

Is Israeli Millennials' Web Comedy Less Politically Engaged? How Social Media Might Hamper Satire

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This paper claims that Israeli web content creators are less politically engaged and overtly critical in comparison to local filmmakers who have been creating for cinema and television. Their comedy leans towards lighthearted nonsense and avoids taking a stand on controversial topics. It is argued that this can be explained by both universal and uniquely local reasons. In general, web creators are not judged by the same standards of artistic quality that is attributed to films and TV shows. Therefore, they choose different topics and aesthetics, which might appear less "substantial" or "artistic" by traditional perceptions. Also, Millennials are often considered by critics to be less rebellious and more self-centered. In addition, Israeli society has become more right-wing, nationalist, and religious. Contemporary culture therefore favors crowd-pleasing optimism over critique or complaints that 'spoil the party'. Furthermore, artists' self-censorship is affected by a growing lack of tolerance, which is sometimes expressed through social media outrage, and might cause severe damage to their careers. Based on these explanations, this paper then analyzes three independent web comedies which touch upon the debatable topic of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and the national-religious community, yet do it with varying degrees of criticism.

KEYWORDS: social media, comedy, satire, digital content, Millennials, Israel

Israeli cinema has always been considered to be predominantly realistic and topical. The most dominant genres deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict, national security issues, and social ruptures.[1] Some scholars even blamed local filmmakers for deliberately emphasizing these aspects to appeal to international viewers. By prioritizing the unique characteristics of Israel as imagined by a foreign (mostly Western) gaze, they offer an exotic anthropological experience. Often festivals, guilds, and funders will encourage and reward this approach.[2] In recent years, with the rise of global streaming platforms and the

[1] N. Gertz, *Motion Fiction: Israeli Fiction in Film*, Open University of Israel, Tel Aviv 1993; E. Kaplan, *Projecting the Nation: History and Ideology on the Israeli Screen*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2020; M. Pick-Hemo, *Wounded Homeland: The Changing Representation of Trauma in Israeli Cinema*, Resling, Tel Aviv 2016; M. Talmon, Y. Peleg, *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2011.

[2] B. Hagin, *Male Weeping as Performative: The Crying Mossad Assassin in Walk on Water*, "Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies" 2008, no. 23(2), pp. 103–139; B. Hagin, R. Yosef, *Festival Exoticism: The Israeli Queer Film in a Global Context*, "GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies" 2012, no. 18(1), pp. 161–178; S. Weiss, *Frum with Benefits: Israeli Television, Globalization, and Srugim's American Appeal*, "Jewish Film and New Media" 2016, no. 4(1), p. 75.

success of Israeli TV series such as *Fauda* (2015–, Yes) and *Our Boys* (2019, HBO), the same accusations have been levelled at local television showrunners.[3]

However, Israeli digital filmmakers, who are active on the web, seem to have a completely different approach. As claimed elsewhere, millennial online content creators, who produce narrative videos,[4] are generally stuck in regression. They prefer to indulge in fantasy worlds and yearn for their childhood, instead of acting like confident adults, taking responsibility, initiating confrontation, or engaging in political issues. Their juvenile nature makes them shy away from most topics that are traditionally considered “serious,” “substantial” or “adult,” and hence they avoid directly addressing the political.[5]

Supposedly, the freedom that is offered on the web creates an opportunity to challenge mainstream views. It can enable a space to present, for example, controversial satire that would have trouble finding a place in traditional public broadcast or commercial platforms. The universal cyberspace also enables foreign viewers to be reached, whose tastes might differ from the local mainstream, whether the kind of art-house viewers that the local filmmakers allegedly pursue, or marginalized groups whose preferences are considered niche. Yet the prominent local web creators have not displayed an aspiration to use this opportunity. During the 2010s, after the social networks boom, and with the dominance of broadband internet connection and streaming platforms, a distinct group of young content creators emerged from the web. In many cases, their immense popularity paved their short way into the cultural mainstream. However, despite their image described in legacy media as innovative, alternative, and even purportedly “revolutionary,” it is hard to locate in their body of work something that even remotely resembles, for example, the outrageous comedy cabarets of Hanoach Levin,[6] or even some of the more controversial sketches in satirical TV shows produced by the Israeli Broadcasting Authority,

[3] Y. Friedman, M. Ghorbankarimi, *The Politics of the Political Thrillers: De-othering Iran in Tehran* (Kan, 2021–), “Transnational Screens” 2022, no. 13(3), pp. 195–217; N. Lavie, *The Constructed Quality of Israeli TV on Netflix: The Cases of Fauda and Shtisel*, “Critical Studies in Television” 2023, no. 18(1), pp. 62–80; T. Riklis, *Our Boys: A Debate: Following the TV Series*, Am Oved Publishing House, Tel Aviv 2022.

[4] The extremely broad term “web content” can mean many different things. From still images of memes, to moving images of Gifs, to documentary videoblogs, or interactive tutorials. I chose to focus on digital creations that are inspired by traditional filmmaking, produced independently, and have cinematic, aesthetic, and artistic values. For a more detailed definition see: I. Rosen, *Independent Content Creators Online: A Paradigm Shift in Film Aesthetic*

and Production, the Case of Israel, Ph.D. Dissertation, Girton College, Cambridge 2023, pp. 9–14.

[5] I. Rosen, op. cit., pp. 29–33, 64–72.

[6] S. Levy, *Queen of a Bathtub: Hanoach Levin’s Political, Aesthetic and Ethical Metatheatricality*, [in:] *The Play Within the Play: The Performance of Meta-Theatre and Self-Reflection*, eds. G. Fischer, B. Greiner, Brill, Amsterdam 2007, pp. 145–165. Levin, who was born in 1943, and is even too old to be considered a “boomer,” began his career in the late 1960s and quickly became the enfant terrible of Israeli theater. The most famous case is his play *Malkat Ambatia* (*Queen of a Bathtub*) (1970), which caused unprecedented public controversy, forcing the theater’s management to close the show after only nineteen performances. His radical sketches set a high bar for local satire, that others rarely achieved since. This

like *Nikui Rosh* (Head Cleaning) (1974–1976) and *The Chamber Quintet* (1996–1997).^[7]

This paper examines how social media might hamper the creative output of new media creators. First, it problematizes the groundbreaking image of digital filmmakers and points out several reasons that discourage local comedy creators from engaging in blunt satire. These general arguments are then demonstrated through an in-depth analysis of a case study. I review three notable Israeli web series that portray lead characters from the national-religious Jewish settlers community. The settlers' representation is only one example of political engagement, but it is very useful here, since the topic has always been highly relevant and controversial, and it stands out in the relatively small local corpus of Israeli web hits, which tends to be personal, surreal, or detached. Finally, I investigate how the new creative forms that emerged in social media converged into the field of political communications and affected official campaigns by prominent Israeli politicians, who appropriated comedy and satire.

The web videos discussed here are online hits, which achieved impressively high viewing numbers. I perform a theoretical, ideological, and cultural analysis of them. In an era of media convergence, in which the boundaries between different media are blurred, I take an interdisciplinary approach. My varied sources include research and theories about different aspects of the World Wide Web, from digital images to online culture, with research and theories of film and television supplementing these sources. I also use a comparative analysis with histories of Israeli visual culture. The content analysis is enriched by an examination of the discourse in journalistic and traditional media coverage, and online discourse, whether in the comment section pinned to a YouTube video, on the creators' social media profiles, or in fans' group chats.

I suggest several reasons for Israeli content creators' preference to avoid direct engagement with politics. First, as mentioned, independent creators are less prompted to impress lecturers, curators, critics, and judges. The web has a different business model, and these creators have other considerations than filmmakers who distribute their films

What Makes Digital Content Creators Avoid Taking an Overt Political Stand?

can explain why contemporary critical films, *Victory* (Eliran Peleg, 2023) and *Cabaret Total* (Roy Assaf, 2024), incorporate scenes taken from his cabarets, despite the many decades which passed since they were written. Interestingly, Levy mentions that Levin's comedy was also perceived as infantile. However, it had different attributes than those that define Gen-Y's childishness. "Levin's characteristically satirical weapons such as exaggeration, distortion and the frequent usage of oral, anal and genital images were reciprocally turned against him by critics and audiences alike, and perceived as clear indications of his overall infan-

tile character and perverse sexuality" (S. Levy, op. cit., p. 146). Levin was most prolific in theater, but he also wrote two feature films, *Floch* (Dan Wolman, 1972) and *Fantasy on a Romantic Theme* (Vitek Tracz, 1977), sketches for the TV show *Layla Gov* (1993–1998, Channel 2), songs for film soundtracks, and books. [7] The first seasons of *The Chamber Quintet* were broadcast in the commercial Channel 2. However, when the show was purchased by the IBA, the CEO Moti Kirschenbaum encouraged the writers to address more topical and political issues. Kirschenbaum was previously the editor of *Nikuy Rosh*.

in cinemas, or TV showrunners. When traditional filmmakers apply for funding from national film funds or TV networks, they commonly prove themselves worthy by flaunting awards or at least good reviews that they received from legacy gatekeepers. The online creators, however, are not as bothered by the need to prove themselves “artistically valuable.” Instead, these creators communicate directly with their audience. Indeed, certain mainstream movies also operate outside of the artistic discourse, for example, the blockbuster lowbrow comedy *Saving Shuli* (Ben Bachar, 2021). Yet movies of this kind are still based on distribution deals, media attention, star personas, and publicity budgets, in order to gain attention and increase ticket sales. Online content creators, of course, also aspire to maximize the number of clicks, but they do not require any of these means to do so.

Second, some scholars argue that Gen-Y are generally fed up with politics. “Polls from Israel and around the world indicate a lack of interest in politics across all demographics and particularly among younger age groups ... some say the cause is saturation,” claim Tamar Almog and Oz Almog.[8] According to them, Generation Y appears to have fewer revolutionary impulses: “Millennials came into a world where the establishment was no longer conservative or strict. They were raised in a supportive, friendly and pluralist environment at home and in school. Most parents and teachers nowadays aim to please the children and therefore there’s nothing to protest or fight anymore.”[9]

This observation by Almog and Almog is debatable, considering that Generation Y (in Israel and abroad) was responsible for several major social uprisings. For example: the 2011 Tent Protest in Israel, the Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street.[10] The Millennials’ use of social media was an inseparable part of these historical movements. Moreover, several scholars point out how the digital age turned comedy specifically into a powerful form of social commentary with a capability for public influence.[11] Interestingly, Boukes et al. claim that online satire videos

[8] T. Almog, O. Almog, *Generation Y: Generation Snowflake?*, Vallentine Mitchell, London 2019, p. 263. According to Eisen, this applies to Jewish Millennials outside of Israel as well. They are less religious than previous generations, less eager to preserve their religious and cultural identity, feel less connected and interested in Israel, and have less sympathy towards it. See A.M. Eisen, *Boomers, Millennials and the Shape of American Judaism*, “Contemporary Jewry” 2019, no. 39(2), pp. 341–350.

[9] T. Almog, O. Almog, op. cit., p. 27.

[10] E.Y. Alimi, ‘*Occupy Israel: A Tale of Startling Success and Hopeful Failure*’, “Social Movement Studies” 2012, no. 11(3–4), pp. 402–407; M. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Polity, Cambridge, Malden, MA 2012; R. Milkman, *Millennial Movements: Occupy Wall*

Street and the Dreamers, “Dissent” 2014, no. 61(3), pp. 55–59; M.C. Mulderig, *An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring*, Boston University The Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future, Boston 2013.

[11] I.-L.K. Bore, A. Graefer, A. Kilby, *This Pussy Grabs Back: Humour, Digital Affects and Women’s Protest*, “Open Cultural Studies” 2017, no. 1(1), pp. 529–540; C.B. Chattoo, L. Feldman, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*, University of California Press, Oakland 2020; Z. Hurley, *Laughable Resistance? The Role of Humour in Middle Eastern Women’s Social Media Empowerment*, [in:] *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender, Media and Communication in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. L.H. Skalli, N. Eltantawy, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023, pp. 489–507; *The*

generate more interactive engagement than regular news, yet they are related to less controversy.[12]

Cross-national research about youth political talk found that Israel was no different from most other countries that were examined. The most salient type in these countries is those willing to talk politics in person but not online. The researchers noted that “this preference may be less about technological mediation, and more about the heterogeneity that characterizes political talk on public-facing social media, where audiences are generally larger, unknown, and more diverse ... and where, consequently, political talk is more likely to get out-of-hand.”[13]

According to Jenkins et al., the current networked media environment is increasingly porous, and therefore more bound for “context collapse.” “Content produced for one audience and one purpose can easily be accessed ... by quite different groups, including those hostile to the original intent ... language crafted in order to speak to the shared assumptions and norms inside a group are made public to those outside the critical counterpublic, both potential supporters and potential haters.”[14]

Literat et al. place significant reservations regarding the discourse on young people’s digital participation. Too often, they argue, scholars make a simplistic binary division. On one side, a utopian view of intrinsically creative youth, and on the other, teens who are apathetic or at risk. They also note that young people are still frequently heralded as digital natives even though such descriptions can overestimate their technical and social skills. Moreover, digital participation is both enabled and constrained by particular social positions.[15]

Nevertheless, in this local case, the online political activity, as vivid as it may be, does not overlap with the products of cinematic web culture.[16] The notable viral hits, which accumulated many views and generated a big buzz in both new and traditional media, remained detached from political and social protests. The digital works of Israeli web comedians do not engage directly and boldly with issues at the top of the public agenda. They do not take an overt stand, for example,

Politics of Laughter in the Social Media Age: Perspectives from the Global South, ed. S. Mpofo, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2021.

[12] M. Boukes et al., *Comparing User-Content Interactivity and Audience Diversity Across News and Satire: Differences in Online Engagement between Satire, Regular News and Partisan News*, “Journal of Information Technology & Politics” 2022, no. 19(1), pp. 98–117.

[13] N. Kligler-Vilenchik et al., *Youth Political Talk in the Changing Media Environment: A Cross-National Typology*, “The International Journal of Press/Politics” 2022, no. 27(3), p. 604.

[14] H. Jenkins et al., *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, NYU Press, New York 2016, pp. 26–27.

[15] I. Literat et al., *Analyzing Youth Digital Participation: Aims, Actors, Contexts and Intensities*, “The Information Society” 2018, no. 34(4), pp. 261–273.

[16] For example, the members of Artuz Hakibud were not afraid to express their agenda, even if it is currently not the most popular among public opinion in Israel. During the “Balfour Protest” against Prime Minister Netanyahu, the group encouraged their fans to join the demonstrations. They even arranged free shuttles from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, promising to entertain those who will come. See *Kav 77 LeBalfour*, Eventer, 2020, <https://www.eventer.co.il/kibudbus>; *Kav 77 LeBalfour (HaComeback)*, Eventer, 2020, <https://www.eventer.co.il/line77>. Yet this political awareness did not find its expression in their clips or lyrics from the same time.

comedy web series such as *Messiah* (created by Udi Kagan and Dana Pollig in 2013), and *The Shvets Family* (created by Dean Naim and Assaf Navon, 2018–2020), or sketches by popular web comedians like Roy Kafri and Niv Majar, or humorous music videos of the rapper Dudu Faruk (Ori Comay) and Arutz Hakibud trio. Other examples will be thoroughly analyzed later.

The musical producer Boi Ecchi (Elior Antwi), who collaborated with social media stars such as Dudu Faruk and Dor Muskal (of Arutz Hakibud), claimed in an interview that: “speaking about problems is not cool.” He explained that the audience will be skeptical that stars really understand problems like poverty and inequality. Furthermore, listeners can simply google any subject and find input from experts who are much smarter than any rapper. “It is a different generation,” he concluded.^[17]

A similar attitude was expressed by the comedian Niv Majar in a publicity interview for the release of the TV show *Televisia MeHaAtid* (*Future TV*, 2017–2018, Reshet). The show was created by some members of “Kol Ma SheMatzhik BaOlam” (“Everything that is Funny in the World”), a collective of comedians who created popular viral videos. As their popularity grew beyond the web, with audiences arriving at their stand-up shows, newspapers enthusiastically covering the phenomena, and professional comedians complementing and then collaborating with them, the young content creators achieved a form of validation that made traditional gatekeepers ready to take a bet on them and allow them into the world of commercial television.

Majar claimed that he does not see their style as detached or politically irrelevant: “The satire is here, and it is present in many of the show’s bits, whether we meant it or not. Simply because we live here ... The top value is that we are allowed to laugh about everything, and about nothing.”^[18] Yet the decision to avoid topical issues and real figures also served marketing purposes and branded the show as an original form of comedy. Majar admitted that “The decision not to deal with politics and politicians, and sure not to make direct impressions of them, was an important part of the show’s base. There are enough of these on TV already.”^[19] As can be deferred from the title “Future TV,” the show was meant to give the impression of something fresh and innovative which had not been seen on television before, something that had been developed in the parallel universe of the web, where allegedly different rules apply. Moreover, the branding assisted the broadcasting network, Reshet, in differentiating its comedic content from its main competitor, Keshet, whose *Eretz Nehederet* (*A Wonderful Country*)

[17] B. Shalev, *Boi Ecchi: “Lo Hayu Shchorim MiSvivi. Ze Haya Meod Nadir. VeGam Lo Hayu Schorim KeModel”* (Boi Ecchi: “There Were Not Any Blacks Around Me. It Was Very Rare. And There Were Not Blacks as Role Models”), Haaretz, 24.02.2022, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/music/.premium.HIGH-LIGHT-MAGAZINE-1.10625103>.

[18] M. Palty, *HaKomikai Niv Majar Mafsik Lehiyot Havtachat Reshet Exzentrif Umagia LaPrime Time Shel Arutz 2* (Comedian Niv Majar Stops Being an Eccentric Web Promise and Arrives to Channel 2’s Prime Time), Haaretz, 17.08.2017, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/television/.premium-MAGAZINE-1.4346243>.
[19] Ibidem.

(Channel 2/ Keshet, 2003–) is by far the most successful and impactful comedy show on TV, and has retained its position in the top places in the rating tables for over two decades[20] especially when considering that previous attempts by Reshet to create competing comedy shows in the same style ended in bitter failures.[21]

A third reason is the national atmosphere. This issue has been more thoroughly discussed in the media in the context of Israeli music, specifically pop hits. As Israeli society becomes more nationalist, conservative, and religious,[22] it appears that the singers who enjoy wide mainstream popularity are the optimistic ones. Just have a look at the titles of some of the songs that dominated the top of the charts over the past few years: Hanan Ben Ari's *HaHaim Shelanu Tutim* (*Our Lives are [Sweet as] Strawberries*), Static and Ben-El Tavori's *Tudo Bom* (*All is Well*), *Toda [Leha Olam]* (*Thank [You, World]*) by Rami Kleinstein and Keren Peles. In an article titled "Why does it feel like the radio is full of propaganda songs," music critic Gili Noy mentioned another example:

One of the biggest hits this year was *Yihieh Beseder* [*It Will Be Alright – I.R.*] ... somehow they managed to make a hip hop song, a genre which

[20] *Eretz Nehederet* was created by Gen-Xers (Muli Segev was born in 1972, David Lifshitz and Asaf Shalmon in 1975), and its core cast and writing staff are from the same age group. Despite several updates in the cast and crew, (including a quick "buy out" of younger talents shortly after they became viral sensations), the format and style of humor have not changed much over its run. In a sort of localized version of the American hit *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975–), the show is very topical, and relies on impressions of public figures, along with sketches with recurring characters whose catchphrases are designed to be quoted in water cooler chats and school playgrounds. *Future TV*, therefore, attempted to move in a different direction. However, despite *Eretz Nehederet's* direct engagement with current affairs, and its obvious liberal-secular stances, the main critique that has been pointed towards it throughout all these years, is that it provides vapid entertainment and fails to create impactful or daring satire as it proclaims to do. See M. Sharon, *Adayin Nehederet: HaKrav Bein Bidur VeSatira Huchra Sofit* (*Still Great: the Battle between Entertainment and Satire Finally Resolved*), *Time Out*, 24.12.2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2ych2kuf>; Z. Shohat, *Shock Absorbers*, *Haaretz*, 16.12.2004, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/2004-12-16/ty-article/shock-absorbers/0000017e36f-df7c-a5ff-e37f20bb0000>; N. Yedlin, *Tzohakim Yitha* (*Laughing with You*), *HaAyin HaShviyit*, 1.03.2012, <https://www.the7eye.org.il/17262>; Even when *Eretz Nehederet* did try to launch fierce attacks

on public figures, they often backfired. One famous example happened in the case of Likud party member Uzi Cohen, whose exposure on TV only increased his popularity and upgraded him to a celebrity status. See E. Asheri, *Tochnit HaMetziut HaPratit Shel Uzi Cohen* (*Uzi Cohen's Private Reality Show*), *TheMarker*, 13.12.2004, <https://www.themarker.com/advertising/1.264929>; G. Reich, *Eretz Nehederet, Hipardi MeUzi Cohen* (*Eretz Nehederet, Let Go of Uzi Cohen*), *City Mouse Online*, 20.01.2008, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/television/1.3377544>; This raises the question of whether direct engagement with current affairs and politics is necessarily more satirical than comedy which appears to be surreal or detached. This question supports Majar's claims.

[21] N. Hadas, *Lo Reuya Lizman Masach: 'Shavua Sof' Medarderet Od Yoter Et HaPrime Time Shelanu* (*Unworthy of Screentime: 'Shavua Sof' Further Deteriorates Our Prime Time*), *Walla*, 18.01.2009, <https://e.walla.co.il/item/1419812>; E. Melter, *Ze Lo Eretz Nehederet: 'Ze Hamatzav' Hikuy Lo Mutzlach* (*This is Not a Wonderful Country: 'Ze Hamatzav' is an Unsuccessful Copy*), *NRG*, 26.07.2016, <https://www.makorrihonor.co.il/nrg/online/47/ART2/804/018.html>.

[22] S. Gutkowski, *Religion, War and Israel's Secular Millennials: Being reasonable?*, Manchester University Press Manchester 2020; N. Lavie, A. Kaplan, N. Tal, *The Y Generation Myth: Young Israelis' Perceptions of Gender and Family Life*, "Journal of Youth Studies" 2022, no. 25(3), pp. 380–399.

traditionally aims to shout and protest, sound like a Disney film soundtrack. The same year in which the Ethiopian [-Jews descendants' community in Israel – I.R.] protest erupted ... the most important thing that a band of two Ethiopian rappers had to say was that 'it will be alright.' And this is the message which became the year's biggest hit.[23]

Similar dissonance may strike those who attend a live performance by the Zabari brothers, a musical duo who achieved their breakthrough with viral clips of animated punk-operas. A reporter who covered their concert described how the singer Yoni screams at the audience "Happy, happy, happy, come along everyone and sing with me," a call that would appear more natural in an evening of sing-along at the kibbutz than in a raging punk concert. The reporter defined the show as "the ultimate combination between Hafla [a term in Arabic, used by Israelis as slang for 'celebration' or 'party'] and punk concert, and it is punctilious as much as it is careless." It is also mentioned that instead of an opening act [by an artist from the same genre], Middle Eastern pop hits are played.[24]

Moreover, critics of the left-wing intellectual newspaper *Haaretz* especially resented the hit *HaHaim Shelanu Tutim*. The song's repeated chorus is:

We have no right to complain whatsoever
Everything is Tfu, Hamsa [signs of protection against evil eye – I.R.], and
praise the lord
Because our lives are [sweet as – I.R.] strawberries
Our lives are [sweet as – I.R.] strawberries.[25]

The singer and writer, Hanan Ben Ari, was born in a settlement in the occupied territories and belongs to the national-religious sector. Columnist Alon Idan claimed that the song's popularity "symbolizes the settler-religious-nationality becoming part of the Israeli mainstream." Jewish music with prominent religious motives used to be considered niche. Through the 2010s, the genre called Pop Emuny (Religious Pop) conquered a place in the front line of the (still) mostly secular and liberal Israeli mainstream.[26]

According to Idan,

If there is a message which Ben Ari wishes to assimilate inside the all-Israeli consciousness it is precisely this: my secular friends, you have no right to complain ... The secular life is described as a collection of distractions ...

[23] G. Noy, *Lama Ze Margish SheHaRadio Male BeShirei Taamula (Why Does it Feel like the Radio is Full of Propaganda Songs)*, Mako, 1.04.2016, <https://www.mako.co.il/music-Magazine/articles/Article-d739f7f7c1dc351006.htm>.

[24] A. Samarias, *Schug Punks: HaAchim Zabari Hem Tofaat Cult SheLo Doma Leshum Davar Aher (Schug Punks: The Zabari Brothers are a Cult Phenomenon Which Does Not Resemble Anything Else)*, TimeOut, 14.11.2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yr5ze3kb>.

[25] My translation.

[26] O. Ben Rubi, *Hayotzrim HaSrugim Hem HaMainstream HaIsraeli HaHadash (The Frum Creators are the New Israeli Mainstream)*, Makor Rishon, 31.01.2021, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/culture/308641/>; P. Kingsley, *Religious Pop Star Singing of 'God and Faith' Wins Over Secular Israel*, "International New York Times", 19.04.2023; G. Uchovsky, *Oy Elohim (Oh My God)*, Mako, 12.12.2019, <https://www.mako.co.il/music-Magazine/Article-30c420d-4doafe61026.htm>.

but when observing from a divine, spiritual, religious view – turns out we are just 'ungrateful', when in fact everything is well, thank god.[27]

The columnist Rogel Alpher agreed with Idan's view, but suggested taking it even further, claiming that the politics of the song

is by far deeper and more terrifying than the argument between right and left ... this is a harsh protest song against the age of enlightenment. A song which disqualifies modernism ... the fact that this blunt anti-democratic and anti-humane song won the title 'song of the year' at Glgltz's [radio station – I.R.] hit parade is a political fact. The fact that it had over nine million views on YouTube is also political.[28]

The music critic Gili Noy claimed that the ideology that is expressed in hits of this kind is connected to the national discourse promoted by Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu, who served as prime minister throughout the whole decade of the 2010s. The message expressed in these songs, as she puts it, is "Let's just shut up and say thanks." The pop songs, she argues, "are only part of a musical phenomenon which express the victory of total Bibism: In Israel of 2016 it is prohibited to say a bad word ... critique is forbidden." [29]

It should be clarified that Netanyahu's regime, despite its deteriorating democratic values, has not officially forbidden critique by law or censorship. But if Noy's observations are true, then these steps are not required anyway, since local artists voluntarily censor themselves. They are hesitant to make controversial statements because their careers depend on public approval. Media outrage culture is particularly prominent in Israel, where "any public statement attracts backlash from every direction ... all orchestrated by media, which is out for blood," say Almog and Almog, who point to it as being another reason for the declining interest in politics. According to them, "this makes many people curl up into a ball, focus on their private lives and avoid dealing with important issues." [30]

Other scholars of digital youth culture are less incisive. Yifat Mor, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Ifat Maoz attribute self-censorship and avoidance of political content to American youth, and claim that in comparison to them, young Israelis have strong motivations to express themselves politically on Facebook. Yet this "does not mean that they do not see possible risks to such expression. To the contrary, risks to political expression are even more salient in a divisive society in a state of inner and external conflict." [31]

[27] A. Idan, *Haim HaHaim Shelanu Tutim? (Is Our Lives Strawberries?)*, Haaretz, 17.03.2016, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/blacklist/premium-1.2885932>.

[28] R. Alpher, *Sone Et HaTutim Haelu (Hate Those Strawberries)*, Haaretz, 9.10.2016, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/premium-1.3089986>.

[29] G. Noy, op. cit.

[30] T. Almog, O. Almog, op. cit., p. 264.

[31] Y. Mor, N. Kligler-Vilenchik, I. Maoz, *Political Expression on Facebook in a Context of Conflict: Dilemmas and Coping Strategies of Jewish-Israeli Youth*, "Social Media + Society" 2015, no. 1(2), p. 8.

**“Lynchternet”:
Shaming, Cancel
Culture, and Social
Media Attacks**

Even if raging, stinging, anarchistic Israeli comedians were to be found, their potential audience seems to be continuously shrinking. While the hipsters in Tel Aviv enjoy edgier humor, as displayed in the alternative stand-up scene in the city,^[32] the majority of the population resent the bitter, darker tones. An example of the typical popular stand-up style can be found in the TV show, *Tzhok MeAvoda* (*Comedians at Work*) (Channel 2/Reshet, 2008–). It features a cast of comedians who prefer clichéd punchlines that often rely on gender and ethnic stereotypes (which typical, non-woke, commercial TV viewers do not seem to find offensive).

While in Hollywood and other Western countries “Cancel Culture” is mostly identified with cases of celebrities who were “punished” because they were perceived as not progressive enough,^[33] in Israel it appears that most artists who risk “cancelation” are those who are perceived as insufficiently patriotic or nationalistic.

There were several notable incidents of this kind around the events of Israel’s military operation Protective Edge in Gaza in 2014, and the 2015 Israeli elections. According to Mor et al., the war in Gaza “brought increased public attention to the risks of online political expression in Israel” ... “Israeli citizens’ political expression on Facebook led to people being publicly denounced, reprimanded by their supervisors, and even fired from their jobs.”^[34]

One notable example occurred when the actress Orna Banai, one of the country’s leading female comedians, expressed sorrow for losses on both sides in a TV interview. Her comment sparked an immediate social media attack on her. Many of the comments were aggressive, coarse, and some even included death wishes and threats. A few days later, Banai said to a local Tel Aviv newspaper: “I never thought it would provoke such harsh words... nowadays it is enough to say that you want peace, and they are all over you, it’s crazy...” While the verbal attacks on Banai often accused her of “betrayal,” it should be stressed that she did not even doubt the IDF’s actions. “I said that I do not support this war. I understand everything [that caused Israel to launch the operation] and that we should strike them, but I hope it will end as soon as possible. It hurts me that civilians die on their side as well. It does not

[32] For further reading on the stand-up scene, see I. Rosen, op. cit., pp. 72–77.

[33] E. Ng, *Cancel Culture: A Critical Analysis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2022; R. Schocket, 13 *Celebs Who Were Actually Canceled In 2020*, BuzzFeed, 3.01.2021, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanschocket2/celebs-canceled-in-2020>.

[34] Y. Mor, N. Kligler-Vilenchik, I. Maoz, op. cit., p. 8. They mention that Israelis chose conscious strategies to mitigate the risks of posting, including using humor. For more about Israelis’ experiences of Facebook unfriending as a result of the 2014 war,

see N.A. John, S. Dvir-Gvirsmann, ‘I Don’t Like You Any More’: Facebook Unfriending by Israelis During the Israel–Gaza Conflict of 2014, “Journal of Communication” 2015, no. 65(6), pp. 953–974. Furthermore, *HaAyin HaSheviyit*, an online magazine that investigates and criticizes the Israeli media field, defined Operation Protective Edge as “a landmark in the deterioration of the attitude towards freedom of speech in Israel,” see I.B.Z., *Haslama (Escalation)*, *HaAyin HaSheviyit*, 4.08.2014, <https://www.the7eye.org.il/119773>.

seem so extreme to me to say that, but I suppose that during wartime you should be in solidarity and only say 'let the IDF win', and I cannot say that." The newspaper that published the interview chose a headline which was somewhat taken out of context, "I Am Ashamed That These are My People." Banai's full statement was "I have a very bad feeling [from the fact] that this is the nation I live in. That I belong to people that, unfortunately, based on the comments, most of them are rude and aggressive ... My opinions are different. They are more humane and what scares me is that I am prohibited from having such opinions ... It is a shame that these are my people."^[35] The interview fueled the fire. The flames went higher, spreading out of social media into opinion articles in national newspapers and panel discussions on TV. Shortly after, the actress was fired from her position as a celebrity endorser for a cruising company.^[36] Banai rushed to apologize, both in an open letter and in another TV interview, claiming she was "misunderstood."^[37]

Around the same time, actor Menashe Noy made critical statements in a newspaper interview, calling Israeli civilians to rebel against the IDF. Noy served as a celebrity endorser for Tara Dairy. Soon after the interview, Facebook users charged the company's official page, demanded to fire him, and threatened to ban its products.^[38] Unlike Banai's case, Tara Dairy did not immediately fire or publicly renounce Noy, but his contract was not renewed.

Indeed, celebrities' political comments caused public storms before Web 2.0. In Israel, memorably, the condescending remarks by the entertainer Dudu Topaz during the 1980s election were well exploited by Likud's leader Menachem Begin in his campaign. In the late 1990s, Tiki Dayan's comments during an election lost her a commercial campaign. However, in the social networks era, the tendency of such scandals has become significantly more frequent.^[39] It appears that right-wing or religious politicians (often those who appeal to the Miz-

[35] Z. Raviv, *HaReayon HaMale: Orna Banai Tachat Mitkafa (The Full Interview: Orna Banai Under Attack)*, Mynet, 20.07.2014, <https://archive.ph/kdCG5>.

[36] *Orna Banai Hebiyah Et Daata - VePutra MiTafkid Presentorit (Orna Banai Expressed her Opinion - And been Fired from her Role as Celebrity Endorser)*, Walla, 20.07.2014, <https://celebs.walla.co.il/item/2767467>.

[37] D. Arad, *Orna Banai Megiva LaHatfakot Negda: Lo Huvanti Karaui (Orna Banai Responds to the Attacks Against Her: I Was Misunderstood)*, Haaretz, 22.07.2014, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/television/1.2384624>; S. Segal, *Minzar Ha'Sotmim Ta'Pe': Haderech Shelanu LaAvadon (Monastery of Shutting Up: Our Road to Oblivion)*, Walla, 31.07.2014, <https://e.walla.co.il/item/2770766>.

[38] R. Rottner, *HaGolshim Mitnaplim Al HaAmud Shel Mahlavat Tara: 'Salku Et Menashe Noy' (Facebook*

Users Storm Tara Dairy's Page: 'Get Rid of Menashe Noy'), Walla, 20.11.2014, <https://tech.walla.co.il/item/2794198>.

[39] During the 2010s, the list included culture and media figures such as Gila Almagor, Achinoam Nini, Yair Garbuz, Anat Waxman, Alona Kimhi, Yehonatan Geffen, Oded Kotler, Gidi Orsher, Oshrat Kotler and Maya Landsmann. See, for example, N. Rak, M. Sharon, D. Moussafir, *Efes BeYahasey Enosh: Mitzad HaAmirot HaUmlalot Shel Amanei Israel (Zero in Interpersonal Relations: Israel's Artists Miserable Comments Chart)*, Time Out, 22.06.2015, <https://tinyurl.com/2mhn947f>; Y. Sharoni, *Az Hiy Amra: Madua Mitragshim MeHaAmira Shel Anat Waxman? (So She Said: What's the Fuss over Anat Waxman's Comment?)*, Maariv, 14.04.2015, <https://www.maariv.co.il/journalists/journalists/Article-471652>.

rahi sector) have been going out of their way to inflate any slip of the tongue. Celebrities' comments are exploited to paint the entire opposing sector as patronizing, disloyal, or unpatriotic.

Social networks allow everyone, no matter how extremist, ignorant, or hateful, an almost unfiltered public arena to share their opinion. They enable haters to easily reach celebrities, who are more easily accessible than ever, and verbally attack them. The platforms also enable haters to team up with other haters. This echo chamber incites even more moderate users to join the attack by applying virtual peer pressure or supplying reassurance. In addition, the algorithms prioritize controversial content that emotionally affects the users.

Legacy media also depend on the number of clicks and amount of user engagement. Therefore, they have generally failed to establish an alternative to web populism. Instead of sticking to a more responsible agenda and framing, commercial TV channels and news companies all over the world are so worried about being left behind that they unproportionally emphasize and follow up scandalous viral stories.[40] Some of them even broadcast TV magazines whose entire premise is to summarize the biggest buzz on the web.[41]

Although public discourse has become more polarized, aggressive, and intolerant, it should be noted that in almost all cases, no (Jewish) celebrities have been physically attacked. It is hard to know how many job opportunities they have missed because of the incidents, but none of them ended their careers as a result of it. In the long run, their careers were not damaged, and they have preserved more or less the same status that they had previously. Many of them continue to participate in large-scale mainstream productions. Nevertheless, one of the most troubling consequences that these incidents had is that the celebrities involved testified that they no longer wish to publicly express their opinions.

Banai said: "I consider whether I should speak or not. Will it hurt my career or not? ... People who love me urge me to shut up... because it is dangerous. They said I am telling the truth, but now is not the time to tell it..."[42] In her apology interview she stated that she learned her lesson: "As a comedian, I should have known how much timing matters. My timing was not right. You don't speak during wartime."[43] Menashe Noy also shared his conclusions: "In retrospect, you see it was pointless to speak my mind... I told [Maya Landsmann – I.R.] that it is pointless... today there is no longer discourse. Everything turned very violent."[44] Anat Waxman, in an interview titled "After

[40] B. Smith, *Traffic: Genius, Rivalry, and Delusion in the Billion-Dollar Race to Go Viral*, Penguin Press, New York 2023.

[41] In Israel, the most notable example is the popular show *HaTzinor* (Channel 10/Channel 13, 2010–).

[42] Z. Raviv, op. cit.

[43] S. Segal, op. cit.

[44] N. Yahav, *Aharey SheNichva BeAvar, Menashe Noy Hechelit Lo Lehabiya Yoter Et Deotaiiv: 'Ze Hasar Taam' (After Being Burned Before, Menashe Noy Decided Not to Express His Opinions Anymore: 'It is Pointless')*, Walla, 28.10.2021, <https://e.walla.co.il/item/3467738>.

the Trauma, I am Afraid to Speak About Politics”, said: “I don’t want to get in trouble. I had enough of politics... I keep away from it. It is a terrible trauma... I regret that interview.”[45]

Creators, and especially comedians, who have been discouraged from speaking freely and touching sensitive subjects, is not a phenomenon unique to Israel. Todd Philips, who created some of the most successful Gen-X comedies, such as *Old School* (2003) and *The Hangover* (2009), explained that he left comedy because “it’s hard to argue with 30 million people on Twitter.”[46] But while Hollywood directors are having trouble with so-called “woke snowflakes,” the situation in Israel is different regarding which topics are considered sensitive and more likely to trigger an attack. In some way, it is perhaps more alarming, since the local creators are not afraid to offend marginalized groups. Rather, they are afraid to offend the authorities – the government, the military, and sectorial parties which arguably represent non-hegemonic communities, but take part in the coalition, while the old hegemonic parties are left outside the government and get fewer seats in the parliament.[47]

Examining the representation of the Israeli settler community in popular comedic videos by notable Israeli content creators reveals insufficient political commentary.

Most of the settlers belong to the national-religious sector. The pro-settlements community promotes one of the most controversial ideologies in Israeli society. They aspire to constitute the Jewish state all across Eretz Israel HaShlema (Greater Israel), the ancient historical borders from biblical times (which are perceived to include the Palestinian territories and the territory of the former Emirate of Transjordan). Therefore, they reject the present borders of the country as set by the international community. Ever since the occupation of the Palestinian territories as a result of the 1967 war, the matter has constantly remained one of the core issues in the political and national debate. This ideology is implemented mainly by building new settlements in the occupied territories, sometimes with the government’s approval and sometimes without it. These actions further complicate and escalate the conflict with the Palestinians and challenge the two-state solution or separation

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[45] S. Bin Nun, *Anat Waxman: ,Aharey HaTrauma, Ani Mefahedet Ledaber Al Politica. Timrenu Oti’ (Anat Waxman: ‘After the Trauma, I am Afraid to Speak About Politics. I Was Manipulated’)*, Walla, 4.03.2021, <https://e.walla.co.il/item/3421613>.

[46] Philips said: “Go try to be funny nowadays with this woke culture... There were articles written about why comedies don’t work anymore – I’ll tell you why, because all the fucking funny guys are like, ‘Fuck this shit, because I don’t want to offend you.’ It’s hard to argue with 30 million people on Twitter. You just can’t do it, right? So you just go, ‘I’m out’”. See J. Hagan,

“*I Fucking Love My Life*”: Joaquin Phoenix on *Joker*, *Why River Is His Rosebud*, *His Rooney Research*, and His “Prenatal” Gift for Dark Characters, *Vanity Fair*, 1.10.2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/joaquin-phoenix-cover-story>.

[47] For more about the definition of hegemony in Israel and its transformations over the years see: G. Ben Porat, D. Filc, *Remember to be Jewish: Religious Populism in Israel*, “Politics and Religion” 2022, no. 15(1), pp. 61–84; D. Filc, *Hegemony and Populism in Israel*, Resling, Tel Aviv 2006.

initiatives, which are meant to divide the territory between Jordan and the Mediterranean into two independent states. The settlement project has been fiercely objected to by Palestinians, condemned by the international community, and criticized by Israel's left-wing parties.

Of the few severe incidents of Jewish Terrorism throughout Israel's existence, most acts were committed by members of the national-religious community.[48] Furthermore, from the time of the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (the Disengagement Plan) in 2005, there has been a rise in extremism within this community. Subgroups, such as the Hilltop Youth (No'ar HaGva'ot in Hebrew – young extremist settlers who often live in commune), have been involved in the destruction of Palestinian property and crops, committing “Price-tag” – vengeful acts of vandalism and violent attacks, and the most extreme cases ended in cold-blooded murders, as in the Duma arson attack in 2015.[49] Unlike most national-religious groups, the extremists no longer acknowledge the legitimacy of the state and its institutions, do not obey them, and do not hesitate to confront and attack not only Arabs but also left-wing Jewish activists and even IDF soldiers. They have been condemned by broader parts of the settlers' community.

In Israeli cinema, the settlers' community has been critically and complexly portrayed by filmmakers such as Joseph Cedar, in *HaHesder* (*Time of Favor*) (2000) and *Medurat HaShevet* (*Campfire*) (2004), and in documentaries such as *HaMitnahalim* (*The Settlers*) (Shimon Dotan, 2016) and *HaMachteret HaYehudit* (*The Jewish Underground*) (Shai Gal, 2017). On television, the topic was discussed in dramas such as *Fauda* and *East Side* (2023, Kan). Whenever satirical TV shows addressed these issues, they commonly portrayed settlers through negative stigmas. *Eretz Nehederet*, despite being broadcast on a commercial channel that appeals to as many sectors as possible, featured iconic fictitious characters of settlers (Moriya Srak and Rachel Brir-Chesed) in a way that criticized and ridiculed their political context.[50] A more recent example from the same show, created by a younger generation of writers, will be analyzed in depth later.

An acclaimed example of the artistic treatment of Jewish extremism is the TV series *Our Boys*. Yet its creators might have other

[48] R. Sharon, *Vengeance*, Kinneret, Zmora, Dvir Publishing, Modi'in 2023.

[49] E.Y. Alimi, C. Demetriou, *Making Sense of 'Price Tag' Violence: Changing Contexts, Shifting Strategies, and Expanding Targets*. “Social Movement Studies” 2018, no. 17(4), pp. 478–484; H. Ben-Sasson, *Yitzhak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur, Torat HaMelekh*, 2009, [in:] *The New Jewish Canon*, eds. Y. Kurtzer, C.E. Sufrin, Academic Studies Press, Boston 2020, pp. 97–102; G.B. Boudreau, *Radicalization of the Settlers' Youth: Hebron as a Hub for Jewish Extremism*, “Global Media Journal: Canadian Edition” 2014, no. 7(1), pp. 69–85;

E. Eiran, P. Krause, *Old (Molotov) Cocktails in New Bottles? 'Price-tag' and Settler Violence in Israel and the West Bank*, “Terrorism and Political Violence” 2018, no. 30(4), pp. 637–657; A. Pedahzur, A. Perliger, *Jewish Terrorism in Israel*, Columbia University Press, New York 2009.

[50] D. Levin, *Political Opponents as Unruly Women: Gender Representations of Body, Voice, and Space in Israeli Televised Satire*, [in:] *Israeli Television: Global Contexts, Local Visions*, eds. M. Talmon, Y. Levy, Routledge, New York 2021, pp. 247–264.

considerations than those of the digital filmmakers. The Israeli writers of *Our Boys* initiated the project as a collaboration with a foreign network (HBO). They were targeting an international audience, whose dominant opinions are generally different to those of Israeli viewers. This drama series belongs to the genre of “quality TV,” and hence seeks the approval of critics and award juries (who tend to hold progressive views). This approach allowed the TV creators (perhaps even propped them up) to be harshly critical and to emphasize Jewish terror. However, while the series was rewarded by the global intellectual elite,^[51] it was denounced by its home country. Prime Minister Netanyahu himself described the series as “antisemitic” and called on the public to boycott the (co-)producing Israeli broadcasting company, Keshet.^[52]

However, local web creators choose a different approach. In comparison to the emphasized political context on TV, two notable web series that introduced famous fictional characters of settlers seem bluntly detached.^[53] Actress Gaya Beer Gurevich was in her mid-20s when she created the persona of *Bne-El*, aged roughly 13, around bar mitzvah age, who spends his days wandering around in open territories. The duo Oshrit Sarusi and Chen Rotman created the split couple Maccabib & Hanel, who maintain a love-hate relationship. In both cases, the plots center on personal topics, mostly family relationships. The dialogues are sometimes improvised and therefore do not articulate comprehensive ideas or messages. It is not as if the young comedians do not have enough knowledge or interest in topical issues. *Bne-El*'s

[51] H. Brown, *Our Boys Wins Big at Israeli Academy of Film and Television Awards*, The Jerusalem Post, 30.04.2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/culture/our-boys-wins-big-at-israeli-academy-of-film-and-television-awards-626333>; H. Lewis, *Peabody Awards: 'American Factory,' 'Dickinson,' 'Watchmen' Among Nominees*, The Hollywood Reporter, 6.05.2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/peabody-awards-nominations-2020-list-full-1289403/>.

[52] R. Eglash, *Netanyahu Calls for Boycott of Israeli TV Channel over 'Anti-Semitic' Series Co-Produced by HBO*, The Washington Post, 31.08.2019, <https://tinyurl.com/39r3j3a5>. It should be noted that Netanyahu had an ongoing dispute with the company over what he perceived as unbalanced political coverage.

[53] These examples were made by creators who do not belong in the sectors that they portray (although Sarusi does come from a religious upbringing). An example of a web series that was created by national-religious filmmakers and actors, and shot beyond the green line borders, is *Behind The Lines* (directed by Noam Keidar in 2015). However, this series did not manage to gain wide exposure, and its viewing figures remain far lower than the examples that are analyzed in this paper. Although this comedy series attempts to

avoid predictable one-sided views, it is still hardly political. Episode 5 is an exception, which quite progressively creates a parallel between the oppression of natives in occupied territories and the oppression of Jewish women within the religious sector. Yet throughout the series it does not question the right of settlers to live in the territories, acknowledge their violent acts, or discuss the context of the conflict. At the same time, it also does not criticize left-wing views, or present arguments to affirm the settlers' right over the land in dispute. Its portrayal of the conflict is hardly believable, displaying farfetched scenarios of Jewish-Arab Fraternity. In Episode 1, there is a brief moment of courtesy between an Israeli who takes over a checkpoint and a Palestinian who asks to pass. Episode 2 suggests romantic attraction. Episode 6 begins with a (non-violent) clash between Palestinians (played by Jews), accompanied by representatives of the left-wing media, and settlers, over an agricultural plot of land. But the plot quickly turns into a forming of friendship. A settler and an Arab share a cigarette, dreaming about the groups sitting together in a circle, singing songs, and smoking weed. The episode ends with the two men working together to plant marijuana in the ground.

creators (Gurevich and her partner Yogev Yefet) even expressed their desire to deepen their knowledge about the settlements (yet emphasized that they do not examine the religious aspects of the movement).[54]

Compared to TV characters like the trigger-happy extremist Moriya Srak, in the two web series there are (relatively) positive portrayals of settlers. Despite creating somewhat stereotypical caricatures, the web creators choose to ignore negative stigmatic attributes that are associated with (some parts of) the settler community, such as racism and violence, and downplay the political context.

Creators of content in Hebrew are (almost entirely) limited to the Israeli audience. If they fail to please local viewers, they are less likely to accumulate likes and shares. Therefore, very often, online artists with professional aspirations attempt to preserve consensus. Another reason for the avoidance of depicting violence (at least realistic violence, which is tragic and has consequences, unlike cartoonish slapstick violence) is their aim to attract young viewers, the desired target audience, who are often the web's trendsetters.[55]

Despite the centrality of geography and borders as elements that constitute the settlers' identity, these are hardly addressed in the web series. The locations are not stated. Bne-El appears throughout the episodes in open, unsettled, or deserted surroundings, or at construction sites. In Maccabit & Hanel's case, it is even harder to determine where they live, and if they take part in the settlement movement or live within the official borders of Israel. Maccabit and her daughters live in an old apartment building, a kind of residence more likely to be in a city.[56] But sometimes she is seen in her mother's private house in an undisclosed location.

The avoidance of directly addressing topical issues can be read as a political decision itself. The definition of Bne-El as a "god-forsaken" kid emphasizes his loneliness and desertedness. He is often shot as the single living object that inhabits wide locations such as fields, groves, hills, and (out-of-hours) construction sites in still-unsettled territories. These surroundings serve the theme of "forsakenness." But if he is indeed a settler, this loneliness erases the Palestinian locals, who are expected to live in these same territories (probably the West Bank). Bne-El's wandering on virgin soil, which is simply waiting to be conquered and developed, resembles early Zionist cinema, which represented the land of Israel as deserted, empty of local communities, waiting to be redeemed by the return of Hebrews to their homeland.[57] In the web series, Palestinians are not only invisible but also never mentioned by dialogue or acknowledged in any way.

[54] Y. Yaakov, *Ani Mutazia Mafhida Shel Yeled Dati Im Isha Sexit (I am a Scary Mutation of a Religious Kid with a Sexy Woman)*, Mako, 25.05.2018, <https://www.mako.co.il/culture-weekend/Article-79e2fae4f019361006.htm>.

[55] I. Rosen, op. cit.

[56] In one of the episodes, she leaves her house to meet a man who parks his car in front of her building, in what seems like an ordinary urban street.

[57] E. Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, I.B. Tauris, London 2010, pp. 13–51.

One episode stands out, though. It comes rather late in the series, episode number 9, called *Mekimim Yishuv* (*Building a Settlement*). Bne-El's endeavor to take over a piece of land and turn it into his new home causes a clash with the authorities. There is even a physical conflict between the settler kid and an IDF officer in uniforms, Jew versus Jew. When the soldier first appears, Bne-El and his friend Elyakim immediately touch him all over his body, completely unimpressed by the hierarchy of the high-ranked adult. Not only there is no distance between them, but the kids constantly physically violate his personal space. When the officer orders them how to behave, they ridicule his commands by interpreting them too literally. The officer gets mad and orders them to evacuate, claiming that the area is a closed military zone. The kids are hardly worried by the much taller, stronger and older soldier, and refuse to obey, saying "Funny... I am not going anywhere... this is my home." After a short argument leads to a dead end, the officer charges at the provisional tent that the kids built and attempts to tear it down. Elyakim stops him in an emotional plea that resonates with common slogans used by settlers in their protests against the Disengagement Plan from 2005. "How can you do this? To deport a child? He has nowhere else to go. This is his home... Don't you have a heart?" He adds exaggerated nonsensical arguments in the form of emotional extortion. Bne-El says, "I don't think words will help in this case," steals the soldier's gun, and threatens to shoot him. This is a conspicuous moment that dares to satirize the violent parts of settlers' resistance. One shot from the kids' point of view shows a gun barrel pointing at an IDF soldier in uniform, an unsettling sight for local Jewish viewers. It is an uncommon shot for local films, which usually adopt the soldier's point of view.

Bne-El's creators would not necessarily adopt this reading, which creates the impression that they deserve some credit for bold satire. In an interview, they frame the episode as nothing more than a kid's tale and shake off political criticism.

A settler friend told us that when he was in high school [one day he and his friends] decided to build a new settlement. They took tents and set [them – I.R.] up... exactly like what kids do. So Bne-El also builds a settlement because he runs away from home after arguing with his mother. I also wanted to run away from home [when I was around the same age – I.R.] ... I feel that we have made a personal series, not political.[58]

They emphasize the tale's relatability; it is a recreation of common early youth experiences. According to their suggested reading, the appropriate genre classification has more to do with kids' adventures, as in *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986) and *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985), or with Israeli cinema's tradition of coming-of-age/ nostalgia/ youth gang films,[59] than with satire or topical commentary. The cre-

[58] Y. Yaakov, op. cit.

[59] In Israeli cinema, these issues often go together, for example, in films such as *What a Gang* (Zeev Ha-

vazelet, 1962); *Lemon Popsicle* (Boaz Davidson, 1978); *Fun Forever* (Yeud Levanon, 1983); *Late Summer Blues* (Renen Schorr, 1987). See M. Talmon, *Blues LaTzabar*

ators' statements indicate that their guiding principle in the making of this episode was to create relatable content that appeals to kids, not adults. This affirms the arguments regarding the web creators' juvenile nature^[60] and their aforementioned considerations for minimizing or glossing over political context.

Beyond the Border: Media Crossover

In contrast to the cases of Bne-El and Maccabit & Hanel, another important example of settlers' representation in online comedy comes from Arutz Hakibud (The trio Rotem Kapelinsky, Dor Muskal, and Omer Ribak, who are most known for their musical comedy clips). A few days after the Duma arson attack and the murder of three Dawabsheh family members in 2015, the comic trio released a satirical video called *Pe'iley Tag Mehir Nehsafim LaRishona (Price-Tag Activists Revealed for the First Time)*. The creators used real footage of Hilltop Youth members' monologues about their interrogations by the Israeli secret service and their ideological ambitions. They mixed the real footage with mock monologues that recreated the aesthetic of the original amateurish videos. The jokes range from a subtle mimicking of the Hilltop boys' dazed manner of speaking to replacing the big full-head-size knitted yarmulkas that they wear with Vikings helmets. The fictional characters' names are nouns like Acne and Archive, but they use "wrong" accentuation, which distorts the words and creates a phonetic resemblance to dated biblical names, which are associated with the national religious community. Hence, despite some grotesque and even nonsensical characteristics, in a casual viewing (especially on a small personal screen) it can be hard to grasp these manipulations at first sight. The use of match cuts, similar positioning of the camera, an identical blank background, along with the eccentricity of the real people, blur the distinction between mock and authentic. This is evident in the comments on the video on social media, where many viewers express confusion and cannot immediately tell the difference between jokes and real documentary extracts. The juxtaposition of ridiculous absurd and what is allegedly national-religious ideology, and authentic tales of self-proclaimed bravery, in a manner that merges them, exposes the Hilltop Youth's ideals and actions as hallucinatory and illogical.

Compared to Bne-El or Maccabit & Hanel, this video is much more politically aware, daring, and unapologetically taking a stand. Yet is it truly the case? That depends on who you ask. An interview with the trio's members creates the impression that each one of them places the video differently on the scale between topical satire and detached surrealism.^[61] Kapelinsky claims: "What is cool about this video is

HaAvud: Havurot VeNostalgia BaKolnoa HaIsraeli (Israeli Graffiti: Nostalgia, Groups, and Collective Identity in Israeli Cinema), Open University of Israel, Tel Aviv 2001.

[60] I. Rosen, op. cit.

[61] B. Tofach, *VeShnitz-El*, Mako, 16.02.2017, <https://www.mako.co.il/culture-weekend/Article-f11049fic-d64a51006.htm>.

that it attached faces to 'Price Tag.' When the press discussed ['Price Tag'], it was mentioned as a code name, there were no characters, and this video presents them. It shows that they are just kids, some of them weirdos, that appear to be easily influenced. It is dangerous." Ribak, on the contrary, describes: "We found this [original video] bit and did not know what to do with it ... We started shooting on the phone and did not know what to say, so we escaped into our nonsense..." The verb "escaped" is an interesting choice of words. Between the two stands Muskal, who provides an ambivalent version:

I think that we are really on the border. On one side, we are not doing escapist humor which strays away from the stuff happening here, and on the other side, we do not attempt to convey a political opinion. We are well familiar with current affairs and have strong opinions – not necessarily right or left – but this is not the center of the creation for us. Even in the 'Price Tag' video, the main issue is first and foremost to show them, and to make it funny.

Of course, it is up to the readers to decide whether this statement is genuine or lip service.

When the video came out it became a viral hit. Among the enthusiastic followers who appreciated it were the creators of *Eretz Nehedert*. Arutz Hakibud had already established a professional cooperation with the mainstream TV hit beforehand (mainly by running the show's social media accounts), but in 2017 the troupe was invited to develop their Hilltop Youth characters into a series of sketches, called *Ma'ale Tapioca*, which were aired as segments on the television show. However, once the medium and the context changed, so did the responses. The same materials which passed under most of the public's radar as naughty memes on social media caused controversy when presented on prime-time TV. A nonsense joke at the expense of the settlement activist Benny Katzover resulted in a defamation lawsuit, in which the show eventually lost, and was required to compensate him by 70,000 shekels.[62] The media crossover resulted in a "context collapse" with greater magnitude.

Artuz Hakibud also experimented with direct political satire around the 2015 elections. They remixed and spoofed campaign videos by Naftali Bennett, head of HaBayit HaYehudi party, which is identified with the national religious sector. The remixed videos performed poorly, and did not achieve the usual numbers of likes, comments, and shares that the trio's materials generate.

When Politicians Become Comedians

[62] E. Ben Kimon, *BeYikvot Maarchon: 'Eretz Nehederet' Tefatze et Benny Katzover Be-50 Elef Shkalim (Following a Sketch: 'Wonderful Country' Will Compensate Benny Katzover with 50 Thousands Shekels)*, Ynet, 4.03.2021, <https://www.ynet.co.il/entertainment/>

article/BJ7eUbCGO; 'HaElyion' Dacha Et HaYirur Shel 'Eretz Nehederet', Benny Katzover Yefutze ('The Supreme' [Court] Rejected 'Wonderful Country's Appeal, Benny Katzover Will Be Compensated), Arutz 7, 31.05.2021, <https://www.inn.co.il/news/494322>.

Ironically, Yaron Katz argues that “the biggest winner in the 2013 and 2015 Israeli national elections was social media.” According to him, “politicians who used social media effectively gained success, while those who made limited use of social media in their campaigns lost much of their political power.”^[63] With the move to the web platform, the campaigns had to be properly adjusted, needing to draw the attention of new media users, to encourage likes and shares. To do so, “a message must be short, witty, funny, punchy, personal and visual. If not, one might be immediately rebuked by TL;DR response (‘Too Long; Didn’t Read’) or just get ignored.”^[64] Hence, along with the clichéd promises of a better future and prosperity, a new kind of video emerged. Videos that adopted the web’s aesthetic and generic conventions. According to Rafi Mann, “one of the most noticeable novelties of the 2015 elections... was the emergence of a new comic political discourse, in which humor was adopted as a major campaign strategy and senior Israeli politicians turned into comedians.”^[65] Instead of conveying traditional values such as leadership, authority or professionalism, the candidates preferred to promote an impression of being funny, cool, and relatable. Their videos “made use of the media’s chief ideological weapon: satire... Voters eagerly anticipated new videos as they tried to outdo one another with clever puns, creative ideas and not-so-subtle jabs at their rivals.”^[66] Jenkins et al. note that new kinds of civic cultures are developing a fresh repertoire of mobilization tactics, communication practices, and rhetorical genres, and therefore “it should be no surprise that institutional politics is increasingly mimicking their languages, especially the blending of popular culture and political speech.”^[67]

One of the most pioneering campaign videos, by HaBayit HaYehudi, featured the party leader Bennett dressed in a costume of a Tel Aviv hipster. He is seen walking around town, constantly handing out uncalled apologies. For example, when a waiter pours coffee on him, he apologizes. When a reckless driver bumps into his car, he apologizes. Eventually, Bennett removes his costume and says: “as of today, we stop apologizing.” The allegorical message is Israel will no longer lower its head and humbly accept every critique by the international community. In a later video, the Bennett-hipster visits a psychologist who tries to cure his “apology addiction.”

[63] Y. Katz, *Israel’s Social Media Elections*, “Open Journal of Political Science” 2018, no. 8(4).

[64] R. Mann, *The Bibi Sitter and the Hipster: the New Comical Political Discourse*, “Israel Affairs” 2016, no. 22(3–4), pp. 793–794.

[65] *Ibidem*, p. 788.

[66] V.S. Press, *How Social Media Is Changing Israel’s Vote*, ISRAEL21c, 16.03.2015, <https://www.israel21c.org/how-social-media-is-changing-israels-vote/>. The acceptance of the amusing clips by Israel’s media

and public was in sharp contrast to the reactions to the first injections of humor into political television ads decades ago. At that time, as comedians were delivering parties’ messages, it was widely criticized as “clowns’ discourse” or “Mickey Mouse politics.” It was perceived as an appeal to the lowest common denominator, a serious degradation of the political discourse, and an insult to the educated electorate. See R. Mann, *op. cit.*, pp. 789–791.

[67] H. Jenkins et al., *op. cit.*, p. 279.

The Likud party rushed to adopt the new style and released a series of video sketches, which gained massive popularity. In the “Kindergarten Video,” Prime Minister Netanyahu takes the position of “the responsible adult,” portraying a kindergarten teacher who tries in vain to calm down the other candidates, who are presented as infants quarreling with each other. In the “Bibisitter” video, Netanyahu surprises a young couple when he shows up at their doorstep, presenting himself as the babysitter they invited, once again sending the message that he is the only responsible adult who is capable of looking after the country’s children. Another video had Netanyahu sitting at his desk, talking on the phone in English with an unseen “Mr. President.” He keeps being interrupted in his important work by an aide who bursts into the office to update the Prime Minister on ridiculous headlines of obvious “fake news” that were published about him. In another video, Netanyahu is playing *Monopoly* and stubbornly refuses to “sell” Jerusalem as part of the negotiations with his opponents. The lighthearted approach of these examples was well accepted by both his supporters and casual viewers. However, one humoristic video by the Likud party (in which Netanyahu did not star himself) did not work as planned. In a scene styled on an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, the video shows members of a support group sitting in a circle, sharing their complaints about how Netanyahu’s actions undermined their organizations. The members who are sitting side by side include Israeli port workers, employees of the Israeli Broadcasting Authority, and Palestinian Hamas terrorists, a comparison that sparked controversy. Despite the tongue-in-cheek comic tone of the video, viewers were offended.[68]

This was not the only case of humoristic campaign videos that backfired due to unclarity, offensiveness, or portraying the candidate as too goofy. Prominent examples were the web videos by HaYamin HaHadash’s party at the 2019 elections. The party lagged in the polls, and in what appears to be a desperate effort to take over the spotlight, attempted to achieve virality through provocations. Thus, the right-wing Minister of Justice at the time, Ayelet Shaked, released a video in which she appears to be modeling a luxury perfume labeled “Fascism.”[69] She also presented her (non-existing) vocal skills and released a ballad called “Separation Song.” Shaked’s antics managed to generate many comments, but the feedback was mixed, and the effectiveness of this strategy was unclear. However, the comedic ad by her partner, Naftali Bennett, certainly flopped. His failed attempt to create a funny video, in which he is seen lovingly petting a white peace dove and whispering in its ear was so bizarre that it turned him into mockery and tarnished his public image.[70]

[68] Y. Katz, op. cit.; R. Mann, op. cit.

[69] See S. Adler, A. Kohn, *A Multimodal Analysis of a Controversial Israeli Political Campaign Ad*, “Social Semiotics” 2020, no. 33(1), pp. 98–114. Although Adler and Kohn treat the video as a TV ad and miss the

campaign’s usage of formulaic web videos’ conventions, its viral aspirations, the online distribution, and the online discourse.

[70] E. Leshem, *‘Birchotay, Ata Timhoni SheMedaber Yim Yona’: HaTwitter Lo Nirga MeHaSirton Shel Ben-*

The necessity to keep social media materials short, witty, personal, and visual, and to do everything that can help to avoid a TL;DR response makes it harder to develop serious discourse. Sometimes it forces public figures who aspire to lead the country not to treat themselves or their peers seriously, and even to give up on their dignity. When officialdom is willing to fool around and communicate through jokes, it takes over the territory that was once reserved for professional comedians. Creative humorists are pushed away from the topical-satirical slot and move on to other forms of comedy. When the king himself fools around, what is the use of a jester? This is another suggested reason for the Israeli independent content creators' preference to focus on different kinds of comedy, and not to overtly take part in the political debate.

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