CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Metaphoric Meltdowns: Debates over the Meaning of Blogging on Israblog

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Blogs have long been a central feature of the Internet. They've been studied as tools for personal expression, variations on traditional self-expression media like journals or diaries, platforms, digital interfaces. These conceptualizations emerge through use and interface design choices, since digital objects have no boundaries without a built-in metaphorical power. As signs, digital entities can be articulated in arbitrary media or modalities (textual, auditory, pictorial, haptic), but once instantiated in a modality they become non-arbitrary, because of their indexical relation to code in software (Boomen, 2014).

While a traditional metaphor transfers meaning between different conceptual worlds, in a material metaphor, the transference occurs between symbols and physical artifacts (Hayles, 2002). In the case of digital artefacts, the transference is between the discourse metaphors of users or interface designs, and the architectures of software and hardware. As Lev Manovich (2001) pointed out, the same database could be accessed through and represented by two distinct interfaces, designed to generate different user experiences, which are based on different metaphors. In the case of blogs, just think of the difference between *LiveJournal* and *MySpace*. The transference between discursive metaphors and architecture can be one that elucidates how the technology operates or rather obscures it, as is the case with the metaphor of the cloud in cloud computing.

The notion of material metaphor elevates the operational reach of discursive metaphors beyond language and cognition towards material and social

configurations, recognizing the way metaphors embody material affordances and specific connections to the digital back office (Boomen, 2014, p. 188). Therefore, we can use metaphors as heuristic tools to articulate what is being foregrounded, what is ignored, and what subject positions are made possible (Boomen, 2014). All of this is to say that whatever we take to be a digital object is the solidification of a metaphoric conception, fixed after the fact, retrospectively giving obdurate characteristics or universal meaning to what is and will always be a continuous process.

The blog/blogging phenomenon formally emerged in the Israeli web space in August 2001 with the creation of *Israblog*. Before 2001, most internet-savvy practitioners were already writing English-language blogs on international platforms or had opened scattered personal blogs in Hebrew on private domains. I initially assumed Israblog would be like most other platforms on which I blogged, an illusion that highlights how one's perception of any online space depends on one's own movements through these networks, something both Hine and Markham noted in their earliest works (Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998). Therefore, what a blog *is* or what a platform is *for* is all up for debate, sometimes fierce. This was made clear to me when *Israblog* publicly revealed its statistics for the first time. It turned out that the type of users I presumed were universal, since they were the ones I saw and interacted with, represented only 4 percent of the site's population—*Israblog* was in fact dominated by females (74%) and bloggers under the age of 21 (75%). I was considered a popular blogger on *Israblog*. Yet the vast majority of *Israblog* bloggers were teenage girls, a mere page away, but in experiential terms occupying a completely different dimension.

Lurking in this blogosphere within a blogosphere, I began to see blogs and blogging in a different light. For adult bloggers at the time (in the country and context I was studying), the blog was a text, and blogging meant writing. Sure, there was a lot to be said about how blogging wrought tensions between orality, literacy and performance, but it was teenage girls who truly explored the boundaries of blogging. For them, blogging was not about writing at all, but viewing (being viewed), as teenage blogger *Ariel*'s first post demonstrates:

> *My first blog was here [on Israblog—c.v] but it was designed so ugly and I didn't know how to use it so I opened another one on Tapuz [a newer Hebrew website—c.v]. But they don't have the functions that are available here so I decided to come back. I'm opening this new blog, in hopes that I'll figure out how to add background music, design it properly, make a cool designed cursor and well, just use it.*

Notice that the verb 'write' is absent from her post and replaced by 'design', 'add' 'make' and 'use'. Girls like *Ariel* used to comment on strangers' blogs in their search for new audiences with phrases like 'you've got a beautiful blog! You're invited to

mine [link]', leaving other bloggers to wonder, post, and comment on how 'beauty' is even relevant to a blog. Blogs encourage not only textual, but visual expression as well, via user icons, memes, template selection, design and color scheme, titles, sidebars, selection of images, typeface, etc. (Hookway, 2008). Badger (2004) claimed that blogs are also 'something to look at' and 'if we think of weblogs as being homepages that we wear then it is the visual elements that tailor the garment to fit the individual'. Badger (2004) assumes we automatically adopt that visual literacy, but Hookway (2008, p. 102) shows that one needs to learn how to 'read' as well as 'view' blogs.

The girls on Israblog decorated their blogs in ways that seemed both like the material culture in their bedrooms and their subcultural dress styles. They engaged in collaborative games in which their blogs were factories of graphic design products, virtual shelves for digital collections, stages for performing blog contests, and venues in virtual cities where they were represented by digital dolly avatars.

When I tried to engage with them through my own blog, *Doctor Blog,* they completely ignored me. In their posts the girls were often begging for attention, soliciting readership and commentary, but they must have only targeted their peer group, since they ignored my comments entirely. I had to retreat to lurking in order to acquire the proper literacy, to figure out and perform the proper blogging 'rites' that would make me visible to them.

I had to change my conceptualization of what a blog was before I could break through. I finally stopped trying to engage girls through writing and started learning some basic graphic design through the tips and tutorials on their blogs. I began to treat *Doctor Blog* as my avatar and designed a new theme for it, including 'ordering' graphic design products from teenage bloggers who participated in the gift-economy style marketplace of designs—badges, graphic dividers, customized cursor, signature, etc. (Vaisman, 2014). Girls who had ignored my textual comments were suddenly exchanging designs with me, criticizing and complimenting on the look of my blog. Since blog design was perceived, inter alia, as dress style, I felt like a colonial-era ethnographer who sometimes needed to dress according to the norms in the researched community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Finally, after recruiting my research subjects properly, I asked one of them to design a special blog badge that said (in Hebrew) 'I'm also being studied by Carmel' and most of the girls who volunteered for the research were happy to display it on their blog frame alongside other identity markers they designed and collected. Both the badge and the 'I'm also' text structure (a discursive convention of identity statement on girls' badges) were a way for me to speak their language and be with them—not in *the* field, but in *their* field (Figures 25.1 and 25.2).

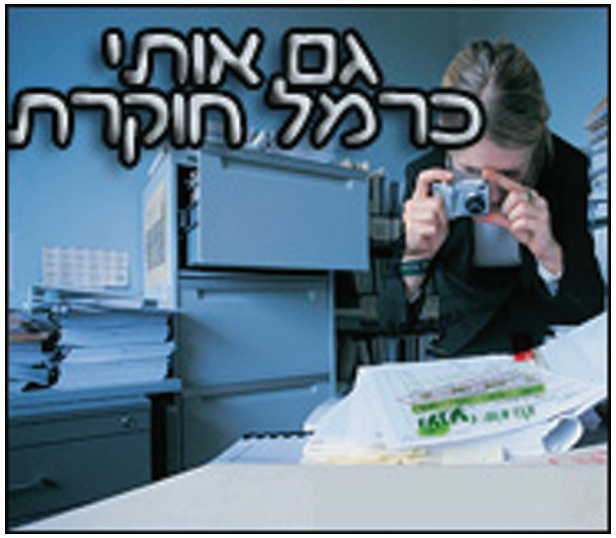

Figure 25.1: "I'm also being studied by Carmel" Hebrew blog badge. Source: Screenshot by Carmel Vaisman

Figure 25.2: "Doctor Blog" design theme as designed by one of the teenage bloggers. Source: Screenshot by Carmel Vaisman

FROM 'METAPHORIC MELTDOWN' TO METAPHOR SOLIDIFICATION

Different competing metaphors might manifest as habits, conventions, norms, social settings and ways of meaning-making. Bloggers navigate between these in order to construct their subject positions; a continual construction and reconstruction of

the meaning of blogging in context. Yet this controversy might not be evident, as the distinctions and diversity are collapsed into one set of practices referred to as 'blogging'. danah boyd (2005) referred to this as 'metaphoric meltdown', resulting in lawsuits, press misunderstandings and research challenges due to blogging being situated between a variety of different tensions—orality and textuality, corporeality and spatiality, practice and artifact. While those of us in the academy, like boyd, might be able to reflect on how these 'broken' metaphoric comparisons never give us the full picture, and we might be able to see blogging as a liminal practice, all of us were still, in some ways, continuously choosing between different interpretations of 'what a blog is'.

As I reflect back on my fieldwork and participation on Israblog during these years, it is clear that practically, we went back and forth between different decisions, preferring some constructions, narratives, and settings over others, whether this richness was visible or latent.

In clashes between actors of equal power this might result merely in textual drama and different blog genres, as was the case with adult bloggers wondering about teenage girls' blogging practices. However, when the platform itself was involved, its operators held the power of solidifying a particular metaphor—that is, encoding in software certain platform defaults, thus intervening in the mode of being of blogs and bloggers, which goes beyond simply imposing a standard.

In what follows, I tell a story that weaves together three key moments in the field: the struggle of the platform operators to make sense of their role while navigating discourse metaphors they cannot translate to code and solidify, the first failed attempt of the platform to solidify a metaphor that went against the grain of the blogging community, and the successful solidification of a discourse metaphor by the platform programmers in a way that favors one group of bloggers over another.

PLATFORM OWNERSHIP CHANGES AND "THE TOOLBAR" INCIDENT

A few days after opening my own blog, *Doctor Blog* on the *Israblog* platform, I contacted the founder and operator of the platform Yariv Habot, hoping for his help as an informant. Habot agreed, and thereafter supplied me with statistics when needed, helped with technical issues of capturing blog pages, and promoted my call for volunteers when my research proposal was approved. But his own position in the field was an interesting case study of metaphoric meltdown. Habot had seen himself as a computer programmer who designed code for a certain type of

webpage that afforded freedom of expression to all, and maintained a formal blog for announcements and technical support. *Israblog* was merely his hobby.

As the platform grew beyond a few thousand blogs, Habot found himself busy with less code and more conflicts. Teen bloggers saw him as 'the man behind the curtain' and worshipped him to the point of embarrassment. Since many bloggers saw themselves as a community, or even a family, they referred to Habot as *Israblog*'s God, king, magician, or father, and approached him with personal conflicts beyond the scope of tech support. He found himself performing the roles of parent, sheriff, and judge, mediating between girls who accused each other of copying graphic designs, as well as identifying and scolding bloggers who tweaked their blog counter to appear more popular.

Habot was an introvert programmer who was not cut out to fill this role. Though he often referred to *Israblog* as 'his baby' project, he never dreamed he would actually have to 'babysit' thousands of bloggers; yet, he was not always able to ignore bloggers' drama since it often had ramifications on the code. For instance, bloggers who tweaked the counter exploited a bug that damaged the counters of all blogs. It had to be fixed on the level of code and all blog counters were off for a few days. This 'counter blackout' became a community crisis he had to deal with on additional levels: the counter was the representation of the audience and the pulse of the blog, so bloggers were practically freaking out without it, blogging frantically about being 'left alone in the dark' and begging audiences to 'show themselves' through comments now that their presence left no digital trace.

Habot felt he had not signed up for this and could no longer handle the multiple facets of this operation. As *Israblog* kept expanding and new challenges emerging, Habot got weary and sold *Israblog* to a media-content company, *Nana*.

Nana assumed they purchased a publishing platform, a golden goose producing free content. They assigned it a content manager, media professional Ilana Tamir, and their first action was to brand it by adding its logo header and toolbar automatically to every blog page. They could not fathom the scandal that broke out among thousands of bloggers who were extremely invested in their blog design, reflecting their virtual bedroom, inner moods, and cultural styles. The blogs were perceived as personal spaces and digital bodies. Imagine their reaction when they woke up one morning to see an unremovable header and toolbar on their screens. It was described by bloggers as forcing them to hang a huge picture they hated in their bedroom, or enforcing a unified dress code. Even adult bloggers who viewed blogs more as diaries written for public audiences, complained over the commercialized aesthetic that discouraged them from writing personal narratives.

The bloggers were quick to organize through platform tools: they opened a protest blog to coordinate a strike, setting a date in which all of them will abstain from writing as a show of power. In addition, they designed and distributed graphic blog badges demanding the omission of the toolbar. *Nana* brought in Habot, the

founder, as a mediator, and after a week of organized protest that made traditional media coverage, finally gave in. *Nana* took down their toolbar, leaving only a small logo aside the original *Israblog* logo.

From content management to community management

Now that 'the man behind the curtain' was gone, the metaphors of God and magician died with him, but Ilana Tamir was expected to 'put on her red shoes' and follow his footsteps. She was most often referred to as 'the mother of *Israblog*', and after a while her title at *Nana* was changed from *content* manager to *community* manager, a reflection of the shift in *Nana's* perspective after the toolbar incident.

For each problem she faced daily, Tamir had to decide: was the blog primarily a text? A place? An avatar of the blogger? Or a way of being? For example, when the phenomenon of *Pro-Ana*[1] blogs drew attention, some bloggers demanded these blogs be closed down to prevent the veneration of anorexia, but Tamir could not treat them solely as propaganda texts: the parents of some girls emailed her requests to let the blogs be, since following these representation of the girls' body was a vital way to monitor them. She decided to contact a professional expert and asked him to comment on the girls' blogs to start a dialogue. The Pro-Ana bloggers ignored all of the expert's communication until he was persuaded by Tamir to open his own blog on *Israblog*. Once he 'moved into their neighborhood' and engaged them as a fellow Israblogger, a dialogue indeed opened, thus the spatial metaphor provided the solution in this case.

Tamir faced a similar dilemma when an anonymous young pedophile blogged about his problems promoting awareness of his impossible situation and offering his point of view. His blog was filled with thousands of hate comments alongside intriguing conversations with worried mothers. Again, Tamir had to decide if this was a matter of text and she had to afford him the freedom of speech he claimed, or a matter of space and she could ban him from the territory of the community she is responsible for. Finally, it was agreed that he would continue to blog on an independent *Wordpress* platform and those who wanted to could follow him there. The text was still accessible, a page away, but bloggers were relieved he was no longer 'among' them as a resident of their community.

1 Pro-ana (stands for pro-anorexia) blogs proclaim that anorexia is a lifestyle choice and not a disease. The blogs, often written by female adolescents, provide places for "anas" to receive support, share experiences, and offer encouragement, including specific instruction for initiating and maintaining anorexia nervosa. For an example of scholarship on this topic, see Gay, Kristen Nicole, "Unbearable Weight, Unbearable Witness: The (Im)possibility of Witnessing Eating Disorders in Cyberspace" (2013). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations.* http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/4676 for a discussion of the consequences of deleting such content from the web.

There was even one instance in which Tamir had to decide if she was responsible for what bloggers were doing offline: *Israblog*gers started organizing meetups on national holidays, held in a public place that was easily accessible from all over the country—the rooftop of the prestigious Azrieli Towers Mall in Tel Aviv. I attended two of these meetings as part of my ethnography, and it was as overwhelming as a carnival. Thousands of bloggers flocked to the mall unannounced. Some wore costumes and accessories, some carried cardboard signs with messages from their blogs, some wrote catchphrases on each other's skin, as if they were using their bodies as the avatars of their blogs.

After a few noisy events that ended with loitering and minor vandalism, the management of the mall called *Nana* and asked Tamir to do something about it or they would sue for damage. Tamir explained she was only responsible for bloggers' online texts and had no authority over their physical bodies, even if they were performing their identity as bloggers in the geographical space.

From community back to platform: The decline of the virtual cities

Most conflicts of interest between various groups of bloggers as described above defied transcoding, in the sense of being able to translate the dominant interpretation into the interface software. However, there was one clear incident which brought to surface a tiny and seemingly insignificant programming constraint that carried profound implications for *Israblog*. It also demonstrated that while *Nana* refrained from modifying platform aesthetics ever since the toolbar scandal, it used its power to shape the platform through back office programming.

As the platform grew, so did the tension between adult bloggers who produced personal narratives and teen bloggers, mostly girls, who used the blogs as storage spaces for graphic designs. At the time, many girls were operating collaborative blogs that functioned as virtual cities. The practice seemed like something between building Lego, building within SIMS, and playing with a dollhouse, except that the materials were digital images.[2] One morning, the most successful virtual city blog posted a sudden farewell post:

2 Virtual city blogs use blog posts as spaces and invite bloggers to 'move in': each blogger that is accepted into the city gets their own 'townhouse' which consists of at least 3 rooms. Each blog post represents a room in which the content of the post consists of pictures of furniture and sometimes room inhabitants. Activity on such blogs consists of constantly posting more spaces as the city expands as well as to represent movement and events in the city. For instance, if there is a party, dozens of posts may be created to represent the club and additional residents joining the party. The posts content would feature resident pictures, their choice of party cloths, drinks etc. One can think of it as a draft animation for 'hanging out' in a virtual world without the actual technology for it.

> *We are retiring due to the new blog posting limit, which means we're not working anymore, which means the city closes. Since we reached a respectable amount of posts, 588, we now have a limit of 5 posts per day; that number makes it impossible to maintain a city. Setting up a house for one person takes 3 posts. So because Israblog introduced this limitation and our editing interface stops working after 5 posts a day, we are forced to retire. Sorry, we hope you enjoyed the city while it lasted.*

I noticed this post published on April 17th 2006 since teen bloggers lamented the closing of the successful city, however, it had little meaning for me at the time. Looking back and considering the concept of digital material metaphor, I realize this was a turning point for *Israblog*, which had struggled with the tension between the blog as a text, a space, and a way of being since its inception. Adult bloggers often complained over teen girls' blogging practices, describing them as a "contamination of the blogosphere" and some took issue specifically with the genre of virtual cities, demanding *Nana* delegitimize it, as this was not considered 'blogging' to them.

Limiting one's updates to five a day might make sense for asynchronous communication and may even be an arbitrary theoretical programming decision. In fact, most adult users would never become aware of the existence of such a limitation. However, for girls who used the blog as a representation of a geographical space that held their digital avatars, each blog posting represented a single move 'into' and 'around' this space. After only five moves, they would figuratively 'hit a wall', forcing them to stop 'building' and expanding.

Through this programming limitation, *Nana* communicated a clear message that *Israblog* was primarily a text and could only be a space within the boundaries of that text. Adult bloggers saw it as a win and other active virtual cities were discouraged since they now knew they could only grow so far. But keep in mind this was 2006, before the explosion of social networks. *Israblog* was the only option for teens who needed a malleable platform with a Hebrew interface. This small programming limitation had silenced the voices and limited the subcultural practices of many girls at their tween years.

The retrospective framing and afterlife of Israblog

When Ilana Tamir left her job at *Nana* in 2012, she was not replaced by another media professional, but by a veteran blogger from the community, Mariette Cohen. When she took over the official *Israblog* management blog, she changed its name to *Miss Israblog*, accompanied by a header of an animated image of a young girl that bore some similarities to Cohen's external features (Figure 25.3)

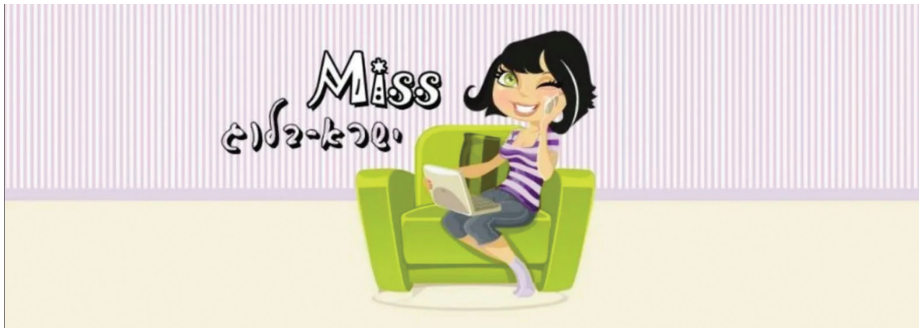

Figure 25.3: "Miss Israblog" header on the official management blog. Source: Screenshot by Carmal Vaisman.

In 2013 *Israblog* celebrated 12 years since its founding and Cohen's blog post congratulated *Israblog* on its 'bat mitzvah', a Jewish rite of passage for twelve-year-old girls. One blogger commented: 'I never thought of *Israblog* as a she before'. The community manager gets to shape the policy of the platform according to her perceptions, and it would seem that Cohen favored the metaphor of the blog as a way of being, representing the dominant demography of *Israblog* which was always, and continues to be, girls in their tweens, or perhaps viewing the entire community as her avatar, an entity shaped in her own image, as one of its first bloggers.

A year later *Nana* experienced financial difficulties and formally withdrew from *Israblog*. Bloggers who cared about the platform and wanted it to exist amidst the rich contemporary social media landscape, took it upon themselves to maintain it without any official support. Cohen chose to continue as a volunteer manager. *Israblog* was abandoned by its media company as a content website, and abandoned by most of its users as they migrated from its territory to other social networks. It now stands alone as a textual archive, or a memorial website. It was picked up by Israeli National Library who views it as a text and preserves it as part of its cultural legacy archives, however, it is better characterized as a material artifact of the internet as a way of being, an integral part of the past selves of many bloggers who came of age and became social media influencers, journalists, activists, artists, and even academics, like yours truly, *Doctor Blog*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: WHAT DOES A PLATFORM THINK IT IS?

The case of *Israblog* demonstrates that 'what the internet is' for particular groups, at particular times is an ongoing process of choices—and perhaps clashes—between metaphors that actively construct and negotiate this position. This

chapter highlights the practices of various platform stakeholders to cope with the multiplicity of positions that subjects and spaces occupy simultaneously, as a mutual interactive process of learning and negotiating. The 'metaphoric meltdown' was resolved eventually, through a process whereby one metaphor became the dominant heuristic for making sense of what the platform was and consequently, the basis for policy. Its solidification in code formalized the digital materiality of this metaphor.

In the *Israblog* story, text is still the primary point of departure, and it is put into question only when it clashes with a different meaning of blogging. The concept of community slowly took root during those years, but as soon as its boundaries were challenged by attempting to extend it offline, *Israblog* withdrew to the textual frame to explain that it was only responsible for bloggers as a discourse community rather than a spatial one. Adult bloggers were actively defending the blog as a text, accepting its community aspect as an imagined community, while marginalizing and harassing girl bloggers over practices that took the blog for a representation of actual spaces (storage, geography, etc.) and bodies. This treatment drove a few girls out of the platform or towards a different blog genre, however, when the platform programmers solidified the textual metaphor through a posting limitation, the girls' defeat was rapid and finite.

While discourse metaphors might entertain multiple meanings, material metaphors represent a choice of a single or a dominant meaning, ignoring and erasing other layers of meaning. Therefore, the type of power that a platform has can perhaps be viewed in terms of the means to solidify discourse metaphors in software code, turning them into digital material metaphors. It is by such dynamics that digital artefacts are forced into familiar categories rather than cultivated into more transformative cultural potentials.

What do the platform operators or owners assume they're operating? How do their assumptions get reflected through default options, interface updates, terms of services, and general use policies? How committed are platforms to accommodate and materialize in code the multiplicity of meanings held by their users? To what extent can users become aware of and subvert the many digital material metaphors that might be working within the platform, the interface, or the norms for use that limit their freedom of expression? According to Andrew Feenberg (1999), users have an 'interpretive flexibility' about technology, which comes with the ability to creatively appropriate technology in ways that alters its modes or subverts the original intentions of its creators. Feenberg operates under the assumption the internet is an unfinished project, still open for negotiations between different actors, but does this assumption hold in the age of algorithm-governed platforms? His key example is French Minitel. In the 1980s, Minitel designed a database that users 'subverted,' using this capacity for their own personal communication, thus forcing Minitel to change its design

and designation accordingly. One can find a more recent example in Twitter, which was designed with a specific mode of communication in mind—microblogging via SMS. Users, borrowing from IRC, instituted many symbolic systems for dialogic and topic-based communication such as user mentions and hashtags (see boyd et al., 2010). Twitter, Inc. later chose to materialize these in code, thus accepting the repurposing of the platform.

Users' legal interpretive flexibility seems significantly limited in the era of algorithms, thus the key path of subversion left is through communication norms, but it can only be done within the limits of the dominant digital material metaphor. For example, there could never have been a code or an algorithm capable of forcing the teen bloggers or Pro-Ana bloggers I studied in the early 2000s to respond to communication they deemed irrelevant, since unwanted communication would stand outside their community or literacy practices.

If the girls wanted to continue virtual cities blogging, pushing their spaces against the limits of text, they could have taken advantage of the replicability of digital platforms: open another blog, link the two and declare the first 'a neighborhood in full capacity'. Tween girl bloggers knew how to get their way, they mustered impressive forces to ignore hate speech, bullying, and irrelevant communication; they fought fiercely for the their rights by appealing often to the management, so I wonder why they simply gave up on virtual cities blogging over a coding limitation, without putting up the tiniest fight.

A decade later, after witnessing my share of conflicts of interests between participants and platform algorithms, I can only speculate that the answer lies in a technological determinist perception. Knowing tween *Israblog* bloggers, I am certain that if *Nana* would have announced a platform upgrade that hindered virtual cities, a scandal would have erupted that would remove this 'upgrade' in less than a day. However, the more a system becomes complex and bureaucratic, the more we tend to naturalize and morally neutralize its technical constraints, accepting them as a given even if they are newly introduced. Once they are assimilated, materialized in code, it is as if the verdict cannot be overturned.