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# Organizational scandal on social media: Workers whistleblowing on YouTube and Facebook

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the emergence of organizational scandals on social media, and how the communicative dynamics of such scandals evolve as a social drama. I propose that when whistleblowers utilize information technologies to expose evidence of organizational misconduct, they, and their audiences, engage in *meta-organizational discourse*: The reflexive – immediate and durational – interactions through which organizational stakeholders instigate organizational scandals on social media, negotiate the normative boundaries of whistleblowing, and (de)legitimize the act of disclosing managerial transgressions online. I examine an organizational scandal embedded in the recent wave of workers' unionization struggles in Israel in which whistleblowers performed the role of investigative journalists by posting a video on YouTube exposing a senior manager trying to dissuade workers from joining the union. Following that, on workers' unionization Facebook pages, union supporters and opponents vigorously deliberated the intentions and consequences of publicly shaming their manager and damaging the reputation of their company. Analyzing workers' discourse suggests that participants from both sides experienced the scandal as something that affected all company employees. They acknowledged the high visibility of their social drama and recognized the potential impact of whistleblowing online across organizational spatial and temporal boundaries.

## 1. Introduction

The notion of “media scandal” was developed in order to account for the drama evolving around the normative transgressions of powerful individuals in the public sphere (Bird, 2003; Molotch & Lester, 1974). Scholars have used Turner's (1980) scheme of “social drama” to analyze these scandals, noting that they follow distinctive dynamics (Cottle, 2006), which include a triggering event, an overt societal conflict, and redressive actions to reduce reputational damage (Sims, 2009). In this paper, I apply and further develop the concept of media scandals as a social drama to organizational settings operating within a socially mediated environment.

To examine the significance of organizational scandals and how their emergence on social media affect organizational dynamics, I consider an organizational scandal that occurred as part of a unionization conflict in the major Israeli telecommunication company Pelephone: Workers covertly video-recorded a senior manager, Oren Cohen,<sup>1</sup> pressuring them to withdraw their union memberships. Promptly after the event took place, Pelephone union activists published an edited version of the video on YouTube. Thus, by intentionally disclosing scandalous information against their employer on social media, they acted as whistleblowers (Liebes & Blum-

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<sup>1</sup> Actors and informants were given pseudonyms to conceal their identity.

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Kulka, 2004).

The exposure of the so called Oren Cohen video on YouTube generated an organizational crisis which evolved as a social drama (Turner, 1980). Participants on the public Facebook page,<sup>2</sup> which Pelephone union activists maintained as part of their labor organizing campaign, vigorously debated the role that Oren Cohen played in this event as well as the potential ramifications of disclosing his actions online. Union supporters emphasized management's transgression in dissuading workers from joining the union, whereas union opponents focused on activists' indiscretion in publicly shaming a senior manager and damaging the image of the company as a whole.

When individuals leverage the high visibility afforded by communication technologies to disclose organizational misconducts, they perform the role of investigative journalists (Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, in contemporary social media environment, motivated users with Smartphones are able to create news by instantly shooting, editing and distributing visual records from scenes of significant occurrences (Klein-Avraham & Reich, 2016). Therefore, I propose that when whistleblowers publish video clips of organizational transgressions online, they, and their audiences, engage in discursive interactions reminiscent of "metajournalistic discourse." In such discourse, journalists consider the meanings of the information they revealed, as well as the ways in which they produced and published that material (Carlson, 2016). On this basis, I develop the concept of *meta-organizational discourse* for analyzing the reflexive interactions through which organizational stakeholders – workers, executives, and others – interrogate organizational scandals on social media.

To study the meta-organizational discourse surrounding the Oren Cohen scandal I explore how the scandal played out in its immediate and durational dimensions. First, in the immediate dimension, I ask: how did union activists, supporters, and opponents instigate the scandal? how did they negotiate the normative boundaries of whistleblowing online? and how did they (de)legitimize the act of disclosing managerial transgressions on social media? Then, in the durational dimension, I ask: how did organizational participants capitalize on the scandal's online visibility to gain advantage in subsequent unionization conflicts? and how did they recollect these mediatized events and their implications over time? To address these questions, I analyze workers' online discourse on YouTube and Facebook surrounding the scandal, as well as retrospective accounts of union activists who participated in the social drama surrounding this scandal.

The meta-organizational discourse analysis of the Oren Cohen scandal suggests that when workers disclose and deliberate organizational transgressions on a public Facebook page, they acknowledge the extra-organizational visibility of their social drama. Furthermore, since these workers are identified with the texts they publish, they might feel accountable for how they interact online (Rowe, 2015). Hence, building from this case study, I propose that by examining workers' meta-organizational discourse we may learn about the tensions which workers experience being involved in organizational scandals on social media, and how they interpret the impact of the scandal's mediated exposure on the reputation and stakes of the organization and its members.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

### 2.1. Media scandals

Scandals are long-lived, sensational, and dramatic "personality-driven stories focusing on people who flout society's norms" (Bird, 2003, p. 23). They revolve not necessarily around a legal violation but around acts which offend the "strong, well defined states of the collective consciousness" (Durkheim, 1933, p. 39). In their classic model of a scandal, Molotch and Lester (1974) proposed that during political conflicts individuals and groups – actors directly involved in the transgression and/or reporters who expose it – strategically leak, instigate, and interrogate scandals to undermine their opposition. Different actors, then, might try to challenge their rivals, including those in superior positions, by incriminating them with a scandal.

Audience members have an active role in sustaining media scandals through public conversations in which they speculate and judge daily matters of morality, law, and order. And, through participation, they clarify their own positions, identify allies, and enlist supporters (Bird, 2003). While media scandals may attract the attention of large, sensationalized publics and provide an opportunity for social voyeurism (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004), they also create quasi-deliberations which could potentially evolve into civic engagement (Lawrence & Bennett, 2000).

### 2.2. Organizational scandals

Studies surrounding scandals in organizational contexts examine how scandalous events develop in the general public sphere when corporations – executives, board members, or employees – partake in unethical conduct, corruption, or deceitful practices (e.g., Grebe, 2013; Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003; Sims, 2009). While such scandals escalate into a spectacle in the eyes of bystanders belonging to the general public, they bear the potential for a concrete effect on the stability and prospects of the organization as well as on vital personal aspects of livelihood of its members. Arguably, the most relevant audience in such scandals are the workers who actually face the scandal's implications. For them, the scandal is essentially organizational.

This paper reveals the dynamics of a scandal which is embedded in organizational resistance discourses (Putnam, Grant, Michelson, & Cutcher, 2005). A previous case study examined how workers utilized a counterinstitutional web site to publicly expose and criticize

<sup>2</sup> Pelephone unionization Facebook page: <https://he-il.facebook.com/hitagdut.pele>

their company's unfair employment policies (Gossett & Kilker, 2006). Here, I examine a social drama which developed when workers experienced organizational wrongdoing, instigated its exposure, and interrogated the meanings of the transgression and its exposure in a radically transformed media environment in which organizational interactions occur publicly and continuously on social media.

### 2.3. Social drama

Social drama, as defined by Turner (1980, p. 50), is the spontaneous process emerging from a "breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette" among a bound-together group of members, such as company workers, with mutual values, interests, and fate. Once the story of the transgression becomes visible, it generates a crisis where factions are created, and members choose sides expressing antagonism against each other. Consequently, members of the conflicted group tend to take redressive actions, trying to prevent the dispute from further widening. One way of resolving the crisis may be by assigning the blame to specific member (s) who allegedly misbehaved.

When the social drama surrounding an organizational scandal unfolds on public social media it creates visibility which is "freed from the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now" (Thompson, 2005, p. 35). At the same time, with the emergence of digital information technologies and the abundance of corporate-related scandals, issue-attention cycles become too short to attract wide-spread public interest (Barkemeyer, Faugère, Gergaud, & Preuss, 2020). Hence, the main audience persistently concerned with organizational scandals are workers and other stakeholders who are directly affected by these events. Social media platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook, afford extra-organizational arenas where these participants can engage in continual overt discourse surrounding the exposure of organizational misconduct.

### 2.4. Whistleblowing on social media

Whistleblowers are often central actors in scandals. They are insiders – members of organizations or communities – who intentionally volunteer concealed sensitive information against perpetrators from within (Liebes & Blum-Kulka, 2004). Contemporary whistleblowers engage in digitally networked activism to expose and disseminate information that might jeopardize the reputation of their organizations (George & Leidner, 2019; Tufekci, 2017). They leverage the "emancipatory affordances" of digital media technologies which enable increased capabilities for creativity, impact, and enhancing joint emotions (Miranda, Young, & Yetgin, 2016; Young, Selander, & Vaast, 2019). The disclosure of sensitive organizational information generates high visibility and elicits public criticism and rage (Thompson, 2005), which are essential for spotlighting organizational failures. Following high-profile scandals, such as the collapse of Enron, governments urged managements to proactively install institutional channels for workers to report unacceptable organizational practices (Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017). At the same time, workers' activism against workplace sexual harassment such as the #MeToo movement suggests that they increasingly join online extra-organizational campaigns by exposing and discussing information about organizational misconduct on social media,.

### 2.5. Meta-organizational and meta-journalistic discourse

When whistleblowers uncover sensitive information from inside organizations on social media, they perform the role journalists often play in media scandals – identifying transgressions, obtaining evidence of their occurrences, editing such material and broadcasting it (Molotch & Lester, 1974). Subsequently, just as journalists and their audiences reflexively discuss the norms of journalists' practice, whistleblowers and organizational stakeholders interrogate the norms of whistleblowing. In other words, they participate in the creation of discourse reminiscent of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016): The discourse – often emerging when members of the journalistic community have transgressed its norms – in which different participants instigate the disclosure of a transgressive event, define boundaries for such exposure and judge its legitimacy with the goal of reaffirming community norms.

Such reflexive discourse surrounding the practices and impacts of journalism resonate through what Zelizer (1997) defines as the "durational mode of interpretation" – proposing that reporters not only provide the accounts of events as they unfold, but, over the years they capitalize on the original story and recollect it as a historical landmark. Journalists draw upon scandals which they and others in their community exposed by referencing these stories as means of establishing their authority. For example, by drawing upon the Watergate legacy, as a language and template for the frequent ritual reenactment of scandals (Hitt, 2004; Schudson, 2004).

Social media platforms enable retrieving and reviewing digital information across organizational boundaries and settings (Troom & Leonardi, 2013). Thus, the durational reflexive interpretations of online texts – including the ways they were produced and published, and the implications of their public exposure – continue to evolve. The disclosed information, then, has the potential to turn into an "immutable mobile" (Latour, 1987) – a textual token which may be reused to sustain and reproduce a given discourse over time (Cooren, Matte, Taylor, & Vasquez, 2007). The material may function as a "boundary object" (Star & Griesemer, 1989) – which is sufficiently robust not to lose its original identity but flexible enough so that discourse participants in various organizations and contexts may adapt it to their specific interactional needs and constraints.

Defining whistleblowing on social media as quasi-journalism, I develop the notion of *meta-organizational discourse* – the immediate and durational interactions surrounding the online publishing of organizational scandals, in ways that contravene formal organizational communication practices. My purpose is to gain insight into the ways in which whistleblowers together with organizational stakeholders use social media to instigate and deliberate organizational scandals.

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1. The case study

By analyzing the Oren Cohen scandal, this study aims to introduce the analytical framework of meta-organizational discourse. Hence, the data were collected to allow elaboration of the key theoretical arguments I propose (Eisenhardt, 1989). That is, I searched for texts in different forms (writing, graphics, audio, and video) that provide evidence reflecting both the immediate and the durational dimensions of this scandal.

##### 3.1.1. Data collection: immediate dimension

In September 2012, in the midst of a contentious unionization drive, Pelephone union activists published the Oren Cohen video on YouTube. The video was covertly recorded by workers during a meeting that lasted approximately one hour in a peripheral Pelephone service center, located in the large Arab town Umm al-Fahm. Union activists received the full recording of the conversation (52 min) from which they edited and posted online a 2:25 min clip with introductory captions and subtitles. The clip was still available online at the time of this research, with 9750 views (May 2021). The clip was posted on YouTube on a Wednesday. On the following day, unionization activists initiated two concurrent interactions on the Pelephone Facebook unionization page. These online conversation threads emerged over approximately 69 h – from Thursday around 11:00 am, until Sunday morning just before 8:00 am, hence mostly outside office hours since in Israel Friday and Saturday constitute the weekend.

To study how the meta-organizational discourse surrounding the Oren Cohen scandal unfolded immediately when the event was exposed, I conducted a qualitative interpretive analysis utilizing original data from social media comprised of the YouTube video clip and the two Facebook interactions. The Facebook conversation threads included 34 participants, 19 men and 15 women, as determined by their profile name and photo, as well as from the text, since Hebrew grammar reflects the writer's gender. Their discourse suggests that 23 participants were pro-union, nine anti-union, and two did not state their opinion. Out of the pro-union participants eight were external bystanders: three former Pelephone workers, three social activists, and two who did not state their affiliation. Out of the anti-union participants, eight were workers and one was a manager. Page administrators (unionization activists) responded four times during each conversation. Altogether, the immediate Facebook interactions included 142 text units<sup>3</sup> (two posts and 140 responses which received a total of 199 likes). At that time, Pelephone employed approximately 4000 workers (Dor, 2014), and the Facebook unionization page had over 1000 followers.

##### 3.1.2. Data collection: durational dimension

To study the meta-organizational discourse surrounding the Oren Cohen scandal during the months and years that followed, I searched for subsequent explicit online recollections of this scandal via Google, and specifically in the research corpus of a large project examining Israeli telecommunication workers' unionization discourse (Lazar, Ribak, & Davidson, 2020). These included hyperlinks of the YouTube video clip, as well as mentions of Oren Cohen, his transgression, whistleblowing about it, the scandal, and its consequences. Such texts were found in two responses celebrating the success of Pelephone unionization effort (January 2013), and the next year (March 2014) in a post with five responses on the Partner unionization Facebook page<sup>4</sup> during the unionization struggle in this other telecommunication company.

Another source providing insights into how Pelephone union activists retrospectively interpreted the scandal is the book "Revolution and justice: The Pelephone's workers unionization story" (Ozana, 2015, pp. 125–127), which incorporates interviews with actors who were involved in producing and publishing the video. Finally, during in-depth open-ended interviews which I conducted with five Pelephone union activists (November–December 2016), about the unionization effort in general and the particular role of social media in the process, I asked them to recollect the four-year-old scandal. Such sources offer insights as to how individuals reflexively narrate their personal experiences partaking in cyberactivism (Stewart & Schultze, 2019), thus constructing their shared legacy of the scandal and its impact over time. This form of data-source triangulation provides a more valid perspective on the features of the examined social phenomenon (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

#### 3.2. Analytic approach

The analysis focuses on how participants interpreted the scandal in reflexive ways. That is, how they conveyed and clarified their positions through engaging with others (Hyland, 2005). To examine these reflexive interactions, I sorted out expressions through which participants mutually discussed the Oren Cohen scandal by referring to themselves (I, we, us) and/or to others (he, she, they, you, or by name). Since in Hebrew the form "you" is different for singular (*ata*) and plural (*atem*) it was easier to interpret whether the recipient(s) of such utterances were singular or plural. Accordingly, when relevant to the analysis, it is indicated [singular] or [plural].

To analyze the meta-organizational discourse, I examined expressions through which different participants – union activists, supporters, and opponents – defined the Oren Cohen event as well as the roles and responsibilities of various actors, how they constructed the boundaries of whistleblowing online, how they evaluated the legitimacy of disclosing sensitive organizational information

<sup>3</sup> The extracts were coded as follows: V=Video; P=Post; R = Response; I = Interview. Quotations are numbered according to their sequential order in the conversation thread: R1.1, R1.2, ... etc. and R2.1, R2.2, ... etc.

<sup>4</sup> Partner unionization Facebook page: <https://he-il.facebook.com/partner.hitagdut>

on public social media, and how they capitalized on the scandal and recollected it over time. [Table 1](#) summarizes the analytical framework of meta-organizational discourse in both the immediate and durational dimensions.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. The immediate dimension

#### 4.1.1. Instigation

The Oren Cohen scandal emerged around two intertwined transgressions: First, a senior manager violated the law by trying to dissuade workers from unionizing. Then, Pelephone union activists breached organizational norms by airing company affairs on public social media. They posted the video clip on YouTube with a few introductory captions (V.1):

In the following clip: A senior manager in Pelephone is pressuring workers to cancel their union membership [...] he guides the workers how to cancel union membership and requests that they do so in his presence. These are severe violations of the court order and are harmful to the unionization.

This introduction generalizes and depersonalizes Oren Cohen's violation, emphasizing the transgression rather than the transgressor: Union activists refrained from naming Oren Cohen and instead referred to "a senior manager in Pelephone," "a director in Pelephone," who partakes in management's illegal assault on unionization. However, their disguising of Oren Cohen's personal details served merely as a gesture of politeness since it was inconsistent with the content of the video clip they posted – in which Cohen, in his own words, stated his identity, position, and intentions (V.2):

I don't want to interrupt your work, but for those of you who don't know me, I am Oren Cohen and I'm also the manager of the customer relations department in Pelephone. I came to talk with you about the union. I turn to you to help us stop this effort.

A day later, union activists adopted a similar discursive practice, on the Pelephone unionization Facebook page (P1). Referring to Oren only by his first name ("we are sorry about Oren") they conveyed a vague apology that allows speakers to minimize their role in a misdeed and downplay their responsibility for its occurrence ([Kampf, 2009](#)):

We are sorry about Oren. He is truly a dear and highly appreciated person in the company, also by us, [...] we have nothing personal against him! Even if another manager were featured in the video, we would have been sorry just the same. [...] The difference is that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, fulfilling a mission for management.

While union activists regarded Oren as a generic manager who was "in the wrong place at the wrong time, fulfilling a mission for management", a union opponent challenged this attempt to underestimate the personal aspects of whistleblowing. He insisted that union activists specifically targeted Oren Cohen as a scapegoat in their struggle against management (R1.7):

You [singular] know what, dear Avi, assuming I agree with your [plural] opinion and Oren was just a pawn played by the management, still why did you [plural] use him, his name, and his resumé to make a scandal? Did you [plural] think for a moment about the damages you [plural] are doing to the company and its image? Did you [plural] think for a moment that behind the name "Oren Cohen" there is a soul, body, family, he has parents, and even a dog at home? Did you [plural] think what you are doing to that person? If he is just a pawn, why shoot directly at him?

After opening his response by personally addressing an activist named Avi, this union opponent suggested that Avi represented the union's opinions and actions. In the same manner, he first emphasized the name "Oren Cohen" but then described Oren's personality "behind the name" by using a generic checklist of attributes ("a soul, body, family, he has parents, and even a dog at home") that would fit many other workers and managers in the company. Hence, this response depersonalized and generalized both Oren Cohen and union supporter Avi, portraying each of them as "an embodiment of the in-group prototype" ([Stets & Burke, 2000](#), p. 231).

The above interaction also demonstrates how, when discourse participants interrogate media scandals, they tend to define victims and villains and ask which actors acted worse than others ([Bird, 2003](#)). In this case, most union supporters and opponents agreed that Oren Cohen was the victim. They only debated who was the villain: management in using Oren Cohen as "a pawn," or union activists in using him "to make a scandal" by shooting "directly at him" instead of at management. Participants from both sides, then, avoided assigning personal responsibility to Oren Cohen.

In an exceptionally personalized response, one participant pointed out this general inclination to overlook Oren Cohen's personal responsibility for the scandal (R1.61-R1.62):

I read all the responses in favor and against. Without getting into my personal opinion, all the responses about the injustice done to Oren Cohen are not relevant. Oren did this to himself. He committed an illegal action which stands against all formal

**Table 1**

Meta-organizational discourse: Analytical framework.

Immediate dimension	Instigation	How participants interrogate the scandal in terms of the transgressions, roles, and responsibilities of actors involved in the event, whistleblowers, and audience members.
	Boundaries	How participants deliberate the norms of whistleblowing online in terms of its purposes, practices, and its impact.
	Legitimacy	How participants evaluate the act of intentionally exposing organizational transgressions on public social media.
Durational dimension	Capitalizing	How participants utilize the scandal in future organizational conflicts, in and across organizations.
	Recollecting	How participants recount their experience of the scandal and its implications over time.

statements of the company about its actions and its instructions to company managers. After he was exposed, he can't come with complaints to those who exposed him.

As a redressive action in the social drama, trying to resolve the dispute "in favor and against," this participant reduced the organizational responsibility for the scandal by putting the blame on Oren Cohen who flouted company official policies which, in accordance with the law, instructed managers not to interfere with unionization. At the same time, he acknowledged "all the responses" of other participants who aimed their arguments at organizational entities – management or the union. This observation further suggests the Oren Cohen scandal instigated surrounding organizational, rather than personal, transgressions.

#### 4.1.2. Boundaries

Interrogating the Oren Cohen scandal, discourse participants debated the normative limits of whistleblowing on social media. Union opponents condemned activists for intentionally exposing damaging organizational information by arguing that activists crossed a "red line" which is obvious to "many others" in the company (R2.5):

Yesterday a red line was crossed, in my opinion and that of many others, when you [plural] publicly communicated a video that damages the good name of my department manager!

Union activists reacted to such allegations by stressing they exercised their legal rights (P1):

To remind everyone, we live in a democratic state, not in China and not in Romania during the Ceaușescu era. There is a law in the State of Israel and all the citizens must act according to the law, even Pelephone. The law says that workers have a right to organize, and the employer has a right to express opinions, but everything should be in the framework of the law!!!

Positioning "workers" versus "the employer" as equal speakers, activists corresponded with the classic definition of the union's role as expressing workers' collective voice (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). Thus, suggesting that by whistleblowing on social media, they represented individuals who might fear standing up alone against such managerial pressures. In this spirit, a union supporter contended activists should be thanked for publishing the video, instead of being criticized, as they acted for the sake of all the workers (R1.46):

To all the bleeding hearts who are going against union members, say thanks that after years somebody rises and does something not only for himself but for more than 4000 workers [...]. The [video] recording is not against Oren personally but against the management.

In defining the limits of whistleblowing, then, union opponents underlined intra-organizational norms of loyalty emphasizing workers should categorically refrain from "publicly communicating" information that might damage the reputation of their company and managers. Union activists, on the other hand, based their arguments on extra-organizational principles. They warranted their voice by claiming that in exposing the video on public social media they are fulfilling higher moral values (Gergen, 1989). That is, they protected workers' right to organize and speak freely.

#### 4.1.3. Legitimacy

To legitimize what might be perceived as an unscrupulous undercover recording, union supporters portrayed whistleblowers as truth-tellers, faithful to the organization, and committed to its improvement (Kenny, Fotaki, & Vandekerckhove, 2018). Union activists insisted they raised the curtain on management's misbehavior, contrasting their actions with management who violated norms of communication through "gossip or manipulations." (P2):

It's important for us to expose you [plural] to the management's conduct behind the scenes [...] One of the purposes of this video is to strengthen you, dear workers [...]. Indeed, we have reached a third as you have seen and heard in the video. Too bad that management is dishonest with you. We don't deal with gossip or manipulations and will not be dragged into it.

With their statement "we have reached a third as you have seen and heard" union activists implied that by posting a video recording of the event online they enabled workers to witness how Oren Cohen in his own words admitted that activists are about to succeed in enrolling at least a third of the company's workforce, as required by Israeli law for establishing a representative union (V.3):

The union guys are close to signing up a third of the workforce and after that happens there will be no return.

In this spirit, a union supporter emphasized the evidence recorded in the video as proof of management's aggressive interference (R1.60):

Oren, the manager who was sent on behalf of management sat with the workers for an entire hour, at the expense of [company] work-time. The [video] recording lasted [approximately] 50 min and it includes much more material that you haven't seen.

Constructing whistleblowing on social media as a normal communication practice, another union supporter urged workers to actively seize any opportunity to expose such managerial interferences against the unionization. He explicitly spelled out the functionalities of information technologies that afford whistleblowing (R2.22):

Don't take your foot off the gas pedal, shoot [video], record, and distribute.

In order to de-legitimize whistleblowing online, a union opponent underlined the risks of adopting such aggressive practices in the workplace. He threatened to retaliate with a counter-scandal insinuating sexual harassment allegations against a union activist (R1.10):

Maybe it's about time to talk about you [union activists] on a personal level. There is a union activist who repeatedly conducts romantic affairs with his female workers and has directly caused two divorces. Truly, not a positive personal example.

Participants from both sides, then, recognized the political impact of instigating organizational scandals by uncovering harmful information on social media. In legitimizing or de-legitimizing this action they emphasized the moral character and intentions of whistleblowers. While union supporters praised activists as courageous and devoted to the company and its workers, union opponents condemned activists as transgressive themselves.

After three days of intensive interactions on the Pelephone unionization Facebook page, when a new work week started and workers returned to their daily tasks, the immediate online interaction surrounding the Oren Cohen scandal ended. Nevertheless, the deliberations about the meanings of the scandal continued in the following years.

## 4.2. The durational dimension

### 4.2.1. Capitalizing

The Oren Cohen scandal marked a watershed moment in the discourse surrounding recent unionization efforts in Israel: [The New Workers' Histadrut Trade Union vs. Pelephone \(2013\)](#) court ruling named Oren Cohen and condemned his transgression in a landmark decision that prohibits employers from interfering in workers' unionization. In January 2013, Pelephone's management was forced to officially recognize the union. A union supporter celebrated this achievement on the Pelephone Facebook unionization page by applauding the workers who provided the Oren Cohen video (R3.1):

Again, all the thanks to the workers of Umm al-Fahm who recorded Oren Cohen, and by doing so, in my opinion, they determined a large part of this huge victory.

A year later, in March 2014, union activists in the telecommunication company Partner capitalized on the Oren Cohen scandal. Leveraging the multimedia affordance of social media technologies ([Schrock, 2015](#)), they posted a screenshot from the Oren Cohen video on the Partner unionization Facebook page with a hyperlink to the original clip on YouTube, and explained (P4):

Recognize this? When Pelephone workers unionized, managers in different ranks, even junior managers, were also sent to get workers to sign a form canceling their union membership. The court determined that this conduct is unacceptable and forbidden [...]. Too bad that managements are manipulating young managers and sending them to "get dirty" on their behalf. In Pelephone it didn't help [management] and also not in Cellcom [another telecommunication company] where a union was established, and this will happen here too [...].

This Facebook interaction reveals the inter-organizational value of organizational scandals on social media: With the rhetorical question "Recognize this?" Partner union activists took advantage of the Oren Cohen video as an "immutable mobile" ([Latour, 1987](#)) – a recognizable textual token ([Cooren et al., 2007](#)), ready for use in their current unionization struggle. Drawing on its memory, legal standing, and digital accessibility, they utilized the clip to criticize Partner management's actions without taking the reputational risks involved in acting as whistleblowers themselves. Furthermore, by then the video turned into a "boundary object" ([Star & Griesemer, 1989](#)), sufficiently flexible so that it may be adapted to specific contexts. Hence, they downplayed the seniority, age, and role of the manager in the video to fit the occurrences in their own organization. Ignoring the actual details of the person involved in the scandal and his specific actions, they translated the public memory of [The New Workers' Histadrut Trade Union vs. Pelephone \(2013\)](#) court ruling into "binding norms of the lessons of past experience" ([Schudson, 1997](#), p. 8).

### 4.2.2. Recollecting

The legacy of the Oren Cohen scandal is narrated in the book published by Pelephone union activist, [Ozana \(2015, pp. 125–127\)](#). Based on interviews with union activists, he recounts the event as a heroic tale of organizational resistance. At this point, for the first time, the original whistleblower is credited by his full name, and portrayed as simultaneously performing the intertwined role of actor, reporter, and audience member:

With his resourcefulness, Hamid Karim, a site worker, draws the smartphone from his pocket and succeeds to secretly document the decisive manager. [The head of the union recollected:] "One night Hamid calls me and tells me 'Today the department manager was here [...] we recorded him, the entire conversation, there is a recording, we watched it and it is good. Not a word missing.' I said to myself they probably recorded him two-three minutes, I asked him how long, he answers 'an hour.' I didn't believe it, I asked him if he was sure, he says 'yes, we checked, it is fifty-two minutes.'" [...] [The file was] immediately assigned the code name 'the ring' [...]. The 'Ace card' was achieved.

When the scandal unfolded, Hamid, as well as other Umm al-Fahm workers who witnessed Oren Cohen's speech, did not participate in the online interaction. However, in their retrospective version of events, union activists underlined their part in the collaborative action of whistleblowing as complicated and challenging, requiring cooperation, creative solutions and risk taking ([Ozana, 2015](#)). This kind of narration resembles the way the Watergate scandal was featured in the "All the President's Men" book ([Bernstein & Woodward, 1974](#)) and film, epitomized by the late-night meetings Woodward had with "deep throat." When activists retell the scandal, they self-legitimize their contentious actions by glorifying whistleblowers' "resourcefulness" and the value of evidence they supplied: This precious item ("the ring") contained massive data ("the entire conversation," "not a word missing," "fifty-two minutes,") revealing crucial evidence (the "Ace card") for the union activists in their struggle.

Unlike in [Ozana's \(2015\)](#) narration, the union activists I interviewed four years after the scandal erupted sounded ambivalent regarding Oren Cohen's status as a victim and whether management or the union were villains in this story. Shai explained (I1):

Oren was a good manager to his team. Just like we learned very fast that personal relations and association with workers are the most important thing [to mobilize workers], management understood that Oren Cohen was a beloved figure [...]. Oren used his position, his power, the workers' love for him in order to violate the court order [...]. But overall, he is a nice person.

In retrospect, union activists tried to reconcile between the roles which conflicting parties played in this social drama. They presented both Oren Cohen's transgressions and their whistleblowing as key parts of the unionization struggle.

## 5. Discussion

Social media platforms enable workers to engage in practices of journalistic work through assembling, editing, and distributing organizational information which they consider to be valuable for internal and external organizational audiences. Therefore, it is useful to apply the concept of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016), to examine how workers instigate scandals, deliberate the normative boundaries of publishing sensitive organizational information, and (de)legitimize whistleblowing online. The meta-organizational discourse analytical framework allows considering how information technologies facilitate workers' active participation in the social drama of interrogating the meanings and consequences of organizational scandals on social media, including the ways they are documented and disclosed.

The meta-organizational discourse analysis of the Oren Cohen scandal reveals how the unionization Facebook page enabled participation patterns typical of a social drama, in which members of a bound-together group take sides debating violations of their mutual norms (Turner, 1980). Unlike online forums that enable anonymously discussing organizational misconducts (Gossett & Kilker, 2006; Vaast & Levina, 2015), on the unionization Facebook page workers claimed their stakes and criticized others using their own Facebook profiles which are linked to their offline identity. In such overt online debates, participants tend to maintain a sense of accountability for their communicative behaviors (Rowe, 2015). This may explain why, in their reflexive discourse, union supporters and opponents alike emphasized values of respect and honesty in organizational communication while condemning those on the other side for incivility.

### 5.1. The immediate dimension

The meta-organizational discourse on the Pelephone unionization Facebook page indicates that participants from both sides defined Oren Cohen as the victim. However, they abstained from a cathartic narration of his tragic fall, which is typical of the deliberation of public media scandals (Boje & Rosile, 2003). While union supporters assigned the violation of unionization laws to management, and union opponents condemned whistleblowers for instigating the scandal on social media, discourse participants did not distance themselves from the story, but rather regarded this event as something that might happen to anyone and impact everyone in the company.

From their conflicting positions in this social drama, participants evaluated the act of whistleblowing on social media in terms of "radical disclosure" – the deliberate online exposure of the secrets of others for political purposes (Heemsbergen, 2016). Union supporters constructed the use of information technologies for whistleblowing as a legitimate bottom-up collective organizational resistance, underlining the content of the video as an objective truth that workers have a right to know and publish. Union opponents, on the other hand, emphasized whistleblowers' disloyalty. Their criticism coincides with a "spiral of incivility" suggesting that those who feel attacked dismiss the factual content exposed by whistleblowers and portray them as hostile members with harmful intentions towards the organization (Björkelo, Einarsen, & Matthiesen, 2010).

**Table 2**

Concepts applied in the analysis and discussion.

Concept	Definition	Application
Meta-journalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016)	The discourse emerging among actors, reporters, and audience surrounding journalists' practices.	Participants deliberated whistleblowing on social media in terms resembling the discourse about journalists' practices.
Social drama (Turner, 1980)	The overt process of conflict, redressive actions and reconciliation attempts that emerges when group member(s) breach their shared norms.	Participants engaged in a social drama surrounding two intertwined organizational norm breaches: Management dissuaded workers from joining the union, and whistleblowers publicly exposed this transgression on social media.
Durational mode of interpretation (Zelizer, 1997)	Capitalizing on stories and recollecting them as a landmark journalistic practice.	Union supporters recollecting the publication of the Oren Cohen video online as a breakthrough in their successful struggle.
Media memory (Neiger et al., 2011).	The mediatization of collective past.	Union activists recounted the collective legacy of the Oren Cohen scandal in terms of its social media production and the impact of the video.
Immutable mobile (Cooren et al., 2007; Latour, 1987)	A recognizable textual token which may reproduced over and over again yet keeping its original qualities.	Union activists across organizations reproduced the Oren Cohen video as a discursive tool in their struggle.
Boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989)	A text that is flexible enough to be utilized and adapted to different contexts, needs and constraints.	Union activists across organizations adapted the Oren Cohen video to the specific contexts of their struggle.



## 5.2. The durational dimension

The meta-organizational discourse surrounding the Oren Cohen scandal suggests whistleblowing is not necessarily “individualistic, ephemeral, and disorganized” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 208) and need not be constrained to a particular moment and organization. The Oren Cohen video resonates years later as an effective organizational communicative text which stakeholders in and across organizations may utilize against various forms of wrongdoing over time. Nevertheless, the active audience engaged in the scandal constituted those who worked in Pelephone during the initial unionization phase in this particular company. For them, the scandal and its ramifications remained as a “media memory” – their collective past which was “narrated by the media, through the use of the media, and about the media” (Neiger, Meyers, & Zandberg, 2011, p. 1). That is, when these workers recounted their shared experiences of the scandal, they created their legacy about the potential, and consequences, of whistleblowing on social media.

The long-term analysis also reveals that by constructing the scandal as a landmark event in the ideological conflict over unionization, union activists attempted to reduce individual responsibility for all those involved, allies as well as rivals. Their discursive practices may be seen as attempts to reconcile between parties in the social drama (Turner, 1980). Unlike audiences of general public scandals, they needed to continue working together with other organizational members whose actions they severely criticized in public.

Table 2 summarizes the main concepts applied in the analysis and discussion.

## 6. Conclusion

In the course of utilizing digital information technologies for whistleblowing, multiple participants cooperate in witnessing, recording, editing, uploading, sharing, and retrieving sensitive material of organizational misconduct over time. Whistleblowing online, then, can be categorized as a “collective affordance” of social media which is actualized by interdependent actors partaking in connective action (Vaast, Safadi, Lapointe, & Negoita, 2017). By collaborating in uncovering, distributing, and interrogating scandalous organizational information, workers are able to collectively act on behalf of individuals who are vulnerable to organizational maltreatment, and therefore might not risk the consequences of speaking up alone. They utilize the emancipatory affordance of digital media (Miranda et al., 2016; Young et al., 2019) in giving voice to those who might otherwise remain voiceless (Ortiz et al., 2019).

Such dynamics of deliberating sensitive organizational information on social media with the purpose of impacting organizational changes are emerging globally among users across industries and corporations: At the end of 2017, women from the media and entertainment industry launched the #MeToo movement encouraging other victims and supporters around the world to disclose information about workplace sexual harassments on Twitter (Zacharek, Dockerman, & Sweetland Edwards, 2017). In Google, workers from different corporate sites simultaneously posted group photos on social media recording their participation in a wave of walkouts against management’s mishandling of sexual harassment cases (Wakabayashi, Griffith, Tsang, & Conger, 2018). And, in the artificial intelligence industry, experts from within several companies published on social media findings spotlighting how various facial recognition technologies were systematically biased against black people. Although their employers generally rejected these claims, and in some cases the whistleblowers consequently lost their jobs, these exposures generally prompted ethical deliberation and policy debate (Metz, 2021). In the occupational arena, workers use organization review platforms such as Glassdoor to share comparable information about compensation and benefits, corporate leaderships, and organizational cultures of different employers, and in the process, some disclose transgressive practices from within the organization (Johnson, 2018; Widdicombe, 2018).

These communicative dynamics are also embedded in contemporary global, social, and economic developments. In advanced capitalist societies, including Israel, workers are experiencing the erosion of their employment security and opportunities, and they turn to information technologies as means of protest and collective action (Rosenhek & Shalev, 2014). As part of these trends, in the Israeli telecommunication sector, tech-savvy workers creatively leveraged digital devices and social media platforms which were relatively accessible to them, in their struggles to unionize (Lazar et al., 2020).

These developments may also explain performances of whistleblowing online during unionization efforts: In neoliberal market economies such as Israel, trade unions tend to adopt an enterprise-based association strategy. That is, rather than forming external alliances with the government or across business sectors, labor organizers gain power by obtaining internal legitimacy from company workers (Mundlak, 2020). Under these circumstances, Pelephone union activists needed to assert the validity of their claims against management in the eyes of fellow workers. They resorted to confrontational measures such as naming and shaming a senior company manager online. Perhaps, in countries where labor relations are bargained at a state, industry, or occupation-wide level – rather than through workers’ collective organizational-based representation – such whistleblowing, and the social drama it generated, are less likely to occur.

## 7. Contributions and implications

This study highlights the distinct characteristics of organizational scandals on social media. It contributes to information systems and organizational discourse research by providing insights about the role of social media in the social drama surrounding organizational scandals, and how the use of digital technologies for instigating and interrogating such scandals shapes organizational discourse. Building from this case study I develop the concept of meta-organizational discourse to further understand the implications of such scandals within and across organizational boundaries. The visibility affordance of digital technologies (Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, & Stohl, 2016) offers scholars a critical unobtrusive arena for meta-organizational discourse analysis. It enables exploring the discourse practices which members adopt in deliberating whistleblowers’ disclosure of organizational scandalous information, in

various organizational conflicts and settings.

In more practical terms, managements too often treat organizational scandals in terms of singular deviations of individuals and overlook their systematic nature (Flangan, 2019). This study proposes that organizations facing scandals on social media should consider that workers and other highly engaged stakeholders experience organizational scandals not from the point of view of occasional spectators but as long-term active participants. That is, beyond discussing the details of particular events and specifically blaming individual actors for the scandal, these audiences contemplate the organizational ethics and circumstances that enable such wrongdoings, as well as how these transgressions, and their online disclosures might affect them personally. Therefore, corporate executives, human resources professionals, and communication experts, should pay continual attention to how workers expose and discuss their experiences of such events on social media. By doing so managements can also learn about their own responsibility in allowing the emergence and reoccurrence of organizational scandals.

## 8. Limitations and further research

The affordances of information technologies are not universal. Different people use different artifacts according to their values, interests, and capabilities and within the social and economic contexts of their time and place (Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001). Therefore, whistleblowing on social media might be differently practiced, received, and repudiated in different cultures. For instance, the narration of whistleblowers as brave silence breakers is more prominent in individualistic societies such as the United States compared to collectivist and traditional societies such as Japan (Starkey, Koerber, & Sternadori, 2019).

Furthermore, the intersections of information technologies and organizations continually evolve over time (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). From a historical perspective, the dynamics of organizational scandals on social media are bound to change. As increasingly organizational scandals take place on social media the novelty of such events, including performances of online whistleblowing, might diminish. Consequently, the overt online conflicts surrounding such scandals might not be as intense as in the current study. At the same time, individuals are more aware of the likelihood that existing and potential employers are surveilling their social media presence, and they respond with self-monitoring practices (Duffy & Chan, 2019). Thereby, workers might proactively avoid associating themselves with such scandals. Future research, then, should consider how patterns of meta-organizational discourses develop over time.

## Author statement

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