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Facebook is the new front in pro-Israel PR war

by **ben harris & joshua spiro**
jta

As Israel takes to the Internet in search of innovative ways to make its case about Gaza to the world, Jews around the globe also are utilizing innovative methods — and new technological tools — to explain what the Jewish state is facing as it acts to protect its southern flank from rocket fire.

StandWithUs, a Los Angeles-based pro-Israel group, has established a round-the-clock Internet task force — in cooperation with the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel — to monitor Web sites and provide instant responses to attacks on the Jewish state. Some 15 to 20 volunteers staff two situation rooms, in Herzliya and Jerusalem, that promote pro-Israel content on social networking Web sites, respond to online opinion polling and try to alter the tenor of discussions in Internet chat rooms.

The group also has launched a Web site, HelpUsWin.org, which provides links to public opinion polls on the conflict, online articles and ideas to integrate pro-Israel symbols with profiles on sites such as Facebook. It also features pictures and videos that highlight Hamas' indoctrination of children and the humanity of Israeli soldiers.

"We're trying to dictate the Net agenda as well as respond to it," said Michael Dickson, the director of the StandWithUs office in Israel.

Much of the online activity related to the Israel-Hamas battle in Gaza centers around Facebook, the hugely popular networking site that has seen a noticeable upsurge in political content related to the conflict. More than 5,000 users are attending a virtual rally on the site organized by the World Zionist Organization. Pro-Israel users are being encouraged to change their profile pictures to "I Love Israel" and donate their "status



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update” to keep track of the terrorist rockets landing in southern Israel.

In Los Angeles, the Israeli Leadership Council, an Israeli-American community group, has launched a number of online initiatives to press Israel’s case. Among them are the Web sites Live4Sderot.org, which raises money and awareness for the citizens of Israel’s embattled southern frontier, and Tzav8.org, which encourages Israeli Americans to register for notification of pro-Israel events. The site’s title is a reference to the order that calls up Israeli reservists in wartime.

Even the larger, more established Jewish groups are trying to influence the digital discussion.

The Anti-Defamation League has launched an Israel defense page on Facebook that has attracted nearly 2,000 members. The ADL also has made posters available for download in what it hopes will spark a “viral media campaign” on Israel’s behalf.

“I think it’s certainly possible to influence younger Jews using social media. I think that’s a correct instinct,” said Esther Kustanowitz, a well-known contributor to several major Jewish blogs.

But, she added, it’s important to take expressions of support on social networks with a grain of salt.

“It’s not like the groups are mobilizing toward anything. It’s just an expression — I’m for the war, I’m against the war,” Kustanowitz said. “For me, joining a group is not necessarily a helpful show of support for peace or against violence.”

The effort comes as Israel, constantly at pains to explain itself to the world, has itself utilized cutting-edge Internet tools to present its side of the conflict.

In New York, the Israeli Consulate conducted an online citizens’ “press” conference, while the Israel Defense Forces has established its own channel on the video sharing site YouTube. The channel features aerial video shot from Israeli warplanes showing the destruction of suspected Hamas targets.

“Since the definition of war has changed, the definition of public diplomacy has to change as well,” David Saranga, the media and public affairs consul in New York, told the New York Times.

But online political activism is hardly the sole province of the pro-Israel community. Palestinian solidarity activists and Jews opposed to Israel’s military operations have also taken to the Internet — arguably with greater force and visibility.

“If you look at the communities that power social news



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Web sites, because these communities tend to be composed of early adopters who generally tend to have a more liberal bias, the stories you tend to see promoted will mostly favor the Palestinian side,” said Muhammad Saleem, a social media consultant in Chicago.

However much it lags behind some pro-Palestinian forces, the use of new media during the Gaza clashes represents a significant advance in the degree of Web savvy demonstrated by the Jewish community and serves to complement more traditional means of political activism, of which there has been little shortage since the conflict broke out in late December.

Dozens of pro-Israel rallies have been held, and more are planned, in more than 50 U.S. cities. Leaders of the Jewish community, along with political and ecumenical officials, have congregated outside of consulates, Holocaust museums, community centers and universities to express their support for Israel.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs, in cooperation with the United Jewish Communities, organized more than 60 rallies across the United States in recent weeks. Amos Kamil, the director of JCPA's Israel Advocacy Initiative, said the plan was to provide a response to the anti-Israel groups receiving media attention.

“We started to see a lot of this was being played out on television screens and computer screens,” Kamil said. “And although much of the community was in support of the Israeli action, it wasn't really showing up on the streets.”

Indeed, across the country a swell of anti-Israel rallies provided venues for some incendiary language directed against Jews.

In Florida, protesters told pro-Israel demonstrators to “go back to the ovens.” And in Kansas City, a protest that attracted 400 people accused Israel of “genocide” and perpetrating a “holocaust” against the Palestinians. One sign that showed a crucified man surrounded by Israeli tanks read “Same Place, Same Way, Same Damn People.”

The demonstration was organized by the Kansas City chapter of the Muslim American Society, which according to a Jan. 5 ADL report “has a troubling history of associations with radical organizations and individuals that promote terrorism and anti-Semitism, and reject Israel's right to exist.”

Kamil said that even the smallest rallies organized by the JCPA and UJC were an important refutation of the rampant anti-Israel sentiments.

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“Although the numbers might be more impressive in a place like New York or Chicago, a rally which affects the local media outlets in smaller communities [is] equally as important to just shaping public opinion about Israel,” he said.

The quick organization of dozens of pro-Israel rallies across the country earned plaudits from some quarters. But among tech-minded activists, street rallies cannot respond at the speed of the Internet.

On sites such as Facebook, “everyone has hundreds, sometimes 1,000 friends — Jewish, non-Jewish, Israel supporter and non-Israel supporter,” said Dickson of StandWithUs.

“You post up a video that in less than a minute can portray what it’s like to live in Sderot right now. Suddenly you have a whole group of people that understands Israel’s position and why Israel needed to act.”

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