpretative framework for the analysis of the *tokbek* using the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1972, Philipsen, 2007, Carbaugh, 2007, Katriel, 1986, 1999).

We stress the role of culturally inflected speech activities in the construction of technologically mediated public spaces and their related norms of interaction.

Tokbek : the political identities

Moron *rightists*. How your Bibi is lying in your faces and pisses on your heads from the balcony. (n”c)

Bentzi A, 21/02/12 10:35

The Attorney General

Israeli, 21/02/12 10:21

should better look for a new job. The left vanished with its diasporic theories. In the last elections the People voted for the Land of Israel and not for the Media parties and the *leftist* slivers.

THE OPPOSITIONAL POLITICAL IDENTITIES

Personhood	Leftist (portray by rightists)	Rightist (portray by leftists)
Fraction of population	Elite (media, detached)	Commoners (Morons, low-education)
Historical comparison	Diaspora Jews	Nazis
Nationalism	Too little - dissolving the national state	Too much - expanding the state to its destruction
Sentiment	Too peaceful and Naïve	Too violent and murderous
Insanity Type	Delusional	Psychos

The Ritual Organization of the *Tokbek* Exchange

- Act (1): political statement by which participants express an opinion in a way that identifies them as either *leftists* or *rightists*.
- Act (2): derogatory statement whereby participants employ a model of personhood as means to censure the political agenda of the other side.
- Act (3): repetition of act (2) ... *ad infinitum*

THE TOKBEK RITUAL

I am so happy I didn't go to learn in your **leftist** college.

Communication student, Afula (24.04.12):

Explain to me how the most **leftist** college is located specifically in Sderot?

>>What is this happiness??

Dan Shayish, (24.04.12):

Communication student,

In your going out against the **left** without a reasonable presentation of the topic reveals a **thick, stupid, and square student**

I assume **there is not even one academic establishment in the country that would have admitted such a vagabond**

And if you were admitted to any academic establishment, **your mere admission points to the nullity of that establishment**

Be well and eat until you vomit **the fascist laws** of Israel Beytenu - sorry **not fascist these are just the N.K.V.D**

THE *TOKBEK* RITUAL AS *KASAH* FEST

- The form and style of the *tokbek* ritual is associated with *Kasah* “bashing talk” (katriel, 1986; 2002):

“The term *kasah* [bashing] ... does not carry the attenuating impact of a shared, legitimating code. Rather, it is interpersonally directed as a put-down, unmitigated by the invocation of a cultural frame that might warrant its aggressiveness.” (Katriel)

TOKBEK AS A RITUAL OF FAILURE

- This bashing ritual communicates **radical pessimism** about its very communicability: The **communicative premise** that the participants share is that **no communication can take place** between them.
- They have no culturally sanctioned "sacred object."
- The absence of shared sanctified commitment to civil engagement, what we see as democratic culture, thus becomes a factor in the analysis of online democratic participation in Israel.

The Israeli Tokbek as a spectacle of politics

- This cultural void around the *tokbek* is balanced by the communicative excess in the form of endless exchange of insults.
- This exchange creates a sense of highly involved and lively debate in a frozen sociopolitical meltdown while vacating the conditions for political action, change, or even dialogue.
- The Tokbek is a spectacle of public discussion: it can continue endlessly and without consequences – the medium affords endless space and time.
- This spectacle facilitates the paralysis in Israeli politics (together with other elements, including “the griping ritual,” Katriel, 1990)

Back to theory of (democratic) participation online

- The role of cultural codes for public participation is essential to the relation between technology and democracy.
- The availability of technology does not guarantee the emergence of a democratic culture. Rather, as our analysis of the *tokbek* indicates, it may very well work the other way around, cultivating existing anti-democratic modes of interaction if these exist.

THANK YOU

Questions, comments, critique are all welcomed.

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