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Pro-Israel lobby targets BBC online poll

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BBC History Magazine was forced to remove an online poll after it was targeted by a project aimed at influencing internet opinion in Israel's favour.

The Give Israel Your United Support (GIYUS) website hosts a downloadable desktop tool called Megaphone. The program alerts users to opinion polls and "talkback" features on news sites so they can respond with pro-Israel views. In turn, users can alert GIYUS operators to any opinion polls they think should be targeted.

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The Jerusalem-based World Union of Jewish Students launched GIYUS and Megaphone on 19 July, a week after Israel launched air attacks in Lebanon.

The long-running BBC History Magazine poll posed the question: "Do you think holocaust denial should be made illegal in Britain?" Soon after it was targeted by Megaphone, the poll was pulled. The magazine declined to speak to *The Register* about the episode.

Prior to contacting *The Register*, our source corresponded with the magazine. Staff writer Robert Attar wrote at the end of August: "I am aware about this situation. I had a look at their site and all they have done is encouraged their members to vote on the polls which seems legitimate to me. It would also be extremely difficult to prevent groups of people voting in this way. As our polls are not used for any scientific or academic purpose I don't see the problem."

Three days after the launch of Megaphone, Amir Gissin, public affairs director of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote to pro-Israel or "Hasbara" organisations to urge them to back the new tactic.

Dear friends,

Many of us recognize the importance of the Internet as the new battleground for Israel's image. It's time to do it better, and coordinate our on-line efforts on behalf of Israel. An Israeli software company have developed a free, safe and useful tool for us - the Internet Megaphone.

Please go to www.giyus.org, download the Megaphone, and you will receive daily updates with instant links to important internet polls, problematic articles that require a talkback, etc.

We need 100,000 Megaphone users to make a difference. So, please distribute this mail to all Israel's supporters.

Do it now. For Israel.

Amir Gissin

Director Public Affairs (Hasbara) Department
GIYUS currently claims 24,000 Megaphone users.

Comparing Megaphone to pro-Palestinian blogs designed to rally support, in [comments](#) (<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1154525982026&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>) to the *Jerusalem Post* on 31 August, Gissin said: "Why can they do it, but we need to sit quietly? The Internet is the communications medium of the future. The government is not behind this initiative, but I can only be happy it exists."

One Megaphone alert dispatched in August said: "Ask the UN to re-examine its position on the Qana incident. Remind the UN that Reuters admitted some of the Qana photos are faked, and that Hezbollah manipulates and uses innocent Lebanese civilians as human shields."

Qana was the scene of a devastating airstrike which killed dozens of civilians, including many children. Israel was widely condemned and the UN security council expressed "shock and distress" at the action.

Other interested parties have called for the initiative to try and stay under the radar. Former Israeli consul-general in New York Alon Pinkas told the *Jerusalem Post*: "Once it is out there that these are organized talkbacks, then anytime anything positive appears on the web, people will say it is manufactured in Israel."

While the loss of the BBC History poll is relatively inconsequential in the grand scheme, it points to a new highly organised mass manipulation of technologies which are supposed to be democratising and encouraging free expression by individuals.

Megaphone has no registration or identity check, so nothing would stop those opposed to Israel downloading Megaphone and using its alerts to voice opinions against its activities, however. Inevitably, a hacked version already exists which replaces Israeli flags with Palestinian ones and alters some of the text.

However it is used, Megaphone is effectively a high-tech exercise in ballot-stuffing.

We're calling it lobbyware. ®

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